Chinese Baptist Fellowship • BIANNUAL MEETING

How Can I Keep on Singing?

Beloved Hymns from Questionable Sources and the Hillsong Controversy

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OVERVIEW

Road map

1. Biblical

1 Corinthians 8 and the ethic of the "stronger" believer

2. Theological

Criteria for judging a song on its content

3. Historical

The 2008 Baptist Hymnal as a case in point

4. Six Case Studies

Beloved hymns, questionable composers

5. Pushback

Three serious objections, weighed

6. Conclusion

Judge the song, not the singer

INTRODUCTION

A Church Music Flashpoint

Hillsong, Bethel Music, Elevation Worship, and Jesus Culture have become lightning rods in the Western church — their theology and public scandals openly debated even as their songs dominate congregational singing.

These songs regularly top the CCLI Top 100 — the industry list of the most-sung songs in churches over the past two decades.

THE QUESTION

Should a church sing a song if it disagrees with parts of the songwriter's theology — or the songwriter's life?

This paper argues songs should be judged by their content — not their source.



THESIS

Songs for the church ought to be judged on their merits — not the merits of the people who wrote them.

1 Corinthians 8: Meat, Idols, and Love

1. **The Corinthian Problem**

   Some believers ate meat sacrificed to idols — socially unavoidable, religiously loaded.

2. **Paul's Principle**

   "There is no God but one" (8:4) — the food itself carries no moral weight.

3. **The Limit on Freedom**

   Knowledge must yield to love: don't let your freedom become a stumbling block (8:9, 13).

> *"Wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his master [God]."*
>
> — Augustine of Hippo, On Christian Doctrine

Applied to song: if the lyrics are orthodox, the source may not matter — unless singing it would cause a weaker believer to stumble.

Criteria for Judging a Song

CONSTANCE CHERRY — THREE ASSUMPTIONS

1. Not every song written is worthy to be sung.
2. All families of congregational song face equal scrutiny.
3. Those who select songs are accountable to God for what they ask the church to sing.

MOHLER'S THEOLOGICAL TRIAGE, APPLIED TO LYRICS

First-Order

Denies core orthodox truth — never sing it.

Second-Order

Real disagreement, non-salvific — leadership discretion.

Third-Order

Matters of opinion — fellowship remains open.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The 2008 Baptist Hymnal as a Snapshot

Compiled as a "snapshot" of what the church was singing — and should keep singing — while remaining faithful to the tenets of the faith.

The Theology Committee reviewed the scriptural integrity of every hymn and worship song. Yet the hymnal still includes over 600 authors, arrangers, translators, and sources — several of them theologically questionable.

> *"Truth is eternal... If a song is true, then God is the One who made it true."*
>
> — Mike Harland, General Editor, 2008 Baptist Hymnal

CASE STUDIES

Six Beloved Hymns, Six Questionable Sources

Horatio Spafford

"It Is Well with My Soul"

Ralph Vaughan Williams

"For All the Saints" (arr.)

Robert Robinson

"Come, Thou Fount"

Ludwig van Beethoven

HYMN TO JOY

Cappeau, Adam & Dwight

"O Holy Night"

Gungor & Houghton

"Friend of God"



THE PATTERN

Six Centuries. Six Traditions. One Pattern.

A cult founder. An unbelieving arranger. A Unitarian-leaning preacher. A composer estranged from the church. A socialist, a Jewish composer, and a Unitarian minister. Two contemporary artists under theological scrutiny.

In every case, the church kept singing — because the words, not the writer, carried the truth.

PUSHBACK — 1 OF 3

Doesn’t Character Matter?

OBJECTION

A composer’s character reflects on a song’s testimony — shouldn’t we sing only from trustworthy sources?

RESPONSE

Romans 3:23: "all have sinned and fall short." Judged by that standard, no composer in history would qualify. Refusing sound songs over their source risks a legalistic, Pharisaical church culture.

To refuse to sing thoroughly biblical worship songs... is both impractical and absurd.

— Sam Storms

PUSHBACK — 2 OF 3

What About Theology Type?

OBJECTION

Scott Aniol argues songs embody one of two worship theologies — covenant-renewal or sacramental. A church shouldn't borrow music from a tradition it doesn't share.

RESPONSE

Taken consistently, this would require tracing every song ever sung back to its theological origin — an impossibly tedious standard that ignores how God has always used broken people to declare truth.

If you're charismatic, then worship like it. If you're not, then don't use their music.

— Scott Aniol, G3 Ministries

PUSHBACK — 3 OF 3

Doesn’t Singing It Fund Them?

OBJECTION

Singing a living, questionable source’s songs generates royalties — which means directly funding a ministry a church may not endorse. This is the strongest objection.

RESPONSE

True, and unavoidable outside the public domain. But applied consistently, the same logic would require divesting from any company, retirement fund, or media source that fails a biblical standard.

That is probably the best argument currently being made as a reason to eliminate the songs.

— Kenny Lamm

CONCLUSION

Let the Church Keep on Singing

The content of a song carries greater weight than the character of its composer. All truth is God's truth — and songs that are biblically accurate, theologically sound, and emotionally honest remain useful to the church, regardless of their source.

The one exception: when singing a song would cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble. There, love — not liberty — has the final word.



Thank You

Questions & Discussion Welcome

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