

The Dangers of Church Music

If we were to discuss various dangers associated with church, I doubt that many of us would claim that church music would be part of that discussion. The stairway is a danger, the parking lot may be a danger, an intruder may be a danger, but not music. How could music be dangerous?

There is more than one kind of danger. Some dangers are physical, some dangers might be political or social, and some dangers are spiritual. Music used in church could present something of a spiritual danger if it's the wrong kind of music or if it's used for the wrong purposes.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Music used in church teaches and admonishes us. We learn much through music. E.g., we teach our children great truths through music, and these truths tend to stick with us; they help form our ideas about God and ourselves. We believe some things because we've learned them through the music we sing. So if the music is not accurate, what we learn will be wrong. If the music is wrong, we will believe the wrong things and behave the wrong way. Or at least, inappropriate music could open the door to false teaching and spiritual compromise. I've often heard that, if a church is moving in a wrong direction spiritually, one of the first things to go bad is the music. That's probably true.

I'd like to consider how the use of music in some churches may be dangerous. Sadly, the dangers and errors I'm about to describe are fairly common in many evangelical churches. We should be careful to avoid these dangers in our church.

What are some of the potential dangers of church music?

- I. Some church music is theologically weak or false.
 - A. Church music should be just the opposite—it should be theologically robust, meaningful, and orthodox.
 - B. Our singing is supposed to proclaim and assert the “word of Christ.” We are supposed to use music to promote wisdom, to teach biblical truth, and to admonish one another. In order to communicate the truth of Scripture through music, we must insist that the music be theologically correct. The principles and ideas communicated in the music must be biblically accurate.
 - C. Sometimes, we find a song in the hymnal that is a bit weak or theologically questionable. A couple of examples of songs that are a bit problematic from our own hymnal:
 1. “He Lives” (#327) – “You ask me how I know he lives; he lives within my heart.” Just about everything about that song is solidly biblical except that one line.

How do we know that Jesus rose from the grave? Is it merely a feeling within our hearts? No, our knowledge about the resurrection is biblical, not experiential. A feeling of Jesus in our hearts is not enough to justify our belief in the resurrection. Feelings in our heart is not the basis of faith.

- a) There is nothing necessarily wrong about songs of personal experience. Many of our spiritual songs talk about the composer’s personal experiences, and as we sing these songs, we resonate with these experiences.
- b) However, the resurrection of Jesus is not a personal experience for any of us. It was for the apostles and for hundreds of others who saw Jesus after the resurrection. But even they would not say that they know Jesus rose from the dead because they felt it in the hearts. They knew that Jesus rose from the dead because they had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion. They knew that the resurrection was a fact of history, not just an inner spiritual feeling.

- c) So the phrase “he lives within my heart” is true as far as it goes, but it is not a very strong basis for believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe that doctrine because the Bible affirms it and it is a historical fact. Ultimately, we believe it because the Spirit of God convinced us of it. God gave us the gift of faith; that’s why we believe it. We believe it because it’s true, not simply because we have an inner feeling about Jesus.
- d) We sing this song around Easter time, but I commonly explain that our faith is not really based on a subjective feeling in our heart. Our faith is based on historical facts revealed in the Bible, and confirmed by the Holy Spirit, not simply an inner personal feeling.

So that’s a weakness of that song. That one line is a bit of a problem. It could be dangerous if we believe that our faith in Jesus’ resurrection is merely a feeling in our hearts—we don’t want to teach that or affirm that.

- 2. There are other songs in the hymnal or in common use in evangelical churches that we simply don’t use for a variety of theological reasons.

- a) Some of them put too much emphasis on human choice in contrast to God’s sovereignty. E.g., “The Savior is Waiting” (#486) – another one that we have not sung since I’ve been here because I object to what the song teaches.

Lyrics: The Savior is waiting to enter your heart, Why don't you let Him come in? There's nothing in this world to keep you apart, What is your answer to Him?

Refrain: Time after time He has waited before, And now He is waiting again, To see if you're willing to open the door, Oh, how he wants to come in.

If you'll take one step toward the Savior, my friend, You'll find His arms open wide, Receive Him and all of your darkness will end, Within your heart He'll abide.

That song and other songs like it (e.g., “Have You Any Room for Jesus?” “God’s Final Call”) contradict my theological commitments to the sovereignty of God and the depravity of the human heart. In my understanding, Jesus is not waiting and hoping that that people will exercise their human wills and allow him to do something that he cannot otherwise do. God is not expecting us to take a step toward him; spiritually dead and depraved people can’t and won’t do that. Rather, Jesus calls his sheep and they respond in faith. God is sovereign, not man. Our hymns should reflect that truth.

- b) Some songs reflect a theological viewpoint that is doubtful/questionable. E.g., “Higher Ground” (#421)

Refrain: Lord, lift me up, and let me stand
By faith, on heaven’s tableland;
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

This “higher plane/ground” language developed within that higher/deeper life movement, sometimes called the Keswick movement, in the late 1800s. It’s a view of sanctification that suggests that we can attain a level of holiness in which we cease to struggle against sin. We make a total surrender, we put our all on the altar, and then we gain a “higher plane” in which we have complete victory over sin. I don’t believe that such an idea is biblically accurate.

The song goes on to talk about avoiding doubts and fears and living above the world, where Satan’s darts are no longer hurled at us. Again, this is not a realistic description of the Christian life. We will never attain a “higher plane” in this life in which we cease to struggle against sin. No matter how many times we’ve put our all on the altar, the struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil will not end until we get to heaven.

Trans: These are not the worst examples of weak theology in songs, but these songs are weak enough that we should avoid them, IMHO.

There are a number of songs commonly sung in churches like ours that, if we look at them theologically and biblically, fall short of the mark. They are rather weak and in some cases dubious or false. They teach some form of error or questionable doctrine, and for that reason, it would be best not to use them.

II. Some church music is frivolous, overly sentimental, and sensual.

A. Church music ought to be both weighty and holy. Music is an expression of worship given to God, and all our musical expressions should be in keeping with God's holy, righteous, and awesome character.

1Ch 16:29 Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: ... worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

Ps 96:9 O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth.

B. Our worship of God should be done in a reverent, decent, and orderly way. We can be joyful in our expression of worship, but we cannot be irreverent, worldly, or frivolous.

C. Sadly, much of church music these days is rather frivolous, overly sentimental, or even sensual.

D. Music certainly is emotional; it often provokes an emotional response. Music is commonly described as the language of the emotions. So there is no problem with music expressing emotions or even provoking emotions.

E. However, those emotional expressions and responses must be in keeping with God's holy character and with biblical requirements.

F. Hymns, in particular, focus on God himself or on what Christ has done for us, rather than on our experiences or feelings. Hymns focus on the majesty and glory of God, while spiritual songs are more focused on personal experiences. Hymns of praise to God are most appropriate in a worship service.

- G. Let's look at these particular weaknesses in much of Christian music today.
1. Some music is frivolous. That means that it lacks weight; it's too light and contains little significant meaning.
 - a) Many children's songs are like this—e.g., *Climb Up Sunshine Mountain*, *Father Abraham*, *Deep and Wide*.
 - b) And there are plenty of songs designed for adults that have been called "7-11" songs—the same seven words repeated eleven times. These songs may be catchy and exciting, but they often lack depth and theological weight; they are frivolous.
 2. Some of the music is overly sentimental.
 - a) Sentimentality describes excessive feelings of nostalgia, tenderness, or sadness. To be sentimental is to have strong feelings of melancholy or longing over past experiences. Often these feelings are tied to romantic experiences or close personal relationships. It's a longing for the good old days and the old folks at home.
 - b) Sentimentality is a human feeling, but it may not be appropriate for music sung in church for a worship service.
 - c) A prime example of a warmly sentimental and somewhat romantic song is "In the Garden."

Lyrics: I come to the garden alone, While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

That song describes a deeply personal, even private, experience in almost romantic terms. Frankly, I don't find it appropriate for the worship of God; it's a bit syrupy sentimental; a bit smarmy. Maybe as a personal devotional song, it's ok, but not in the congregational worship of the church.

3. In a similar vein, some music is rather sensual or romantic.
 - a) This is true especially of modern/contemporary Christian music or praise and worship music.
 - b) Some of this music has been described as "God/Jesus is my boyfriend" music. If the song could be used as a romantic love song, then it's probably not appropriate for use in a worship service. We should not think of God or our relationship to him in romantic terms. Our love for God is not a romantic love; we don't "fall in love" with God. We may love our spouse that way, but we don't love God that way. So it's inappropriate to use romantic imagery or language to worship God.
 - c) Thankfully, we don't have any of these songs in our hymnal, but they are common in evangelicalism and in the wider Christian world. An example:

John Mark McMillan's 2005 song "How He Loves Us" (Dave Crowder Band)¹

Lyrics: He is jealous for me, loves like a hurricane, I am a tree, bending beneath the weight of His wind and mercy. ... I realize just how beautiful You are and how great Your affections are for me. Oh, how He loves us so; oh, how He loves us, how He loves us so; Oh, how He loves us so. Oh, how he loves us; how He loves us so.

¹ Cited by Michael Joncas, 10 July, 2014, at <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2014/07/10/jesus-is-my-boyfriend-songs-new-entries-in-the-struggle-between-orthodox-and-pietist-hymnody/>

REFRAIN: Yeah, He loves us; whoa, how He loves us.
whoa, how He loves us; whoa, how He loves.
Yeah, He loves us; whoa, how He loves us.
whoa, how He loves us; whoa, how He loves.

... Heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss,
And my heart turns violently inside of my chest.

Here are a few other similar examples of lyrics from current worship music:²

“I’m madly in love with you”

“You are more beautiful than anyone ever”

“I want to hear your voice, I want to know you more”

“I want to touch you, I want to see your face”

“I’m desperate for you; I’m lost without you”

This kind of language may be appropriate for spouses or for those in romantic relationships, but not for Christians as they sing about God. If this is what we believe about God’s love for us and our love for God, then we are thinking wrongly. This kind of music is false and misleading because it presents wrong ideas about God.

And besides the lyrics of these songs, they are often presented in a style that is highly sensual/romantic. Many of these kind of songs are played in a rock ‘n roll style, and that style in itself is worldly and sensual. It’s simply not appropriate for church worship music, IMHO.

Songs that talk about our love for God or God’s love for us are perfectly appropriate. But if you could sing the same lyrics to your boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse as a love song, it’s probably not appropriate; it’s over sensual/romantic.

² Cited by Preston Sprinkle, <https://theologyintheraw.com/is-jesus-my-boyfriend/>

III. Some church music is emotionally manipulative.

Ephesians 5:19 *speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,*

- A. Music is an expression of worship and praise as well as a means of teaching and admonishing one another. But we should not use music to manipulate human emotions. Music is emotional, and skilled musicians can use music to provoke certain feelings. We don't want to confuse feelings produced by music for spiritual affections prompted by the HSp.
- B. Sadly, some modern church music is emotionally manipulative. The music is the means of setting a mood or developing a feeling within the audience, and that feeling would not be there without the music. If you take away the music, the feelings or experiences would also evaporate. If the feeling/experience is dependent on the music, then it's not really a work of the HSp; it's musical manipulation.
- C. You may be aware that something unusual happened recently at Asbury University in Kentucky. One day this past February, the normal chapel service kept on going; students stayed around and prayed and worshipped. Then more students joined them, and soon hundreds of people were showing up to join in this apparent revival. This incident became known as the Asbury revival.
- D. When these kind of things happen, people want to know if it was a real revival, or just an emotional outbreak. One thing that seemed to be true of the Asbury revival is that it was driven by worship music. Contemporary Christian music seems to have played a large role in this so-called revival.
- E. I don't know if the Asbury revival was a real move of the Spirit of God or more of an emotional response or manipulation. I've heard both praise and criticism of this revival. I suppose that church historians will sort out whether it was manufactured or heaven sent.

- F. John MacArthur recently commented on the Asbury Revival. He said, “Shut off the music and see what happens.” Some say that the revival there was largely based on a particular form of music. The feelings of spirituality and of the presence of God were perhaps evoked through the music, in some regard at least. It would be interesting to see how large of a factor music was in that so-called revival.
- G. For many people today, music is designed to provoke a feeling, to trigger an experience. People come to church to feel close to God; they want an experience of the divine, and music can stimulate that feeling. In many churches, the music is the means by which people feel close to God.
- H. And some church musicians are very skilled at providing an emotionally moving experience. They can use music to induce a certain feeling within the people. They know what chords and rhythms to use to get people excited or stirred up or feeling spiritual. That feeling is what they are aiming at; that’s what they are trying to produce.
- I. Obviously, there is a danger in appealing to people based on their emotions. The danger is that people use music to create spiritual feelings. It’s not the Spirit of God who creates these experiences; it’s the music. Without the music, the feelings would not happen. People may feel like they are in the presence of God, when in reality, it’s just an emotional response from the kind of music they are using. The music can produce feelings of spirituality.
- J. Spiritual feelings should arise from a proper understanding and appreciation of the Word of God as the HSp works in our hearts. If we take away the music, the truth should still ring in our ears. We resonate with the truth of God’s Word, not with the power of the music. Worship music should be a response to the truth of God’s Word—it should be the Word of God and the conviction of the Spirit of God that produces spiritual experiences, not a particular form of music.

As one writer recently put it,

“It is Christ over chords. True spiritual affections are created within us by allowing the Word of Christ to richly dwell within us; singing then helps us to express those affections that were created by the Spirit of Christ filling us with the Word of Christ.”³

We must not use music to manufacture spiritual feelings. Church music that merely manipulates human emotions can be dangerous.

I assume that most of us value psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, especially those we use in the context of church worship. God’s desire for music is that it helps us express worship, fellowship together in unity, and teach and admonish one another.

We must be careful to avoid the dangers associated with church music.

We must avoid music that is theologically weak and/or false.

We must avoid music that is frivolous, overly sentimental, and/or sensual.

We must avoid using music that is emotionally manipulative.

Fortunately, there is plenty of good music that we can use in church that avoids these dangers. I trust that God will give us the discernment to know and appreciate good music and to avoid the kinds of music that would be potentially dangerous.

³ Scott Aniol, “Christ or Chords? The Manipulated Emotionalism of Hillsong, Asbury, and Pentecostalized Evangelical Worship. G3min.org, 13 March 2023.