

# CHURCH HISTORY: THE DOCTRINES THAT DEFINE US

## WEEK 2: WHY DON'T WE PLAY ALL STYLES OF WORSHIP MUSIC?

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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- Have you ever wondered why our church believes the various doctrines that we do? Have you thought about why another church, which seems to be a strong evangelical church, believes something completely different?
- Sometimes it is hard to take a position on doctrine when both beliefs seem to come from the same Bible.
- Is it possible for two churches, both desiring to honor God and walk with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, to land on opposite sides of vital doctrine for the church? Is there a place for fellowship with those who hold to completely opposite views than we do?
- The goal of this series is to examine various doctrinal convictions in the context of the church today, looking at how and why churches differ in these areas. Using God's word, we will seek to develop and strengthen convictions in key doctrinal areas, while thinking through how to interact with those who differ in their convictions.
- Here is schedule for the upcoming lessons:
  - July 21<sup>st</sup>: Introduction to the series/Why is doctrine important?
  - **July 28<sup>th</sup>: Why don't we play all styles of worship music?**
  - August 4<sup>th</sup>: Why don't we believe all the spiritual gifts are for today?
  - August 11<sup>th</sup>: Why don't we hold to Covenant Theology?
  - August 18<sup>th</sup>: Why do we have only men as pastors and elders?
  - August 25<sup>th</sup>: Why do we practice believers' baptism?

### INTRODUCTION

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- Likely, one of the first metrics that someone will use to size up a church, besides the teaching/preaching of the Word, is their music.
- What kind of songs do they sing? What kind of instruments do they use?
- Because of this, there is much potential for division amongst believers based on music.

- However, we must ask: Should believers break fellowship over music? Are the style/instrumentation/song choices within a church *that* important?
- Are there doctrinal convictions that should inform the music we listen to personally and sing corporately?
- How do we at MBC think through what music to play?

## A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MUSICAL WORSHIP

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- Before looking at how we handle differences in music in the church today, we want to look to Scripture to give a theological framework for why and how we should sing together as the church.

**Exodus 32:1-10** - *Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said to them, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. “They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’” The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. “Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”*

- While this passage does not speak of musical forms of worship, the principle that we can glean is that those who claim to worship Christ and sing praises to the Lord may not define those terms as God’s word does.
  - Israel was worshipping a false idol, yet they were attributing the name and works of the Lord to this false idol.
- As we approach the topic of worshipping through song, we must consider, “Do the songs that we sing speak of the God of the Bible, or a God of mankind’s own making?”
- Songs can use “Christian terms”, but we must seek to define those terms biblically and not simply sing a song because God is mentioned.

**John 4:23** - *But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.*

- Again, while this passage does not speak specifically to musical worship, there are principles of worship, generally, that can help us build our theological framework.
  - Believers are to worship in **spirit**. True worship does not simply come from the externals, but rather, it comes from the heart. It is sincere, and it is motivated by a love for the Lord (Matt 22:37)
  - Believers are to worship in **truth**. True worship must be consistent with the truth. It must be informed by God's revelation of Himself through His word.
- As we give musical offerings to the Lord, it must be from a sincere heart and rooted in truth.

**Ephesians 5:18-19** - *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;*

- Paul, here, gives a general command to be filled with the Spirit. He is speaking of a continual submission to the Holy Spirit in our life as a believer.
- With this command, there is an expected result by a believer's submission to the Holy Spirit: believers sing!
- This passage provides the means, content, and context of our singing!
- What are we to sing?
  - **Psalms** – OT psalms were meant to be sung! This is known as “Israel’s hymnbook”
  - **Hymns** – These were likely songs of praise to Christ used by the early church that were different from OT psalms. Some think that texts, such as Col 1:12-16, would have been sung in the early church.
  - **Spiritual Songs** – These were, perhaps, songs of testimony that covered a wider array of spiritual truth.
  - These give us a framework for singing biblically-rich and truth-filled songs!
- Where do we sing?
  - With one another! This is why we have corporate worship!
  - We come together to sing together, encouraging and exhorting one another through song.
- Why do we sing?
  - Our singing is an overflow and a melody of a heart of praise!
  - As we submit to the Holy Spirit, that submission will produce a heart of true worship and praise to the Lord!

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

- While this passage is very similar to Ephesians 5:18-19, it is helpful to distinguish the commands that Paul gives in these passages.
- Not only should our singing be a result of a Spirit-filled life, but it is also a means by which the word of Christ dwells in us!
  - The word of Christ is to dwell in us **BY** teaching/admonishing **AND** by singing!
  - Again, this reminds us that the songs we sing are means of worship only as much as they accurately reflect God's word.

## **HOW HAVE CHURCHES GONE ASTRAY?**

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- With this as our foundation, it can cause us to wonder, “How have so many churches and believers gotten off track in their musical worship?”
- It would be helpful to look at some of the trends in the church for the last 60-70 years that have contributed to the fractures in the songs that the church sings.

### **Maranatha Music/Contemporary Christian Music**

- Founded in 1971, Maranatha Music was one of the first contemporary Christian music publishing companies, founded by Chuck Smith, Sr., of Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California.
- Maranatha Music acted as a change agent to broaden support for Christian rock in that the early “praise” music was softer rock & roll. It was folk rock and rock ballads. Further, Calvary Chapel held to a more conservative theology, avoiding the extreme elements of Pentecostalism which were still unacceptable to most churches at the time.<sup>1</sup>
  - Groups like Maranatha Music and those involved in the CCM movement began what would develop into a “seeker sensitive” mindset of trying to win the world through worldly efforts.
  - While the motives seemed pure, it redefined worship from what is pleasing to God to what is pleasing to man.
- Within Maranatha Music, along with Chuck Smith's theological amalgamation (which would be described as “soft Pentecostalism”), came their original music which focused on responding to an apparent lack of “experiential authenticity”.
- For the youth at Calvary Chapel, musical authenticity meant songs written out of their own lives and experiences, where direct experiential knowledge was privileged over everything else.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>2</sup> *A Venture in Faith: The History and Philosophy of the Calvary Chapel Movement*

## **Bethel Music/Hillsong/Elevation Worship**

- With the rise of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements and the prosperity “gospel”, as well as the shift toward experiential efforts in musical worship (rock music, lights/some machines, etc.), churches such as Bethel, Hillsong, and Elevation have continued to rise in popularity.
  - These groups all fall within the Pentecostal camp and bring a strong emphasis on “experiencing God” and a warped view of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- A big reason, though, for the rise in popularity of these churches is their music!
  - It’s fascinating that many believers would look to the theology and doctrine taught in these churches, or at the lives of those in leadership of these churches, and clearly see issues, yet would be drawn in by their musical offerings.
    - Numerous leaders of Hillsong Church have been charged with sexual abuse.
    - Stephen Furtick (Elevation Church) holds to a form of modalism (false view of the Trinity)
    - Bill Johnson (Bethel Church) taught that Jesus had to go to hell to be tortured for 3 days.
    - Yet, 38 songs that made the Top 25 lists for CCLI and PraiseCharts—which track what songs are played in churches—originated from Bethel, Hillsong, Elevation, and Passion Church.
- Their songs are catchy, musically appealing, performed by excellent musicians, and all of this is packaged with enough language to sound Christian, leading to many churches embracing them in an attempt to draw young people in.
  - Their music and theology constantly calls out that God desperately loves all people, that Jesus is inclusive and that God is not interested in perfect people, He loves you just the way you are.<sup>3</sup>
- As with the CCM & Maranatha Music, these have led to a massive shift in worship music from psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to experience-driven, man-centered “worship”.

## **SHOULD MUSIC DIVIDE?**

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- While we can look at some of the movements and certainly have concerns about the choices made throughout recent history, some may ask, “Is the music we sing really *that* crucial?”
  - Should music divide churches?
  - Are we putting this too high on the doctrinal “tier list”?
  - Where does this actually land in regard to doctrinal urgency?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B161129/>

## Music is an Expression of Theological Conviction

- As we think through churches that differ from us musically, these differences can express a range of doctrinal differences, from 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> tier issues to simple preference issues:
  - Does a church have different instrumentation (piano/organ only vs. full band) or different means of presenting lyrics (hymnals vs. slides)?
    - These would fall under preference issues and shouldn't divide at all!
  - Does a church teach the gospel clearly and sing doctrinally-rich songs, with some of those songs coming from questionable sources (Bethel/Hillsong)?
    - This may fall under tier 3. Because of personal convictions, or a desire to separate from these groups, we can agree that these are brothers and sisters in Christ, but we may decide to either not attend or attend but not sing these songs.
  - Does a church allow any style/source of song, though with doctrinal accuracy, as well as have lights, smoke machine, or other effects to set a certain “mood” during worship that is meant to lead to a worship “experience”, yet still teach the gospel clearly and accurately?
    - This would likely fall under tier 2. We would agree that these are believers, yet because of their convictions on music, we would not be able to come together on a Sunday morning in the same local church.
  - Does a church have no discernment for the music coming in, with theological and doctrinal convictions match the shallowness of their singing, and without clear gospel teaching?
    - This would at least be tier 2, possibly tier 1 depending on what is being taught, but it should certainly raise red flags in our minds.

## We Teach Through Our Music

- The biggest reason you should stop singing songs from Hillsong, Bethel, Jesus Culture, and Elevation is that their music embodies a false theology of worship.<sup>4</sup>
  - We must consider what the music we sing teaches to others.
  - **Titus 2:1** – *But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.*
- This continuationist theology and expectations concerning how the Holy Spirit works led to a redefinition of worship from that of Reformed traditions to what they considered more consistent with New Testament teaching. Charismatic theologians argue that the Holy Spirit's primary work in worship is that of making God's presence known in observable, tangible ways such that worshipers can truly encounter God.<sup>5</sup>
  - Their theology is not one of worship, but experience!

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<sup>4</sup> <https://g3min.org/stop-singing-hillsong-bethel-jesus-culture-and-elevation/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

- If the church’s purpose is to equip the saints (Eph 4:12), what, then, are we equipping them with?
  - Ex: “What a Beautiful Name” by Hillsong
    - *“You didn’t want heaven without us, so Jesus you bought heaven down”*
    - While this may seem like a loving lyric, it is completely unbiblical. God did not send His Son to die for sinners because He was lonely and we were the only way to correct that, it was for His glory (Rom 3:21-26) and to demonstrate His love to unworthy sinners (John 3:16)!
  - Ex. “Wake” by Hillsong
    - *“You will never fade away; Your love is here to stay. By my side, in my life, shining through me every day. You wake within me, wake within me. You’re in my heart forever.”*
    - These lyrics are vague, not rooted in Scripture, and really don’t mention God at all. Out of context, this could be taken as a secular love song, not worship of a holy God.
- Because these songs can range from unclear/ambiguous to directing others to a false gospel or a false view of God, we must not be willing to allow this to come into the church, and we must be careful with churches that have embraced songs from these artists/groups.

## HOW DO WE THINK THROUGH WHAT SONGS TO SING CORPORATELY?

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- With the understanding of music’s reflection of theological conviction, as well as Scriptures call to be worshipping in a manner that reflects the truth of God’s word, we take very seriously that music that we bring before the Lord and His people as we gather together.
- Before introducing a song, our team will examine songs for certain criteria to ensure, to the best of our ability, that the songs we sing together are God-honoring and are helpful for our people.
- Included in this are the following criteria:
  1. **Biblical/Theological Accuracy:**
    - a. Ultimately, we want to sing songs that reflect the truth of God’s word so that we are singing God’s truth back to Him in praise.
    - b. We are to have the word of Christ richly dwelling within us, and one way that we do that is by singing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs back to one another and to God with thankfulness in our hearts (Eph 5:19-20; Col 3:16).
    - c. This is the top priority when thinking through the lyrics of potential songs.
      - i. Is the song **Biblically-True**?
      - ii. Is the song **God-Focused** rather than man-focused?
      - iii. It the song **Clear** it what it communicates?

## 2. “Singability”:

- a. While the greatest consideration with the **lyrics** is theological accuracy, the greatest consideration for the **music** is if the song itself is singable for a congregation.
- b. By that, this means that we look at the melody/key/rhythm/movement of the music in the song to make sure that it is something we could teach to the congregation and that is approachable for people of varying levels of musical skill.
- c. This is important because, though a song may be theologically rich, if it’s not something that is simple enough to follow, it may cause more people to simply listen, rather than sing together.

## 3. Song Association:

- a. Something else that must be considered, given the rise of groups like Bethel, Hillsong, Elevation Worship, etc., is the associations of a song to a particular group.
- b. While we understand that no song writer/composer is perfect and we could, likely, find something that we disagree with, doctrinally, with every song writer, there are certain groups that we do not want to take songs from because of the danger this could pose due to **first-tier (gospel essential) doctrinal differences**.
  - i. While there are a few songs from those groups I listed that would pass the first two criteria (theological accuracy and singability), these are not groups that we would want to point others to.
  - ii. Whenever we use a song, we must, by law, put the copyright information on the song’s title slide, which provides royalties through organizations such as CCLI.
  - iii. With this, we cannot know the discernment level of everyone that comes to MBC, so we would not want to have a song by Hillsong, for example, that someone may see and then search out with an implied endorsement by MBC, only to lead them to a church of false teaching.
- c. Because of all of this, we have decided not to include songs by groups like this, even if the songs themselves are good.

## **SHOULD BELIEVERS LISTEN TO BETHEL/HILLSONG/ELEVATION WORSHIP?**

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- Moving from discernment with music for corporate gatherings to the playlists of individual believers, I have had some ask me if it sinful or dangerous to listen to “good songs” by Bethel or Hillsong (i.e. those songs by them that are theologically accurate).



- While I believe it is **possible** for a discerning believer to separate a song from the artist and be able to worship the Lord faithfully by singing God’s truth back to Him, I would give a warning to believers who may include songs by Bethel/Hillsong/Elevation worship in their playlists.
- As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:1-5, as we encounter those who are “*holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power*”, we must “*avoid such men as these*”.
  - Paul exhorts Timothy to completely separate from the ungodly because of the danger they pose.
- Also, we must be careful to consider the implications, such as:
  - Based on the platform you use to listen to music, does it provide financial support to these groups?
  - Would this be a potential stumbling block to other believers? (1 Cor 9:9)
  - Would this be a potential hinderance to your witness to the world? (1 Pet 2:12)
  - Could this cause you to “lower your guard” with these groups, leading to poor discernment in vetting songs that you sing? (Prov 4:23)
- At the end of the day, we must ask ourselves if the perceived benefits are worth the risk.
- With other theologically-healthy artists producing solid music (Keith & Kristin Getty, Sovereign Grace, CityAlight, Matt Boswell, Matt Papa), as well as the treasure trove of traditional hymns, are we ***lacking*** in an area of our musical worship that ***requires*** us to sample from questionable sources?