

# How to Evaluate Songs for Congregational Worship

Scott Christensen

## **OBJECTIVE CRITERIA** (*Lyrics* – where principles must control preferences):

- 1) **Are the lyrics Biblical and doctrinally sound?** Do the lyrics distinctively and accurately reflect Biblical language or ideas? Do they contain Scripture and/ or scripturally inspired thoughts? Do the lyrics reflect sound theology and Christian practice? Is there continuity with the historic orthodox doctrines of the faith?
- 2) **Are they spiritual and God-centered?** Do the lyrics stimulate spiritual reflection and contemplation of truth? Do they induce genuine praise, thanksgiving, contrition and joy that is God-directed? Do they leave one delighting in God's character and deeds or upon ourselves and/or worldly values? *Worship must glorify God.*
- 3) **Are they edifying and instructive?** Do the lyrics enhance one's understanding of truth? Do they bring helpful words of encouragement, admonishment and exhortation to godly Christian living? *Worship must edify believers.*
- 4) **Are they profound and substantial?** Do the lyrics elevate or trivialize the message? Do they honor or dishonor God's character and deeds? Is there a shallowness cast over truth and Christian experience or a thoughtful engagement with it?
- 5) **Are they clear and understandable?** Do the lyrics clearly communicate the message in an understandable way? Is the message obscured by outdated language or overly popular language that will soon be outdated? Is there an enduring quality to the words chosen?
- 6) **Are they addressed to the heart and mind?** Do the lyrics address the heart as well as the mind (i.e. songs that provoke proper affections of the heart as well as godly intellectual reflection)? Is there a balance between songs that are weighty and thought provoking (i.e. songs that focus on deep truths) as well as those that are simple (but not trivial), meditative, repetitive (e.g. note Psa. 136) and responsive in nature?
- 7) **Are they marked by variety?** Do the lyrics reflect a balance in emphasis (cf. Eph. 5:19 & Col. 3:16 – *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*)? Do they reflect songs addressing God directly (first & second person) as well as those which speak about God (third person)? Do they focus on God's character as well as His deeds? Do they reflect doctrine and theology (what we believe) as well as experience and practice (what we do)? Do they emphasize a corporate dimension (the church) as well as a personal dimension? Do they reflect the wide variety of responses of worship (i.e. contrition, thankfulness, joy, praise, peace, celebration, reflection, exaltation, etc...)? Is the variety of songs primarily devoted to God as the subject (rather than ourselves)? *God is the focus of our worship.*

## **SUBJECTIVE CRITERIA** (*Music* – where preferences must be guided by principles – Phil. 4:8):

- 8) **Is the music wholesome?** Does the musical style reflect worldly values or that which can be distinctively identified with historic standards of artistic truth, dignity and beauty?
- 9) **Is it excellent and creative?** Does the music appeal to standards of musical excellence? Does it have a well crafted form with good melody, harmony and rhythm? Is it original and artistic, rather than formulaic or derivative?
- 10) **Is it memorable and singable?** Does the song have a memorable tune? Does the music help one to remember the lyrics lodging its truth in the heart and mind? Does the song lend itself to the average person to learn and sing? Does it have a reasonable melody and rhythm that allows for easy congregational singing or can be adapted for such? Is the vocal range within acceptable limits for most people to sing? *Congregational singing should not require professional abilities.*
- 11) **Is it compatible?** Does the music fit the lyrics? Do the two go well together as an appropriate expression of the message or meaning of the song? Does the music lend itself to the spirit and content of lyrics for worshipping God that is distinct from music for mere enjoyment? Does the music hinder or enhance the message of the lyrics given the particular kind of emphasis (e.g. the mood – joyful, solemn, majestic, etc...)?
- 12) **Is it stylistically balanced?** Does the music reflect a balance and variety of different styles (cf. Psa. 150) that communicate to a broad range of tastes and aesthetics (e.g. seniors and well as young people) while retaining wholesome and excellent values? Is there a balance between historic hymns and songs as well as contemporary musical styles? Is there an appreciation and utilization of the wide variety of aesthetic expressions and creative abilities God has endowed us with?

*Scott Christiansen is Pastor of the Summit Lake Community Church in Mancos, Colorado.*