

Evaluating New Songs

For the longest time it seemed brethren were fairly certain Sacred Selections contained just about every hymn that needed to be sung. Like it or not, that has certainly changed. Many congregations are now using some other hymnal other than Sacred Selections. Many congregations have also added a “supplemental” book (often paperback) that contains all kinds of new hymns. Several brethren are actively writing and publishing new hymns, with an emphasis on songs of praise. All of these new song books and new songs have dramatically expanded the options in our singing, but is that a good thing? Just how do we go about evaluating all these decidedly newer songs?

Is it too much to suggest that the criteria for new songs is no different than that which should be used for old songs, indeed, for every song? The New Testament mandates acapella singing of “*psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*” (Eph 5:19) but allows us considerable liberty in choosing those songs. We can sing fast or slow, in four-part harmony or in unison. There is nothing inherently good about old hymns nor is there anything inherently wrong with a song simply because it was written yesterday. We are at liberty to sing old or new songs, but there are some important considerations that should apply to every hymn we sing.

For example, a song ought to be a scripturally accurate. The most important element of any hymn is the words. If those words reflect or teach false doctrine then the song fails. This is true of any hymn, old and new. Singing has a teaching aspect to it. Who wants to teach error? Of course, hymns receive some poetic license because they use poetry and imagery to express our emotions and feelings. This is true in the Bible’s psalms (see Psalm 51:5, for example). Thus if our standard is to go over every song with a fine tooth comb and a magnifying glass we may end up unable to sing even the inspired psalms in Scripture! That isn’t fair to any hymn, and it is certainly unfair when that standard is only applied to new songs. Yet if something notably stands out as being inconsistent with New Testament Christianity why should we have such a “fly in the ointment” in our worship? We have no shortage of hymns. Let us sing what is clearly and obviously scripturally correct.

A song ought to be sing-able. In Restoration Days most hymns were sung to the same tune so that brethren could concentrate on the words instead of its music. We have come a long ways since then! More melodies have been introduced, and then four part harmony became popular. As brethren’s musical sophistication grew so our taste for more and more complicated songs has grown. Now we sing hymns with repeats, different parts “leading out,” all kinds of musical notation and a variety of choruses and endings. Some hymns are so complicated one needs a roadmap to get through them! We need to remember that if a song becomes too complex for “regular folk” (especially those without formal musical training) to sing then it loses its functionality in worship. If the worshiper is paying too much attention to the repeats and holds then he or she may not be giving sufficient attention to the words and that is not good at all!

A song ought to edify. In a meeting once I found myself singing with a congregation from their “supplemental” song book. We sang a hymn where each part (tenor, alto, soprano, bass) were singing different words all at the same time! I wonder if an elementary school used four different teachers teaching four different subjects simultaneously if the students could learn anything at all? Such chaos and confusion is not conducive to learning, so what was such doing in the assembly of the saints? For certain, the hymn we sang sounded very beautiful but I could not pick out any specific words or hardly keep up with what I was singing. From a spiritual standpoint, it seemed like a complete disaster. How could anyone be edified when nothing could be distinctly heard? Colossians 3:16 says we are to “*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.*” “Teaching and admonishing” requires some degree of clarity, doesn’t it? Further, it is fair to note that teaching also requires a *message* that is being taught. Some songs repeat the same word over and over. Repetition can be a part of scriptural singing (see Psalm 136). But what is taught, what is the message, in the continual repetition of one word?

Singing is one of the easiest acts of worship and also one of the hardest. It is easy because it involves a physical action on the part of the worshiper, it is something we can all participate in. However, it is hard to keep one’s heart engaged while doing the mouth and tongue sing, isn’t it?

We should be glad that new songs are being written that help us praise God and edify one another in contemporary terms and through new music styles. Just their newness may help us “re-engage” in singing in a better way. That said, all that is new is not necessarily good. Let us choose wisely, both from our rich heritage of grand old hymns and these new songs, so that when we are singing our music is beautiful to God because we are *“singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord.”*

- by Mark Roberts

“We Love You. . .”

... that's what parents have always told their children, but sometimes the kids have trouble understanding it. After all, they don't always get everything that they want. And, they frequently get punished when they do something wrong. Parents are quick to explain that love is responsible for the way things are - "We're doing this because we love you" – but that doesn't make it any easier to understand.

The reason children have trouble understanding a parent's love is because they are immature. Typically, when they become mature adults, with children of their own, they understand it perfectly. In fact, they often act in exactly the same ways that their parents did. They even tell their kids, "I'm doing this because I love you." Some day the kids will understand this – and the cycle continues.

There are some folks in the church who always insist that everything be kept pleasant and positive. They do not like it when false doctrine is exposed, and they can not stand for false teachers to be named. If a situation becomes so serious as to require that a congregation publicly discipline an unruly member, they are appalled. Their complaint is that we "don't have enough love". But we argue that such actions are actually a sign of our love.

The reason these folks don't understand this level of love is because they are spiritually immature. Like children, their view is limited to the present moment rather than the long term.

Hopefully, we all will become mature enough to recognize that true love for one another will cause us to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort" as needed (2 Tim. 4:2). Love is like that sometimes.

- by Greg Gwin