

# How I Choose Songs for Corporate Worship

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Church music leaders are often bombarded with song requests from the congregation...this is a good thing! It tells the music leader that there are passionate worshipers out there who seek to make worship a life-habit rather than merely a Sunday morning hobby. However, sometimes people don't realize that *not every song is suitable for corporate worship*. Many times people wonder why I choose the songs I do or why I'm *not* choosing songs they might think I should. In my "Philosophy of Worship and Music in the Church" (above), I've outlined some of my criteria for song selection, but here I'll attempt a more thorough explanation. Always open to refinement (*semper reformanda!*), I love to receive challenges and questions about my arguments and philosophy. In fact, my philosophy has been dramatically honed over the years by fruitful conversations and dialogues I've had with thoughtful people. So here's a glimpse into my process:

**1) I try to keep a continual pulse on the congregation's spiritual needs and preferred modes of musical expression.** This is important as a first consideration because, even if one has fulfilled all the other criteria, if a local assembly's needs are at a different place, or if the church's vision, mission, and direction are not considered, a congregational song can often be ineffective. When I choose songs, I'm always asking questions such as: Where is the congregation at spiritually? How do they need to grow and stretch in our worship? What aspects of God do we need to reflect on at this time? Additionally, I'm conscious of what styles and arrangements of music seem to connect tangibly with the congregation. This is admittedly subjective and very hard to pin down in a large church, but I at least try to take these thoughts into consideration.

**2) I get my hands on everything under the sun.** I am constantly reviewing tons of music and hundreds of songs. I'm buying and reviewing albums from all swaths of (mostly Western) Christendom. Just to let you know, here are the artists I most regularly review and pay attention to (I've starred the ones I find the most continued value in):

## Out of the United States

*Indelible Grace* (Nashville, TN)\*  
*Red Mountain Church* (Birmingham, AL)\*  
Christopher Miner\*  
Chris Tomlin\*  
*Sovereign Grace Music*\*  
*David Crowder Band*  
*Passion*  
*Lincoln Brewster*  
*Fernando Ortega*  
*Caedmon's Call* (their 2 worship albums)\*  
*Paul Baloche*  
*Desperation Band* (New Life Church)  
Charlie Hall  
Kristian Stanfill  
Christy Nockels

## Out of Great Britain

Tim Hughes  
Vicky Beeching\*  
Matt Redman\*  
Keith Getty\*  
Stuart Townend\*  
Brenton Brown\*

## Out of Australia

*Hillsong*  
*Hillsong United*

Additionally, I rely on a few sources to give me good feedback on the music that's out there. I call friends and colleagues in the music/worship-leading field and ask them what they've been listening to and doing in their church. I fly through the album reviews in *Worship Leader Magazine* (though they're often unfortunately not discerning and critical enough in these reviews). I also subscribe to *songDIScovery*, an album of new music

from new worship music artists across the world put out monthly. Other than these, I'm frequently scouring our hymnal and countless others for texts and tunes which stir the soul. I'll occasionally write something of my own, too.

**Some explanation:** A growing movement of people (particularly in Reformed circles) are latching on to the idea of taking the texts of old hymns and setting them to new, singable, tasteful music. *Indelible Grace* is the forerunner for this, and Red Mountain Church has marvelously followed suit. Not many in evangelicalism have made themselves aware of this congregational song gold mine, but my hope is that they soon will. I am sold out on this movement, and want to be a part of its cultivation in American evangelicalism. While I appreciate listening to much of David Crowder, Passion, and Hillsong, I often find their congregational songs too unsingable, enigmatic, and/or scattered in thought (see below for detail on these criteria). The Brits (esp. Beeching & Redman) are generally a bit more deeply biblically reflective (though I do find considerable depth in Crowder on occasion), more theologically rich, and more substantive, even though their songs sometimes teeter on the brink of unsingability.

People often ask me, "Why don't you do things like *Third Day*, *Newsboys*, *Jeremy Camp*, or <insert Christian rock band/artist here>?" My short and probably too simplistic answer is that such groups do not write congregational songs; they write performance songs. Just because a song is meaningful and stirs your heart (and my heart is stirred by the music of such artists!) does not mean that the song is fit for congregational worship on Sundays. There is crossover, however, but in general, these groups aren't writing songs for congregational worship, unless they've put together a worship album. Even so, those albums tend to fall short of the criteria outlined below. (Some still might argue that they've seen these groups' songs done well in the congregational setting. I'm skeptical. In my experience, I've looked out on congregations during the singing of such songs and noticed a sizeable amount of people not singing simply because they couldn't keep up. The people that were singing I suspect were avid Christian music listeners who knew the music already. But if they were to put themselves in the shoes of the first-time singer/listener [which we *always* must do!], they'd realize just how difficult some of these songs are to translate into congregational worship.)

**3) I sift congregational songs through my criteria.** Some might view this criteria as overly critical, too restrictive, and even Spirit-quenching. I view it as responsible, pastorally necessary, and obedient to the Spirit's as He speaks through Scripture and experience. Furthermore, an average congregation can only learn about 10-15 new songs per year, and with such limited space, I *have* to be incredibly discerning and selective. So whatever passes through the following criteria makes it onto my list of potential songs. (Note: I've offered examples of good and bad songs to help better articulate my criteria.)

- **Is it singable?** Does it have a melodic line that is not overly difficult to sing, either because of large and frequent note-interval jumps or in overly-complex rhythm? Does it contain a vocal range which is appropriate to the average person? These things immediately kill a congregation's participation and stifle the whole purpose of congregational worship. This one criterion often rules out a vast majority of contemporary Christian music and even a sizeable percentage of what is, ironically, placed in the "worship" category.

Good Example: **Chris Tomlin's "How Great is Our God"** has a beautiful, melismatic melody in the verses and a lifting rise as the chorus progresses...and, a modern yet Psalm-like expression of the transcendence of God!

Bad Example: **Matt Redman's "Let Everything that Has Breath"** seems to struggle here. The verses of the song have a quick and inconsistent rhythm, and it's almost impossible to get a congregation to sing together on them.

- **Does the music complement the text?** In the art of congregational song, the music is subordinate and subservient to the text. That means if we have a song whose musical setting is incongruous with the text (i.e. a jubilant song of praise set to a slow, dirge-like minor key, or a song of mourning and penitence set to a peppy, synchopated beat), it is unfit for worship, because the music does not help describe the text...it detracts from it. And anything that distracts us in our worship of God violates the spirit of 1 Corinthians 14.

Good Example: "**Lord Most High,**" by **Gary Sadler and Don Harris** is set to a rousing 6/8 rhythm with a melody that rises on the words "Lord Most High ." Very fitting!

Bad Example: **Indelible Grace's "O Come and Mourn with Me Awhile"** is a beautiful and textually rich hymn about mourning the crucifixion of Jesus, yet it is set to a happy, major-key melody with an overly excited rhythm.

- **Is it theologically precise?** Is the text in accord with the truth of Scripture? Even more pointedly: Does the text potentially blur things which are clear in the Bible? For instance, sometimes I find songs which imprecisely describe aspects of one person of the Godhead which are only appropriate for another (e.g. the *Father's* work in regeneration, the kingship of the *Spirit*, etc.). Other times, descriptions of spirituality are imprecise (e.g. that God's presence is "intoxicating" to Christians). Yet other times, we find songs that are so uninformed that they are simply wrong (e.g. a song that conveys a universalistic conception of salvation).

Good Example: **Vicky Beeching's "Great is Your Glory"** is outstanding here. It combines rich theology with a very simple expression of worship.

Bad Example: **Darrell Evans' "Your Love is Extravagant"** has us saying to God, "Your fragrance is intoxicating in our secret place." What does the Bible say about Spirit-filled worship? "Do not get drunk on wine...but instead be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18) seems to imply that a state of drunkenness is the antithesis of what it looks like to be Spirit-filled. "Your Love is Extravagant" is imprecise at best, biblically erroneous at worst. Even more indicting, the musical setting sounds strikingly similar (a coincidence, no doubt) to Dave Matthews' sexually provocative song, "Crash into Me" (maybe it's only me that hears that connection).

- **Is it logically coherent?** Does the song convey one or a few main ideas, or is it scattered and piecemeal in its text and expression? Unfortunately, some songs fail at this point. They are seemingly random in their expression, from phrase to phrase, with little or no logical connection with what has come before and/or what comes after. Sometimes, the thought is not well-connected or linear enough. They come across sloppily written or overly spontaneous without purpose. Sometimes, songs are incoherent simply due to bad grammar!

Good Example: "**In Christ Alone**" by **Keith Getty and Stuart Townend** excels here. Each verse expresses incredible truths about the atonement of Christ and our standing within it, and even better, each verse logically ties into the next beautifully, culminating in the glorious final verse about Christ's resurrection and our life within that reality.

Bad Example: I find some **Hillsong** music in this category. Some of their songs seem to be random expressions of love and stock "Christian-ese" phraseology with no central point or thought. I understand that expressions of love are sometimes appropriately communicated in a "stream of consciousness" kind of way, but it seems a little too subjective and disjointed for *public, corporate* worship. Such songs are better for private worship.

Bad Example: I love **David Crowder's, "Wholly Yours,"** but the phrase "this just might could be" is odd, confusing, and grammatically troublesome!

- **Is it God-centered?** Is the song directed toward God or to my subjective experience? Is the song a song praising God, or merely reflecting on the benefits he bestows to me in the experience of worship? There *is* an appropriate time and place to reflect upon ourselves and our state before God, but only in connection (either explicitly or implicitly) with how it brings glory to God.

Good Example: **Charles Wesley's "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" (new music by Red Mountain Church)** is a song totally wrapped up in our own sin, anguish, and destitution, but yet it brings tremendous glory to God because it reorients the believer to acknowledge that it is *God alone* who is worthy of praise and adoration for the great work of salvation in the life of a sinner.

Good Example: **Matt Redman's "Blessed Be Your Name"** is one of those rare gems that perfectly bridges the subjective experience of humanity with the unchangeable glory of the Divine.

Bad Examples: **Matt Redman's "Intimacy"** fails here as a congregational song. It may be great for private worship, but our focus in public worship is the adoration and praise of God. **Michael W. Smith's "Healing Rain"** likewise is overly focused on the benefits of worship (healing) as opposed to the object of worship (God).

- **Is it Gospel-centered?** In speaking of our devotion to and work for God, is it always set in a context of our response to grace, rather than giving off a sense of earning God's pleasure or favor? Does it verge on boasting too much of *my own* commitment and devotion rather than the merits of Christ's finished work?

Good Example: **"Before the Throne of God Above," by Charitie Lee Bancroft and Vikki Cook** is marvelous here. It is a beautiful exposition of the atonement theology found in the book of Hebrews, and calls us in to worship with boldness, based on the merits of Christ.

#### **4) I try to pick the best of the best, or else exchange what might be my top pick for something that seems more contextually appropriate to our congregation at the time.**

Not all songs that pass the criteria make it onto the playing field. There is a limit to the amount of songs a congregation can learn in a year, and sometimes congregations are at given times in need of certain messages or expressions of worship more than others. Sometimes I've even introduced songs only to sense one or two weeks later that it's just not working or fitting with our congregation. Songs may be perfectly appropriate, but they may not connect with us at the moment.