

Picking Songs To Sing In Corporate Worship

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Not all that long ago, a church member approached me and asked how we go about selecting the songs that we sing on Sundays for the worship service. After giving thanks for such a wonderful question, I went on to recount about 6 or 8 things that we try to bear in mind when selecting the songs and hymns to sing. I decided to jot them down and I will elaborate briefly on each point.

1. **First and foremost, the Theology is always most Important** — Whatever song we sing in corporate worship, the ultimate question is: *‘what does the song teach in these lyrics!’*? It must be biblical, accurate, true. We refuse to sing shallow, inaccurate, or even songs that are unclear about the message it conveys. We understand that music teaches in the worship service far more than we may realize. It must be, then, that the song lyrics teach a thoroughly biblical message.
2. **Choose a song as a “call to worship”** — Often one of our first songs (or two songs) may come under the theme of “Call to worship.” This means that the song is sung either first in the service or near the beginning of the service (for instance, after the announcements or a Scripture reading & prayer). A song that leads us in a “call to worship” is a song that we sing to God *and others*. In singing the words, we are calling or summoning or inviting or reminding one another in the assembly to praise & worship God! For example: “Come Christians join to sing” is a classic call to worship! These are wonderful ways that we can teach the congregation about coming into God’s presence and even together, corporately, and vocally invite one another to worship the King!
3. **Sing about God (describing God, Jesus)** — Many hymns describe God in his character, in His nature, in his gospel. These hymns are usually marked by singing about God in the third person — “Holy, Holy Holy, Lord God Almighty” and countless others. These are wonderful songs to insert early on in the song set. These songs teach truth, they remind us of God, they bring Scriptures to mind as we sing songs that allude to and echo Scripture texts.
4. **Sing To God (obedience to Him, personal reflections)** — Then there are songs and hymns that speak to God. These come in the second person descriptions: “Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee” or “Jesus I my cross have taken all to leave and follow Thee.” Songs such as this do not so much speak *about* God (though they certainly can!) but they are much more *personal* and *individual* as we speak from our own hearts to God as our God, our Savior, My King, My Lord.
5. **Starting with quicker tempo and working toward slower more contemplative** — Of course there are songs with all kinds of tempos and variation of rhythms. We try to be mindful, generally speaking, in picking a song or two that begins with a thunderous call to worship, and then a song that brings us to the biblical description of God, Christ, His gospel or His Word. Then we may transition into a slower song that is more thoughtful, meditative, prayerful, and even slower in pace and tempo so

that the singers can pause, consider, think, and worship with the mind while singing with the heart.

6. **Select a song that prays/prepares for the sermon (or responds to the sermon just heard)** — There can be a wonderful blessing in picking a song that deliberately prepares the congregation for the preached Word. This can also take place when the Word has just been preached. A song can be selected to *respond* to the preached Word and call the people to action. Show us Christ, Speak O Lord, Brethren we have met to worship and lots of others can fit this category of deliberately preparing the assembled people to hear from God's Word.
7. **Focus must always be on the Truth conveyed not the popularity or style.** — I give no thought to how popular a song is or how often it comes up on popular "Christian" radio. I could care less. What we do give our attention to is the truth conveyed by the lyrics. What is the progression of the verses? What is the doctrine being stated? How deep is it? How accurate is it? Does it fit well with the theme of the worship service and with the theme of the sermon to be preached? So we pick songs not because they're popular or cool or trendy or relevant or well-liked. We pick songs that are packed with glorious truth that will aid the mind in focusing on the biblical truth to be preached.
8. **Select songs that are singable corporately, tempo, rhythm.** — Some songs, and many contemporary songs, can be difficult to sing in a corporate setting. Maybe the rhythm or tempo or timing of a song just may not lend itself to corporate worship. That's why the song meter of hymns is so helpful. It keeps the singer going in a simple, clear, understandable, and repeatable manner. For us in our particular local church, we do not encourage nor practical "special music" where someone sings a solo. We want the church to sing together with and lift our voices and hearts together with each other in songs and praises to God.
9. **Pick songs that draw us into Church history — sustained the church thru centuries.** — Countless hymns have been sung through the history of the Church. We could sing the Doxology and go back to the 17th century. We could sing A Mighty Fortress and almost hear Martin Luther thundering this forth with the German saints in the 16th century. We can sing Now thank we all our God with Martin Rinkart in the dark days of suffering and death in 17th century Germany. We could join our voices with Charles Wesley in the 18th century when he wrote And can it be that I should gain? So many hymns were sung in joyful times, in times of plague and death, in times of fear and uncertainty and times of corruption. Yet, God remains the same. Hymns have held the people of God high in lofty praise through some of the darkest seasons of the church. Singing hymns brings us into this wonderful history of hymnology and psalmsinging in the church.
10. **Select Songs that enhance the preaching text/theme (or, the gospel, or an attribute of God)** — Of course, one of the great reasons we pick the songs we sing is to serve and aid the theme or text that will be preached. If there are songs that go well with the text or attributes of God that will be heralded from the Word, we want to sing about them as well. So this takes deliberate prayer, thoughtful planning, purposeful intentionality but we trust that it blesses the people of God when they come to gather with the saints to worship Christ the living and risen King!