

**Worshiping the Lord Together in Song:
Looking at Our Songs Through the Lens of Scripture
*A workshop in five sessions***

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GUIDE FOR WORKSHOP COORDINATOR

This series of workshops can be an effective way to help a congregation in any culture to better appreciate the importance of congregational singing, consider carefully what they are currently singing, and strategize ways to improve their repertory. I designed these workshops primarily for church leaders and musicians, but any member of the congregation could benefit.

Workshop organization and implementation

The leader of these workshops serves as a moderator rather than a teacher or lecturer. Participants find answers to specific questions in Scripture and in the lyrics of their congregation's songs. This self-discovery format keeps participants engaged, encourages critical thinking, and gives them the opportunity to edify each other.

The amount of time needed for each workshop will vary from culture to culture. For example, Americans generally like a fast-paced discussion time. When they hear a satisfactory answer to a question, they are ready to move on. However, the French enjoy debating every possible answer and giving each person the opportunity to share his or her opinion. In some cultures, the oldest participants will do all the talking and younger participants will stay respectfully silent. Time for translation should also be taken into account.

If you get the handout translated into the trade language or local dialect, and if someone serves as an interpreter during the workshop, it is wise to ask him or her if they prefer having a copy in English.

The number of participants should be considered when planning the workshops. The larger the group, the fewer people will be comfortable speaking in public. Therefore, it is advisable to split larger groups into smaller ones for discussion, assigning one question per group. After a certain amount of time, everyone can convene to hear a spokesperson from each group share a summary. In smaller settings, participants may take turns reading the passages out loud and tackling each question together.

Session 1: Why do we sing together as a congregation?

Before launching into the material in this first session, it is helpful to ask each participant why he/she chose to attend and what they hope to learn.

In this session, the moderator guides the participants in critical thinking about congregational singing. These important questions lay a foundation for all the other material

that will be covered. Obviously, a deep dive into the theology of worship is not possible in a short period of time, but participants will benefit from considering these key passages in God's Word. I have provided possible answers for each question, but participants often suggest other excellent examples. This teacher's guide includes more Scripture references than the handout. Exact references should be verified when using Bibles in other languages because of differences in versification.

1. **Does worship begin with God speaking to us, or us speaking to God?** (Hebrews 1:1-2, examples from the lives of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-4, 7), Moses (Exodus 3:1-6, 4:29-31), and Paul (Acts 22:6-11))

Revelation always comes first: worship is a response to revelation.¹ In these passages God always takes the initiative to reveal himself to mankind: "And the Lord said..." In response, these men of old worshiped by building altars, hiding their faces, falling to the ground, obeying God's commands, leaving their homes, etc.

2. **Why do we sing to the Lord? Who is he and what has he done?** (Psalms 100, 107, and 111)

We sing to praise God for who he is and what he has done. For example, he has made us, he is good and faithful to each generation, he has delivered us from our enemies, he has led us, he has satisfied our souls, he has preserved our lives, and he is just, merciful, and compassionate.

3. **What happens in our own hearts as we worship God?** (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 3:18)

We are edified, instructed, and transformed as we sing God's Word, through the working of the Spirit.

4. **What happens in the hearts of unbelievers who hear us worship God?** (Psalm 40:3, 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, Psalm 96:1-5 [Whom do they worship?])

Whether or not they realize it, unbelievers are confronted with their idolatry and their need for repentance when they hear believers praise the true God. As truth is sung, they respond either by believing or by hardening their hearts (Hebrews 3.7-8, 4.2).

5. **How have our culture and upbringing influenced the way we sing in church?** (Answers will vary.)

For example, in Western culture today, people listen constantly to music, but they rarely sing. Therefore, their voices are losing flexibility, power, and range. Popular music often features soloists rather than groups singing in harmony, so our ears are not being stretched to pick out different vocal parts.

¹ Ron Man, "The Bridge': Worship Between Bible and Culture," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (ed. James R. Krabill et al., Pasadena, CA: International Council of Ethnodoxologists and William Carey Library, 2013), 16.

Also, Western pop culture is obsessed with extravagant musical performances featuring a high level of visual stimulation and sound amplification. People expect the same kind of super-charged emotional and visual experience when they come to church. Churches in non-Western cultures may face similar challenges or different cultural obstacles to congregational singing.

Conclusion:

We see from Scripture that our worship music should accomplish two important tasks at the same time:

- 1. Our songs should summarize God's revelation**
- 2. Our songs should express our response to God's revelation**

Amazingly, three audiences are listening at the same time as we sing:²

- 1. God: the primary audience**
- 2. Ourselves: we sing to one another and we exhort our own hearts**
- 3. Unbelievers: children, teens, visitors...often someone is present who is not yet a believer in Jesus**

It is no wonder that the most common command in Scripture is "Sing to the Lord!" Participants may identify other practical reasons for which we sing together, such as music's usefulness as a tool for memorizing theology and expressing our unity as the body of Christ.

Session 2: Church music and culture: Two truths, two perspectives

In this session, participants consider two truths that help guide us in making stylistic choices for congregational songs. This first section is important for any people group. The second part of the session describes two opposing perspectives on music and culture that are common among evangelicals. If a local congregation has been taught explicitly or implicitly by Westerners that Western church music is superior, or if they are inclined to embrace Western pop-rock worship music as their primary music style, this section is very important. If they are already encouraging local arts development, you may want to skip this section.

Two truths:

- 1. Because God created us in his image, we are able to create beautiful art and music.** (Genesis 1.26-28; Genesis 4.17-22; 1 Chronicles 15.16, 22)
- 2. Because we are depraved sinners, our artistic and musical works are corrupted by the Fall.** (Romans 3.9-18; Ephesians 4.17-24)
 - a. What happens if we forget one of these truths when we choose worship music?**

If we forget one or over-emphasize another, we can get into trouble: either we become overly accepting of anything that humans create, or we become overly suspicious.

² Philippe Viguier et Kevin Stauffer, *Manuel pour la conduite du culte : Pour une louange intentionnelle dans l'Église* (Lyons, France : Editions Clé, 2020), 86.

b. How does the Bible describe this present world and the people who love it?
(Ephesians 4.17-19, Romans 1.24)

The Bible describes the Gentiles (unbelieving non-Jews) as walking in the futility of their minds, with darkened understanding, alienated from the life of God because of ignorance and hardness of heart. They are callous and committed to sensuality and impurity.

c. How does the Bible describe God's people? (Ephesians 4.20-24, 5.7-11, 1 Peter 2.9)

We are actively putting off our old selves and being renewed in the spirit of our minds. We are putting on the new self which reflects the character of God in righteousness and holiness. Our lives should be full of light, focusing on that which is good, right, and true, seeking to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. We are not to take part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. We are to be holy, distinct, and set apart.

Clearly, the worship of the redeemed people of God should be distinct from the carnal, immoral ethos of the world. However, just what does that distinction sound like on a practical level when it comes to church music?

Two perspectives:

- 1. The "one-culture" perspective:** Biblical worship has one particular shape that is naturally reproduced across the world. According to this perspective, the most godly, holy music we can sing are the songs written by Western Protestant churches in the past few hundred years.

In other words, some Christians believe that truth, goodness, and beauty have found their ultimate expression in the hymns of Western Protestantism. Scott Aniol is an articulate defender of this position, which he calls the "sanctificationist" view of culture. (I chose the term "one-culture" for the handout because it is easier to translate.) Based on his definition of culture as behavior, and his opinion that human behavior is always morally good or bad, he draws the conclusion that biblical worship has a very distinct shape that will naturally be reproduced anywhere in the world, as people grow in godliness.³ I call this view of culture and worship the "cookie cutter" view.

- 2. The "multi-cultural" perspective:** Biblical worship is expressed in many different ways within the framework that God has given us. The Lord has given us principles that he expects us to apply with wisdom in every culture. (1 Corinthians 14.40) He gives creative, musical talents to people in every culture and generation. (1 Samuel 16.17-18, Revelation 21.24-26)

Other believers (myself included) would argue that God did not give the church a musical score to follow in worship. If any culture could boast of knowing what styles of music

³ Scott Aniol, *By the Waters of Babylon: Worship in a Post-Christian Culture*. Kregel Ministry Publishers, 2015. Kindle.

God definitely approved of, it would be the Jews. Yet we find no prescriptive instruction in Scripture about preserving Jewish rhythms, melodies, harmonies, or song structures.

We know that the Church's worship should involve preaching and teaching, singing, offering, fasting, praying, and the ordinances. However, we do not find instructions about how long pastors should preach, how often the church should observe the Lord's Supper, or how the offering should be taken. We do not find detailed instructions about corporate worship, either. We can therefore conclude that while God gave us clear principles to follow in worship and church music, these principles are more like the boundaries of a painter's canvas than they are like a cookie cutter.⁴ Each biblical church will apply those principles in slightly different ways, even within the same culture. Furthermore, by observing the glorious diversity of God's creation, we can assume that he also enjoys musical diversity in worship. We read in Revelation 21 how the nations will walk by the light of the Lamb in the city of God, bringing into it their riches and honor (21:24-26). Perhaps the diverse ways of praising the Lord in the Church are a foretaste of the worship in Immanuel's land.

Session 3: Worship songs in the Bible

Where better to look than the Bible itself to find the best worship lyrics for congregational singing? God has given us an entire hymnbook in his Word.⁵ The Psalms and other songs in both the Old and New Testaments were inspired by the Holy Spirit and sung by Christ himself as well as God's people across the millennia.⁶ In this session, the moderator invites the participants to analyze these lyrics and make them their standard for choosing other hymns and spirituals songs for their congregation. While Western hymnwriters like Isaac Watts, Fanny Crosby and Keith Getty have made tremendous contributions to hymnody, they wrote (or still write) within the contours and constraints of English. Each language has idiosyncrasies that are reflected in its poetry. Although this is equally true of the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms, its primary characteristic of parallelism is preserved in translation.⁷

The moderator may begin by choosing a song of Scripture (this list is provided to participants on their handout) **and demonstrating how to analyze its contents:**

- 1. According to this song, who is God and what has he done?**
- 2. How does this song exhort us to respond? How does it describe (or address) those who refuse to respond?**

⁴ Examples of these boundaries include reverence and awe (Hebrews 12.28-29), joy and gladness (Psalm 100.1-2), intelligibility (1 Cor. 14:15-17), and orderliness (1 Cor. 14.40).

⁵ The Hebrew term *selah* is sprinkled throughout the Psalms and the song of Habbakuk. Scholars are unsure of its exact meaning, but some believe it indicated a pause or musical interlude. Participants may enjoy tackling the question of the purpose and importance of musical interludes in worship services.

⁶ Michael Lefebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), preface.

⁷ However, the acrostic alphabet structure of Psalms such as Psalm 25, 34, and 119 cannot be preserved in translations.

This analysis often leads participants to express their amazement at the richness of the lyrics of Scripture. These song texts are packed full of truths about who God is and what He has done. Moreover, they serve a **double purpose of revelation and response**. Not only does God reveal himself to us in these lyrics, but he also provides words of response to that revelation in praise, confession, intercession, thanksgiving, etc. Clearly, the act of singing together as a congregation is not mere time-filler in a worship service. God accomplishes great things through it. “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11.33).

If time allows, **further questions** may be asked for deeper reflection:

3. What is the theme of the song?

We find a great variety of themes in the Psalms and in the other songs of the Bible. *For example, Psalm 119 is a celebration of God’s written Word, while the first half of Psalm 22 expresses extreme physical, spiritual, and emotional grief. The songs of the Bible have high spiritual nourishment, even when they are short and simple (like Psalm 23).*

A **bonus question** that is not in the handout:

What is the song’s nutritional value or text load? (I.e., how many distinct truths does it contain about God’s revelation or our response?) For example, in Psalm 84, we find sixteen different truths about who God is, what he has done, and how we should respond. Sixteen truths in twelve verses indicates a high nutritional value or text load.

Ethnomusicologist Roberta King refers to the “text load” of a song as the amount of information that it contains. A song with high text load contains many different words or concepts, while a song with low text load has few changes throughout. Most of the words stay the same throughout the song.⁸ In her years of ministry in Africa, she encouraged churches to develop songs that could support a higher text load, recognizing that believers in oral cultures are often dependent on songs and stories to teach them new information and help them meditate on Scripture.⁹

After this demonstration, **participants should be given the opportunity to analyze another song of Scripture or portion thereof and to share their findings with the group.** This time of biblical meditation is edifying for everyone.

Session 4: Our church’s worship songs

Next, participants should choose a song from their church’s active repertory and put it under the microscope.¹⁰ This is where things really get interesting! Before diving into

⁸ Roberta King, *A Time to Sing: A Manual for the African Church* (Nairobi, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1999), 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰ The **active repertory** (songs that are most frequently sung by a congregation) can be determined by keeping track of which songs they have sung more than once over a certain period of time. Ideally, the list should cover 6-12 months of songs, but a list from a shorter period of time can still be helpful. If the church does not have such a list, the organizer can simply ask participants which songs their church sings regularly. |

analysis, the moderator should introduce the participants to the **traffic light exercise** invented by Megan Myers. The goal of this exercise is to help them evaluate their lyrics for biblical accuracy and clarity.¹¹ **Lyrics deemed biblical are labeled “green,” questionable or vague lyrics are “yellow,” and unbiblical lyrics are considered “red.”** While poetry does involve ambiguity, and participants will undoubtedly disagree about what constitutes a “yellow” or “red” phrase in a song, this process will make them far more aware of what they are singing. If a particular song or a certain key phrase in a song is not biblically accurate or clear, its utility for the congregation is called into question. Sometimes changing a word or phrase can solve the problem; if not, the church leaders and musicians may decide to quietly retire the song from the rotation.

The moderator can assign one song per person, per couple, per group, or have everyone analyze a few songs together.

Revelation:

1. According to this song, who is God? What has God done?

Response:

- 2. What does this song tell us about how we should respond? What does it say about people who refuse to respond?**
- 3. What is the theme of the song?**
- 4. Do the traffic light exercise. Does the song have any “red” or “yellow” phrases?**

In conclusion, the moderator can ask a few broader questions:

Do our songs have many different themes?

On average, do our songs have a high, medium, or low level of spiritual nutrition?

The goal of this analysis is not to provoke sweeping generalizations, such as “All worship song lyrics should have high text load,” or “Complex songs are better than simple songs.” Rather, the goal is to slow down and think about what we are singing. A congregation’s active repertory should contain a variety of themes, flavors, and “weights” of text load. Most importantly, the lyrics should be biblically accurate.

Session 5: Goals for our worship music

In this final session, participants zoom out and consider four facets of their worship music ministry. I have suggested a few goals for each facet. The moderator may choose to tweak these goals or if time allows, he or she could ask the participants to supply them. In

like to analyze a section of this repertory ahead of time and choose three or four songs that range from very poor lyrics to excellent lyrics.

¹¹ Megan Marie Meyers, “Developing Disciples Through Contextualized Worship Arts in Mozambique: Grazing and Growing” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2015), 49, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

conclusion, participants create a plan of action based on what they learned during the sessions.

1. **Our song texts: (Colossians 3.16, Ephesians 5.19)**
 - a. Theologically correct (songs that are distinctly Christian)
 - b. Saturated with Scripture
 - c. Varied in theme
 - d. Original (not translated) texts, when possible.
2. **Our melodies:**
 - a. Highlight the message and beauty of the text
 - b. Singable for the church family
 - c. Enjoyable for the church family
3. **Our musical accompaniment: (Psalm 81.1, 88.1) (According to our musical abilities and the desires of the church leaders)**
 - a. **Supports the singing discreetly (not overpowering the singing)**

Undoubtedly, members of the same congregation have different opinions about this subjective element of church music. **Church leaders may decide that certain musical styles should be avoided because of their connection to idolatry, immorality, or entertainment. Rather than avoid these discussions, we can lean into them prayerfully, considering disagreements as opportunities to demonstrate love to one another (1 Corinthians 13).**

4. **Our hearts:**
 - a. **Pleasing to the Lord (Amos 5.23-24)**

God looks at the heart (Matthew 15.8-9). He rejects our worship if we are living in sin (Matthew 5.23-24).

The moderator can adapt the questions listed below according to the local context. I have included several questions in addition to those given in the handout.

Questions for future growth:

1. **Song texts:**
 - a. **What criteria will we use to choose new songs?** Who will evaluate the songs before they are added to our repertory? Which of the “textual tests” that we learned during this workshop could be helpful? Is our active repertory too large, too small, or just right? If we need more songs, who will choose them? How will we teach them to the congregation? (A “hymn of the month” has proven to be a very effective method.)
 - b. **How many Psalms are we singing?** What Psalters are available in our language? Are the text and music of the Psalters a good fit for our congregation? If not, whom might we commission to adapt them or create new psalm settings?
 - c. **How many of our songs are translations?** What percentage of our current songs are translations from other languages? Do we know any mature believers who are gifted in poetry or musical composition whom we could

commission to write us a text or song for an upcoming event or preaching series?

Additional questions regarding the church's repertory: Do we sing any Bible stories set to music? Would such settings be helpful in our context? If so, when could we organize a song-writing workshop and whom could we invite?

2. Melodies:

- a. Can non-musicians in our church sing our songs without difficulty? Which songs seem to be the most memorable, singable, and musically pleasing to our congregation? Who wrote the music to those songs? What other songs are available by these hymnwriters that we could add to our repertory?
- b. Do the melodies stay in our minds all week long?

3. Musical accompaniment:

- a. How often do we check our volume?
- b. Are we practicing together? Are we preparing individually?
- c. Are we meditating on the song texts?
- d. Do we view ourselves as servants or music stars?

4. Our hearts:

- a. How can we better prepare for our worship service and the Lord's Supper?
- b. Are we at peace with each other?

Ending with a time of prayer will enable the participants to focus their thoughts and hearts on the Lord and seek His direction for this aspect of their corporate worship. Our God is worthy!

"Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12.28-29)