

Musical Meaning in Congregational Worship
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If God is to be pleased with our worship, we need to be discerning regarding the kind of music we use. We don't really realize what our music is saying. We're not aware that the music we use may be incorrect doctrinally or debasing our affections. In order to be discerning in this regard, it is necessary to evaluate the meaning of our music and ask whether that meaning is appropriate for congregational worship.

1. Music is a medium for communicating meaning.

A. Music communicates on four levels.

1. Textual Content (denotation - propositional truth)

Propositional truth is communicated through the text of the hymn itself. This is simply the content of the hymn.

2. Textual Form (connotation - affective truth)

Though the basic content of a hymn communicates propositional truth, meaning is never separable from form. In other words, propositional truth is not the only truth that is communicated in hymns. The form in which that propositional truth is packaged communicates as well. For instance, take the following example of near-synonymous words. The actual propositional truth communicated with each word is identical, or nearly so. But the connotative "flavor" of the second word is actually quite different from the first:

Girl : Wench
Boy : Chap
Mischievous Child : Brat

The terms mean the same thing propositionally, but they have different connotations. So when we evaluate hymns, we cannot stop with looking simply at the propositional content. We just also look at how it expresses that content. To illustrate this point further, consider the following example of an obviously sacrilegious poem, borrowed from Dr. Kevin Bauder:

God is here,
God is there,
God, you know is everywhere.
He's up your nose,
Between your toes,
He dwells within your garden hose.

The propositional truth that is communicated in this poem is certainly biblical—God is omnipresent. But any thinking person would agree that it fosters an inappropriate (comic) response to a divine attribute that ought to evoke awe, fear, and comfort.

Often even the metric composition of the poem can communicate different feelings. For instance, consider the well-known poem, “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas”:

‘Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

This poem was written with what poets call an *anapaestic accent pattern*. This means that a strong accent follows two weak accents (Ex: un-der-STAND). All poets know that this accent pattern should be used for “exuberant, ecstatic texts, for a feeling of lightness comes from the use of the basic triplet movement.”¹ This fits perfectly with the silly, light message of the poem.

But notice how the underlying meaning of the same text changes when penned in a new form:

‘Twas Christmas eve, the house was still,
And not a creature stirred.

This version was written in *iambic Common Meter*. Poets know that this accent pattern is “stately and noble and is best used for those texts which are propositional.”² In fact, this is why most hymns are written with an iambic accent pattern. However, this form does not seem to fit the mood of this trivial poem.

This is important, because when we evaluate what kind of music is acceptable for congregational worship, we must not only evaluate the propositional content of the text, but we must also evaluate the form to see if the emotional content is appropriate.

3. Associative Meaning (cultural and individual)

Some meaning in music is purely associative. For instance, listening to an orchestral version of the American National Anthem may engender pride and patriotism for some, but certainly not all. Someone may hear “Amazing Grace,” and because he has some specific experiential connection with the hymn, it will

¹ Austin C. Lovelace. *The Anatomy of Hymnody* (Chicago: G.I.A., 1965) p. 14.

² *Ibid.* p. 13.

“mean” something very specific to him that it does not to the person next to him.

This level of meaning will matter in our evaluation of music only in two respects:

- a. If the association is a shadow of intrinsic meaning.

Though associations don't *make* music wrong, they are sometimes clear indicators of what the music is really saying. For instance, just because a style of music is associated with a bar doesn't *make* it wrong to use in church. But the fact that it *is* used often in taverns may be a good indication that the music is intrinsically communicating messages that fit with the tavern lifestyle. Examining associations sometimes helps us to determine intrinsic meaning, which we will discuss more later.

- b. If the association is currently active in our culture/subculture.

The only other reason that association might affect our evaluation of music is if it carries a cultural meaning *now*. In other words, if a certain song or style of music communicates something negative in our current culture—even if that meaning is not intrinsic—it is probably better to steer clear of it for the sake of weaker brothers (1Co 8.9).

4. Intrinsic Musical Meaning (bioacoustic - affective truth)

Though one level of musical meaning is purely associative, another level of meaning is intrinsic. By *intrinsic* we mean that the very nature of the music communicates something. The communication is not due to a text, associations, or culture. The form of the music itself communicates meaning.

For example, I was once asked a variation of the famous riddle, “If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” The variation was, “If rock music plays in the woods, and no one is there to hear it, is it still wrong?” The answer is, *yes!* What makes some music wrong is not necessarily how individuals or cultures interpret the music. What makes it wrong is that it intrinsically communicates anti-biblical messages.

- a. Scriptural proof for intrinsic meaning in music

The Bible attests to this fact. Consider these passages:

Job 30.31

“My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep.”

Isaiah 16.11

“Wherefore my bowels shall sound like an harp for Moab, and mine inward parts for Kirharesh.”

Isaiah 30.19

“For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: thou shalt weep no more: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.”

Jeremiah 48.36

“Therefore mine heart shall sound for Moab like pipes, and mine heart shall sound like pipes for the men of Kirheres: because the riches that he hath gotten are perished.”

Certain musical sounds are compared to mourning, wailing, lamentation, and rejoicing. Scripture clearly connects music and emotion, even with individual instrumental sounds. Music clearly does communicate.

b. Experiential proof for intrinsic meaning in music

Common sense also attests to the truth of intrinsic meaning in music. The typical department store or restaurant recognizes this fact. Major studies have been conducted to determine what styles of music encourage shopping or eating. Classical music is compiled into CDs called, “Power Classics” and “The Ultimate Relaxation CD” because those songs communicate what the title indicates. Clearly, music communicates certain moods that are transmitted through human emotion. A good example of this is when David used music to affect Saul’s emotions (1 Sam. 16.23).

c. How music communicates

There are literally hundreds of theories for how music communicates, but the one that seems make the most sense is the Biocoustic Theory. This theory is based upon several presuppositions.

- 1) The first presupposition is that all humans express primary emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, and anger with the same outward, observable manifestations. For instance, humans in any culture at any time are generally slow and downtrodden when they are sad, jittery and tense when they are afraid, and fast and intense when they are angry. These universals begin to break down when we get to more specific higher emotions such as hope, anxiety, jealousy, or shame, but primary emotions are manifested the same ways universally. Various anthropologists have studied this phenomena. They researched various tribes who had no contact with other

cultures, and showed them pictures of facial expressions, and asked them to match them with various basic emotions. Even with no common cultural conditioning, the subjects chose the correct emotions. They tried the reverse study, asking the natives to portray the facial expressions of various primary emotions. The results were the same. They proved that all humans portray basic emotions the same general ways.

- 2) The second presupposition is that music that aurally reproduces these universal outward manifestations will universally communicate the primary emotions to which those manifestations are attached. In other words, if a certain piece of music is loud, fast, and intense, it is probably mimicking anger. Now to speak this simplistically is somewhat suspicious. Obviously we cannot narrow a musical composition down to just three moods—music is far more complex. But the fact is that music uses combinations of melody, tempo, dynamics, rhythm, etc. to reproduce natural human emotional responses. In doing so, it carries intrinsic meaning. And in reality, deep music examination is not required to discern this meaning. Any thinking person know when music communicates the exact opposite of what someone insists that it does:

“No lullaby will work if yelled jerkily at a brisk rate and no war march will have the desired effect if crooned mellifluously at a snail’s pace.”³

“. . . loud, fast music is arousing, whilst soft, slow music is soothing.”⁴

“If someone were to insist that a fast sprightly waltz was really sad or melancholy, we would refer him to the behavioral features of sad people and show him that when people are in that state they do exhibit the qualities in question (i.e., the qualities of sad music), rather than speed or sprightliness.”⁵

So what is important for our discussion is that we evaluate the intrinsic meaning of music to discern whether it is appropriate for congregational worship. This is significant when we understand that music can communicate unbiblical emotional responses just as it can communicate biblical ones.

B. We must evaluate all four levels when determining meaning.

³ Tagg, Philip. *Fernando the Flute*. Goteborg, Sweden: Gothenberg University, 1981, pp. 186-87.

⁴ Sloboda, John. *The Musical Mind: The Cognitive Psychology of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1985, p. 1.

⁵ Hospers, John. “Aesthetics, Problems of,” *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*. New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1967, p. 47.

2. Responses of the emotions are necessary for congregational worship.

This is why we use hymns in congregational worship in the first place! If it were not for the fact that responses of the emotions are necessary for worship to take place, we could just recite doctrinal statements all day. But the fact is that affective truth is just as important as propositional truth, and music facilitates this best.

Our Lord's statements to the woman at the well in John 4 make it clear that in worship, God desires responses of the spirit—that is emotional responses—to truth just as much as he desires the truth.

3. Only some emotional responses are acceptable for congregational worship.

- A. Jonathan Edwards' distinction between *affections* and *passions*

When discussing the emotional responses connected with worship, a differentiation must be made within the larger scope of "man's emotions." In present day culture all emotion is seen as an indivisible whole. Emotion is judged only based upon what it is directed toward and nothing else. No matter how those emotions are developed, their only criterion of worth is their object.

However, we must distinguish between different qualities of emotions, and they must be evaluated individually. Not just any emotion is appropriate for the worship of God. There seems to be one sense in which emotion manifests itself as immediate and fleeting and another sense in which it is developed and lasting. For the purposes of this discussion, the former will be labeled "passions," and the latter will be labeled "affections." Responses in worship should be from the affections and not simply contrived passions.

Well-known theologian Jonathan Edwards developed this distinction in his treatise, *Religious Affections*:

“The affections and passions are frequently spoken of as the same, and yet in the more common use of speech, there is in some respect a difference. Affection is a word that in the ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion, being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination, but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more over powered, and less in its own command.”⁶

“The affections are no other than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), pp. 26-27.

inclination and will of the soul.”⁷

Notice that he says the "inclination" and "will." These are objective, rational terms. Edwards was right when he said that "passions" can negate any sense of thought or rationality. These have no place in the worship of God, for one occupied with these irrational feelings cannot truly appreciate the objective truths about God and worship Him accordingly.

"Passions" are what a person experiences almost involuntarily without any thought whatsoever. They bypass the intellect and result in a subjective physical response. It's the kind of thing that happens when you see a Hallmark commercial that causes you to cry. Passions are not necessarily wrong; they are simply part of our physical makeup. But they certainly cannot be trusted as anything objective or concrete.

"Affections" as opposed to "passions" are volitional responses to acknowledged truth. These are not immediate, but developed; they are not fleeting, but lasting. They involved the whole of man—mind, will, and emotions—not just the latter.

This is the difference between laughing because you understand the punch line to a joke or laughing because you are being tickled. In order for the response of laughter to follow the telling of a joke, you must “get” it. In other words, something has to happen in your intellect before you can have the response—you have to understand what makes the joke funny. But the response of laughter that results from tickling has nothing to do with the mind—you do not have to intellectually assess the fact that you are being tickled before you respond with laughter. It is something purely surface and physical.

True, affectionate responses of worship will be based on an intellectual understanding of truth and will not be a fleeting passion that has quickly risen and will soon vanish.

B. Some affections are appropriate for congregational worship.

Some proper responses to truth about God are things like thanks, praise, exultation, and adoration (1Ch 16.29; Ps 7.17; Ps 68.4). Other passages demonstrate responses toward God such as brokenness, contrition, and grief (Ps 51.17; 38.18); longing and desire (Ps 42.1, 2; 73.25, 26); fear and awe (Ps 5.7; 33.8; 103.3-5); gratitude (Ps 100.4); and joy and hope (Ps 32.11; 42.5). God is truly glorified when His people respond to truth about Him. To glorify God is to magnify God's unique excellence through our responses.

When music elicits responses like these, it is likely appropriate for worship.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

C. Some passions are inappropriate for congregational worship.

Some music communicates messages that are inappropriate for believers in any situation. For instance, through accurately representing the movements and passions of the physical act of love through sound combinations, music can communicate physical union. Since this is an act reserved for the privacy of marriage, and public representations of this are certainly unbiblical. Another example is chaos, which can be easily represented through music, and is certainly wrong for believers.

There are other messages that are acceptable in some situations, but are not appropriate in congregational worship or even whenever they are mixed with something sacred. These unacceptable emotions are often slight distortions of emotions that *are* appropriate. In the following examples, both will be compared and contrasted:

1. Sentimentalism vs. Adoration

Adoration to the Lord is a response certainly commanded by Scripture and appropriate for congregational worship. Adoration means to love intensely and admire.

However, this is often confused with sentimentalism. Sentimentalism is false emotion that is out of proportion to a situation and not justified by it. It is usually drippy, mushy, schmaltzy, slushy kinds of feelings that have no basis in truth.

Unfortunately, churches are filled with sentimentalism. So many people are moved to tears when they hear a song, not because of any objective truth, but because it makes them feel good or they have some kind of nostalgic connection to it. This is not true worship!

2. Joviality vs. Joy

Christians should always exhibit joy (Php 4.4-7). As justified sinners, we certainly have much to be joyful about. But this is not the same thing as “happiness” or “lightness” or “joviality.” Just because we are joyful does not mean we should skip around all the time. In fact, it is almost certain that we *should not* skip around all the time. The issue here is maturity. This is the difference between an adult and a child at Christmas. The child will bounce around full of light, trivial happiness. But an adult, though full of joy in the occasion, will not express it in the way of the child. And in actuality, the adult is experiencing a more true, lasting emotion based in something concrete.

Yet much Christian music and church services are jovial instead of joyful. This cheapens spiritual truth. When songs sung in church are bouncy, light, and merry,

they do not accurately reflect Christian truth.

3. Levity vs. Community

It is important for believers to exhibit biblical fellowship with one another in the body of Christ. It is even important and necessary for believers to have a sense of community or “togetherness” as they worship the Lord with a unified voice. But often, in order to encourage these kinds of responses, churches will stoop to levity in their services. This may take the form of incessant joke-telling or even a “handshake chorus” in order to encourage fellowship. But this sort of baseless lightness of manner takes place at the expense of many more-biblical kinds of responses. This does not mean that church leaders should try to stifle what one pastor calls “real-life humor” that takes place in the course of a service. What it does mean is that they should not try to manufacture irreverent levity.

4. Romantic Affection vs. Reverent Love

While loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is the greatest command (Lk 10.27), this should never take the form of romantic affection. Too many songs intended for worship communicate more of what two lovers would share than the kind of reverent love that God desires.

5. Sadness vs. Sorrow

One important appropriate response of worship is sorrow (Ps 51.17; 38.18; Ecc 7.3). Contemplating our sinfulness, Christ’s sufferings, and the plight of mankind should elicit a brokenness or grief. But this should not be confused with sadness. Never should Christians lose the joy that comes only from a relationship with Christ.

6. Familiarity vs. Paternity

While believers are children of God and have a Father/Son relationship with Him through adoption, never should Christians be so “familiar” with Him that they slip into irreverence. Never in the Scriptures do we find believers interacting with God on an disrespectful, familiar level. Even David, who had a tender, close relationship with God, does not use the kind of vulgar language with God that many Christian songs do today.

7. Somberness vs. Sobriety

God commands believers to be sober (1Th 5.6; 1Ti 3.2; Ti 2.6; 1Pe 1.13; 5.8). This directly contradicts many of the inappropriate responses we have already seen (joviality, levity, etc.). However, sobriety is not somberness. Never should

believers be gloomy, melancholy, or grave.

8. Triviality vs. Simpleness

Simpleness in worship is certainly praiseworthy. God is pleased when believers offer modest offerings to Him. But nothing is commendable in triviality. Triviality deals with that which is superficial, insignificant, or of little substance. To make biblical truth trivial is to cheapen in and rob it of its significance.

9. Virtuosity vs. Excellence

God demands excellence and skill in worship (Ps 33.1-3). But to show-off one's talents through virtuosic or "flashy" performance draws attention to the performer and away from worship.

4. How to discern music that is appropriate for congregational worship.

A. Examine the textual content.

This is the most obvious step, but many churches even fail here. Unfortunately, many church leaders and members mindlessly sing through songs out of tradition, never stopping to evaluate what they are singing. We must, however, ask some important questions in order to evaluate our music.

1. Is the text doctrinally correct?

This may seem obvious, but do we really examine the texts we are singing? For instance, do we realize that when we sing, "Faith of Our Fathers," we are actually paying homage to the *Roman Catholic Faith* of author Frederick W. Faber? Or do we really understand the charismatic errors in "Pentecostal Power?" Or how about the A-millennial message behind "Onward Christian Soldiers?" We must be more careful with what we allow in our churches. Is "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder" or "There's a New Name Written Down in Glory" correct biblically?

Sometimes just a word or phrase is errant. For instance, in "All Hail the Power," can we really be identified as the "chosen seed of *Israel's* race"? Or is it biblically correct to sing that Christ "emptied Himself of all but love" in "And Can it Be?" In these cases, it may be sufficient to simply change the phrase to match with Scripture. For instance, we could change the phrase in "All Hail the Power" to "chosen seed of *Adam's* race," or the phrase in "And Can it Be" to "emptied Himself *and came in love.*"

Some words or phrases are simply empty of any biblically apparent meaning at all. For instance, what are "visions of rapture" in "Blessed Assurance"? Other

texts simply do not accurately portray biblical truth or Christian experience. For instance, is this statement really true: “I have ceased from my wand’ring and going astray, since Jesus came into my heart”?

We need to be careful to examine the texts of hymns and songs before we use them in our congregational worship!

2. Is the text appropriate for congregational worship?

a. Inappropriate messages

We must carefully evaluate our sacred music to determine if their message of the text (both propositionally and affectively) is really appropriate for congregation worship. Many messages are not.

The most common culprit of this in churches is sentimentalism, Sentimentalism in sacred music does not help foster deep affections for God, but rather surface emotionalism. This is certainly appealing to modern people because it fits perfectly with the emphases of pop culture. Kenneth Myers makes this point:

Sentimentality is as rampant in the culture of evangelicalism as it is in popular culture outside the church. Perhaps this is one of the reasons evangelicalism adapted itself to popular culture so readily. The friendliness of it, its lack of ambiguity, its sense of familiarity, its celebrityism—add to these qualities sentimentalism, and one realizes how much the two cultures have in common. But sentimentality may be the most corrupting of these qualities.⁸

Many modern Christians, wary of deep doctrine and influenced by mysticism and emphasis on experience, mistake feelings of nostalgia and sentimentality for worship. Someone may be moved to tears when they hear a song, but this is not necessarily worship. It may be a fond memory or a nostalgic connection to the song. One of the classic sentimental gospel songs is *In the Garden*:

“In the Garden”
I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

⁸ Kenneth A. Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Wheaton: IL: Crossway, 1989) pp. 84-85.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice,
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the garden with Him
Though the night around me be falling,
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling.

It is hard to distinguish the sentimentalism and almost romantic affection of this text from a common sentimental love song except for a few select phrases. Surely God would be pleased with a more biblical, truth-based expression of love for Him.

Another problem with especially some gospel songs is that their stanzas are a basic older hymn, but then someone tacked on a chorus to the end. Often the chorus has little if anything to do with the stanzas, and sometimes the chorus will even contain errant doctrine! A classic example of this is "Grace 'Tis a Charming Sound." Stanzas 1, 2, and 4 were written by Philip Doddridge, a strong 5-point Calvinist who would have never approved of the "Jesus dies for all mankind" line in the chorus by Ira Sankey!

b. Is the text congregationally oriented?

The use of pronouns in congregational music plays a large part in this emphasis. Much use of "I," "me," and "my" usually indicate a more individualistic song that may not be fitting for congregational worship. We must look beyond the pronouns, however. There are many songs that use singular personal pronouns that are nevertheless objective and corporate in nature.

We must therefore look at the content of the music and evaluate whether or not it expresses truth that is individual or congregational. Much sacred music is very introspective and personal. This is true for modern worship music as well as older gospel music. These kinds of texts are not appropriate for congregational worship. Instead, we should choose texts that are objective and corporate in nature.

3. Is the text understandable?

Writing hymn texts is a specialized skill. Not just any poem will work for congregational singing. One of the most important factors involved in evaluating hymns is whether or not the text is understandable when singing. This was one of Isaac Watts' chief reasons that he began writing hymns. The congregational songs of his day were filled with long, drawn-out sentences that were hard to comprehend while singing. As he began writing hymns, Watts determined that he would write hymns with short phrases that could be easily understood.

Another important factor with this issue is whether the grammar of the hymn is in the current vernacular or whether it is too antiquated. There are many similarities in this respect between hymns and Bible translations. The reason we use modern translations is so we can understand the Scriptures in our current language. We may have to set aside a good translation in favor of another because its language is too archaic. The problem with hymns, however, is that though we have many good "KJV"-category hymns—hymns that have great content but are perhaps a bit antiquated—we don't have very many "NASB"-, "NIV"-, "ESV"-type hymns. We have tons of "Good News for Modern Man" kinds of songs—songs that contain biblical truth at one level, but whose form trivializes or even contradicts the message.

We need to examine our hymns to make sure that they are understandable, and perhaps we will also find the need to be writing more "NIV" kinds of hymns—hymns that are quality in content, form, and modern grammar.

B. Examine the textual form.

As we saw earlier, form is just as important as textual content in the communication of meaning. We cannot only evaluate textual content, we must also examine how that content is "packaged."

1. Examine the vocabulary.

Authors will sometimes use vocabulary that is cheap or trivial sounding in their songs. Some of this depends on current culture. For instance, the word "awesome," though an appropriate word to describe God, may have somewhat more crude connotations in our current culture. We should choose hymns that use worthwhile vocabulary and reject that which uses trite words.

2. Examine the grammar.

Many songs are simply poor grammatically. If God desires skill in our musical worship to Him (Ps. 33:1-3), then surely this is not acceptable for congregational

worship.

3. Examine the structure.

Many hymns are “whiplash” hymns. They jump from one subject to another with no continuity. One of the marks of good hymns is that the content within stanzas and between stanzas forms some sort of progression of theme. Also, the skillful use of poetic devices in hymns help aid in the understanding and memorability of a hymn. Conversely, hymns with weak structures should be rejected.

C. Examine the associations.

As we discussed earlier, associations don’t *make* something evil, but they are often an accurate indication of what the music means. For instance, why is it that certain styles are always used to portray romantic love, or sentimentalism, or chaos, or aggression, or physical love? The fact that these styles are commonly used this way doesn’t *make* them portray these things, but it does give us a window into their likely intrinsic meaning.

It’s like this: if I hear an airplane in the sky, and the glare of the sun is preventing me from seeing exactly what shape the plane is, how could I discern what the shape is? By look at its *shadow*. Now, does the shadow *make* the plane have that shape? No; the plane intrinsically bears the shape. But the shadow does give me a good indication of what the shape is. With music, associations are often shadows, giving us a pretty good idea of what the meaning is.

D. Examine the intrinsic meaning.

Discerning musical meaning does not require an advanced degree in musicology or an extensive knowledge of music theory. Consulting experts in these areas is always wise, just like we would consult experts in science to determine whether smoking is harmful to our bodies, or just like we would consult a linguist to interpret a letter written in a foreign language.

But the fact of the matter is that the nature of how music communicates makes it possible for anyone to discern meaning. Musical meaning is fundamentally connected to human emotion and natural human responses.

1. What does the music sound like?

So, really, in order to discern what music means, we just have to ask, “What does this sound like?” Remember that music reflects the natural, detectable manifestations of primary emotions. Most researchers agree that the most basic emotions are joy, surprise, anger, disgust, sadness, and fear—they each have

discernable physical indicators. Music can also reflect other universal physical motion through rhythmic combinations—motion like marching, falling, sensual movements, chaos, and physical union.

When evaluating music for its worth, we should not get much more specific than this. If we try to assign sounds to physical objects or what anthropologists call “higher emotions” like shame, grief, or trust, we leave the realm of what is universal. These kinds of interpretations are individualistic.

But what we can do is discern what the music is intrinsically communicating on a basic, universal level. Again, consulting experts is helpful and wise, but not necessarily crucial.

2. Is the general mood appropriate for congregational worship?

After we have determined what basic, universal meaning the music carries, we simply have to ask whether it is appropriate for the situation in which it will be used—in this case, congregational worship.

a. Immoral meaning should be rejected.

There are certain kinds of meaning that should *always* be rejected. If the music communicates sensuality, lust, physical union, or unbridled anger, then no Christian should listen to it, let alone use it in worship.

b. Inappropriate meaning should be rejected.

There are other kinds of meaning that are not necessarily wrong, but are inappropriate for congregational worship.

Examples of this music are “Beautiful Dreamer,” “Daisy, Daisy,” and “Let Me Call You Sweathart.” While this style of music is not inherently sinful and does not seem harmful by our desensitized perception, it does not have the capability of carrying the deep, doctrinal, God-centered texts that should comprise the content of worship. This style of music is sentimental and trivial at best.

Another example would be romantic love. Music that intrinsically communicates this would not be acceptable for worship.

E. Additional considerations:

In addition to evaluating meaning, discernment in hymnody requires some additional considerations.

1. Is the hymn singable?

The nature of congregational song requires that hymns be singable. Singability is accomplished through various use of poetic devices and an attention to the singing abilities of the average singer.

2. Is the hymn memorable?

Because relatively few people can read music well, most people sing hymns basically from memory. This requires that the hymns be easily memorized. Continuity of content along with certain poetic devices can aid this, as well as a tune that can be readily grasped and remembered and an attention to hymn structures that aid in memorization.

If we are going to please God with the music that we use in our congregational worship, the we must be more selective and careful with what we chose. We must carefully examine our music to determine if their meaning is pleasing to God. God is not pleased when we chose things that are shallow, trite, sentimental, or that which expresses sentiments that are not appropriate for a relationship with Him. He wants us to chose music that communicates messages that fit our purposes for congregational worship.