

Discernment with Worship Music

As shepherds, our primary responsibility is to lead the congregation in worship that honors God. Worship is central to our Sunday gatherings, and each song should draw the church into meaningful praise rooted in Scripture.

A key question at the leadership level is how much the source of a song should determine its use in Sunday worship. Copyright law requires churches to give credit to song's source, which raises concerns that this acknowledgment might inadvertently endorse the broader theology of the songwriter or ministry.

For example, songs like *Man of Sorrows, O Praise the Name*, and *Scandal of Grace* are thoroughly Christ-centered and have resonated deeply with our congregation in the past. Their gospel-centered lyrics have been cherished in our services. Yet, questions arise about the ministries that produce such songs. Concerns over prosperity theology, leadership scandals, or questionable practices lead some to wonder if using their music implicitly endorses their broader theology.

This creates a dilemma: while we must protect the church from false teaching, we also aim to lead in heartfelt, Christ-centered worship. The question we must answer is, "What is the best path forward?"

Navigating through Unity – What's the shared interest?

The shared interest in this discussion has always been ensuring that our worship honors God, maintains theological soundness, and guards the congregation from serious false teaching that is contrary to the core tenets of the church. At the same time, we seek to protect the church from a legalistic and separatist culture which imposes extrabiblical rules and regulations on our worship gatherings. Furthermore, we want to sing songs that have resonated with the broader contemporary church, as we are not a traditional, liturgical, hymns-only church. Many faithful, gospel-preaching churches have chosen to establish that kind of worship culture. And we will not be the kind of church which elevates one church culture over another as more or less faithful, pure, or true to the faith.

We believe the best path forward is to implement songs into our worship gatherings which are biblically faithful and theologically sound and set guardrails for leading the church away from false doctrine. This approach avoids "canceling" people or ministries in the body of Christ, focusing instead on equipping the people within our congregation to discern truth from error. This will give us freedom to implement a broader selection of gospel-centered and Christ-honoring songs into our gatherings.

Who or what ministries are we talking about? (“The Big Three”)

The three worship ministries that are most relevant to this discussion are known as “The Big Three”—Hillsong, Bethel, and Elevation.

Hillsong Church & Worship (Brian Houston & Carl Lentz): Hillsong Church, founded by Brian Houston, has faced scrutiny for accusations of prosperity theology, which emphasizes health and wealth as signs of God’s favor, potentially diluting the gospel’s full message. Leadership scandals, including the moral failures of prominent pastors like Carl Lentz, have also sparked questions about the movement’s integrity. Despite these issues, Hillsong’s worship songs often convey clear biblical truths and have been embraced by many churches worldwide.

- Of the three ministries discussed here, Hillsong has given us the least number of reservations. They have written songs that frankly all churches should sing. At the top of the list are *Man of Sorrows*, *O Praise the Name*, *King of Kings*, *This I Believe*, and *The Passion*. These songs are profoundly gospel-centered and glorifying to the work of Christ on the cross and resurrection.

Elevation Church & Worship (Steven Furtick): Elevation Church is critiqued for its focus on positive thinking, self-empowerment, and vision casting, which can sometimes overshadow the core gospel message of sin, repentance, and the cross. The church’s growth strategies and the prominence of Furtick’s personality have also raised concerns about fostering a celebrity-driven culture. While Elevation’s music is widely loved, these criticisms highlight the tension between modern approaches and a commitment to foundational Christian doctrines.

- Steven Furtick’s ministry has drawn both praise and critique but labeling him a false teacher requires biblical discernment. False teachers, as described in Scripture, deny core gospel truths like Christ’s deity or salvation by grace. Furtick affirms these essentials, preaching Christ crucified and salvation by grace. While his emphasis on personal empowerment and vision casting can seem to overshadow the cross, his ministry has borne fruit, with many coming to faith and being baptized. A balanced approach acknowledges God’s work through his ministry while equipping believers to test everything against Scripture (Acts 17:11), avoiding overly simplistic judgments and fostering thoughtful discernment.

Bethel Church & Worship (Bill Johnson): Bethel Church, led by Bill Johnson, is often criticized for its focus on supernatural experiences like healing and prophecy, which many believe have overshadowed core biblical teaching. Concerns include teachings suggesting believers can achieve a level of divine authority similar to Jesus’ miracles and practices such as “grave soaking,” though this has been disputed and even shown to be unfounded accusations. While Bethel’s music is widely popular, these theological and practical issues raise concerns about potential doctrinal confusion, especially for those less grounded in orthodox teaching.

- **Hesitation with Bethel Music:** After careful research and discussion, we have decided to refrain from using songs created by “Bethel Music” or the lead pastor of Bethel, Bill Johnson, due to significant theological concerns and ministry practices that could likely create confusion. This decision isn’t about judging their sincerity or their salvation, but about guarding our congregation from potential stumbling blocks. To be as clear as possible, and for the time being, songs connected with the specific name “Bethel Music” or “Bill Johnson” will not be used in our corporate worship. We will not go to extremes of canceling songs with anyone associated with Bethel. Bill Johnson has family members who also create music. Thus, we will not rigorously or legalistically cancel any song just because it has the last name Johnson.

The decision regarding Bethel Music and Bill Johnson is based on specific, significant theological concerns and ministry practices that we as elders believe set them apart from Hillsong, Elevation, and other well-known Christian artists today. While all songs are carefully vetted for theological soundness, Bethel’s unique emphasis on controversial practices and teachings presents a higher risk of doctrinal confusion or misinterpretation within our congregation. This approach reflects careful discernment, not hypocrisy, as it evaluates each source individually, prioritizing the spiritual health of our church.

Lastly, while it’s important to be discerning, we must avoid jumping to conclusions about any ministry or leader without substantial and clear evidence of false teaching that contradicts the gospel and the core doctrines of the faith. Jesus taught that we would recognize people "by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-20). The true test of any ministry lies in its lasting impact and spiritual growth. Instead of dismissing entire movements based on controversies or perceived theological differences, we should carefully evaluate the good they produce alongside the areas where caution is needed.

Distinguishing the Source from the Song

There might be the perception that using songs by Hillsong or Elevation may inadvertently endorse their broader theology, practices, and philosophies of ministry. While the songs themselves might be thoroughly vetted and theologically sound, the concern is that using them could lead to confusion or even the subtle acceptance of teachings or practices that don't align with our convictions. This concern is valid and stems from a deep desire to protect the church from influences that could compromise our commitment to biblical truth.

While it might seem like using their songs equates to endorsing their ministries, it's important to differentiate between the *source* and the *content*. The truth is, some of the most powerful and biblically sound songs we sing are born out of genuine encounters with the truth of the gospel, even if they come from imperfect sources. By using these songs, we aren't endorsing the entirety of the ministry or encouraging others to follow it blindly. Instead, we are acknowledging that God can and does use imperfect people to create worship music that is honoring to Christ and the gospel.

So, how do we plan to implement songs from sources like Hillsong and Elevation?

Parameters to Guard Theological Integrity in Worship Songs

1. Careful Vetting of Lyrics

We will **vet each song** to ensure the lyrics are biblically sound and aligned with our church's theology. We are not passively choosing songs based on popularity or emotional appeal; rather, we are ensuring that every song we sing is biblical and theologically sound. Furthermore, we will be doing a complete review of all songs in our system to ensure they meet our doctrinal beliefs. **Here are the criteria for song selection:**

Biblical Integrity (Colossians 3:16)	Are the verses and chorus biblically faithful, with reference to Scripture and biblical themes?
Authorship (Titus 2:1)	Does the author align with sound doctrine, or do their beliefs pose a serious threat to the gospel, the glory of Christ, and the souls of our people?
Clarity (Colossians 4:4)	While poetic expression is allowed, does the song avoid theological confusion that could seriously mislead the church?
Singability & Musicality (Psalm 150)	Is the song easy for the congregation to pick up after hearing it once or twice? Does the music complement the lyrics?

Vertical & Horizontal Elements (Ephesians 5:19)	Does the song draw attention to the Triune God, while also edifying the saints and allowing for personal expressions of faith?
Engages the Heart & Mind (1 Corinthians 14:15)	Does the song fill minds with biblical truth while also using the gift of music to engage the heart for Christ?
Cross-culturally Engaging (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)	Does the song connect with our younger, contemporary church culture while remaining inclusive to varied backgrounds?

2. Transparency and Accountability:

To maintain transparency, we will begin posting the weekly setlist along with the source of the song, as well as the guidelines we use to choose songs. This will allow the church to see how we make these decisions and why certain songs are included. Additionally, we will make it clear on our website that the use of a song does not equate to wholesale endorsement of the theology of the broader movement from which it came.

3. Resources for Discernment:

Alongside our song selection, we will be creating podcast episodes and sharing articles that discuss how to thoughtfully engage with Christian music, including recognizing the difference between the content of the songs and their sources. These will be widely distributed and readily accessible to all who worship with us.

4. Balanced Setlists:

Each service will include a mix of songs from various sources and traditions. This balance ensures that no single influence dominates our worship, and it keeps us rooted in both historic and contemporary expressions of faith. We are not going to let one type of song or source take over our corporate worship.

5. Public Statement:

We will be posting this article online to help our church understand why and how we are navigating this issue the way that we are.

But why all the trouble?

Some may wonder, “Wouldn’t it be easier to just avoid songs from these sources entirely, especially since there are plenty of other good songs out there?” At first glance, this might seem like the simplest solution—no vetting, no disclaimers, no risk of confusion. However, worship is not only about theological accuracy but about connecting people’s hearts to God in transformative ways. Some songs written by Hillsong and Elevation have resonated deeply with many because they communicate timeless biblical truths in ways that engage both heart and mind. Avoiding them entirely would mean missing out on songs that have proven to enhance corporate worship and lead people into meaningful encounters with God. When thoroughly vetted for theological soundness, these songs can be powerful tools for leading Christ-centered worship, as we’ve seen in the past. Our goal is not to use these songs for their popularity but for their ability to draw people into vibrant worship that glorifies God.

Furthermore, by insisting on complete separation from these sources and any others we perceive as questionable, we risk creating an environment where the focus shifts toward human efforts to maintain the highest level of theological purity. This kind of rigid separation can inadvertently lead to a pharisaical church culture, where the emphasis on “staying clean and pure” can overshadow the gospel of grace that welcomes flawed people redeemed by Christ. Many people in our church have been seriously hurt, discouraged, and stifled by such church cultures. Some have lived through the “Worship Wars,” with churches splitting over style of music (traditional or contemporary). While this discussion is not the same in every way, the *spirit of the discussion* is very similar. In both, there is a kind of thinking that is hyper-vigilant to maintain the “purity” of the local church. Instead of isolating ourselves to achieve such a high standard of theological purity, we should aim for discernment and balance—embracing what is good and true while guarding against what might be misleading. This approach models the grace and wisdom of Christ, who engaged the world without compromising truth.

Opportunity to Equip the Church with Discernment

Choosing to avoid certain songs completely may feel like a protective measure, but it can actually have the unintended consequence of removing our need to practice discernment. One of our callings as Christians is to engage the world thoughtfully, testing everything against the truth of Scripture (Romans 12:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we choose to avoid songs from these sources entirely, we might miss an opportunity to teach biblical discernment—a skill that extends far beyond just worship music.

Think about this: the people in our congregation are exposed to all sorts of theological influences—through books, social media, podcasts, and even conversations with other Christians. What better opportunity do we have than in the context of our gathered worship to equip our church with the tools to discern truth? By carefully vetting songs, explaining our decision-making process, and being transparent, we’re actively teaching people to evaluate everything in their Christian lives critically and biblically.

The Threat of “Spiritual Safetyism”

One legitimate concern is that if we use songs from sources like Hillsong and Elevation, then younger or newer Christians might be “led astray.” This concern is fair and should not be dismissed. However, by simply avoiding and condemning these sources, we may be guilty of “spiritual safetyism.”¹ Just as shielding biological children from every challenge weakens their ability to grow, avoiding anything potentially questionable in the source of worship music could create a spiritual bubble that prevents believers from developing discernment. Thus, in an effort to protect younger Christians, we may end up weakening them. Avoiding uncomfortable or imperfect sources doesn’t make us stronger—it could make us spiritually weaker, being unable to recognize and confront theological error when it does arise.

The Question of Royalties

One last thing to address is the question of royalties. Do we pay royalties directly to songwriters when we use their songs? Not exactly. CCLI requires a flat fee, and royalties are distributed based on how often a song is used across all churches, but it is not directly tied to our individual use. Moreover, we frequently pay for goods or services from sources whose beliefs differ from ours—whether coffee, products, or services—without endorsing everything they stand for. What matters is the value we believe that these songs can bring to our worship gatherings.

What Shapes us Most in Corporate Worship

What shapes the church far more than the source of a song are the actual lyrics and music of the song, which are sung week after week, embedding truth into hearts and minds of the saints. It is the preached Word of God that proclaims the gospel with clarity and power, and the Lord’s Supper that physically reminds us of Christ’s sacrifice and unites us in worship. A song’s connection to its source pales in comparison to the formative power of biblically sound *lyrics*, accompanied by Christ-exalting preaching, and the sacramental rhythm of communion. These elements, rooted in Scripture, are what truly shape the theology, worship, and identity of disciples of Jesus.

¹ “Safetyism” comes Jonathan Haidt’s book *Coddling of the American Mind*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Coddling_of_the_American_Mind

A Personal and Pastoral Plea

In closing, our goal is not to impose man-made rules and regulations on our worship gatherings, but to ensure worship remains biblically sound and God-honoring. Worship shapes our hearts and minds, so we approach song selection with care, aiming to create a space where worship is both meaningful and rooted in gospel truth. Singing songs in corporate worship is in no way an endorsement of everything that comes from the source. Ultimately, what shapes us most is the *content of the songs* themselves. Many of these songs have led the church into deeper worship of Jesus Christ. And they continue to do so for many in our church today. Let us focus on pursuing Jesus together, singing with one voice to glorify Him (Romans 15:5-6).