

# A Defense of Singing Songs From Bethel and Hillsong

Perhaps you saw an article that appeared online recently in which Mackenzie Morgan, a worship leader at Refine Church in Lascassas, Tennessee, announced that she and her church would no longer sing songs that come from Bethel Church in California or Hillsong Church in Australia.

After examining some of the teaching from both Bethel and Hillsong, she concluded that to sing any song that originated with or was composed by someone from either of these local churches was dangerous.

Morgan insists that when it comes to corporate singing in church, “theology matters.” “It matters,” she says, “if a song is weak in theology, it is not accurately displaying the Holiness of our God.” I couldn’t agree more.

Here at my church, Bridgeway, we are intensely careful never to sing error. If a song is in any way inconsistent with Scripture, we don’t sing it, no matter who wrote it or how much we might like the melody.

Morgan is also bothered by the fact that in singing the songs of Bethel and Hillsong “royalties” are being paid to them, and in this we are tacitly subsidizing and spreading “their false gospel message.” She continues:

“What if the majority of the church is leading its people astray singing music that is less than worthy of a Sovereign and Holy God? Would God be pleased with the lights? With the smoke machines? With the obsession of hands in the air and ‘response’ from the crowd? With loud worship nights singing songs He doesn’t approve of?”

So let me go on the record in this regard. I don’t like the

strobe lights that so often are used in church worship sets. I refuse to make use of smoke machines. But I'm puzzled by the reference to the raising of hands. Has she not read Scripture's many references to this practice? Has she not considered the deeply symbolic and spiritual nature of not only this but of other physical postures in worship?

I'm curious: Does a person's stiff, statuesque posture, with hands firmly at one's side or stuffed into one's pockets, honor God more than lifting one's hands in praise?

And should we not expect a "response" from the crowd? I read in Scripture of shouts of joy, declarations of "Holy, holy, holy," and affirmations of thanksgiving, among others. And what is the alternative to "loud worship nights"? Quiet or soft worship days? And as I said, no one is endorsing songs of which God wouldn't "approve."

Be assured of this. In no way do I endorse or turn a blind eye to the scandals that have rocked Hillsong in recent days. In no way do I endorse certain ministry methods that are employed at a variety of churches that artificially stir up emotions as an end in themselves or manipulate people into behaviors or experiences that lack biblical sanction. Every church, be it Bethel, Hillsong or Bridgeway as well (including Refine Church in Tennessee), needs to labor more vigorously to tether its teachings and practices to the inspired Word of God.

But let's go straight to the point. Because this woman believes that some of what Bethel and Hillsong teach is unbiblical, no other church should make use of the music composed or sung there. She also insists that we should "read their church's doctrine and see what they preach, teach, and believe. But don't stop there. Don't compare it to your traditions or what you think is right. Compare it with Scripture. Scripture is the ultimate authority. Not me, not your pastor, not the world, only God. There are no gray areas in God's Word."

So, I did just that. Bethel's statement of faith is profoundly evangelical and orthodox and consistent with the historic creeds of Christianity. They affirm the Trinity, the inspiration and authority of the Bible, the incarnation and virgin birth of Jesus Christ, His substitutionary death on the cross, bodily Resurrection and ascension into heaven. They explicitly declare that Jesus is "true God" and "true man."

They further affirm that we are saved by grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus. Bethel was at one time affiliated with the Assemblies of God, and yet their statement on the issue of Spirit baptism differs from that denomination's viewpoint. Here is what they say:

"The baptism of the Holy Spirit, according to Acts 1:4-8 and 2:4, is poured out on believers that they might have God's power to be His witnesses."

Nothing is said about speaking in tongues being the initial, physical evidence of Spirit baptism. They do appear to believe that this experience is separate from and subsequent to conversion, but even then, the language is a bit ambiguous. And let us not forget that although I and many evangelical charismatics believe baptism in the Spirit occurs simultaneous with conversion, the doctrine of "separate and subsequent" has been and still is embraced by numerous Christian denominations within the Pentecostal world, and is ably (even if not persuasively) defended by countless biblical scholars who minister in that tradition. We may disagree with their view on this point, but it is very much a secondary, perhaps even tertiary, doctrine. It is hardly a hill to die on.

They also believe in the Second Coming of Christ and the eternality of both heaven and hell.

One statement that clearly needs greater clarification is this:

"We believe the victorious, redemptive work of Christ on the

cross provides freedom from the power of the enemy—sin, lies, sickness, and torment.”

I also believe this, but the question of when complete freedom from “sickness” is to be expected needs to be clearly stated. But note well: There is nothing in the statement that affirms the “Word of Faith” movement and its beliefs or the so-called “health and wealth gospel.” If anyone at Bethel teaches these notions, it is not because they are acting in conformity with the church’s official statement of faith.

And there is a lengthy, thoroughly biblical defense in their statement concerning the historic and traditional biblical sex ethic, in which marriage is designed solely for one woman and one man. As for homosexuality and transgenderism, I can’t recall ever reading a more clearly defined and thoroughly biblical perspective on those issues.

I’m baffled by how or on what basis Morgan accuses them of preaching a “false gospel.” They preach salvation by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone. They tether their hope of eternal life on trust in the sinless life, sacrificial, atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus. {eoa}

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**Sam Storms** *is the lead pastor for Preaching and Vision at Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and the president of Enjoying God Ministries.*

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