

Should Worship Leaders Sing Secular Songs in Church?

I've always been on the fence about doing secular songs in worship. I personally don't care for it but have played them when a pastor has asked. However, a recent trip to Elevation Church has caused me to make up my mind.

Twenty-five years ago, it would be unthinkable to sing a secular rock song in church (you couldn't even get away with an Amy Grant tune!). When did this all start? I'm guessing Willow Creek, the original seeker church, was the culprit. (And we all know how their seeker methodology panned out. Read "Willow Creek Repents?")

The seeker crowd will argue that unsaved people love hearing secular songs in church. When they hear a pop song they know, they'll think, *Wow, church isn't boring after all. I think I'll come back!* For these Christians, getting the unsaved into church trumps everything. I appreciate and applaud their dedication to reaching the lost. However, using the same do-whatever-it-takes-to-get-them-in-the-door logic, why not install stripper poles next to our drum sets—wouldn't that attract a crowd?

The harsh truth is the gospel can be a tough pill for an unsaved person to swallow. So Paul talks about the concept of making the Good News as attractive as possible in Titus 2:9-10. And really, that's the whole point of the weekly newsletter –to encourage churches to be as attractive as possible with their music.

But how attractive should we get? That answer can only be found with prayer and careful consideration of your own ministry. Here's my thinking.

Can't We Just Focus on God?

My main argument up until now has been that we can listen to secular music anytime we want. We have roughly 84 waking hours a week—can't we spend just one of them focusing on God during the Sunday morning praise set? I've heard statistics that few Christians ever darken the door of a Christian bookstore or listen to Christian radio. That hour may be the only time of the week most people ever even hear Christian music.

By definition, a seeker is seeking God, so why not present the gospel to them in every way, shape and form?

Do You Want Christian Karaoke?

Rarely can church talent even come close to decently reproducing a secular song—it takes the top guns of a megachurch to pull that off with their paid musicians, tracks and great vocalists. Otherwise churches end up sounding cheesy—and people will probably be so occupied comparing your lousy version with the original, they won't even get the message you're trying to convey.

A friend of mine recently laughed about his worship leader's weak performance of U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name." Do you really want people in your congregation snickering at your hubris? Some worship leaders are failed/frustrated rock stars, and secular songs give them a chance to scratch that itch. How about scratching it in a karaoke bar instead?

My Big Epiphany

And here's what I experienced at Elevation that helped me make up my mind against doing secular songs in church. Their worship team opened the service with the current secular hit "Can't Hold Us" by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis—a super-catchy, four-on-the-floor dance song (and they pulled it off spectacularly, I might add). After the service, I had lunch with a friend and spent the rest of the day in Charlotte, N.C. All afternoon, I couldn't get the song out of my head:

Can we go back, this is the moment
Tonight is the night, we'll fight till it's over
So we put our hands up like the ceiling can't hold us
Like the ceiling can't hold us

I mean, I had a serious earworm for hours. Then it hit me: "I can't believe I've just gone to church and the only thing I'm taking away from the service is this stupid pop song!"

Later that evening, I shared my new anti-secular-music-in-church epiphany with a friend. He and his wife attend Andy Stanley's North Point Church in Atlanta, and he told me how the worship team has been performing secular songs right before the service all summer.

Problem is, they leave church with pop songs running through their minds. His wife told me North Point's rendition of Styx's "Come Sail Away" stuck with her all Sunday afternoon. She asked, "Shouldn't songs about Jesus be running through my head after church?"

Yep, they sure should.

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