

Shortly after school, I did a course in commercial radio production. Our instructors warned us – ‘After this course, you will never be able to listen to radio again in the same way. You are going to hear faults, mistakes, errors, and spot problems where you never saw them before.’

I am about to do the same thing with you tonight. I am going to teach on the texts we sing – the lyrics of the music we use before God. And it may be that, when we are done, you will not be the same; you will see problems where you never saw them before; you will see some hymns and choruses in a whole new light. But hopefully, something else will happen. You will begin to think very seriously about what we say about God, about which words and sentiments are appropriate when talking about God. And the ultimate joy of this will be to grow to know and fear Almighty God, as He truly is. Let me tell you, I am as guilty as anyone of having sung and promoted trivial songs. But when God shows you otherwise, there is no turning back.

Ephesians 5:19 gives us a command for what we are to be singing. Three types of songs are mentioned: *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*.

The first one is easy – we should sing *psalms*. The early church sang the Psalms. In fact, some traditions in the Reformed side of Christianity hold to the position that we should only sing psalms. I think this text alone disproves that, but we’ll leave that. We should sing the Psalms. The Psalms are anthems of praise, they are prayers to God, and they are proclamations of who God is. That is what church music is to do – it praises God; it is prayer to God, and it is also a proclamation – a teaching tool.

It is my desire that the church I pastor should sing more of the Psalms. There are songs today which have captured some of the Psalms and put them into musical form, and many of them are decent melodies. Our desire is to invest in a hymnbook which has the Psalms in it.

The second kind of song we are to sing is the *hymn*. Hymns have in fact been a part of most religious traditions. A hymn is usually a kind of poetic text put to music for celebration, praise, or for teaching. Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn after the Last Supper, Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison. In **1Corinthians 14** we see that it was even expected that people would arrive at church with a hymn.

Now it is more than likely that the hymns that Jesus and the apostles sang were, in fact, the psalms. And hymns and psalms are essentially the same. I would simply say that a hymn is a non-inspired psalm. Or better, the psalms are inspired hymns.

The third kind of song we read of is the *spiritual song*. And this, more than likely, refers to any song with a spiritual theme. So, whereas a hymn is a psalm-like song put to rhythmical meter, which praises God, a spiritual song is any song with a Biblical theme or truth to it. Simpler, shorter songs (sometimes misnamed ‘choruses’), folk songs, longer songs designed for a soloist, compositions for choirs, even some of the grand orchestral works, would qualify as spiritual songs. Once again, there is no shortage of songs to sing.

The question is – ‘How are we to sort through this avalanche of musical material?’

Well, before we look at the tunes in the next session, I want us to learn to be discerning by examining the texts we sing.

Now notice something important – these Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs flow out of allowing the word of Christ to dwell richly in us. In other words – deep familiarity with the thought and sentiment of the Scriptures produces lyrics that are true to the Scriptures. And that’s our guide. If there is one way of boiling down the issue of lyrics, we could say – *‘Lyrics must be true to what God has said, and the way God has said it’*.

Now immediately our minds go to the issue of the lyrics saying something doctrinally incorrect. That is sometimes a danger, and we should make sure that the theology of our songs reflects Biblical teaching. If a song sings about ‘Fall on us now Holy Spirit’ it is untrue in its theology. We should guard the doctrine in our songs carefully.

However, I want to outline three far more subtle, and therefore more dangerous, threats to truth. They are the dangers of *sentimentality, shallowness and self-centredness*. And these are almost more often about *how* we say it.

These dangers are very, very present in the large majority of modern hymns, choruses and so-called CCM (Contemporary Christian Music). By ‘modern’ I refer to the era from 1830 till today. Because from 1830, with the rise of pop culture, sentimentalism swept the world, as did shallowness and self-centredness. And these pervade the lyrics of songs made in these eras, with some blessed exceptions.

And they are dangerous, because as we saw in the last session on the ‘Theology of Music,’ music teaches. Music shapes our view of God. And when sweet melodies enrich words which are not right, it is a danger. Our religious sentiment is in danger. Truth is under fire.

Sentimentalism

We hear ‘sentimental’ and we think of a person who keeps his old school ties and cries when looking at old photo albums. But that is not the main definition of sentimentalism.

Sentimentalism, put simply, is feeling incorrectly. Sentimentalism is overindulgence in the emotions. It is trying to get certain emotions for their own sake, rather than by focusing on something and experiencing appropriate emotions. Sentimentalism loves the emotions, whether they are sorrow or laughter or happiness. And so it seeks emotions as ends in themselves. When sentimentalism enters religion, it starts to use God and His truth as just a springboard to get a good feeling. And because it focuses on the emotions, its feelings are not based on truth. They are not a reaction to truth.

As we have seen repeatedly, emotions are very important to God. And in fact, God does not want half-measures when it comes to the emotions. He tells us the first commandment is to love Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind. We don’t want the emotions diluted or shackled by a false stoicism. Indeed, Jonathan Edwards was criticised for having people respond too emotionally to his preaching, and he replied by saying, *‘I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.’*

I do not believe a song or hymn can be too emotional, as long as it stirs up the right emotion in the right way. In fact, the best songs and hymns say things in ways we cannot; they put into words and music that emotion which we have felt but could not articulate as effectively.

Good hymns, songs, express emotion, but they are not about the emotions. Hymns are about God and His ways; they are not supposed to be about us. When a song or a hymn departs from speaking about how great God is and instead starts to sing about how very, very much we feel for God – it starts to become a kind of self-congratulation about how much we feel. This is sentimentality.

When Bernard of Clairvaux writes the following, he is expressing an emotion that is right, but yet it is not about the emotion it is about Christ:

‘Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,
Thou Fount of life, Thou Light of men,
From the best bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.’

By contrast sentimentalism says:

‘I got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart, Where?’ or ‘I’m happy today, Yes, happy today, in Jesus my Lord I’m happy today’ or ‘I’m so happy, ah here’s the reason why, Jesus took my burdens all away’.

David *expressed* emotions in the Psalms, but his Psalms were not *about* his emotions. **Psalm 28:7** *The LORD is my strength and my shield; My heart trusted in Him, and I am helped; Therefore my heart greatly rejoices, And with my song I will praise Him.*

By contrast, listen to the sentimentality of some famous 19th century hymns:

‘When I am sad, to Him I go, No other one can cheer me so; When I am sad He makes me glad – He’s my friend.’

‘Drinking at the springs of living water, happy now am I, my soul they satisfy – drinking at the spring of living water – O wonderful and bountiful supply.’

‘Isn’t the love of Jesus something wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.’

Modern CCM songs often sing explicitly about how they are feeling as the subject of the song – using terms like ‘I’m lost in your love’, ‘I’m falling in love with you Jesus.’

C.S. Lewis tells us about the tyranny of sentimentalism.

“Instead of telling us a thing is ‘terrible’, describe it so we’ll be terrified. Don’t say it was ‘delight’; make us say ‘delightful’ when we’ve read the description.”

Lewis was saying that sentimental words tell the readers how they must feel, and how they are feeling rather than letting the subject material work on them as it did the author. This ironically does not have the effect of producing joy, it instead dulls the hearer.

My son has a toy which cries out, ‘This is fun’ when a button is pressed. I asked myself if the manufacturers were not secretly pessimistic about the fun-potential of their product and so thought they ought to include a suggestive line to help the child know what might not be quite so apparent. That is like sentimentalism – hearts not fired by the truth itself, so the hearts must be fired up by the thought of being fired up.

The best hymns and songs call on profound imagery and metaphors to fire our religious imagination in the best way. This is what the best poetry, hymnody, should aim for.

The second thing about sentimentality is this: it not only idolises on the emotions, it expresses the wrong emotions. For each created thing there is an appropriate love.

Sentimentality refers to having wrong feelings. It refers to loving something much more than it is worth, or loving something much less than it is worth. Sentimentalism is present when it connects a wrong emotional response with what it is viewing.

For example: When we talk about a man loving his wife, a woman loving a kitten, an athlete loving winning, a miser loving more money, a boy loving an ice cream, an engaged couple loving a lonely walk – we are talking about distinct things.

You do not love God the way you love a kitten, or ice cream, or a sunset or even a spouse. When you speak of loving God in a way that refers to another kind of love – it is sentimentality. It is worse than mixed metaphors – it is taking God's name in vain.

You might see my dog; take it by the ears and say, 'So cute!' But if you did the same thing to me, there would be a problem. It would be inappropriate; and how much more so, when we say things about God and our walk with God, which do not belong at all to an encounter with God.

When Isaac Watts says, '*Love so amazing so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*', he is expressing a right sentiment.

Another popular hymn is almost pure sentimentality:

'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.
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.'

What we have to realise is that Jesus is not a pal, a boyfriend, a homeboy, a therapist or a celebrity. When we speak of how we feel, it is to arise out of responses to truth about Him, not emotions we would like to feel. That is simply idolatry.

Many of the hymns of the late 19th century just gush with sentimentality:

'Footprints of Jesus, that makes the pathway glow'
'In My Heart There Rings a Melody'
'Heavenly Sunshine'
'Sunshine in My Soul'
'Heaven Came Down'
'Haven of Rest'
'Joybells Ringing in your Heart'.

This is not a matter of preference; it is a matter of truth. The emotion to which these writers were trying to connect Christ is not fitting. They enlist 'sweet images' of garden walks, sunshine beams and sailing, to try and evoke an emotion which they then try to work back to Christ.

Many of these popular hymns (ironically considered by some as ‘The Grand Old Hymns’) fed off the pop culture of the 19th century, which was sentimentality. In the mid twentieth century came the Jazz and Rock revolution. Here sentimentality simply stepped up the ante to full-blown sensuality. Modern CCM songs, and many modern ‘Christian songs’, like the Sankeys of the 19th century, have enlisted the current pop culture. Consequently, the whole tone is romantic, and even sensual, and the songs could pass for either crooning love songs from one lover to another, or supposed praise songs for Jesus. And this is deliberate, so as to supposedly witness to the unsaved and get air time on secular radio.

Sentimentality teaches us to feel incorrectly. We attribute to God what does not belong to Him. This warps our entire concept of who He is. The very best hymns and songs teach us how we should feel before God.

Sentimentality destroys our sincerity. We say gushy things we don’t mean. It destroys your sense of awe. We get used to faking emotions for emotions sake, and pretty soon, worship is like scratching an itch, which we create. We want emotion, so we use soppy sentimental lyrics with soppy sentimental tunes, and we scratch the itch. But in the meantime true worship of the true God is not happening.

Essentially, sentimentality is not truthful. It is a lie. It is untrue in its affections.

How do I learn what is sentimental and what isn’t?

You need to become a contemplative person who understands what words to use to describe a particular ‘affection’. Think carefully – what kind of love am I talking about when I say ‘Love God?’ Is it like the love of a sport, of a meal, of a landscape, of a dog, of a child? What words should be used to express this kind of love? Likewise, what words would be used to describe the emotions of fear, hope, joy, awe. The right affection produces the right words, and the right music to carry those words. Read and write words which express a true sentiment about God.

Shallowness

Now I need to make this distinction. There is a vast difference between something being simple, and something being shallow. Simplicity is a good thing. The Christian life is simple. God prizes simplicity of life. Simplicity is a virtue – shallowness is not.

A simple song is beautiful, because it boils truth down to its essence, and a child can grasp it. The kingdom of heaven is to be received as by a little child. So the Psalmists sometimes write very simple lyrics – *‘O God, you are my God, early will I seek you.’*

And there are hymns with very simple words that are a blessing like, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’

Now, simple lyrics are wonderful when they communicate the truth in basic, understandable terms.

But shallow lyrics are not merely simple. Shallow lyrics are less than simple. Shallow lyrics communicate less than the basic minimum of truth. Shallow lyrics trivialize the truth with foolish, repetitive or simplistic phrases.

Let me illustrate: You can communicate the Gospel simply: God is holy; men are sinners; God demands justice, yet God loves sinners; God poured out justice in His sinless Son, and if you turn from your sin to Jesus Christ, God will forgive you and reconcile you to Himself. That is a simple Gospel.

But to say that the Gospel is, 'Reach out and touch the Lord, let Him pour His love into your life' is not simple – it is shallow. That is not the Gospel. It is a shallow substitute. It has less information than necessary and so is untrue.

But unfortunately, shallow substitutes are the mainstay of hymns for the last 150 years, as well as most of the choruses and CCM songs today with few blessed exceptions.

Just think for a moment of the shallow sentiment expressed in some of these songs, 'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,' 'I've got peace like a river, joy like a fountain, love like a mountain,' 'Give me oil in my lamp,' 'Cast your burdens unto Jesus.' 'It only takes a spark to get a fire going, then all those who are around, can warm up in its glowing, that's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it, you want to sing, it's fresh like spring, you want to pass it on.' That's not simple – it's foolish!

Now, here is why shallowness is often undetected – because it is filled with Biblical language. But you need to understand that something doesn't become true because a writer spins together a lot of Biblical metaphors and Biblical phrases.

Let me give an example. Here is a ready-made modern Gospel song, which I wrote:

'We're here to exalt, praise & adore
To love you with our heart, more and more
Worship in spirit and in truth
Yes, remember your Creator
In the days of your youth
You have mercy on the sinner
You even ate with them at dinner
We have peace which passes understanding
And on all your promises we are standing
Come and now bless us in this place
And help us to live in your grace.'

It took me about 2 minutes to write that, not because I'm smart, but because it says nothing. Anyone can string together Biblically sounding phrases in an incoherent, trite or sentimental fashion. It doesn't communicate truth.

You can say 'Praise Him, praise Him, glorify Him, praise Him,' and it can amount to nothing but a musical form of vain repetitions. Simplicity doesn't mean repeating a phrase, even if it is Biblical, seven hundred times. That is not simple – it is shallow. It becomes like a mantra, a chant, where we think that, by virtue of saying spiritual sounding things again and again, we are really praising.

We could go through most hymnbooks and find that most hymns from the modern era are collections of clichés without much substance.

Not all pieces have to be as profound as another. We can't only have simple songs; we need songs which will elevate as well. But we should have some simple songs too. But what it says simply, it should nevertheless say truly.

Yes, songs for children should be simple. But consider this hymn which Isaac Watts wrote for children:

'Why should I love my sports so well,
So constant at my play,
And lose the thoughts of heaven and hell,
And then forget to pray?'

Compare that to:

'It's love that makes the world go round,' 'Father Abraham,' 'Play on your harp little David,' 'The B-I-B-L-E,' 'I'm gonna zoom around the room and praise the Lord,' 'If I were a butterfly,' 'Stand Up and shout it if you love my Jesus.'

Children don't hear this and figure – 'I can understand God' – they start to learn, God shouldn't be taken very seriously – God is a game; God is like my cartoons or picture books. Isaac Watts wrote simple songs for children. Today, most people write shallow songs for children.

Once again, be a contemplative person. Read lyrics carefully. Compare the simplicity with the simplicity of the Psalms. Is this simply truth in its essence, or is it just spiritually-sounding phrases lumped together to rhyme?

Simplistic words kill meditation. They are substitutes for devotion. They are like candy floss to substitute for a meal – easy to digest, little thinking, little consideration – just a banal, trivial, thought. If the songs you love are trivial, your concept of God will be trivial. And no one feels awe in the presence of a shallow god. We must be happy with simple lyrics, but we must not be content with shallow ones.

Self-centredness

Someone said, 'Count how many of our modern hymns and choruses begin with *I* or *me*.' This is a psychotically self-centred culture. God is one more accessory, one more product for my own happiness, well-being, security and comfort. And this obsession with self comes out in lyrics. Instead of making praise about God, it becomes about us. And for that reason – it is not true.

There is a correct way of speaking about personal experience. It is to speak of God with personal experience as an illustration of how good or great God is. That is how the Psalmists speak of their personal experience. They say what they are feeling, but as a way of speaking about God. Whatever they are feeling they say it with reference to God – it is praise, prayer or proclamation to or about God.

Imagine me sitting down with my wife for dinner and saying, 'I am so happy to be with you.' Now, while I am talking about how I am feeling, I am really praising her.

But picture me sitting down with my wife and saying, 'I am so glad to be here. I'm just here to praise you. This is special time for me. I am here to speak to you. I am here before you in sincerity and truth. I just want to acknowledge you at this time. I am lost in joy and happiness

here and now. I am swimming in gladness and feeling such amazing joy.’ Soon, her smile will fade as she will see I am not really talking to her. I am talking to me about me, using her as an excuse.

Self-centredness is always telling you what it is doing supposedly in the name of God:

‘We’re just here, praising you Lord’

‘I just wanna praise you, lift my heart and say I love you’

‘Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down; here I am to say that you’re my God’

‘We have come into this place gathered in His name to worship Him’

‘Let’s Just praise the Lord’

‘We bow down, we bow down’.

The psalms and good hymns simply say, ‘Praise the Lord’ or ‘Rejoice the Lord is king.’ Self-centred ones say, ‘We are praising You,’ ‘Lord I’m coming back to You.’

Self-centred lyrics are a kind of blind pride because we say we are praising but we really aren’t. We’re actually self-consciously aware of ourselves – what we are doing. Self-centredness turns all the focus on our act of praise, on our emotions, instead of on Christ and His perfections. This is why it isn’t true – it says we are doing things we really aren’t. It says we are feeling things we aren’t.

When you are singing entirely about your experience instead of about who God is and how that has worked its way into your experience – it is not true.

Here’s a good verse which expresses personal joy – but it’s about Christ:

‘Jesus the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast; but sweeter far Thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest’.

Compare it to the self-centredness of 19th century hymns:

‘I am so glad that Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me’.

‘O that will be glory for me, glory for me, glory for me’.

Just like sentimentalism focuses on the emotion, self-centredness focuses on us – how we are feeling, what we are doing, what this means to us. We claim the song is about Christ, but again, we are not singing of God’s perfections, we are singing about ourselves – about our state, our attitudes, our actions. God seems to be the means – what we are doing seems to be the end. The focus is on our comfort, our pleasure, our satisfaction.

Canon Liddon said ‘*Look at a modern hymn; it is, as a rule, full of man, full of his wants, of his aspirations, of his anticipations, of his hopes, of his fears, full of his religious self, if you will, but still full of self. But read an ancient hymn: It is, as a rule, full of God, of His awful nature, of His wonderful attributes; it is full of the Eternal Son, of His acts, of His sufferings, of His triumphs, of His Majesty.*’

For that matter, there are a lot of songs which I consider heavenly materialism - songs about how in heaven we’ll have a mansion, and be rich and be relieved. What bothers me about them is that the joy of heaven will be *Christ*. Some of the hymns don’t celebrate Christ – they celebrate reaching a place – ‘crossing the river, meeting up with loved ones, walking on streets of gold, finally resting and having comfort’, and these might be fine to rejoice in as secondary joys. Read hymns like ‘I’ve a Home beyond the River,’ ‘Sweet By and By,’ ‘Shall

We Gather at the River?’ From these you will get the sense that the joy is not God, but us – our future. But the true joy of heaven is God Himself. And too many of these hymns and choruses and songs are, again, a celebration of ourselves – like singing about how much we look forward to retirement.

There are only rare exceptions to this rule in modern Christian songs. Self-centredness makes the worship about me, not about God. God shifts from being the end, to the means. And therefore, it is not true.

The problem with sentimentality is that it is not truthful. The problem with shallowness is that it is not truthful. The problem with subjectivity is that it is not truthful. As believers, we must seek the true, the good and the beautiful. So the answer is – *let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*. Take in not only *what* God says about Himself. Take in *how* He says it. Then we will reject sentimentality for true sentiment, shallowness for blessed simplicity and self-centredness for God-centred personal experience.