

# [Article] A Method for Analyzing Lyrics in Congregational Singing



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## Introduction

I recently had the privilege of visiting a retired missionary friend here in France. Her body has been so ravaged by Parkinson's disease that she can no longer read, write, walk, or attend church. When I asked how she spends time in God's Word, she replied, "I sing songs, because the lyrics are full of Scripture." This dear saint is unable to keep her head upright or her glasses from sliding off her nose, but she can still sing, so sing we did. It brought tears to my eyes to hear her lift her voice in her favorite French hymn: "*Oui, mon cœur chante! Mon âme est contente! Mon Jésus est tout mon bien: je ne craindrai rien.*"<sup>1</sup> What a beautiful example of Colossians 3.16, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."<sup>2</sup>

Worship songs with solid, biblical lyrics are vital in the indigenous church and in the life of each of its members. Although ethnodoxological literature emphasizes the importance of such lyrics, it does not propose ways to analyze lyrical content. After conducting a few music workshops with Central Asian church leaders, I realized that I had skipped this important step of analysis. I did not know what their churches were currently singing, or how to help them evaluate those song texts. A survey of the literature enabled me to create a simple method based on ideas and tools developed by Roberta King, Monique Ingalls, Jeff Todd Titon, and Megan Meyers.

In this paper, I argue that worship song lyrics merit analysis and evaluation, and I explain why indigenous church leaders, rather than ethnodoxologists, should conduct this evaluation. Next, I describe the method I developed and how I tested it. In conclusion, I summarize the results and make practical suggestions for its implementation in literary and oral societies.

## Why is it necessary to analyze and evaluate the lyrics we sing in church?

First, song lyrics merit analysis and evaluation because they are a key component in corporate Christian

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<sup>1</sup> "Yes, my heart sings! My soul is satisfied! My Jesus is my all in all: I have nothing to fear" (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations in this paper are from the English Standard Version.

worship. This point may seem so obvious that it's not worth mentioning. However, since God not only mentions the importance of singing in worship but literally commands it (Psalm 33:1-3, Ephesians 5:19), we should stop and consider why. Ethnodoxologists and theologians have identified three primary reasons. First, we sing to express praise to God who has revealed himself to us. Ron Man describes worship as “a dialogue between God and his people, a rhythm of revelation and response,” according to passages such as Psalm 96:4: “For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.” He explains, “In worship God speaks to us through his Word, and we respond with our hearts, voices, and bodies. . . . All worship is a response to God’s prior revealing and saving initiative” (Man 2013, 20). He believes worship services should reflect this back-and-forth dialogue through elements such as Scripture reading, teaching, prayer, and offerings. Song lyrics have a unique and important role in corporate worship because they contribute to both aspects. Some hymn texts, such as “How Great Thou Art,” contain summaries of God’s revelation *and* calls to respond, while others focus on one or the other. A congregation should seek for overall balance in its repertory. Overemphasis of one aspect of worship can lead to dry intellectualism or shallow sentimentalism.

Second, song lyrics merit analysis because they target three audiences at once. In addition to exalting God, which could be called the “vertical” direction of worship, songs edify the worshipers themselves. This could be considered the “horizontal” direction of worship. As God’s people sing God’s truth, they grow in their knowledge of him. The Apostle Paul mentions both directions when he refers to congregational singing in his letters to New Testament churches: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom [*horizontal*], singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God [*vertical*]” (Colossians 3:16). “Addressing one another [*horizontal*] in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord [*vertical*] with your heart.” Therefore, what a congregation sings directly contributes to their knowledge of God and his Word. Megan Meyers refers to a church’s song texts as its “lyric theology,” attributing this idea to her mentor Roberta King (Meyers 2015, 47–48). Therefore, analysis of lyrics allows a congregation to determine whether its lyric theology is robust or weak.

Song lyrics also target a third audience, either directly or indirectly. Not only do songs express praise to God and instruct believers, but they also challenge listening unbelievers to turn from their idols and put their trust in the Lord. The Psalms are full of references to unbelievers, describing them as the wicked, sinners, and scoffers. While some Psalms address unbelievers indirectly, others boldly call them to repent and to worship God: “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way” (Psalm 2:11–12). In the New Testament, the Pharisees’ hypocrisy was exposed by the disciples’ loud praise of Jesus. When they angrily asked Jesus to rebuke his disciples, he replied, “I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke 19:40, KJV). When Paul and Silas praised God for his goodness in the midst of suffering and injustice in Philippi, unbelievers were confronted with their need for salvation (Acts 16:25–31). A congregation should analyze its song lyrics to determine whether unbelievers who may be present will be lulled to sleep or awakened to the fact that they are perishing. Although they are not the primary audience or the main focus of congregational singing, they should still be remembered.

### Who should analyze worship song lyrics?

I believe indigenous congregations should conduct their own analysis of the lyrics they have been singing, rather than relying on an outsider to do so. Self-analysis is preferable for two primary reasons. First, it requires the congregation to apply critical thinking to their songs’ lyrics and their overall repertory. This process enables them to determine whether their active repertory fulfills the purposes for congregational singing that are given in

Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Over time, church leaders and members who seek to apply these biblical principles will grow in spiritual maturity and discernment, according to Hebrews 5:14: “Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Second, insiders are in a better position to analyze their worship song lyrics because they know the nuances of their language and the connotation of certain terms in their culture. As a form of poetry, song lyrics are particularly challenging for outsiders to analyze. This is true whether the lyrics were written in the indigenous language or were translated. Sometimes translated lyrics or lyrics that are loosely based on another song are an improvement to the original in theological clarity and content, but this is not always the case. Textual analysis by insiders is especially important in oral societies. According to James Krabill, “Textual analysis of oral materials presupposes first of all a profound understanding of the language which outsiders, with but a few exceptions, rarely achieve” (Krabill 1995, 345).

By conducting this analysis, church leaders will know the kind of adjustments they should make to their repertory. However, they may not realize the importance of this process or know how to go about it unless someone helps them. Ethnodoxologists can fill this important role by including a workshop of textual analysis as a preliminary step when visiting a local church. This analysis will be equally helpful in research as ethnodoxologists look for ways to spark creativity within a particular congregation.

### How can we analyze worship music lyrics?

First, before delving into lyrical analysis of a church’s active repertory, I recommend that the workshop leader help the participants think critically about why they sing together as a congregation. This can be accomplished by engaging them in Socratic-style questioning, drawing out their perspectives, making them aware of possible areas of compromise, and pointing them to Scripture. Possible questions and answers include the following:

1. What comes first: worship or revelation? (Hebrews 1:1–2, 2:12, examples from the lives of Abraham, Moses, and Paul) [Revelation always comes first: worship is a response to revelation.]
2. Why do we sing as a congregation?
  - a. What are two main reasons we praise God? (Psalms 107, 100, and 111) [We sing to praise God for who he is and what he has done.]
  - b. What happens in our own hearts as we worship God? (Ephesians 5:19–20, Colossians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 3:18) [We are edified, instructed, and transformed.]
  - c. What happens in the hearts of unbelievers who hear us worship God? (Psalm 96:4–5, 1 Corinthians 14:24–25, Psalm 40:3) [They are confronted with their idolatry and their need for repentance.]
  - d. In what negative ways might our culture have influenced the reasons we sing in church? [Answers will vary.]

Second, I recommend that the leader invite the participants to consider the worship lyrics in Scripture as their

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<sup>3</sup> The “active repertory” of a congregation has been defined by Jeff Todd Titon as songs that are sung at least twice over the course of a year of worship services (Ingalls 2018, 121).

primary reference point, rather than lyrics from Western culture or any other part of the world. The Psalms and other songs in Scripture have the advantage of being literally inspired by the Holy Spirit and sung by Christ himself as well as God's people across the millennia (1 Chronicles 25:1-7; LeFebvre 2010). In addition, while hymnwriters such as Isaac Watts, Fanny Crosby, and Keith Getty have made tremendous contributions to English hymnody, they wrote within the contours and constraints of the English language. Each language has idiosyncrasies that are reflected in its poetry. Although this is equally true of the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms, its primary characteristic of parallelism is preserved in translation.<sup>4</sup> God has given us an entire hymnbook in the Psalms, along with compelling songs by his people in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that the leader choose a song from Scripture and demonstrate to the group how to analyze it, as follows:

1. What does this song teach us about God's self-revelation: who is he and what has he done?
2. How does this song exhort us to respond? How does it describe (or address) those who refuse to respond?

If time allows, further questions may be asked for deeper reflection:

3. What is the song's overall flavor or theme? (For example, Psalm 119 is a celebration of God's written Word, while Psalm 22 expresses extreme grief due to unjust oppression.)
4. What is its nutritional value or text load? (That is, how many distinct truths does it contain about God's revelation or our response?)<sup>6</sup>
5. Where does it fall on the following spectrums?
  - A. Simplicity/complexity
  - B. Revelation/response
  - C. Celebration/lament



*Figure 1. Traffic light analogy.  
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After this demonstration, participants should be given the opportunity to analyze another song from Scripture, or a portion thereof, and to share their findings with the group. This time of biblical meditation can be spiritually refreshing and edifying for the participants.

<sup>4</sup> However, the acrostic Hebrew alphabet structure of Psalms such as Psalm 25, 34, and 119 cannot be preserved in literal translations.

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew term "selah" is found sprinkled throughout the Psalms and the song of Habbakuk. While its exact meaning is unknown, some scholars believe it indicated a pause or musical interlude. We enjoyed a lively debate during the workshops about possible reasons for "selah" moments in worship services.

<sup>6</sup> Roberta King refers to the "text load" of a song as the amount of information that it contains. A song with high text load contains many different words or concepts, while a song with low text load has few changes throughout. Most of the words stay the same throughout the song (King 1999, 61).

Third, I recommend that the participants choose a song from their church's active repertory and put it under the microscope. This is where things get really interesting! In addition to the five questions mentioned above, a sixth question should be asked: How biblically accurate and clear are the lyrics? Megan Meyers suggests using the analogy of a traffic light to help participants rate songs and identify problematic phrases within them (Meyers 2015, 49). Lyrics deemed biblical are labeled "green," questionable lyrics are "yellow," and unbiblical lyrics are considered "red." Though poetry involves ambiguity, and participants will undoubtedly disagree about what constitutes a "yellow" or "red" phrase in a song, the process will make them more aware of what they are singing. If a particular song or a certain key phrase in a song is not biblically accurate or clear, then its utility for the congregation should be called into question.



Figure 2. Lens analogy.  
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The goal of this analysis is not to provoke sweeping generalizations, such as "All worship song lyrics should have high text load," or "Complex songs are better than simple songs." Rather, the goal is to encourage the participants to slow down and think about what they are singing. A congregation's active repertory should contain a variety of themes, flavors, and "weights" of text load.

To conclude the workshop, I recommend that the leader invite the participants to "zoom out" and consider their big-picture view of worship. This discussion will enable them to develop a more holistic approach that goes beyond both the textual *and* musical aspects of congregational singing, as important as both are in worship. The following questions will help the participants think carefully about their perspective and compare it with Scripture.

1. Which of the three "lenses" of worship do you see as the most important? <sup>7</sup>
  - a. The mind (cognitive): Understanding God's self-revelation in order to know him and worship him as he desires: teaching, preaching, Bible study, and so forth. (Psalm 119; Colossians 3:16; Romans 12:2; Hebrews 12:28–29; 1 Corinthians 14:15)
  - b. The heart (affective): Expressing emotional response to God's self-revelation: joy, awe, sorrow, and so forth. (Psalm 100:1–2; Luke 1:46–47; Revelation 7:9–10)
  - c. The body (physical): Expressing physical response to God's self-revelation: posture, dancing, the Lord's Supper, baptism, offerings, hospitality, and so forth. (Exodus 15:20–21, 1 Corinthians 11:26, 14:40; James 1:23–27)

Worship is obviously a vast subject, and we see in Scripture that it involves all three lenses—it requires our entire being. Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." According to Moore, while people use all three lenses when they worship, they tend to see one as primary and the others as secondary. This is true at both an individual and a denominational level. Having a "primary" lens is natural and necessary, but Moore suggests an "integrated" approach (Moore 2006, 88). It is possible for a congregation to emphasize one of the lenses to the point that the others are disregarded. Therefore, the following question can be helpful:

2. How might your congregation be overemphasizing one lens to the detriment of the others?

For instance, congregations and church traditions that emphasize the cognitive aspect of worship can become

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Gerard Moore, who calls these lenses teaching, experience, and ritual (Moore 2006, 80).



calling it “a simple, accessible, and methodical analysis.” He is particularly passionate about the textual content of songs, having written many of his own and taught sessions on church music in local churches. A week after the workshop, he contacted me to give further feedback:

Our churches need this workshop. Young people want [to introduce] new songs, and your workshop could help church leaders to evaluate [those] new songs objectively. The spotlight analogy that you showed us is extremely important [for that reason]. The musical aspect is so subjective; it depends greatly on musical tastes. But theological content is very objective. . . . The Bible gives primary emphasis to songs’ textual content.

The Socratic format of the workshop worked well for several reasons. First, it enabled me to pinpoint cultural differences and to adapt subsequent workshops accordingly. I observed how Americans are ready to move on immediately after someone suggests a satisfying answer to a question, while the French like to debate all the possible nuances of both questions and answers. Therefore, in preparing a French workshop for a music camp several months later, I assigned just one question per discussion group, asking a spokesperson from each group to summarize their findings. This new configuration worked well.

Second, the workshop’s format led to good interaction and discussion with participants, regardless of culture. Each time I moderated the workshop I learned new insights from the participants’ wealth of knowledge and experience and from their meditation of God’s Word.

Third, the question-and-answer format allowed me to appropriately navigate my gender role. In my conservative Christian circles, women do not typically teach men theology in formal settings. The format of this workshop helped me avoid taking a “teaching” posture. While the method seemed to have good short-term benefits for the participants, its long-term effectiveness remains to be seen.

### **How might ethnodoxologists implement this method?**

In conclusion, I have several practical suggestions for ethnodoxologists. First, I recommend that they contact church leaders several months in advance to ask them to keep a record of what songs are being sung in their worship services. This will allow the ethnodoxologist to establish the congregation’s active repertory ahead of time. Keeping a record of songs is possible even for churches in oral settings who do not sing from hymnbooks, project lyrics onto a screen, or prepare weekly printed bulletins. If they have a smartphone, they can simply record the music portion of the services and send it to the ethnodoxologist each week, or just send a voice message stating the title of each song. Any songs that are sung at least twice in a given period of time make up the active repertory. If it is not possible for church leaders to keep a record of songs, or if they live in a remote region without internet access, then they can follow Meyers’s method of making a list of twenty songs that their church particularly enjoys and sings often (Meyers 2015, 48). They should then provide a translation of these songs to the ethnodoxologist so that they can choose a variety for analysis during the workshop.

Second, I recommend that the workshops be recorded for evaluation, with the permission of the participants. This is particularly important in settings where the ethnodoxologist does not speak the participants’ language. Assessment of a workshop is difficult for the facilitator if he or she cannot understand the chatter between participants. Ethnomusicologist Nicole Beaudry’s retranslation method can solve this problem. After getting permission to record her interaction with the people she was studying, she arranged for her translator to stay for an extra day to listen to the recording with her and fill in the communication gaps. Beaudry suggests providing adequate compensation for the translator and cultivating a genuine friendship so that the process of retranslation

is enjoyable (2008, 237–38). While labor- and time-intensive, these steps exponentially increase a facilitator's ability to assess the effectiveness of this method and to make further improvements.

Third, I recommend that the ethnodoxologist research the cultural setting as much as possible, in order to adapt the method appropriately. In oral settings, participants could sing the song together as they analyze it, rather than looking at a printed copy. Some cultures prize poetry and song lyrics that contain many layers of meaning. According to John Oswald, Tibetan believers enjoy Jesus's parables for this reason, and they appreciate song texts that have similar characteristics (Oswald 2013, 18). Although it takes additional time to peel back layers of meaning, participants' appreciation of song texts will undoubtedly deepen as a result.

Fourth, I suggest that if indigenous church leaders decide that their lyric theology is weak, then the ethnodoxologist can help them adapt a local genre or create a new one that could support a higher text load. During Roberta King's years of ministry in Africa, she encouraged churches to develop these kinds of genres, recognizing that believers in oral cultures are often dependent on songs and stories to teach them new information and help them meditate on Scripture (King 1999, 62).

### Conclusion

The Lord is calling out for himself among the nations a people for his name (Acts 15:14). One day, all of his people will be gathered together with him and will worship him in glory. Scripture gives us a sneak peek of the texts that we, angelic hosts, martyrs, and the twenty-four elders will sing, in passages such as Revelation 5:9: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open the seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

But even now in this broken, weary world, God's people are continually offering up sacrifices of praise. An ideal song repertory for a local congregation will contain lyrics that balance summaries of God's self-revelation with calls to respond. Lyrics that are faithful to Scripture enable Christians to express their praise to God, encourage one another, and challenge unbelievers to turn from their false gods. A robust lyric theology contributes to a church's spiritual health, and a repertory that contains a variety of lyrical themes, text loads, and levels of complexity is a blessing to any congregation. Such precious elements of worship deserve our careful attention.

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