

## CHURCHGOERS MAY REMEMBER SONG LYRICS OVER SERMON QUOTES

Judges

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Before you read this article, start by reciting the alphabet in your head.

There is a reason you just fought a strong temptation to hum. It's the same reason you can remember jingles from childhood and lyrics to your favorite rock anthem, but not the security password you set up last week.

If you can name all 50 states or all 66 books of the Bible, my guess is it's because of a song. Sunday school teachers, marketers, hymn writers, rock stars, and kindergarten teachers are all well aware that "what is learned in song is remembered long."

And neuroscience backs this up. Pairing information with music helps our hippocampus retrieve that information with ease. Music is a powerful teaching tool, and before the discipline of neuroscience existed, the followers of Yahweh employed that tool.

Miriam's Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 was composed to stamp the memory of God's transcendence onto his people's consciousness. The 150 psalms, whose words by themselves are perfectly potent, were written to be sung. The children of God understood their need to be reminded by sacred words set to melodies. After all, ours is a long history of forgetting and being summoned back to remembrance. Music plus words equals recall.

But recall is not all that music aids. Words set to music have a profoundly formative effect. Any lyric we hear or sing can yield us either well-formed or malformed, depending on the content of that lyric.

In my youth group in the 1980s, we were urged to destroy the records and cassettes that might train us in the paths of secular music. If you've ever downloaded the clean version of a song instead of the explicit version, you recognize the formative power of lyrics. Sacred or secular, the songs we steep ourselves in are shaping us. This should stop us in our tracks. How are the lyrics of our worship music forming us?

Does our sacred music merely move us in the moment or form us for a lifetime of faithfulness?

James 3:1 warns that not many of us should become teachers, because those who teach are judged more strictly. I memorized that verse in the old version of the NIV as "Not many of you should presume to be teachers." It is dangerous to presume to teach; it is equally dangerous to presume that the music we sing in our services is not teaching. By Wednesday, the pastor's three sermon points are forgotten, but the chorus of the worship song is still being hummed, its message repeating in our brains.



It matters whether those who lead us in song see their task as creating a mood or a memory. If primarily a mood, lyrics can take a back seat to vocals and instrumentation. If primarily a memory, the lyrics are critically important. Like the Psalms, they should be able to stand on their own, combined with music or not.

But other factors are formative as well. Do we sing music characterized by an individual focus or a corporate one? Is a scriptural connection clear, or are we singing a jumble of vaguely Christian thoughts? Is the congregation's reaction the primary measure for the value of a song?

In short, does our sacred music merely move us in the moment or form us for a lifetime of faithfulness? To presume to write, select, or lead our sacred music is to presume to teach. It is not a question of if our songs teach, but what.

In an age of widespread biblical and theological illiteracy, leaders must choose those songs with care. Many who will sing them under our leadership are spiritual infants. Imagine if the lyrics of the ABC song were 85 percent accurate. For many, the Sunday gathering is their first encounter with the local church. Before they attend a membership class or Bible study, they will sit in a Sunday service and receive instruction not just in sermon but in song.

As someone who is dedicated to combating biblical illiteracy in the church, my plea to church leaders is this: Choose songs that teach well.

Choose songs that train spiritual children in the language of Scripture, sound doctrine, and spiritual disciplines. Carve memory paths deep in their minds so that right thinking can inform right feeling and right feeling can motivate right doing. Give the children of God the gift of a good memory in an age of formidable forgetfulness. Teach them to sing their ancient faith.