

Lecture #10 – Effective Song Leading

I. Introduction

In previous lessons we have explored the fundamentals of music theory and conducting. We have seen that music has its proper place in the corporate worship of the church. In this lesson we will go beyond the basics and look to go from being someone singing and waving their hand around in front of a crowd to leading a congregation in worshipful singing.

II. The Need for Music Leadership

I Corinthians 14:40 is the underlying guide for functions of the church: “Let all things be done decently and in order.” To do so requires a foundation of truth (Scripture) to build on and leadership to ensure direction and cooperation.

In our day, the knowledge of music is not as pervasive as it once was. Sure, we consume more music than ever before as a society. But enjoying music and creating it are two vastly different things. Then again there is a vast difference between knowing music and then teaching it, as there is between singing and leading other in song.

The cry of the hour from our church music programs is for leadership. Men and women are needed who both know music theory and the practice of sacred music. People who understand what effective and solid church music is. This is more than just knowing a few hymns or abhorring worldly music.

Lee Roberson famously said, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” The music of our churches is not an area of exception to that rule. Pastors have sadly undervalued and undeveloped it, likely from their own musical ignorance. Song leaders, choir directors, musicians, and singer of all types fall prey to apathy, pragmatism, and compromise.

III. The Knowledge Factor

An effective song leader knows music. They understand the various symbols and terminology. They know rhythms, key signatures, and the like.

To effectively lead others, you generally must know more than others in your area of expertise. Music is no different. While you can kid around at times and joke about those squiggly lines on the paper, in truth you must be joking in those moments and not expressing your own lack of knowledge.

IV. The Spiritual Factor

Sacred music is a spiritual endeavor. We note that in the times of the Temple it was the Levitical priesthood that led in music and singing (I Chronicles 25, for example). Paul was writing in Ephesians 5:19 to believers (“yourselves”), not unbelievers. The music he commends to those believers are spiritual in source and substance.

As Christians, we must seek to do “all to the glory of God”. While we strive to do our very best for His glory, we cannot confuse the fact that high quality music does not mean it is spiritual music. We must seek to be spiritual first, and musically adept a close second.

The effective song leader is sold-out Christian. A man of fervent prayer and diligent Bible study. He *knows* what he is singing and to whom he is singing it. He *feels* the expression of each song. He has genuine love for the church and a zeal to reach the lost. His Christian walk is exemplary. He is an encouragement to others.

V. The Physical Factor

As he is representing both the Christ and His church, the song leader should dress and look in a respectfully, professional manner if at all possible. Clothes neat, not out of style, and well cared for. This cannot be done for vanity’s sake or for personal attention, but rather as an exercise in doing our best for our Lord.

VI. The Personality Factor

The song leader must be a friendly person. He should be approachable to all and caring. His demeanor is proper for the situation, joyful in times of celebration, somber in times of mourning.

This must be done naturally. You cannot force yourself to become someone you are not without it obviously becoming an act. But even the most introverted person can be friendly and open without acting like a used-car salesman.

VII. The Preparation Factor

The effective song leader should never “wing it” unless it absolutely unavoidable. Care should be taken to select songs for each service that are fitting.

It is advisable to track the songs used to promote variety and limit repetition. This could be done simply with a database or spreadsheet, but even just looking over the past few months of songs would prove useful.

It may be useful to make a list of songs in the hymnbook that you wish to use. Make use of the topical index in the hymnal to find plan songs for a theme or holiday. If leading at a missions conference, sing missions-themed songs like “Send the Light” or “Rescue the Perishing”. If leading at a funeral, don’t sing a rousing chorus of “I’ve Got Peace Like a River” (unless it was requested, then you may have to).

Know the songs before you stand before people to lead them. Practice singing them through. Look up how to pronounce difficult words. Know the timing and which hand pattern you will use to lead it.

VIII. The Appropriateness Factor

Know the time of year, any holidays that may affect the service, and the type of service you are planning for. Don’t slip in a Christmas song in July unless you are having some sort of special day like that. It may be appropriate to sing a patriotic song or two in some services but do remember that we gather to worship Christ first and foremost.

Watch for verses that are especially applicable. It is too often the habit to skip the third verses of songs and that is to our detriment. Sometimes there are great truths in those verses that people need to hear and express. Sometimes a particular verse is especially fitting for the time. For example, on skipping verse 3 of “America the Beautiful” on Memorial Day or Veterans Day is a mistake because it is the one that speaks of “heroes proved in liberating strife”.

IX. The Excitement Factor

Leading a congregation in singing is a tremendous privilege. You don’t *have* to lead singing, you *get* to lead singing!

No song leader should step to the platform looking like they were sentenced to the job. Your attitude is contagious. How you enter the pulpit and your facial expressions before you sing a single note are critical. If you want to sing, others will too.

X. The Team Factor

The old poet said, “no man is an island unto himself”. Neither is a song leader. He is part of a team.

All activities in a service are under the authority of the pastor. We confuse this with titles we sometimes use. The modern term “worship leader” is not accurate as it portrays a separation between preaching and singing and their purposes and leadership. Music is but one facet of the service, all of which is under the oversight of the pastor.

Most of the time the song leader is the music director, but not in every case. Sometimes there will be choir director that is also not the song leader. The instrumentalists are also part of the music ministry team. All these should work together as a unit to bring glory to God.

XI. Some Practical Tips

- Know Christ.
- Walk with Christ.
- Keep a servant's heart.
- Pray and prepare.
- Arrive early.
- Look up and mark the locations of songs in the hymnal ahead of time.
- Confer with instrumentalists to make sure they are comfortable with the selected songs.
- If the accompanists are able, consider transposing songs into keys that are easier to sing.
- Greet people before the service. Don't let the first time they see you be when you walk to the platform.
- Start on time.
- DO NOT start by saying, "good morning", waiting for a response, then saying they can do better. It is past time for that to die out.
- Be joyful and friendly in appearance and manner.
- Be positive.
- Act like you are the happiest person in the world to be doing what you are doing.
- Be genuine.
- Always give your best even when not feeling your best.
- Don't lock your knees.
- Speak clearly.

- In general, limit unnecessary speaking. Leave the preaching to the preacher.
- There are times it can be effective to say a few words about the history of a hymn or perhaps to highlight a phrase or verse. But keep it limited.
- Announce the song number THREE TIMES.
- If you make a mistake, then smile and get back on track.
- Sing out.
- Sing the lead/melody.
- Don't stare down at your song book. Look at the people. You are leading them not notes on a page.
- If looking at the people makes you nervous, look over the back of their heads to the back wall.
- Do try to look around the auditorium at the congregation.
- Give visual cues as often as possible.
- Motivate others to sing without being a cheerleader at a pep rally.
- Know the pastor or preacher and what they expect or like.
- Stick to the plan unless prompted by the pastor or Divine Providence. Do not improvise if you can help it.
- Sing with the best technique you can.
- Stand close enough to the microphone to be picked up but without overpowering it.
- Watch the sound booth. There needs to be communication between the platform and the sound booth to address any issues in a timely and inconspicuous manner.
- When finished, depart quickly and quietly. Don't run into the person who is coming up behind you.
- Avoid "showmanship" tactics like having one side of the auditorium sing against the other.
- Stay humble.
- Stay late.
- Deflect praise.

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- Watch out for Satan's traps and attacks.
- It is OK to be moved emotionally by a song, but don't do it for show.
- Do the best you can with what you have.
- Develop communication skills.
- Stick with it.