

Watch Your Language !

Reflecting on the Language of Public Worship Introduction to the Resources

Over the past few decades, one of the key questions that liturgists have been asking is how what we say and do in worship shapes our theology and ethics. ... While debates rage over how the three are connected, most would agree that worship helps form our understanding of God and the way we live in God's world with one another. If this is the case, it means the words we say and sing in worship are vital to Christian formation.

David Bjorlin

<https://congregationsong.org/atonement-theology-actions-song/>

Tell me what you sing, and I'll tell you who you are!

Albert van den Heuvel
(Dutch ecumenist)

Why should we watch our language in public worship week by week ? And what might it mean to begin to do this ? The aim of this collection of resources is to begin to answer both those questions, and to offer some tools for ministers and other interested people to reflect on the words used in worship week by week and to ask whether they are fit for purpose.

The rationale for these resources is threefold:

Firstly, we would suggest we acknowledge that there is a potential problem with the use of certain images and metaphors in worship. However harmless and right they may seem for some, for others they contradict our core beliefs about what it means to be followers of Christ. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the words and images we use in our worship week by week and ask whether, and how much, they reflect our core beliefs and values as a community.

Secondly, we would suggest we look at the hymns and prayers we use week by week and ask ourselves what picture of God they are presenting, and whether that picture is one which we would wish to identify with ourselves and communicate to others. It is very easy to take certain words and images for granted, so much so that we actually don't consciously realise exactly what we are saying and singing week by week.

Thirdly, we would suggest that we reflect on the ways in which we are all formed by the words of our worship services: how stories, liturgies and hymns have formed us through the years, and how in turn they might form – or deform – others. It is sometimes said that people are formed in their faith more by the hymns they sing than the sermons they hear. If this is the case, then our choice of hymns each week has enormous implications.

At present the resources are made up of three parts:

Some Reflections on the Purpose & Problems of Music in Worship, inviting ministers, worship leaders, and other interested persons to ask questions about the use of music in their worship

A Checklist for Worship Leaders, inviting reflection and discussion on specific hymns or songs chosen for worship

Three **Thematic Reflections**, focusing on **Hymns & Songs of Warfare; Hymns & Songs of Violent Atonement; Hymns & Songs of Nationalism** for use by churches with a specific interest in these areas

It is hoped that we will be able to add to them in the future.

In Conclusion

It is clear that our choice of hymns and songs each Sunday has implications. It both forms the theology and worldview of those who regularly attend worship, and also communicates to those who don't, something of the beliefs and values of the congregation.

Both of these effects are hidden ones, and it may only be when a congregant reveals something about their core beliefs in a conversation, or when a visitor asks us about something they have heard in the service, that we realise the importance of thinking through our weekly choice of hymns and songs.

We hope this collection of resources will help you begin to do just that, and that it will inspire you as a congregation or ministry team to reflect together on the hymns and songs you select each week and perhaps even to work together on a short position document on these important choices.

Dr. Valerie Hobbs is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the University of Sheffield and a research associate of the CSBV. Her book, [An Introduction to Religious Language](#), was published by Bloomsbury in 2021.

Peter King is a research associate with the CSBV. He has for a long time been concerned with the words we use in our worship services and whether they are consistent with the beliefs we express in our sermons and statements.

Michael Spalione is a theologian and musician. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky, teaches at Bellarmine University, and is a research associate at the CSBV.

Carolyn Whitnall is a PhD student with the CSBV, exploring how scripture is interpreted and used (including musically) by neo-charismatic evangelical Christians as represented by Bill Johnson and Bethel Church.

For further resources on these issues check out the [Hostility, Healing, Hymnody](#) blog.

