

Congregational Worship at Firm Foundation Bible Church

by Tony de la Riva, Associate Pastor at FFBC

The purpose of this document is to provide a theological and philosophical overview of our approach to congregational worship at Firm Foundation Bible Church. The point of this document is not necessarily to describe what our music is like on a typical Sunday morning, but simply to present what we believe is the biblical framework behind it—the “why” behind the “what,” as it were.

OUR PHILOSOPHY: THE CHURCH IS FOR THE CHURCH

When it comes to congregational worship at Firm Foundation, our essential conviction can be boiled down to this statement: “the church is for the Church.” In other words, we believe that the assembly of God’s people is primarily for worship and edification (Ac. 6.1-7, Eph. 4.11-16, 1 Cor. 14.1-5 ff.) as opposed to outreach and evangelism. In fact, outreach and evangelism happens most effectively in the church when the church has its “believers-first” priorities in order (cf. 1 Cor. 14.24-25).

What this means necessarily is that our corporate gathering is not about drawing a crowd, or “me,” or “you,” or our individual preferences, but about “us,” the followers of Jesus, and our God-directed focus and mutual edification.

Interestingly, along those same lines, the three most meaningful Scripture passages on music in the New Testament are the following:

- “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.” (Colossians 3.16)¹
- “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart...” (Ephesians 5.18-19)

1 All Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise stated.

- “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” (1 Corinthians 14.26)

Obviously these passages say and imply a number of things, but for our purposes, the primary thing they all tell us is that, in the context of the community of God’s people, music is for our corporate instruction and edification.

Taking all of this together, we are led to two conclusions:

- The assembly exists to build up the body of Christ in the truth—specifically, the truth of the Gospel (Col. 3.16)—which means that the entire purpose of our corporate gathering is to point one another past ourselves *to* the Lord Jesus so *that* we become more like him.
- Our music is one part of that purpose.

Practically speaking, what our “church is for the church” philosophy means for us is that our worship music must be **congregational**—that is, it must be for the entire congregation, and not for one individual or a few individuals (including the individuals on the worship team). And if music is going to be truly “congregational,” it needs to be both **clear** and **true**.

Congregational Worship Music is Clear

By “clear,” we mean at least three things:

- **Unambiguous** -- The truth and doctrinal message in a song is not ambiguous or obscure, but is easy for any average person to see and to understand. Unlike art in a museum which may or may not have a message, we have something definite to say and people need to understand it.
- **Singable** -- The singing style is not overly artistic, technical, or complex. ‘The average person’ needs to be able to sing it.
- **Designed for participants, not spectators** -- Similar to “singable,” congregational music is designed for participation, not performance; it’s designed to be sung by everyone in the congregation, not performed by a virtuoso and/or enjoyed concert-style by a crowd.

A great example of what we are talking about here is a song called “Immutable” by Shai Linne, which you can hear with lyrics at <https://youtu.be/K1Dsf-BTVWk>. This is a song I love and is as doctrinally-sound as any song you will ever hear—but it is utterly unsingable for our congregation. Therefore we would

never—and could never!—sing it as a congregation during a Sunday morning service. In fact, the genre of this song would very likely offend more than half of our congregation, which is another reason we wouldn't do it on a Sunday—but more on that below.

Congregational Worship Music is True

When we say that a congregational song needs to be “true,” it goes without saying that it must be **consistent with our doctrinal and theological commitments at FFBC**. We are protestant, evangelical, baptistic, non-charismatic, reformed in our soteriology, and dispensational in our hermeneutic. We are not Catholic, Orthodox, charismatic, arminian, or covenantal. Our congregational music needs to be consistent with what we believe and what we teach.

More broadly, however, when a song is “true,” we also mean that most Christians will clearly see its doctrinal content or theological quality to the point that they are not likely to debate it. This is important, because we all are going to be edified by the messages of different songs.

For example, I am personally edified by a song called “Evergreen” by Audrey Assad. The message is true and biblical, and I think I can demonstrate that. However, I fully acknowledge that, in a room of twenty Christians, ten of them may disagree with me on how doctrinally-solid “Evergreen” actually is. By contrast, very few Christians are going to disagree, for example, on the doctrinal soundness of “In Christ Alone” by the Gettys.

In other words, our aim is at FFFBC is to do music that is true—that is, music that is made up of clear affirmations of the core, central truths of the Christian faith, and especially of the Gospel (cf. Col. 3.16). And a good indication of when a song is “true” according to how we are trying to understand it is this: the song isn't confined to a particular theological sphere or subset of Christianity.

To be clear, genre can definitely confine a song to particular sphere of Christianity, but that would tend to be more of a cultural issue than a doctrinal or theological one—but again, more on that below. For now, we are talking about a song's doctrinal or theological content. And if a song is sung by both charismatics *and* presbyterians, or by Christians in 1800 *and* Christians in 2022, or by Christians in underground China, the American south, *and* coastal California, it's probably “true.”

AESTHETICS: STYLE, GENRE, BEAUTY & EXCELLENCE

In my experience, it is this area of things—and particularly style and genre—where Christians typically tend to focus when it comes to music in the church. They want to sing the songs they hear on KLUV, or the songs they sung in church growing up, or whatever’s on their own personal playlist. Unfortunately, it is also on these same grounds—usually unintentionally—that their whole assessment of worship stands or falls: whether or not they’re able to sing the songs they like determines whether or not they find the music “worshipful,” “joyful,” or “edifying.”

At the risk of making too broad a categorization, it is important to understand that all these things have to do with the *aesthetic* element of music. Aesthetics are important to be sure, and that is because we are made in the image of a God who values aesthetics (which is why human beings are musical—but that is a different conversation). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize a the outset that aesthetics are secondary to clarity and truth because, while clarity and truth are matters of principle, aesthetics are matters of conscience and preference. Ultimately, when it comes to congregational music, aesthetics only have value to the degree that they support and promote clarity and truth.

That said, how do we understand style, genre, beauty, and excellence when it comes to congregational worship music? More importantly, how do we factor them into our worship music at FFBC?

Style & Genre

When it comes to style and genre, congregational music should be **culturally appropriate so that it doesn’t offend or alienate a respectful congregation**. Again, take “Immutable” by Shai Linne as an example. Doctrinally and theologically, that is a song that is in lock-step with us at FFBC, but it’s hard to imagine a song that is more foreign to our people, culturally speaking.

When it came to cultural issues like these, Paul labored not to alienate others over things that are ultimately not matters of principle (1 Cor. 9.21-23). His approach was not, “Unless I have a bacon fest I’m not going to win the Gentiles,” but rather, “The bacon is a a non-issue so I’ll eat the bacon.” Similarly, when he was among Jews, he wouldn’t even mention bacon because, again, the bacon is a non-issue. His instruction to us is to do the same (Rom. 14.1-15.7, 1 Cor. 10.23-33).

In other words, in large part, the overall tone and tenor of the culture of the people in our congregation is going to determine what kind of music is acceptable or not for congregational purposes.

Just because I like a song doesn't mean that we should sing it in church. And someone will say, "Yes, I know that, tell me something I don't know." But read it again and let it sink in. I like "Immutable" by Shai Linne, but we can't sing that in church at Firm Foundation because the style and genre would alienate probably 90% or more of our congregation.

We all have 6.95 days per week to enjoy whatever we whenever we want. At Firm Foundation, we believe that each one of us—worship team servants *and* the people in the pew—has an obligation *not* to impose our preferences or consciences on the congregation. Instead, we should "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14.19) and work to make sure that "all things be done for building up" (1 Cor. 14.26). And in really practical terms, that means being content with songs that are broadly acceptable among our people and not ripping off the band-aid with something that is culturally outside of their comfort zone.

Beauty & Excellence

In short, the music should be compelling in its beauty and excellence, drawing people in (as opposed to repelling people because of its ugliness or lack of skill) and adorning the truth to deepen its impact.

To be sure, this is almost a non-issue because a church is ultimately bound by the talent and skill of the musicians that God has given to it. And that's good seeing as how beauty and excellence are not matters of sin and righteousness in and of themselves. Thankfully, however, at the time of this writing, we have several very talented musicians in our congregation, but our point is just this: to the degree that the available skill and talent allows, to that degree we should aim for excellence and beauty in order to adorn and enhance the truths about which we are singing. To the degree we can, we should make the music attractive so as to *attract* and draw people in, and we should avoid repulsiveness so that we do not *repel* people and drive them away.

Aesthetics are Ultimately Invisible

At the end of the day, the proper place of aesthetics is not to draw attention to themselves per se either positively or negatively, but to commend, enhance, and beautify the truth content of the music to the people of God.

This is important, so let me put that again in a large call-out in case anyone skims over this paragraph:

The proper place of aesthetics is not to draw attention to themselves per se either positively or negatively, but to commend, enhance, and beautify the truth content of the music to the people of God.

There is a sense in which aesthetics in congregational music is a lot like the alternator in your car. If you're thinking about it, it's probably not doing what it should be doing. Instead of thinking about what you're singing, you're distracted by the talent (or lack of it), or you're either absorbed in or offended by the musical style or genre.

Similarly, when the aesthetic element is good, it's a lot like fresh breath on a first date. It's not the star of the show, but it sure makes things pleasant, and it can even heighten your experience with, and estimation of, the person you're with—especially if they're a great person.

CHOOSING CONGREGATIONAL MUSIC

In really practical terms, here are some simple questions to help us determine whether or not a song is a good choice for congregational worship at Firm Foundation:

- Would Christians would tend to debate its doctrinal content or theological quality?
- Are its key features are genre, style, or the creativity, talent, or skill of the performer?
- Is the language of the lyrics itself more colloquial, casual, or consisting primarily of cultural themes (as opposed to intentionally, explicitly biblical themes)?
- Is the singing style characterized by things like excessive off-beat rhythm, improvisation by the singer, runs or “vocal acrobatics,” etc.?

If any of these mark a song's dominant features, then the song is probably not something that we'd do as a congregation.

Bad Reasons for Choosing (or Not Choosing) Music

In and of themselves, the following are **not** good reasons to either choose or *not* choose a song for congregational worship:

- It's what younger / older people want.
- It's *not* what younger / older people want.
- It's made by a questionable musician / music group / ministry.
- Its theological roots or associations are questionable / unquestionable.
- It is / isn't from a particular genre.
- It's old / new.
- It's fast / slow.
- It does / doesn't make me "feel" worshipful, joyful, edified, etc.
- I like it / don't like it.

None of these are good reasons to use or not use a song for congregational worship per se. The Lord knows that I have worked hard as long as I have been at FFBC **not** to allow bad reasons—including my own personal preferences—to play an inappropriate role in my song selection here. Otherwise we would have sung "Immutable" by Shai Linne a long time ago!

Our aim at Firm Foundation is that our congregational worship be—wait for it—**congregational**. Lord willing, that means that we will continue to work hard to stick with "clear" and "true" as our governing guidelines when it comes to the songs we choose to sing as a congregation.

HOW CAN I CONTRIBUTE AS A WORSHIP TEAM MEMBER?

While I (Tony) am of course responsible for overseeing the congregational worship ministry at FFBC, I know and am convinced that I have a biblical obligation to serve you, to be sensitive to your preferences, and to depend on you. I believe that we are a team, and I sincerely want this to be a team effort and not the "Tony show."

In view of that, here are some ways that you can meaningfully contribute to the music ministry:

1. Be available, dependable, flexible, and have integrity. And love the church.

Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and be there when you're scheduled to be there. Show up and be on time. Be willing to serve as well as to sit one out. Above all, view your service not as your opportunity to 'do something you're passionate about,' but as something that God is using in the lives of others to make them more like Jesus—because that's *exactly* what God says it is.

Jesus himself has equipped each of us with spiritual giftedness to serve the body:

- ...for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Service is not about self, but about the spiritual growth in Christlikeness of those around you.

2. Suggest songs to me, and know what the team needs if we're going to be able to sing it.

Did you hear a song on the radio and you'd like to sing it in church? Do you remember a song from your youth? Do you have a song they sing at another church, or one you used to sing at an old church? Bring it to me, and let's talk about it together and look at it honestly in light of our guidelines.

It is also important to keep in mind here that doing a song is not quite as easy as bringing in a piece of paper with typed-up lyrics on it. Depending on the skills and abilities of our musicians, we may need chord sheets or full sheet music. We also may need to make an additional purchase to acquire licensed, legally-usable music—and it may have to be shipped, not downloaded—and we may have to buy several copies so that we can all legally have our own copy for practices and Sunday mornings! Plus, if I and/or our accompaniment doesn't know the song, we'll need to carve out time to learn it out of our regular practices and Sunday-morning responsibilities. Besides all that, the raw facts of our personnel and skills may not allow us to replicate the sound that you have in mind or that you've heard on the radio.

Besides the content factor—which is the most important factor, hands down—a lot goes into singing a song on Sunday mornings, so it’s important to have some kind of realistic idea of what that looks like.

3. Become familiar with the music that I and the musicians are familiar with.

Modern and traditional church music essentially sums up what I know and am familiar with, and the same is true of our primary accompaniment (which, at the time of this writing, is Arleen and Corinne). There are many examples, but some of the main ones are: traditional hymns and hymnals; the Gettys; Sovereign Grace; Matt Papa; Matt Boswell; Bob Kauflin; and Andrew Peterson; just to name a few. There are a lot of good reasons why it would be spiritually beneficial for you to familiarize yourself with music from these sources, but concerning congregational worship: 1) nearly all of the music from sources/artists like these is going to be doctrinally solid (i.e., it’s “true”); and 2) most of it is written for the church and can easily be sung congregationally, even though it is often “performed” concert-style (i.e., it’s “clear”).

4. Take advantage of special music.

It is safe to assume that we are all in the music ministry because we love music, enjoy singing, and (hopefully) are reasonably gifted. Some of us have a stronger desire than others to share our God-given talents with the congregation, and I can certainly sympathize with that desire in different ways. So, take advantage of special music, which usually happens during the offering after the sermon, but can happen before a sermon in certain circumstances.

Special music is typically not congregational, but instead is a time for you to ‘do your thing,’ as it were, and put your talents on display in a song that is meaningful to you. In this sense, special music is a kind of “open mic,” and I will be as hands-off as possible and will do whatever you ask me to do to help you.

We only have a few guidelines here:

- Allow me and/or the other worship team members the grace to *not* participate in your special song. Allow us to allow you to do your thing.
- All special music needs to be sacred, Christian music. No secular music, please.
- Allow me and/or the other elders to review your song first. The leash is pretty long when it comes to special music, but we do want to make sure that a song is reasonably within a framework of theological soundness and stylistic decency.

FINALLY, LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Unfortunately, church music can be an ugly area of body life. That is because, when it comes to music, preference and conscience come into play maybe more than in any other area of the church—but it doesn't *feel* that way. When the music doesn't go the way we think it should, it *feels* very personal, or like someone is sinning, or like they're sinning against us. As a result, things can easily shift from Christ-centered, body-edifying worship to unmet desires, conflict, and hurt feelings.

"My brothers, these things ought not to be so!" (Jas. 3.10) So, as fellow servants on the worship team, how can we uphold the command to 'love one another not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth' (1 Jn. 3.18)? There are several ways:

1. Remember that we're still in developmental mode.

Since I arrive at FFBC in the spring of 2020, we've had an *incredible* amount of turnover, personnel changes, and unforeseen circumstances. If we're going to build chemistry, consistency, and relationships, it's going to take time, effort, and lots of grace from all of us. Let's all remember to be patient with the process as well as with each other.

2. Remember that any conflict we will experience among us will almost certainly be ENTIRELY over preferences, and NOT over principle.

Sin vs. righteousness. Truth vs. error. Character issues (as opposed to maturity issues). Those are all matters of principle. The Bible says that we are to die on hills of principle.

But fast music vs. slow music? New vs. old? Hymns vs. KLUV vs. southern gospel? Guitar vs. piano? **All of that is preference at least, conscience at most.** All of these things are on par with the color of the carpet, and *none* of them are matters of principle.

When it comes to things like music style, genre, fast vs. slow, etc., we're not talking about character, sin, righteousness, truth, or error. We're talking about things that we like or prefer. Or, at the very most, things about which we have our own unique, individual convictions—like Christmas trees, or drinking alcohol. And most Christians who are reading this understand the difference between having a personal conviction against alcohol vs. telling another Christian they're in sin because they have wine in their refrigerator.

When it comes to matters of preference and conscience, God's clear, unambiguous, definitive command to us is set yourself aside, defer to others, and put others first (Rom. 14.1–15.2, 1 Cor. 10.23–11.1). Conflict, arguments, frustration, discouragement, quitting, etc.—*all* of those are unbiblical responses to issues of preference and conscience.

If there is anything that I would encourage us to remember, it's this:

If we're not talking about sin and righteousness, or truth and error—if all we are talking about is song selection, music style, or things like that—then we have no biblical grounds for conflict, or to be upset, hurt, frustrated, or discouraged.

If you find yourself upset or frustrated, or you feel like you're not being heard because the music isn't going the way you would like to see it go, please prayerfully read through Romans 14:1–15.2, and 1 Corinthians 10.23–11.1, then spend some time in prayer and ask the Lord to help you see things the way he sees them, and *then* come and talk to me—in a spirit of humility and believing the best and not the worst (1 Cor. 13.4-7).

3. Know that I am working hard not to let my preferences and personality have an oversized influence on the music ministry

I am constantly trying to lean on our musicians, and working to find ways to defer to others and accommodate their desires. I'm constantly bouncing thoughts off Lloyd and other leaders, and I am starting from an assumption of mistrust of my own judgement, and from an awareness of my need for outside perspectives and critique. Please know that I am ready, willing, and constantly working to defer wherever I can and wherever I should.

4. Remember that I am responsible to lead.

Please remember that I am not doing what I'm doing arbitrarily, but that I am working hard to be responsible before the Lord with this stewardship that I have been given. I was brought here and tasked by the leadership of this church to provide theological and pastoral oversight of our worship ministry. It

may not always be obvious or evident, but I have concrete theological and philosophical commitments that are driving what I do and the choices I make, and I am leaning heavily on the leaders around me as I do what I am responsible before God to do, which is oversee this ministry.

5. Don't gossip, and keep lines of communication open.

Airing our grievances to unrelated third-parties is gossip, and gossip spreads like gangrene and defiles many (Heb. 12.15). Frustration builds and relationships break down when there is no communication. God wants us to be people with courage and integrity—people who deal with our issues directly and honestly (Lev. 19.36, Pr. 27.6, Mt. 18.15). If you ever find that you have issues or concerns, talk to me directly—and, again, in a spirit of humility and believing the best—and talk to me first!—and let's see if we can work through it.

6. Work to be encouraged by what we're singing. Make it your goal to grow in your love of the Gospel in Gospel-centered music.

At the very least, I am confident we can all agree that the music we're doing is “true” even if it's not always our favorite. Therefore, work hard to be encouraged by the Gospel in the music we do as a congregation. Ask the Lord to help you not to miss the kernel for the husk. Matthew Henry's father said he thanked God he could find ‘honey in the carcass’ of a bad sermon. In the same way, work to see Jesus in the music we're doing even when the cosmetics aren't what you would necessarily prefer.

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS OR FEEDBACK?

I realize this has been a long read, but I believe it's important, so thank you for making it all the way through. If you have any comments or questions, let's get together and talk about it!

Pick a spot on my calendar that works for you: <https://calendly.com/delariva805/meetup-1-2-hours>

Thank you for your interest in the music ministry at Firm Foundation. May the Lord fulfill your desires and use your gifts and service to grow us all together in our likeness to Jesus. Amen.

Rev. April 2022