

A Song for Every Generation

By: Lynn DeShazo

I had a good heart-to-heart talk recently with a seasoned pastor about contemporary worship songs. This man is actually "pastor emeritus" of my home church. Brother Bill, as we call him, went to seminary at a very conservative school, was ordained a Baptist pastor, was deeply impacted by the move of the Holy Spirit known as the Charismatic Movement, and ended up, among other things, on the faculty of Liberty Bible College in Pensacola, Florida. He eventually came to us and pastored seventeen years, then passed the baton of leadership onto our current pastor. He's seen a lot of things over the years. So I was pleased to have him, as he put it, "bounce a few things off of you". Here are a few of the issues we batted around a while; see if you can relate to any of them.

"I hear all these new songs, but I am rarely moved by any of them. I like a song that makes me weep!"

Every generation has its own music and its own songs. What is meaningful to one generation may not make much of an impression on another. Certainly, musical preference has a lot to do with whether we perceive a song as "moving" or not. If I may, however, further interpret Brother Bill's statement, I believe he is saying "I want to sing a song that has been birthed by a real encounter with the real God. When you sing it, you sense the life flow of His Spirit!" There is no shortage of contemporary worship songs these days. Many are written quite well, but craft does not always equal anointing.

Another aspect of his view, I think, is that the longer you walk with the Lord, the less you equate fervency and passion in worship with physical energy. Song lyrics like "I am free to run" are not what sustain you (nothing wrong with that lyric - I'm just making a point!). You don't identify with "Jesus, I will never let You go" as much as you do, "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it". You are finally persuaded, by his stage in life, that you are beset with many weaknesses and that Christ is truly your only hope. Many of our new songs are written by young men. Young men LIKE to run and scream and jump up and down! Passionate expression, which I realize is not always loud and physical, is a value with them. Youthful energy needs an outlet, let's face it. By all means, let it go up to God in fervent worship! Saints of all ages need to be fervent in their worship; older believers just want to do it in ways that are appropriate and

satisfying for their life season and maturity. As one fellow middle-ager put it to me, "I'm tired of hopping around. I just want to sing a song that has some substance!"

Brother Bill speaks from the perspective of a man who's reached retirement age, though he has no intention of retiring from ministry. I have observed in him that, as we grow older, we become more in touch with our own mortality and the end of natural life that awaits us. I see this awareness in my own life, for that matter, but older saints know they have less days ahead of them than ever before. They want songs that get to the heart of the matter, and that artfully and accurately sing of the mercy and majesty of the Lord. They are tired of singing, as am I, "I love You, yeah, yeah, yeah."

"What's wrong with bringing out some of the old songs that we used to enjoy?"

One of the frustrations of older believers is with the apparent neglect of their musical preferences. I have to say, I think he's right on. We seem to place so much emphasis on new songs in our zeal to be musically current, that we rarely reach back for older selections. So worship services are often unfamiliar territory to our most senior members. Do we need new songs? Of course. A new song keeps us fresh in God and relevant to our culture. But we are missing out on some rich treasures from the past if all we ever sing is the top of the current worship "hit parade". More importantly, we are failing to honor our mothers and fathers within the local church family by never considering their desires. "Every now and then, someone will throw us a biscuit," is the way Brother Bill voiced his frustration. We worship leaders can do a better job of serving our oldest members. Many denominational churches are seeking to do this by offering both traditional and contemporary services. But if your church doesn't have a traditional history to draw on, or is just too small to offer two kinds of services, then what do you do? I see this as a real dilemma for many churches. Obviously, if your church is a new work and consists only of young families and singles, this topic is not an issue for you. But established churches tend to have multiple generations among their members.

"All I hear is soloists. Whatever happened to harmony, or just singing in the Spirit?"

My pastor friend remembers the days when the Holy Spirit was so

manifest in services that the people sang as one voice with hardly any prompting at all. Songs were often much simpler compared to what we have today, but genuine worship rose up out of the people. It wasn't driven by a "soloist", to use his terminology, leading from the platform. There was space given for the people to sing their praises spontaneously. It was just expected that the utterance gifts of the Holy Spirit would be in operation. He misses that, and he's not alone. I've heard that sentiment expressed from our founding generation over and over again. They are not the kind of people who live in the past or who constantly pine about the way things used to be, either. It is true that they experienced a genuine revival. Who wouldn't long to be part of that again? Truthfully, I think they just want to experience afresh the beauty of being able to hear one another sing to God as a community of worshippers assembled in His Presence. Sometimes what we do on the platform is so loud and involved that people just cannot hear each other over the musicians. I believe, too, that worship leaders can be so distracted with engineering the song set that we lose the ability to facilitate true worship arising from the people. The effect can be, "the worship team are really the worshippers, and the rest of us are just enjoying (or not) what they're doing for God." That is not the congregation in worship. That is an audience who is watching the "worship show" and not participating. This scenario, unfortunately, occurs regularly in the churches of America. The congregation is not to blame here; the leadership is.

Also, I believe we charismatic churches have retreated from being ourselves in the matter of corporate singing in the Spirit. I realize there are some negative connotations that some people attach to this practice, and we certainly don't want to alienate anyone who visits our services. However, "singing in tongues", as we say, is a beautiful, highly edifying, completely scriptural expression of worship. Don't worry about offending the visitors, for pete's sake! They just might hear someone "in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God" (Acts 2:11).

Redwoods and Bradfords

I know from having been a worship leader that it is a challenge of the highest order to make a worship service meaningful for everyone present. This is where hymns can be great bridges and community builders across the generations represented within a local church. Treasured hymns can be a comforting anchor against the stormy stress of rapid change in the lives of those who know and love them. The younger folks may have to

learn them, but if they love Jesus, they'll soon come to appreciate the life of God still in these hymns. Interestingly, there is a movement afoot to introduce the classic hymns of our faith to a new generation of believers. In fact, it is this younger generation themselves that are rediscovering hymns and arranging them in fresh, contemporary settings.

In the imposing forest of worship songs, classic hymns are like redwoods. They have endured for centuries and for good reason - they were birthed in streams of revival. Our older choruses and many of our modern worship songs are more akin to Bradford pear trees. They'll be good for about twenty years or so, and then they'll die off as the musical landscape changes once again. The forest will be replenished by a fresh crop of songs. The truly great ones, of course, will join the redwoods.

One characteristic that I've observed of churches that sprang up during the Charismatic Movement is that there is typically no standardized body of hymns. If older adults know hymns, it is from the church affiliation of their growing up years, not from being a part of that revival. The children of these adults do not know the hymns at all, with a few exceptions, because the church they grew up in did not sing hymns. Our church, for example, began in the mid-1970's among a group of families who left, primarily, Baptist churches. Since hymns were associated with the spiritual deadness in so many denominations of the time, these hymns were often perceived to be themselves "dead" by those encountering the Holy Spirit in power. Hymns were, therefore, rarely sung. Unfortunately, the baby was often thrown out with the bath water in those days. The worship services of our church in its early days consisted of the scripture choruses and the music of the Jesus movement. Our musical foundations were simply not built upon hymns (past revivals). They were built upon the music of the revival being experienced at that time, which has long since passed. Many of the songs from the Charismatic Movement have fallen into disuse, of course. They are rarely known by anyone younger than a baby boomer. Truthfully, many of them are so musically "dated" now or so overly simplistic that the chances are slim to none that they'll ever make a comeback (sorry, Brother Bill!). Musical fashion simply changes with the times.

What's on the Menu?

Now here's a point for you leaders to consider. It is not realistic to expect a twenty-something worship leader to know what musical diet would best serve everyone in the household of God. That is a role for spiritual fathers

and mothers! The fact is, your church is going to get a steady diet of whatever your worship leader is personally consuming. Children will eat chicken nuggets and pizza everyday, if you let them. They're not mature enough to make the best decisions on their own. (This, to be fair, is a broad statement and doesn't apply to every young leader.) Simply put, if you want something besides spiritual "chicken nuggets" (i.e. appeals to youthful tastes, but doesn't have much meat) for your congregation week in and week out, it is up to you fathers - pastors and elders in local leadership - to insist on a balanced diet. You may not personally know much about music, but you certainly should be able to recognize whether a song is life-giving to your congregation, or whether its theology is good or terrible! I know there is often a fine line to walk between being too controlling with your staff and giving them needed pastoral input. You have to allow them plenty of creative breathing room, or they will soon come to hate being the worship leader, and you'll be looking for another one. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for the worship life of your corporate gatherings lies with you. So please take an active role in your worship leader's development as a disciple of Jesus, first and foremost, and secondly as a music minister. Help them develop an awareness of generations in the worshipping community. Put resources in their hands. Send them to a quality conference and go with them, if you can. Introduce them to a more experienced leader in your church or community who would be willing to work with them.

Leaving Mayberry

I have learned that it is human nature to equate the songs that we sang at the time of our earliest, or most powerful, spiritual encounters with "the anointing". If our favorite older songs seem more "anointed" to us than modern songs, it is often because they are forever linked in our hearts with significant God encounters. It is also human nature to grow increasingly nostalgic with age. Remember the scene at the dedication of the rebuilt temple in Ezra's day? The younger ones rejoiced that the temple was rebuilt, while the older ones wept at the memory of the more glorious temple of their youth which was built by King Solomon. Who can blame them? Tragically, however, they couldn't rejoice over the restoration that was occurring right before their eyes because of a nostalgic attachment to "the way things used to be." I do have empathy for Brother Bill's feelings on contemporary worship. I agree with him on several points. At the same time, I see the need for many of us to guard against succumbing to a May-berry-like nostalgia over worship songs or styles. It

is human nature and a weakness of aging to want to cling to the past as a stress response to change, and to fail to see the good in anything new. It is a weakness of youth to fail to see the wisdom in what has gone before them, or to hum-bly appropriate it. A sense of heritage in worship is therefore helpful and needed. Nostalgia, however, is only a hindrance to the growth of the local church in worship. Now, please let me clarify that singing old songs is not being nostalgic! I am referring to an attitude that is cast in stone concerning music ministry. Indeed, some of our older songs have far more substance and meaning than the adolescent fare being circulated these days. Singing a few of them next Sunday would make a big improvement in the spiritual content of worship songs in many places. Just because a song is old doesn't mean it should be permantly retired. The Bible is pretty old, isn't it?

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