

Why I've Stopped Singing in Your Church

By Bill Blankschaen

I love music. Truly I do. I love to sing. But you wouldn't know it on Sunday morning when I'm visiting your church.

I'm not talking to all of you, of course. I'm sure many churches, maybe even yours, get it right. I just haven't been there that often, I guess. My experiences with modern worship music in evangelical Christianity often leave me not just silent, but wondering if I should be joining George Bailey in making a quick exit from the agony.

To be candid, I know how to behave in your church. I've been raised in it my entire life. So I know how to fake it when necessary. Lately, it's been very necessary when the music is playing and we're supposed to be singing, you know, to God. Frankly, I'm tired of it. Maybe all the "seekers" are enjoying it, but I'm finding it hard to sincerely engage in anything resembling worship.

Instead of feeling the joy of joining with other believers in offering praises to the Almighty, I often feel insulted, bored, and disconnected from 2,000 years of worship history. And just when I think that maybe it's just me having a selfish and sinful attitude — a very real possibility — a flamboyant electrical guitar solo breaks out. I'm left deciding whether to waive my iPhone and buy the t-shirt or just shut up and go home.

As best I can sort through my own muddled and messy thoughts, I think there are three things that really bother me about the worship music in many Evangelical Christian churches today:

1. They're really, really simplistic. There, I tried to keep the words small. You certainly put a lot of work into doing that for me each Sunday. It's not just that most of the lyrics are simple — as in easy to understand. It's that so many of the songs remind me of the ditties we sang at camp — when I was ten. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure the theology in some of those camp songs was more advanced than the ones I've heard in some of your services. But, hey, everybody else seems to be really, really enjoying it so maybe it's just me. Unless, of course, they've also learned how to fake it.

2. They're all pulled from the latest Top 40 Worship channel. Or so it seems. Most songs I hear in evangelical churches of late have been written in the last decade, if that. I know I'm painting with a broad brush here because there have been some really, really (is this helping?) awesome songs written in the last two decades that deserve a place on the all-time worship songs list. We just usually don't sing those. Maybe because they're *so* three years ago.

What ever happened to the previous 2,000 years of church music history? Oh, I know, every so often you toss a token "hymn" (meaning within just the last century or so) into the mix. But even then, it's a remix that requires melodic jujitsu to keep up with the quicker pace and fancier chord progressions. One distinguishing mark of the worship music of centuries past is that it generally focused more on content than today's simplistic style. Songs like "Arise, My Soul, Arise"; "Immortal, Invisible"; "Rejoice, the Lord is King"; or even the simple "I Sing the Almighty Power of God" typified a depth of doctrine that taught us as it revealed the glory of our Lord.

3. They repeat. And repeat. And repeat. And repeat. And rep — all right. See what I mean? Really, really annoying. Really. The first time we sang the simplistic ditty, I could tolerate it though I thought the infinite God of all creation deserved better. By the fifth time, I was hearing echoes of Jesus warning about vain repetitions. But once you went softer and slowed it down on the seventh time, it really began to resonate with my soul.

Not.

Please. Stop. Now.

Yes, there's a place for repetition in worship — if the words are really that good or pulled directly from Scripture ("Agnus Dei" by Michael W. Smith comes to mind), but even that can be overdone. Ironically, most of the same evangelical churches that practice this repetition in modern worship music would resist using more formal chants from church history designed for that very purpose. Or reciting historical creeds of the Church.

So, enough complaining you say. What am I proposing that would be better?

I confess I don't have a well-developed strategy for modern worship. I'm just a guy in the pews, a husband, father, and former pastor, frustrated that I

just don't feel like singing by the time the worship music ends. It seems that focusing on three things would at least be helpful so take it for what it's worth.

So here's what I'd like songs in church to be:

1. **Truthful.** Rather than trying to get dumber than a fifth-grader in the worship service (no offense to my fifth-grade daughter), offer truth that grows my understanding of God as we glorify him. He is truth, after all, so it shouldn't be that difficult.
2. **Written for adults.** We're not camp attendees giddy about it being our first time away from home. Well, maybe some of us are — but the rest of us don't always want to have to choose between clapping our hands in rhythm with the group or wrestling with the guilt trip you put on us. Go ahead. Give us songs with deep doctrine that excite our souls. We're not seekers anymore. Come to think of it, I never was.
3. **Timeless.** Let's sing songs that reach back into the archives of songs proven to have been used by God to edify His people. Mix them in with modern songs, by all means. That's fine. But don't feel as if you have to make them sound like they just hit the airwaves last week. Imagine Mayberry today on MTV. Modern? Yes. Watchable? No. Sometimes classic is really cool. Really.

I could mention the need to play the music well, of course, but, frankly, I can live with the best you can give on that one. Make it as excellent as you can, please — just don't make us sing it *ad nauseum* or worship your musical talents instead of our musical God.

I don't like what I've been feeling in your church. It's like what the redeemed George Bailey prayed, "I want to sing again. I want to sing again."

I really, really do.