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Do We Sing All Five Worship-Hymn Preferences?

"I just love the old gospel hymns," exclaimed Helen, the oldest choir member, after the choir finished practicing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

Carol, a choir member in her mid-sixties, asked, "But aren't some of those gospel hymns theologically unsound? I prefer the *really old* hymns like 'Holy, Holy, Holy.'"

Bill interrupted with, "I'll take the contemporary praise songs over those oldies every Sunday. I first heard 'Father I Adore You' at an Emmaus Walk Weekend back in the 1970s, and that really spoke to me."

"But those are actually *old* contemporary songs," said Amy, a thirty-year-old choir member. "The praise songs written in the 1980s, like 'Change My Heart O God,' are much more meaningful..."

The youngest choir member, Jacob, interrupted Amy with, "That type of praise song is *too old* to call contemporary! Songs written during the last fifteen years, like 'You Are My All in All,' are what's happening now."

Which of those five choir members is right? All of them! Many factors—such as the denomination in which we grew up or our ethnic origins—influence our hymn-type preferences. But more than any other *single* factor, the year we were born determines what hymns we like.

A high percentage of American Protestants born before 1927 prefer the old gospel hymns (predominantly written between 1870 and 1935). Why do so many people in that age range prefer this hymn-type? We "bond" to music, both sacred and secular, between age sixteen and twenty-four. Thus, when most people born before 1927 sing *the old gospel hymns* they feel God's presence in a special way. Three examples of *the old gospel hymns*: "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!" (1873); "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" (1882); and "In the Garden" (1912).

At least three-fourths of American Protestants born from 1927 through 1945 prefer the great classic hymns (predominantly written between 1520 and 1870). When World War II ended in 1945, sixteen million Americans took off their uniforms. Between 1945 and 1960, Gallup Poll Surveys indicate that U.S. church attendance (as a percentage of U.S. population) rose to levels never achieved before or

since. The sanctuaries that these people filled to overflowing resounded to *the great classic hymns*, pipe organs, and choirs. That generation's "bond" to these hymns will never come unglued. Three examples of *the great classic hymns*: "A Mighty Fortress" (1528); "Holy, Holy, Holy" (words 1826, music 1861); and "The Church's One Foundation" (words 1866, music 1864).

The big challenge for churches: Many people born since 1960 view most of the hymns in both hymn-types noted above as boring, devoid of meaning. This viewpoint appeared in the mid-1960s, as the Vietnam War began. Many age-18-to-44 adults were developing new music preferences.

As a new hymn-type arrived on the scene, the public began describing it with the following words: "non-traditional," "contemporary," "praise songs," "modern praise songs," and "praise and worship songs."

As the next four decades unrolled, many mainline clergy and worshipers viewed this new hymn-type as *a single preference*. But that is far from accurate!



The people who like “praise songs” are NOT *one group* that prefers “contemporary.” That tragic mis-perception produced declines in mainline worship attendance, and in some instances, the gradual disappearance of entire churches.

Ninety percent of Protestant congregations with non-declining worship attendance report *three hymn-type preferences* among worshippers born since 1945. Finding names that communicate these three hymn-types to such a diverse-background group as clergy and worship leaders is difficult. The following names attempt that feat:

1st Generation Contemporary: Modern Praise Songs, written in the 1960-1978 era. Three examples: “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love” (1966); “Father, I Adore You” (1972); and “He Has Made Me Glad” (1976).

2nd Generation Contemporary: Restorational Praise & Worship Songs, written in the 1978-1995 era. Three examples: “I Love You Lord” (1978); “Majesty, Worship His Majesty” (1981); and “Shine Jesus Shine” (1987).

3rd Generation Contemporary: Missional Worship Songs, written 1995 to the present. Three examples: “Lord Reign in Me” (1998); “Here I Am to Worship” (2000); and “How Great Is Our God” (2004).

Approximately 75 percent of mainline Protestant worshippers born since 1946 prefer *2nd Generation* and *3rd Generation Contemporary*.

If a church sings ONLY *1st Generation Contemporary* (written predominantly between 1960 and 1978), many younger worshipers feel uninspired, “wish we could sing something more contemporary,” and decide to visit a congregation where that happens.

For most worshipers born after 1964, *2nd* and *3rd Generation Contemporary* (written from 1978 to the present) are as integral to their worship experience as were *the old gospel hymns* to worshipers born before 1927.

Should mainline churches sing all three types of praise songs? To avoid gradually shrinking in membership over the next decade, congregations must consciously decide to provide worship experiences that match the spiritual preferences of young-adult age groups. Music may not determine the people a church effectively reaches, but music choices determine the people a church CANNOT reach.

Churches that sing *3rd Generation Contemporary* may still fail to reach age-14 to age-40 young adults. But churches that refuse to include the music that most effectively connects with people of that age guarantee that they will NOT see many of them in worship each week.

But is it possible to sing that many hymn-types? Examples of how non-declining mainline churches do it:

◆ Congregations that average fewer than 150-200 people in worship increase the likelihood of maintaining stable attendance by providing one “blended” worship service—that

every Sunday sings *the great classic hymns*, an occasional *old gospel hymn*, and *at least two* of the three generations of *contemporary praise songs* noted above.

◆ About 50 percent of larger, non-declining mainline congregations (200-1,000 or more average worship attendance) offer two kinds of worship services on Sunday morning and sometimes a Saturday evening worship at 5:30 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. Often, this pattern involves (a) a traditional service at 8:00 a.m. or 8:30 a.m. on Sunday, in which worshippers sing *the great classic hymns* and a few of *the old gospel hymns*; (b) a 10:30 a.m. or 11:00 a.m. service in which worshippers sing songs from *at least two* of the three generations of *contemporary praise songs*; and (c) in some instances, Saturday worship at 5:30 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. that uses songs from *at least two* of the three generations of *contemporary praise songs*.

◆ The other 50 percent of larger, non-declining mainline congregations (200-1,000 or more average attendance) use (a) a “blended” style in two, three, and sometimes four Sunday morning services—blending *the great classic hymns* and *at least two* of the three generations of *contemporary praise songs*—and (b) in some instances a Saturday worship at 5:30 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. that uses songs from *at least two* of the three generations of *contemporary praise songs*.

How do we make the shift?* Print the following in the worship bulletin *every Sunday* for *at least six months*:

“Because we strive to show equal respect for all five preferences in worship music, we select songs and hymns meaningful to every age group via a balanced music selection consisting of (a) *the great classic hymns* written 1520-1870, (b) *the old gospel hymns* written 1871-1935, and (c) the three generations of *contemporary praise songs* written 1960-1978, 1978-1995, and 1995 to today.”

Bottom line results of showing equal respect for all five hymn-type preferences: (a) At least 75 percent of young-adult attendees (and many older adults) find worship more meaningful. (b) Worship attendance, Christian conversions, and offerings increase. (c) By focusing on age-18-to-44 young adults (rather than clinging solely to historic worship hymns), a congregation increases the likelihood of health and strength twenty-five years from now.

*See the study/discussion process in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 4, How to Increase Worship Attendance*, plus an in-depth discussion and list of 116 praise songs from the three types of “contemporary praise songs” in *Volume 32, We Are Singing the Right Hymns in Worship...Aren't We?* Download both of these volumes free of charge (www.TheParishPaper.com).