

Why Do We Sing What We Sing?

“Rockin’ with Jesus”

Mark 16:14-20

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Sunday, August 14, 2022

Sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll epitomized the ‘60s as hippies, flower children, and flower power swept through the nation. Many churches blamed the music of the age for creating such a sinful subculture. But, it wasn’t long before those same churches, attempting to widen their appeal to young adults, incorporated the sounds of rock ‘n’ roll into worship. “Rockin’ with Jesus” was also the result of the so-called “Jesus Movement” that sprung to life in the midst of all the social upheaval swirling around. Convinced of the worthlessness of a lifestyle based on drugs, free sex, and radical politics, people became Jesus “hippies,” also known as Jesus “freaks.”

Singer/songwriter Larry Norman is remembered in the Gospel Music Hall of Fame as the first person “who combined rock ‘n’ roll with Christian lyrics.” Listen to how he described those early days:

The Jesus Movement took the gospel to people who wouldn’t come to church, and primarily to people who wouldn’t be welcome in church; dropouts, prostitutes, thieves — exactly the sort of people that Jesus went looking for. In fact, the Jesus Movement itself wasn’t even welcomed in church. Many were converted pot-smokers and leftists with long hair who wore blue jeans without the compulsory necktie, or even worse, torn, ragged clothes. But like books that don’t seem to match their covers, the miracle of salvation had set their souls on fire and they wanted to share it with their brothers and sisters. The roots of the Jesus Movement stemmed from a strong desire to redeem the unlovable, the outcasts.

During my high school years, as well as earlier, I began witnessing to kids, but they were awkward attempts, to be sure. Even during my band days at Capitol Records, I would witness to my “fans” who came to hear me play. When I left my band in 1968 and moved to Los Angeles, I didn’t feel awkward about witnessing anymore — I felt directed. I chose my ground and worked my beat. I walked up and down Hollywood Boulevard several times a day ... witnessing to businessmen and hippies, and to whomever the Spirit led me. I spent all of my Capitol Records royalties starting a halfway house and buying clothes and food for new converts. Years later, I started a Bible study in my own home which grew into over 300 Vineyard Fellowship Churches. This was the collective spiritual commitment of the times in which we found ourselves, and one by one, we found each other. In those early days, we had no money, no organizational skills, no community support for our work; only a desire to preach and protect, to rescue those who were lost in the haze of drugs and confusion and seemed indifferent to the traditional church. But who needed money for miracles? Jesus could and would provide all of our needs.

After witnessing out on the streets for a time, I got used to hearing kids call me a “Jesus Freak.” Soon I learned to accept it as a term of endearment or at least of deference, since anyone who walked the boulevard each day was soon identified by their “thing;” whether it was drug dealing, hustling, or preaching. But the Jesus Movement was **such a spontaneous, silent tapestry, that only God knew He was weaving it.** Few of us even

realized we were part of it when the press announced that it had uncovered a new bohemian youth subculture: “The Jesus Revolution.”

With the aid of widespread secular and Christian media exposure, the Jesus Movement exploded across the United States. The movement reached its pinnacle when 80,000 young Jesus People attended Explo '72, an event organized by Campus Crusade for Christ, at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. After that, the Jesus Movement continued at a grassroots level within smaller individual groups, meeting in homes or coffeehouses. In addition to bringing the gospel to thousands of people seeking a more meaningful and purposeful life, the movement spawned a whole new generation of church leaders who brought that evangelistic style of worship into mainline Protestant denominations — now known as “contemporary” worship.

Unlike traditional worship services that are led by the pastor, director of music, and choir, contemporary worship is led by the worship leader and praise team. The pastor’s role is that of teacher bringing the message. There is no formal liturgy. All prayer is extemporaneous and congregational participation is entirely in singing along with the worship leaders. As we are doing this morning, songs are sung in blocks with simple lyrics projected on screens. To accommodate those screens, most often contemporary worship services are held in an informal setting like an auditorium or fellowship hall.

These changes in time, place, and manner for worship were the result of the “seeker-drive” church growth model of the early ‘90s. It was based on the premise that informal style and music would appeal to those who were unchurched, with the hope that once they were in the doors they would be disciplined into broader church engagement. That model had a lot of success in creating mega-churches, but it didn’t produce the desired result. Most seeker churches grew in worship attendance but not in engagement. And many, like Mars Hill, the largest in the country, collapsed from abuse and scandal within the church’s leadership. As with every other season of substantial changes in church music, the culture of the world had infiltrated the church. The seeker-driven mentality reflected the consumerism of our age as people began to “church shop” according to their preferred time, place, and manner for worship, while in the church evangelism became a marketing strategy which was first championed by super pollster and church marketing advocate George Barna.

The lesson we learn from the failure of the seeker-driven church growth strategy is that we are to be seeker-sensitive, but not seeker-driven. There is a difference. “Seeker-sensitive” means we discern the spiritual hunger within our community by listening and learning, seeking to know what Jesus himself asked to those who were lost: What are you looking for? Whom do you seek? Then, in a spirit of welcome and generosity, we discern together how we can communicate the gospel in word and song in ways that are accessible and relatable to those seeking healing and wholeness.

Sadly, as we all know, the worship wars over traditional versus contemporary of the past two decades have done grave harm to the Body of Christ. For some, the agreed compromise was an attempt at a blended service utilizing both hymns and contemporary praise songs in a liturgically traditional service. Going from two distinct services in both liturgy and music into one service can be done meaningfully well, or it can feel like a false attempt at keeping everyone happy by fulfilling a quota of each style of music.

Blended worship is the generic name for convergence worship which, somewhat ironically, emerged from the liturgical renewal movement of the early '90s in mainline Protestant denominations. Convergence worship seeks to remain faithful to historic traditions while making them more relevant through contemporary expression. The elements of convergence worship are: a fourfold order to worship (Entrance, Word, Table, and Sending Forth); a broad range of musical content and style as an expression of the whole church past and present; and a commitment to recovering the arts in worship, encouraging worship with all of our being. That convergence can be meaningful, when it is done with care, intention, and a generosity of spirit.

Next week, we will wonder aloud together, "what now?" Trusting, as Larry Norman said so long ago about the Jesus Revolution, that God is again weaving a silent tapestry of worship and music for the living of these days.