

Worship Wars Chapter 8

There's a Civil War in the church today over worship. There may be no area of ministry in the church that receives more complaints and carries more controversy than the ministry of worship. If one group is happy, you can almost be guaranteed the other group is not.

To clarify, the war is not between the Pentecostals and the Baptists, nor between the Wesleyans and the Presbyterians, nor between pipe organs and guitars, nor between Rock music and Country music. Do you want to know where the battle lines are actually drawn? *The war is between the old song and the new song.*

The Beauty Of the Old

The old song is vital to true worship, carrying with it some tremendous qualities like:

- Stability: The old song has proven its ability to endure the erosion of time and to withstand the furor of storms.
- Continuity: The old song enables today's three generations to join together in glorifying God with one voice.
- Vocabulary: The old song has proven its ability to articulate precious truths of the faith.
- Historicity: The old song roots us to the rich heritage of our forefathers, connecting us to our corporate identity as the multi-generational church of God.
- Orthodoxy: The old song gives us language to celebrate the creeds and proven theologies of the church.
- Safety: The old song provides security and comfort, largely because it is familiar.
- Satisfaction: The old song is so satiating to the soul that once you've had the old, you don't want the new, for you say, "The old is better" (see Luke 5:39).

The Role of New and Old

The old song plays a crucial role in the worship life of the church, and yet when all we have is the old, our tendency is to back off from contending for the new thing God is always doing in the earth (Isaiah 43:19).

When we settle for only the old song, we enjoy all the above benefits, but there is one lacking dimension. There is one thing the new song supplies that is generally lacking in the old—power. The new song provides power. It's possible occasionally to have a powerful worship service with just the old song, but it's the exception. In the vast majority of instances, the unthrottled power of worship is tapped and unlocked in the new song.

There is a “breaker anointing” that sometimes attends the new song. Micah 2:13 describes the breaker anointing, which is a grace from heaven to break through barriers and move God’s people into the next dimension of Kingdom living. While not every new song will always have that barrier-breaking quality, your chances of finding that kind of breakthrough are best when you move into the new song.

Or, to use the language of Ephesians 5:19, psalms and hymns may pull everyone together and take you to the river, but it’s the spiritual songs (new songs) that will take you down the river into the swimming depths.

I’m not saying the new song is always powerful. I’ve been in plenty of worship gatherings where a lot of new songs were sung and there was no power in the meeting at all. The new song has as much potential to fall flat as does the old song. However, when the Spirit is breathing upon our worship, it’s the new song that has the ability to transform the spiritual landscape.

On the positive side, the power of worship is in the new song. On the down side, the new song often seems volatile, unpredictable, raucous, and disruptive. Like the new wine, it foments in a swirl of energy that can be explosive and unsettling to those who want to be able to predict every move in advance.

Obviously there are trade-offs. At some point we need to decide whether we’re willing to hazard the volatile nature of the new song in order to enjoy its benefits. If we have the courage to navigate the bumps, the new song has the power to catapult us forward into our destiny in God.

What Is the “New Song”?

When I speak of “the new song,” I am thinking of two primary categories:

- A song that is new to our church. When a song is first introduced to our worshiping community, it’s a new song to us regardless of when it was written. The song may be 100 years old, but if we’ve never heard or sung it before, it’s new in our book. One kind of new song that is especially fitting is a song that is newly written by a congregation member. Perhaps someone within the house is able to capture precisely what the Holy Spirit has been saying to our fellowship in recent days and to express that theme creatively through a new composition.

- A song that has never been sung before. Here’s where the new song really gets interesting. When the river of God begins to flow in a meeting, and the worshipers are getting caught up in the glory and refreshment of the living waters, something begins to happen within the hearts of worshipers. They begin to have a new song rise up from within, begging for expression. We appreciate the lyrics that songwriters give us, but when we’re in the river, our worship surges over the banks of pre-written lyrics and published hymns. Suddenly we find ourselves wanting to express a song of the moment, a song that comes directly from the heart of a lovesick worshiper. It probably won’t rhyme, and it may not have a smooth meter to it, but it’s fresh and passionate and alive. We’ve never sung it quite like this before, and we probably never will ever again, because it’s a “now” song that expresses our immediate heart cry. And it’s powerful!

In Romans 7:6, Paul speaks of “the newness of the Spirit,” which he contrasts with “the oldness of the letter.” His point is that the Spirit is ever new. Where the Spirit of the Lord is active, there’s always something new stirring. So when the Holy Spirit takes hold of our worship, He is always generating new songs in the hearts of the faithful. Spirit-led worship will have a “newness” to it. (If you don’t have newness in your worship, get stir crazy.) When you hit the river you can’t help it—a new song just automatically flows.

New and Old In Heaven

In heaven, they’re singing both the new song and the old song. Revelation 15:3 tells us they’re singing the song of Moses in heaven; well, that song is a few thousand years old. But there’s an even older song in heaven. It’s recorded for us in Revelation 4:8—“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” That song is older than the hills. It has been sung around the throne of God for many millions of years. So in heaven they appreciate the old song.

But they also sing the new song in heaven.

Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. *And they sang a new song*, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:8-9).

If they’re singing songs both new and old in heaven’s river, and we’re praying for God’s will to be accomplished on earth as it is in heaven, wouldn’t it be reasonable to conclude that we should be singing both new and old songs in the church of Jesus here on earth? The wise worship leader will bring out of his or her storehouse songs new and old (see Matthew 13:52).

The Skill of Juggling Both

The old song unites people together in one common, familiar expression that enables them to flow together in momentum as a group. When an old song is pulled out, watch the room draw together.

Then, when we lead out in a new song, the dynamics change. People are somewhat hesitant because they’re not sure where this new song is going. So when a new song is first thrown out, it can have the effect initially of appearing to dissipate the momentum of the meeting. To rally everyone again, an old song may need to follow a new song. But once the new song “takes,” it will have a kind of anointing on it that is richer and stronger than that of the old song.

Worship leaders who are enthusiastic to see the release of the new song sometimes make the mistake of devoting too much time to new songs—and the overall momentum of the meeting can suffer as a result. They love the new, but don’t always discern when the congregation has become disengaged and distant. When that happens, what can a worship leader do to get those who have drifted off mentally to become

engaged again in what's happening? Usually the best solution is to come back to an old song.

Worship gatherings that flow with the river of God usually are led with wisdom and expertise by a leader who knows how to use the old song to draw a room together in cohesiveness, then use the new song to release a surge of energy and power. But when the energy level dissipates, the leader knows to return to the old song. The river is best followed by alternating wisely between the old and the new song. Effective leaders have learned the dance of balancing between the two.

The old song gathers; the new song propels. The old song unites us so we can flow together; the new song has the power to catapult us into deeper waters. Instead of pitting one against the other, let's maximize both. If we do, we have the best chance of finding and following the river.

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