

Truth endures, but hymn styles change

November 15, 2013

Some worship songs endure for centuries, while others stir the souls of one generation and leave others cold.

What enables some songs to span centuries, cross denominational lines and contribute to the worship of multiple generations in diverse settings?



“Hymns that endure are hymns that the people can embrace as a shared experience, both corporately as a congregation as well as individually. They are hymns that are singable as a congregation, with messages that the body

believes to be true,” said John Jackson, minister of music at [First Baptist Church in Farmington, Mo.](#), since 1971.

“Essentially, they are hymns that give us the sense of a shared identity that is sustainable across many eras and cultures. Many times they are passed down from generation to generation within families, churches and denominations through various means as a result of this shared identity.”

Bob Brooks, a veteran church musician and dean of the graduate school of ministry at [Dallas Baptist University](#), echoed some of the same themes.

“Enduring songs of worship are biblically accurate, theologically sound,

musically well-written and singable by the people of God,” he said.

Many people view “Amazing Grace” as the quintessential enduring hymn. Brooks noted it appeared in *Olney Hymns* in 1779, but it wasn’t paired with the New Britain tune—with which it is known now—until the 1844 edition of *The Sacred Harp*.

Look to the Psalms

The psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures offer an important case study.

“The psalms help us with our understanding of timeless theological concepts and worship experiences. But we are freed up, because the original music is not extant, to create music that gives those lyrics wings in the 21st century,” he said.

“Great texts endure,” Brooks added, pointing out classic hymn texts wedded to appropriate contemporary musical settings often find a new and receptive audience among students today. A contemporary setting of “Be Thou My Vision” has become a favorite in DBU chapel services, he noted.

Terry York, professor of Christian ministry and church music at Baylor University’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#), agreed new settings for old hymn texts can be meaningful.

“Some texts have been rescued by new tunes,” he noted.

However, a good marriage of melody and lyrics matters, he insisted.

“The wedding of the text and the tune is incredibly important. The tune’s job is to deliver the text without distraction or distortion. In a good marriage, the tune does not fight the text but underscores and maybe enhances it,” said York, who has written more than 40 published hymns.

“New musical settings must match the mood and the meter of the text—one

is not enough.”

Aligning with biblical truth

Enduring worship songs have a text that aligns with biblical truth, a melody “that expresses the height and depth of the text” and that use language that speaks across generations, said Todd Wilson, pastor for worship and music at [First Baptist Church in Abilene](#).

“Great truth can be lost in language that can be easily dated or music that is poorly written and not easily sung by a local congregation,” he said.

The timeless character of some hymns never should be discounted, but worship leaders should recognize the importance of songs that speak meaningfully to a particular time and place, York added.

“It’s OK that some songs don’t endure. Some are long-lasting, and there are some that are for the moment, and that’s all right,” he said.

“Songs of worship that endure are both timely and timeless. Their timeliness never goes away, and they become timeless. Some are timely—period. There are none that are timeless without first being timely.”

-With additional reporting by Vicki Brown of Word & Way