2nd Opinion: “Bieber fever” & the worship wars

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I thought the worship wars were over. The church I grew up in put traditional Southern gospel-style music out to pasture for a more generic contemporary style in the mid-’90s. We weren’t in the most progressive region of the country. Surely we were the last band of skirmishers in a war winding down.

But the war is raging still. I hear from pastors who say their No. 1 problem is helping old-timers turn loose of the hymnals and welcome innovations like overhead projection, electric guitars and a backbeat. At stake for them is the future of their church. How can they reach younger generations with outdated worship?

I’ve marveled at how visceral these discussions get. A *Wall Street Journal* article suggests why. Reporting on mass hysteria set afire by celebrities like Elvis and the Beatles and, more recently, Justin Bieber, Melinda Beck suggests victims of “Bieber fever” suffer from a legitimate malady. Citing neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*, Beck explains, “Hearing familiar, favorite music stimulates the release of dopamine, the neurotransmitter involved in pleasure and addiction, providing the same rush as eating chocolate or that winning does for a compulsive gambler.”

{mosimage}The power of “familiar, favorite music” may help explain why musical style is so important to young worshippers. They may interpret the dopamine release they experience while singing a worship song—or even a secular song—as a profoundly spiritual experience. Maybe this explains why my classmates and I went berserk when my friend’s band played

“When Jesus Comes Around,” a Christianized version of Green Day’s “When I Come Around.” Silly as it sounds, we found it worshipful. I guess we couldn’t help it.

But the research suggests older Christians also are held in music’s dread sway. Beck reports: “Dr. Levitin’s research also showed that musical tastes formed in the teen years become part of the brain’s internal wiring, as that is the time when some neural pathways are solidifying and others are being pruned away. That’s why the music adults tend to be nostalgic for is the music from their teenage years.”

So, even if you convince a Christian of a certain age “In the Garden” isn’t better theology than “When Jesus Comes Around,” it won’t matter. They’ll still prefer it, not because of what it says but because of how it makes them feel.

Here are three observations of application for churches:

First, pastors would do well to help their congregations give up debate about which style of music is “best.” There are no winners in that battle. For the sake of dialogue, church members must acknowledge their musical preferences are just that—preferences. God is not on the side of the organ or the Stratocaster. Drop the pretense of righteous indignation and simply admit, “We like this music better.”

That said, and second, while we are talking about preferences, we are not talking about mere preferences. If I understand Levitin’s claims, people have profound biological responses to the music they like. They want to hear certain melodies and instruments in worship not because they are selfish or hardheaded but because certain melodies and instruments move them. They produce biological feelings we identify as “worshipful.” And most people won’t be able to explain why.

Finally, if we’re to make progress in the worship debate, we have to shift

the focus from music to relationships. Truth be told, I'd be happiest in a service with an Allman Brothers vibe. But I love and respect fellow congregants who are moved by Bach cantatas, which are lost on me. If a pastor could foster an environment in which congregants lobbied for the type of music that moved their friends and loved ones—because each wanted the other to be moved in worship—questions about which is "best" would become inconsequential.

There are issues left unaddressed here, such as whether feeling worshipful should be a priority. In any case, wouldn't it be something if swarms of screaming, swooning "Beliebers" inspired a ceasefire in the battles over church music?

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