

Facing the Music

3 March 2016



500 teens. Stacks of games. A billion activities. Music. Lights. A dancing competition. Then, almost out of nowhere, a question screamed across the beehive of an auditorium by one of the guys upfront: 'ARRRE YOU READY TO WORSHIP GOD?!'

It was a citywide youth event, and I was preaching later on in the evening. The sudden call to worship jolted me out of my hip-hop dancing-induced coma, and as I stood on the side of the venue, two thoughts occurred to me:

- 1) I don't think they're ready to worship God.
- 2) Right now we need clear, direct, focused worship songs.

The songs...seemed to be referencing God more than worshiping Him directly.

Making a Worship Song and Dance About It

Let me be clear: my goal wasn't to critique the worship time with my arms folded; my first priority was to get into His presence and enjoy Him, not to stand and judge how things were being done. As the band played, though, I couldn't help thinking that this was quite a good litmus test of the content of some modern worship songs. There was no prayer beforehand, no word of encouragement and no real orientation as to exactly what we were doing, meaning that the words of the songs would have to do the heavy lifting.

The songs we sang in the auditorium that night were great. They made statements about God, statements about us and statements about what our lives were like now that we'd met Jesus. I have absolutely no doubt that they were written to honour God and to help people sing to Him. And yet. And yet there was some kind of intangible hollow space, a solid core that was missing. The songs were about the difference God makes in our lives (so true), the fact that we're living for Him every day (absolutely) and that we're free (what an awesome truth!), but somehow they seemed to be referencing God more than worshiping Him directly. In short, they were being sung *about* God more than *to* God.

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How Great Thou Art

One of the things about art is that it's always looking for new expressions. Worship is a creative art, and because there are only so many ways to say that God is holy and that we're lifting Him up, songwriters will explore new phrases and angles. This often makes for colourful new ways of singing about God, but can also lead to oblique phrases that might be accurate in themselves, but don't make for good corporate worship songs. Many, many people today have their theology formed more by worship lyrics than by Scripture, and a song can be the difference between treating God like a concept and treating God like a person.

There's precious little said in the Scriptures about how our corporate worship times should look. We know that we've been created to glorify God and thank Him (Romans 1:21). If we're to follow the example of John the Baptist, who was held in such high regard by Jesus, we too have to say, *'He must become greater; I must become less.'* (John 3:30) In the church at Corinth's corporate times together, where people would bring hymns, songs, words of encouragement and tongues, Paul was concerned that, *'All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church'* (1 Corinthians 14:26). But how is the church truly strengthened in its worship? Surely it's when our eyes are directly fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

Put it this way, when our worship songs focus on His character, glory, power, love and grace, we can't go wrong. Singing to Him about how amazing He is can only be good for us; it takes our focus off ourselves and onto what – or rather Who – is unchanging.

But we need to closely examine some of the songs that are making their way into our meetings.

There is an I in Worship

Of course, there will always be elements of ourselves in worship music; after all, we're the ones experiencing God's mercy, love, grace and power. It would be ridiculous to suggest we remove any reference to ourselves in the corporate songs we sing. But we need to closely examine some of the songs that are making their way into our meetings.

I've resisted the temptation to mention particular lyrics, because it just doesn't feel right to take songs of love that people have written to the King and place them in a negative light. After all, the people who write them don't always necessarily endorse them being sung in large gatherings – it's local worship leaders who decide to do that.

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Welcome Matt

I believe one of our finest examples of a modern-day worship writer is Matt Redman. For over

twenty years he's written some of the world's most widely-travelled worship songs. I've stood in a small hall in Florianopolis, Brazil, singing one of his songs translated into Portuguese. I don't believe he's one of our best because he has the best voice or is the most charismatic or uses the best metaphors. I believe he stands out because he has consistently written songs almost entirely focused directly on God. It sounds like something every worship songwriter should do, but he's done it the most over the last two decades. His songs are profound precisely because they're so simple and so focused.

So I'll let him have the last word:

'Worship songs can't just be rooted in culture – they won't be deep enough. They have to be rooted in scripture.'