

The Collision

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For most Christian singers, there's a dream. It's a dream of being a light to the world, a city on a hill. It's a dream of wide-scale popularity that will take the gospel message to people who need to hear it. It's a great dream, and sometimes it comes true. Sometimes an artist breaks through the pack, breathing the rarified air at the summit of the mountain that is mainstream popular culture. When that happens, believers around the world celebrate the new, powerful platform that one of our own has been given. And what's not to celebrate, right?

The Trouble with Success

I view the upward trajectory of a Christian artist with a combination of optimism and concern. I'm optimistic because the message of Jesus needs to go out into the world, and the bigger the stage, the wider the reach. I love the idea of a person filled with the love of God and armed with a creative expression of the truth, occupying the airwaves that so often feed us false reality. My concern for them, though, stems from the knowledge that the pursuit of mainstream success is a game that is played on the industry's terms, and if you want to keep playing the game, you have to play by their rules, because it's their turf. All too often, the price of relevance is some kind of compromise on truth, and if you get your foot in the door based on a certain premise, you have to keep that up.

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The world has changed too. It's never been faster to separate friends from enemies and to find out who subscribes to your particular ideology and who opposes it. One or two questions will sort it out, and the answers will instantly travel around the world to let everyone know what you stand for. Will you be prepared to take an unpopular, godly stand and risk alienating potential fans, or will you take a popular, ungodly stand and risk compromising your own beliefs? Do your beliefs really even matter? Aren't you just an artist who wants to create something beautiful without having your own personal belief system interrogated? It's a complicated dance and you're not leading it, plus it's on an unfamiliar dance floor and it's on another planet.

For a Christian artist (or any Christian trying to please a large group of diverse people), there is an inevitable collision of two kingdoms. We can delay it, but we cannot avoid it. It's the moment when that which can't be compromised meets that which can't be tolerated – and only one can win.

The Chance to Make an Impact

It was with great sadness that I learned, a few months back, of the inability of a popular Christian singer to find themselves on the right side of that collision. An extremely talented artist, they had built up a faithful fan base through years of anointed, soulful worship music before being thrust into mainstream consciousness through a breakthrough album that spawned a handful of heavy-rotation singles. They did the talk shows, the circuits, the big stages, rubbing shoulders with those at the top of the game. It was – and still is – a fairytale rise to prominence and relevance on a global scale.

Their music is unmistakably spiritual, and maybe in previous generations that would have been good enough. This generation, however, wants to categorise people more quickly and decisively. So this artist was invited to an interview where a hot-button question was asked. Granted, any celebrity doing an interview should know that they can be asked anything about any topic, but this was underhanded. It had nothing to do with the singer's music and was designed to alienate some section of their fan base, no matter what the answer, just as the wave of their seemingly overnight success was reaching its crest. It was a cheap trick, but it's how the game is played. This artist was asked about a particularly contentious topic of disagreement within Christianity – is it a sin? Is it wrong? And suddenly, there it was: the moment of collision.

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I genuinely sympathise with the complexity of having to give an unlikable answer when the main goal of your entire career is getting people to like you. Having said that, the answer was a compromise. 'I can't honestly answer on that,' they said. Their reason? Too many dear friends embraced that which was identified by many Christians as sinful, and so it would be difficult to say whether it was right or wrong. 'Read the Bible and find out for yourself,' they said. 'And when you find out, let me know, because I'm learning too.'

On the spectrum of commitment to personal values, saying you're not sure whether something is morally wrong just because your friends do it is the hallmark of a weak moral code and zero conviction. When you're speaking about obeying a holy God's commands and you give that as your answer, it's an off-the-charts compromise and a betrayal against those who gave their lives for the truth of Jesus. The pressures and intimidation of that moment must have been tremendous, but the rationale was a tragic way to represent what it means to follow Jesus. The problem wasn't that this singer was unsure of what to think about this issue, but rather that their friends' responses set their course, not God's commands.

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Avoiding or Embracing The Inevitable

'Our society strives to avoid any possibility of offending anyone – except God,' said Billy Graham. A Christian should never set out to be offensive to anyone and yet also live with the knowledge that holding to the commands of Jesus will mean an inevitable offense at some point. For instance, Paul said, *'... make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders ...'* (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). But Peter and John, when being commanded by the authorities not to speak in the name of Jesus, said, *'Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'*

So what's it going to be? Avoiding the collision or embracing it? The answer is to live our lives faithfully before God and to understand that there will be points at which following Jesus will mean an open unpopularity, whether it's in the public sphere, the workplace, school or at home. Jesus brought this point home the strongest of anyone when He said:

'Do not assume that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'A man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.' (Matthew 10:34-39)

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I don't know about you, but on the scale of collisions, that's pretty seismic. That's pretty unavoidable. He doesn't want us to cause divisions, but He knows that He will cause them, that we should expect it, and that it doesn't mean something is wrong. In fact, the divisions, if they are because of the true gospel, will often prove that we actually are following Him.

We Can't Have It All

It turns out that we can't have it all – none of us can. We cannot serve God faithfully and follow all His commands while always enjoying the respect and admiration of everyone. We cannot replicate the worldly popularity of those who don't hold to God's commands, because their lack of submitting to His boundaries is often the very reason they are so popular. We may enjoy human praise and God's favour for a time – Jesus did it and the early church did it – but not for too long. The collision comes because the course has been set. In that tiny interview studio, the kingdom of Jesus was set to collide with the kingdom of this earth, but the singer answering the question prevented it. They changed its course. They played the game the world wanted them to play without realising that while pandering to popularity keeps worldly doors open for you during our brief time on this earth, being faithful to the truth will be rewarded through eternity.

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The interview answer was a compromise and a missed opportunity, but at the very least it can serve as a cautionary tale to us. The moment of collision came, but the sound of 'You rock!' from the world was deemed more important than the sound of 'Well done, good and faithful servant' from Jesus.

No Compromise

It was Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, who stood virtually alone when it seemed that the whole world was turning against the truth of Jesus in the 4th century. It would have made his life so much easier to simply go with the tide that opposed him. 'The world is against you, Athanasius!' was the cry of one of his exasperated colleagues. 'Then I am against the world,' came his famous reply.

When the course of the world collides with the course of the gospel - and it will for each one of us, at some point or another - may we be found with the same courage and clarity.