

I Love Worship – Seriously!!

By Mike Frost

I was recently the guest preacher at a church where the worship leader greeted me before the service and informed me that she had chosen fewer songs that morning because (and I quote) “we know how much you hate worship.” I was taken aback. Hate worship? Surely I’m not known for that!

I love worship, but obviously my grouching about the state of contemporary worship had reached her ears. So, this got me thinking. I admit I can’t stand the current practice of stringing a whole group of mindless pop songs together and calling it worship. Look, I’m all for a professional worship program, but if I hear another half-hour power praise medley with Barry Manilow crescendos, I think I’ll go crazy.

But that doesn’t mean I hate congregational singing per se. After all it’s one of the very legitimate ways Christians have worshipped God throughout our history as a movement. But the current obsession with what’s called ‘praise and worship’ – multiple discontinuous songs strung together – is a relatively new innovation.

However, some younger worship leaders look at you askance if you suggest we sing less songs than they’d prepared. In a recent Christianity Today article, Charles Colson caused a minor kerfuffle when he questioned whether a lot of contemporary praise and worship is just an exercise in making Christians feel better about things rather than a genuine adoration of God. He claimed, “I’m convinced that much of the music being written for the church today reflects an unfortunate trend – slipping across the line from worship to entertainment. Evangelicals are in danger of amusing ourselves to death...”

Now, Colson, by his own admission, prefers traditional hymns. I can’t say I’m with him there, but I do relate to his beef about a lot of contemporary worship. I’m getting tired of singing love songs to Jesus-my-boyfriend. And frankly I feel silly when I have to sing songs so sentimental and cloying they could have been written for a 1990s boy band. As much as I’m loath to admit it these days, I’m not ‘in love with Jesus’ (for some people this might sound like blasphemy). But let’s be honest, I love my three daughters more deeply than I could ever imagine loving anyone, but I have never fallen in love with them. My love for them transcends the exciting, heady, temporary feelings of romantic love.

Likewise with Jesus. I love him and am completely in his debt. But I’m not head over heels in romantic love with him. So it’s not singing that I don’t like. It’s the kind of singing that I’m expected to engage in. As much as this romanticising of worship bothers me, even more disturbing is the recent trend of singing worship songs in which I have to pledge my unfaltering devotion and service to him. You know, the ‘Jesus, I will never let you go...’ type song. In these songs I have to declare that I will follow him to the ends of the earth and that I will praise him all my days. In one sense, there’s nothing wrong with making such promises to God. The Psalmist does so on occasion. But frankly, I’m so much more comfortable with singing about the fact that Jesus has promised that he will never let me go. My promises seem hollow and unreliable. It’s God’s promises to me in Christ that are solid, reliable and unfaltering.

So, what was the early church singing about? Paul’s best known reference to communal singing appears in Colossians 3:16: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (*Italics added*) What exactly Paul meant by psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is much debated (he also uses the same phrase in Ephesians 5:19). We have no early Christian documents dealing with congregational music or singing. There is considerable evidence that the New Testament contains

passages that were probably hymns or chants or public confessions of faith. Such passages as Col.1:15-20; Eph.5:14; Phil.2:6-11; 1Tim.3:16 are probably proto-hymns, the earliest sung confessions of worship and belief (the earliest text we have of an extra-biblical Christian hymn is dated around A.D. 200).

If we look at these passages we see that they comprise powerful propositional statements about the nature of Christ: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... (Col.1:15f) “...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” (Phil.2:10ff) “He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.” (1 Tim.3:16) These passages are creedal and the singing or chanting of these ‘lyrics’ was educational for the first Christians as much as it was worshipful.

I don’t want to imply that there aren’t plenty of contemporary worship songs that contain lyrics of a similarly creedal fashion. I’m much happier singing these songs. They are opportunities for the congregation to collectively voice their beliefs triumphantly and devotionally without resorting to naff sentimentalism.

Remember that the singing of the Scriptural ‘lyrics’ quoted above was a dangerous act in the Roman Empire in the first century. You were liable to end up in serious trouble for declaring: “...thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him” (Col.1:16). If Charles Colson is right and much contemporary worship is aimed at soothing us rather than inspiring us, we have probably moved too far from our roots as the Christian movement.

Contemporary worship avoids danger and stumps for gentleness, sentimentality and respectability. Where is the danger? Where is the responsibility? So many great revolutions have been birthed through the songs their revolutionaries sang. The French revolutionaries sang in 1789 outside the Bastille. The Bolsheviks sang their radical songs in St Petersburg. The American civil rights movement sang of liberty and righteousness in Alabama. The anti-Marcos revolutionaries sang through the streets of Manila. In South Africa, under apartheid, Christmas carols were banned because they evoked a revolutionary yearning for freedom and peace. That’s how powerful the music of revolution can be. The earliest Christians knew something of the revolutionary effect of their beliefs and their worship reflected this. They were not seeking to overthrow the state, but they were celebrating the establishment of another kingdom at odds with the beliefs and values of the Roman Empire.

Why can’t we today sing equally daring songs? While secular artists like Xavier Rudd, John Butler, Ben Harper and U2 are writing radical songs about global justice, Aboriginal reconciliation, fair trade and the elimination of poverty, we’re singing silly loves to Jesus. But ours is the most dramatic story of justice, peace, love and grace.

I can’t write songs (I sometimes really wished I could), but I call on our worship song writers to rediscover the spirit of the earliest Christian, a spirit often embodied by the church in the Two Thirds World. Some years ago I was in Kenya and found myself part of a Swahili-language worship service. A man was chosen to step forward and start singing a cappella. His first song choice was booed by the women who insisted he choose another. When finally he struck on a song acceptable to the congregation, he sang a phrase that was then echoed by everyone else. This rhythm of him singing and us repeating continued until the room was alive with movement, music and worship. At times he simply improvised by singing a single note that others joined in on. It was a beautiful and powerful expression of love for God. I couldn’t sing as well as those Kenyans, but I sang my lungs out that day. It was communal, worshipful, creedal, simple and Spirit-led.

So who says I hate worship?