

The Worship Movement Phenomenon

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By many appearances, the Christian music industry is in the midst of a worship explosion.

Think of any musical style—rock, reggae, soul, classical, raze, alternative, easy-listening, urban, jazz—and there’s a Christian artist somewhere using it to proclaim God’s praise. For many contemporary Christian musicians, including a “worship set” in the midst of your concert has become almost expected. Names like Matt Redman, Delirious?, SONICFLOOD, Ron Kenoly, Tree63, Darlene Zschech, and a flood of other worship artists have achieved a level of notoriety previously reserved for performance-oriented musicians.

There is a flurry of new record labels devoted to worship music, including 40 Records (created by Bill Gaither and dc Talk’s Toby McKeehan), Worship Together, and sixstepsrecords (founded by Louie Giglio of Passion). They join the now-hallowed ranks of Integrity, Maranatha, and Vineyard, which have been producing worship music for a combined total of more than 50 years. The *WoW Worship* CDs, compilations of the most popular current worship songs, have racked up sales in the hundreds of thousands. Praise and worship now merits its own space in retail markets, and praise and worship radio stations are springing up almost weekly. And the movement goes on.

Where are we headed? Where have we been? What is happening?

Whenever there is a sweeping change in a culture or society, it’s wise to sit back and reflect on what God is doing. Our goal should be to *define* the issues, *discern* the difference between the good and the bad, and then *devote* ourselves to what pleases God, regardless of what “the masses” are doing. Proverbs 14:15 says, “A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.”

Given the sudden, widespread popularity of praise and worship music, it’s important that we give thought to our steps. We’ll start by seeking to answer a few basic questions. What is a worship song? What is worship music? Where are these songs coming from? What do they say, and how are they perceived? What are the artists and writers saying?

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From there we'll move on to look at the pluses and minuses of the praise and worship movement. Obviously, what many people thought was a passing fad appears to have enduring qualities. Lives really are being changed. God really is being worshiped. Yes, worship may be merely a trend for some, but clearly it is a passion for many. Still, it's worth asking if everything that calls itself "worship" can be seen as edifying and worthy of the name. It might also help us to consider how the church might profit in even greater ways from all that is taking place.

Finally, we'll spend some time addressing the ways we can benefit from what God is doing in this generation. Whether or not you've been aware of what's been taking place, God is up to something that can revolutionize our lives.

What he's "up to" is gaining for himself more of the glory that he alone is worthy of and deserves. Although far from the whole picture, worship songs can play a vital role in that process, and help us define and encourage who we are in Christ before God.

I pray that our brief look at the praise and worship phenomenon will bear the sweet fruit of a greater desire to live for the audience of One.

A Few Concerns about the Worship Movement

We looked at a few of the many benefits of the worship music phenomenon. Some additional positive effects we didn't discuss include revitalization of worship services, expressions of unity, additional styles of music being used to praise God, financial provision for those who write worship songs, and above all, people responding in faith to God.

However, lest we miss the point of what God is seeking to do, we need to be aware of truths that the worship movement doesn't change. Here are a few.

1. Worship and music are not necessarily the same thing. God certainly wants us to worship him *with* music ("It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High," Ps 92:1). But worship, as Scripture defines it, has to do with what controls our hearts and forms our desires. It is reflected not just in what we sing, but in the way we speak, think, and act.
2. Listening to worship music does not make me a worshiper. After all, being in a church building doesn't make me a Christian. And living in an environment saturated with worship music doesn't mean I'm worshiping God in spirit and truth.

3. There is nothing new under the sun. We can be tempted to think that worship is somehow “new” or has finally become “genuine” simply because it’s presented in a style we prefer! We must resist the arrogant assumption that the church was in darkness and despair prior to the arrival of Matt Redman, or Ron Kenoly, or Delirious?, or Don Moen, or (...you fill in the blank). Worship is God’s idea and can be accomplished without any technology whatsoever. Sometimes, it’s even better that way!
4. Feelings do not necessarily equal truth. I thank God for the deepening theological content of worship songs, but many songs still focus almost exclusively on the subjective side of our relationship with God. The key issue here is balance. Our feelings for God must be firmly rooted in our understanding of biblical truths about God. God’s Spirit always works in agreement with his Word, never in opposition to it. God is looking for those who worship him in Spirit *and* truth.
5. Not every song communicates good theology. Because it’s so much easier to remember songs than sermons, musicians can become our primary theologians. A catchy chorus can quickly brand itself into your brain, but that doesn’t mean it’s teaching truth. For centuries, the church has sung what she believes—wouldn’t it be wise for more writers of worship songs to take theology seriously? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if more teachers and pastors started writing songs to teach and edify the church at large? Granted, both might have a few things to learn at first, but wouldn’t our times of worship be richer?

Please understand my heart in raising these issues. I, along with millions of others, have derived great spiritual benefit from the high profile that worship music has received in the past few years. God is being glorified! I pray it will only continue. May these thoughts help us discern the true motives of our hearts as we seek to live lives worthy of the calling we’ve received.

Worship Songs and the Local Church

We’ve looked at some of the benefits and concerns of the worship phenomenon. Now I’d like to raise an issue that gets too little notice in discussions of worship music: the local church.

If you’re 17 years old and want to write worship songs, whom do you turn to for inspiration? While your parents, pastor, and worship leader may play a part, more than likely you’ll look to one or more Christian worship leaders or bands whose CDs you like. Is there anything wrong with that? Not necessarily. However, with the popularity of

worship artists and songs comes the temptation to neglect something better: writing songs to serve the church in which God has placed you.

Corporate worship songs may often be sung and played from a stage, but they aren't written for the purpose of being performed. They are written to be sung by God's people. In a culture dominated by an entertainment mentality, please remember this: Jesus didn't come to establish a worship music industry. He came to build a church. Record companies will pass away; the church will remain. While the music industry can greatly serve the church, we must never allow it to become the church's source of direction, teaching, or worship diet. It is the job of pastors—not worship songwriters or publishers—to decide what the church sings.

Speaking of the pastoral role, where else but in a local church can a songwriter be mentored so personally, carefully, wisely, and gently, to help him write songs that are biblically faithful *and* can serve a local church? How would it affect a local pastor if young songwriters in the church started writing songs to supplement sermons, to reinforce biblical truths the pastor has been covering, or for special events? How many local churches would benefit from songwriters who know the church's history, needs, and challenges, and could write songs that speak truth into those situations?

Still, you might be wondering, how *do* I get my corporate worship songs out to others? Well, you could make a demo and send out lots of copies. That offers a very small chance for the song to appear on a worship CD. But I'm convinced it's not the best way to operate within God's greater goal of building the church.

The better way looks more like this. Make sure you're committed to your local church and your pastor. Ask others for observations about your life. Practice the spiritual disciplines faithfully. Serve in your church in whatever ways you can. Then play your songs for people that you respect in your church, asking them for suggestions. Keep revising and improving your songs. If you're already serving as worship leader, try out some of your songs in your church. If they're well received there, tremendous! (Still, that doesn't necessarily mean they're meant for the entire body of Christ.)

Continue to serve in the church where God has placed you. As you grow, God will bring the increase and fruit he desires. If your songs are sung around the world, God will be glorified. If they don't make it beyond your small group, God will still be pleased if your heart is to serve your brothers and sisters nearest you.

Writing corporate worship songs is hard work, not something to be taken on casually or for the wrong reasons. If you're gifted to write songs, I pray that you will experience fresh grace in the coming days to write biblically rich, emotionally passionate, beautiful songs for God's glory.

A Good Report: Benefits of the Worship Movement

I remember talking to a record-label executive in the mid-1980s about worship recordings. He was certain that worship music would always remain regional, and therefore any national promotion of a worship CD would be a poor investment.

Well, times change, don't they? If we'd been having that discussion twelve or 15 years later, we would have started by assuming that the appeal of worship music is international—because it is! Yes, for better or worse, “worship” has become mainstream, at least within the Christian world. The latest Christian catalogs devote entire sections to new worship recordings, artists, books, and projects. There's much to thank God for in this worship “explosion.”

First, it has renewed a God-focused emphasis within the Christian music industry. Facing the “give ‘em what they want” pressures of the bottom line, many of the gatekeepers in the Christian music industry are finding that, sometimes, what folks *really* want is to hear about and sing to *God*. That's a wonderful development! In turn, Christian musicians have greater opportunity to realize that it's all about Jesus, and not about them. Audiences want to worship God, not the artist! Michael W. Smith, SONICFLOOD, Third Day, and others have remarked how what began as a simple song of worship in the middle of a concert eventually stretched into 15 minutes, half an hour, or more. For all three it has led to worship recording projects.

Another positive aspect of the worship movement is that more people are seeking to encounter and exalt God as they listen to Christian music. Certainly, entertainment is still a major ingredient of the contemporary Christian culture, but a hunger for God's presence is being evidenced in many ways.

For example, much of the interest in worship is taking place among youth. Previously, these young people—if they'd even been aware that worship music existed in a contemporary format—might have been uninterested in songs that exalt God directly. But a few years ago I was deeply moved when I watched the video of a large worship event held in England in the mid-1990s. I realized these thousands of teens had come not simply to jam to the latest Christian band, but to praise and extol their Maker.

Finally, the outpouring of new worship songs is enlarging the repertoire of songs that magnify the greatness of God. Just as God used the simple praise choruses of the 1970s to open many hearts to his work in their lives, we now have contemporary songs of greater substance and depth, songs that combine devotion and doctrine. A handful of songwriters (Stuart Townend, Graham Kendrick, and Steve & Vikki Cook, to name a

few) are writing songs which, I believe, will still be around 100 years from now. Along with this has come a renewed interest in setting the hymns of the past to new music, so that current generations can benefit from the rich resources of Watts, Wesley, Newton, and others.

God is certainly behind the worship phenomenon. But as with many blessings, the potential for counterfeits and confusion exists.

How to Benefit from the Praise and Worship Movement

The praise and worship movement has its critics and its proponents. As in most cases, there's some truth in both perspectives. We need to thank God for all he's doing, yet be careful not to abuse or misinterpret his gifts.

So how do we benefit from the current outpouring of worship songs? Here are some thoughts.

Be more discerning and humble about songs that are current. Don't assume that because a song has a great beat or a catchy hook that it's a good song for congregational worship. Look for songs that contain solid biblical truths that inspire a passionate response. On the other hand, be aware that there are many songwriters who are in the early stages of honing their skills. We want to be careful not to despise the day of small beginnings. Let's not berate a songwriter who has a heart to worship God but is still learning his or her craft.

Value the worship leader in your local church. Someone who leads congregational worship can face many challenges—disgruntled church members, a pastor who may not be overseeing the worship ministry with sufficient attention or grace, generation gaps, long hours, and more. Take time to express your appreciation for your worship leader. When he introduces a song that is particularly effective in helping you value truth about God, let him know. Show him that his commitment to your local church isn't taken for granted. When you want to recommend a new worship song, do so without implying that the church is missing God's will if they don't sing it the very next Sunday.

Seek to grow in your expressiveness and passion for God. The praise and worship movement has opened up many people to new experiences of wholehearted worship. Surely, if our affections are pointed anywhere, it should be in God's direction. What a wonderful opportunity to move beyond our comfort zone into a place where we may actually find we enjoy God during enthusiastic corporate worship! Move your feet, clap your hands, sing with all your heart. This isn't just a good idea. It's biblical (Ps 100, 150).

Finally, songwriters should take advantage of this outpouring of songs to write more songs that contain objective truth about God and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The church is hungry for songs that ignite our emotions with the fuel of biblical doctrine. The church is always in need of songs that display the glories of the gospel—our redemption, our adoption, our reconciliation with God, our justification, our freedom. When will we ever have enough songs that extol the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb? Never.

In Revelation chapter five, we catch a glimpse of the scene around God’s throne. What a spectacle! The four living creatures and the 24 elders, then thousands of angels, and eventually all creation join in to extol the glories of the Lamb who was slain, who purchased men for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation! The passage is introduced in verse 9 with the words, “And they sang a new song.” May we continue to sing *that* kind of new song, as we eagerly await the day when we will sing a new song forever.