

The Calling of a Songwriter: Proclaimer

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As theologian Marva J Dawn has written:

“Worship may not contain all the truth, but worship must never contain untruth.”

If we want to sing entertainment songs down the coffee shop, then we can more or less muse about whatever we want to, and our songs can be as surreal as we like. I once heard of a songwriter who described his technique as, “Vomiting out whatever came to me – like a cat with a hairball.” Strangely enough, that guy actually wrote some pretty decent pop songs! But if you want to sing songs for the worshipping church, it’s a whole different matter. There’s still an element of ‘overflow’ – the pouring out of heart, mind and soul. But there’s a deeper challenge and more at stake. There’s a call for every worship songwriters to be a ‘proclaimer’ – wrapping our lyrics around the deep and wonderful revelation of the God of scripture. It’s essential that we bring everything we write in line with the bible.

In one sense then, there are quite a few restrictions placed on a congregational songwriter. But, taking a more positive perspective perhaps ‘restrictions’ is not the right word. I recently heard Australian pastor Brian Houston commenting on how strange it is that when it comes to driving a car we refer to ‘speed *limits*’. As he reminded us, the average person can only walk at a pace of a few miles an hour. So to be able to drive at speeds like 60 miles per hour is actually a fantastic ‘speed *opportunity*’ – not a limit. The point being, that it’s all a matter of perspective. The same can be said of writing songs which aim to be fresh and creative, yet remain firmly within the boundaries of sound theological thinking. That is a restriction or a limit – it is a challenge and a reason to be even more creative! To work even harder, and search even deeper to write lyrics which stand up poetically, serve the church pastorally, and are immersed in the revelation of God as He is revealed in the bible. Writing songs for the church to sing therefore has some unique challenges not found in other expressions of music and poetry. But for those who have a heart to see the people of God pour out worship in spirit and in truth, and see how big a role fresh new songs have to play in that area, it is a challenge we will rise to.

Part of bring a proclaimer in songwriting is to create songs which centre in on God, and not on us. That sounds almost too obvious to mention, but actually it’s easy to fall into the trap of songs which end up being all about us. ‘meet me’, ‘heal me’ ‘free me’ songs can be an important part of the congregational worship ‘diet’ – after all, the Psalms have aspects of these cries. But if they’re all that’s on the menu then we’re in for some serious spiritual malnutrition. There’s a totally different dynamic that kicks in when we honour God by writing songs which ooze with the revelation of Him, and give space to respond to that revelation. I love Tim Hughe’s song, “Here I am to worship”, a song which has caught on like wildfire in so many countries now. One reason I think it’s been such a great vehicle for gathered worship is it’s balance of revelation and response. The verses are so full of the wonders of who God is and what He has done. He is the ‘light of the world’ who ‘stepped down into darkness’. He is the ‘King of all days, o so highly exalted’. The One who, for love’s sake ‘became poor’. It’s a song which proclaims Jesus – His incarnation, His death on the cross, and His authority as the ascended and glorified King. There’s a great ‘inhale’ factor – as we breathe in these soul refreshing truths. But then in the chorus we’re given space to ‘exhale’:

*“Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that You’re my God.”*

The other thing to bear in mind is to paint as big and as colourful a picture as we can in the scope of our songs. If we look through many of the old hymn books there are songs on so many aspects of the nature and character of God. Songs which embrace every season of the soul. Hymns which give the people of God a voice to express worship in so many different circumstances of the Christian life. Collected together these hymns are painting a big and colourful picture of God and His kingdom. It’s clear that many of the old hymn writers took the call to be proclaimers very seriously. Let us too take up this call – for one thing, let’s begin to ‘mind the gaps’ – in other words to attend to some of the areas of theology and life of which the church does not have many songs to sing. This is a task we can take on alone. We need to seek help from theologians, preachers and pastors

– people who can help us identify some of these gaps, and then even suggest ways we might go about filling them in. In the UK over the last couple of years I have part of a songwriters consultation where we invite various theologians in to address us. Some of the ‘missing themes’ that have kept re-occurring in our conversations – and they’ve encouraged us to pay attention to – are such things as the Trinity, the resurrection, and songs of lament. There are many more themes which need looking at too – and whilst there’s no need to get depressed and demoralised about the situation (although that might at least lead to some more lament songs!!!), there is a heightened on all of us to bring honour to God, edification to the church, and truth to the world by painting as a big and as full a picture of our God in worship as we possibly can.

But one word of caution to end on. At the end of the day, worship songwriting is not about being absolutely ‘precise’ or being ‘clever’. And there is many a time when a simple little overflow of the heart is all that is called for. In fact, simple does not have to mean shallow, and it is possible to have some songs which pack some deep truth into a shorter song. Every song – whether full of words, or simple, must first and foremost be the overflow of a heart amazed by God.