

Worship: A Divine Romance?

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Ex-London Bible College student Sam Hargreaves wrote his dissertation on 'the use of romantic imagery in worship songs'. Both poignant and provocative, it forced many of us to reflect on some of the words and imagery we use in worship. Whilst you may or may not agree with every single point Sam makes, we hope his article will help you to think through some of these issues.

People sometimes laugh when I tell them that "Jesus is my girlfriend?" was the subject of my London Bible College dissertation. However when they hear the subtitle - "A critique of romantic imagery in worship songs, and a doctrinal framework for intimacy in worship", some get a bit defensive. Why 'critique'? Surely we want our worship to be intimate with Jesus, the 'lover of our souls'? And why 'doctrine'? Do our songs not need to be relevant to the general public, who aren't interested in theological terms but are fed a diet of love songs on the radio? Why not turn these love songs to their appropriate subject?

Yet the question we have to ask is are 'romantic' expressions of worship appropriate? I mean are they biblical? And does it help or hinder our relationship with God? One recent author has commented,

"Our songs have emphasised the feeling that Jesus is more of a boyfriend than the second member of the Trinity." [Brian and Kevin Draper, *Refreshing Worship* (Oxford, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000) p. 33.]

I would argue that this, if true, is something of a problem! In our efforts to present God as a loving, close, friend we have sometimes gone too far and presented a God made in our own image. A couple of weeks ago I heard from a pulpit 'God is not interested in doctrine or theology – he is interested in your heart!' What a dangerous half-truth! As Robert Dale writes,

"The person who chooses the hymns [and choruses] for worship is potentially the most important theologian in the congregation." [Robert D Dale, *To Dream Again*, (Nashville, Broadman 1981) quoted by Barry Liesch, *The New Worship*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books 2001) p. 42.]

It is not the rules of a football match which make it exciting. It is not the white lines around the pitch which attract fans and players to the game. But without them a game of football would fall apart. There would be anarchy and it would be impossible to watch or play.

Theology, rather than being the boring, stuffy intellectualised thing best avoided, should act as the lines on the football pitch, showing what is 'in', and what is definitely 'out'. In his fantastic Biblical Theology of Worship, David Peterson argues that,

"The worship of the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible." [David Peterson, *Engaging With God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992) p. 20.]

God has shown us how to worship him; he has shown us names to call him (Ex 3:14; Jn 14:6; Rev 22:13), activities to carry out (Lev 1-7; Lk 22:10-20; 1 Cor 14:26), attitudes to imitate (Gen 4:7; Is 58:6; Jn 4:23), and above all his presence to meet and empower us to worship (1 Kgs 19:20; Jn 14:26; Acts 4:31). All our expressions of worship need to be tested by the Word and the Spirit.

Biblical romance

"But romance with God is in the Bible!" I hear you cry! Well, okay, let's spend a little time looking at whether the Bible expresses a sense of individuals having a romantic type relationship with God. It is common to point to the Song of Songs as a justification for romantic worship, viewing it as an allegory of God's love for his Church or individuals. Now I believe the OT must be interpreted not primarily by how it may come across to us today, but first in the manner it was understood by its original writers and readers, and second by any New Testament reinterpretation. Yet neither of

these factors point to a divine-human love story. Nowhere does it say that. It is about human love, between a man and a woman. Most commentaries say the divine-human reading was introduced by Origen (3rd century AD) and used mostly to explain away a rather embarrassing book.

"These modes of interpretation... do not explicate the primary level of the text, which is explicitly about human love and no-where mentions God." [Marcia Falk, *Song of Songs*, in *Harpers Bible Commentary*, p. 525.]

In our age of confusion over sex and relationships we should surely embrace this biblical expression of human sexuality. Maybe we are a bit embarrassed, too. We take the book completely out of context to justify romantic love songs to God.

Now, some also turn to the imagery of Israel as God's wife (Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1-3) or the Church as the Bride of Christ (Eph 5:22-33; Rev 19:6-8) as a justification for romantic songs. You cannot dispute that these are in a sense romantic images. However, they are also fundamentally corporate images. Yes, God loves us with the devotion of a faithful husband. Yes, he is preparing us as a pure, spotless bride. These are fantastic and biblical images within themselves, but it is a quantum leap to use these passages to justify images of individual romance between us and God. The truth is that the Bible consciously avoids these images in order to separate the God of Israel from the sexualised deities of the Gentiles. Our God is faithful and loving, but also pure and holy; other than his creation, not involved in a kind of romance with individual worshippers.

Another often quoted example is the Greek word for worship, *proskynein*, which is a compound of *pros*, meaning "towards", and *kynein*, meaning "to kiss". This has been used to justify a sense of romance in worship. However, Peterson warns that the actual usage of the word in the New Testament and Greek Old Testament must be the interpreter's guide, not the way it is made up (its etymology). [Peterson, *Engaging*, p. 79.]

As a contemporary example, imagine someone two thousand years from now looking at our word 'holiday' (from 'holy' and 'day'). They might assume this means a single day, set apart for a religious purpose. Although this may be the root, it is not what the word means in contemporary speech! Peterson concludes that the word *proskynein* came to indicate a physical or spiritual prostration, "an expression of awe or grateful submission – recognition of God's gracious character and rule." [Peterson, *Engaging*, p. 73.]

What are we saying?

A central issue is the way that people from outside the church interpret our songs. When we talk of loving God, is it a romantic fiction? When a non-Churched person hears us singing 'Jesus I am so in love with you', or 'By your side, I would stay, in your arms, I would lay', or 'I don't want to grieve you, you are my precious lover', how do they interpret that? Is it seen in the context of the cross? If it is surrounded only by romantic words about 'arms around me' and how much we can feel God, will it not be considered as ephemeral and fickle as the contemporary modern relationships we see on TV and hear about on the radio? What is love - a one night stand? A fuzzy feeling? An individual right?

Feelings are important! Our worship of God has to spring from some sort of heart attitude, not mere intellectual decision (Ps 28:7, 51:17). But these feelings or attitudes must be inspired by the truth - the truth of who God is and what he has done for us – not just a band playing emotional music, or a story which tugs at the heart strings.

This is love – that while we were still sinners God gave his only Son, that ultimate act of self-sacrifice, of identification with the beloved, of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is love, not mere feelings of physical gratification but action, mercy and grace. This is the story which our songs need to be proclaiming and our hearts need to be responding to in worship.

Transcendence/immanence and the Trinity

Good theology recognises God's holy otherness as primary. Tozer, remarking on Isaiah 6, says,

"Here Isaiah was an astonished man, he was struck with awe, his whole world suddenly dissolving into a vast eternal brightness... in that presence, Isaiah found no place for joking, or for clever

cynicism or for human familiarity." [AW Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship*, (Carlisle, OM Publishing, 1986) pp. 58-9.]

This sense of God's otherness can be lost in our worship. Yet it goes hand in hand with the closeness of God the Father in the person of his Son, our High Priest (Heb 4:14) and Mediator (2 Tim 2:5). Jesus is the Leader of our worship, who presents our offerings before the Father (Heb 9:24), indeed he also sings praises in heaven! (Heb 2:12). And he himself is made present in our midst by his Holy Spirit (Eph 1:17-21). This is the work of the Trinity – not an outdated doctrine but a vital framework for our worship. [Recommended reading on this subject: Barry Liesch, *The New Worship*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books 2001), (especially chapter 10), James B Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, (Carlisle, Paternoster Press 1996), Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, holy, holy*, (DLT 1997).]

Christopher Cocksworth says this.

"It would be foolish and unfair to devise our own understanding of God and to refuse to engage with the way God has described himself... God has spoken to reveal who he is. God has given his self revelation. God has shown himself to be the Trinitarian God of love." [Cocksworth, *Holy*, p. 42.]

Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been called "the proper name of God." [Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press) p. xii] If we want to know what to call God, how to address him in worship, what better place to start than the way he has revealed himself to us? Forget all that stuff about water, ice and steam, or three leaves of a clover. What we are taking about here is the three persons of God, each with their own attributes and unique relationships with the other – the Father, completely holy and other, who is the subject of our worship and begets the Son; the Son who is the agent of creation and becomes like us, immanent and close, presenting the Father to the world; and the Spirit who comes from the Father and the Son and empowers all that is done for the glory of the Father. And yet, though they are unique, each is fully God and each is united in being and in perfect relationship. One God, three persons.

The 'scary' Old Testament God has not suddenly become our buddy – he has sent his Son to be one of us, and to allow us to enter into that relationship the Son has with the Father, through the sanctifying and empowering work of the Spirit.

"When we come into this sweet relationship, we are beginning to learn astonished reverence, breathless adoration, awesome fascination, lofty admiration of the attributes of God and something of the breathless silence we know when God is near. [Tozer, *Whatever*, p. 27.]

When we worship, we do so not simply on earth (although this is important), but also we are literally doing so in the presence of God in heaven as we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6). This is intimacy! This is coming boldly into the presence of God through Christ (Heb 10:19-22). It is not enough to say "God you feel so near". Our song texts must proclaim, and moreover draw us into, the participation of the Triune life of God where we understand true intimacy with the transcendent Father, through the immanence of the Son in the end-time Kingdom drawing of the Spirit.

What kind of intimacy?

When looking to express intimacy with God, we have got to make sure this is driven by biblical imagery rather than the lyrics of the Top 40. Interviewed on this subject Graham Kendrick commented,

"A large number of praise and worship songs are based very closely on the pop song genre, therefore it should not be surprising to us if the imagery of romantic love fits very naturally, perhaps one might say even too easily." [Email interview, received 7th May 2001.]

He went on to speak of the primary problem of intimacy being interpreted individually, as a merely interior experience of God. In contrast Kendrick asks,

"If the Bride of Christ is a corporate thing, could it not be argued that the experience of intimacy with God should also be very much a corporate thing?... The supreme example of worship intimacy surely has to be looked for in Christ Jesus and his relationship with the Father, from Jesus' baptism

when the Father spoke over him the words 'this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased', through to the drama of Gethsemane where Jesus' love is proved by his obedience even to the point of death on a cross: 'Not my will, but yours.'" [As above.]

This corporate and Christ-centred sense of intimacy is a vital goal. We need more and more to be thinking both creatively and biblically about how we can express this in song. It demands a commitment to bringing 'we' language back into the worship time; we as the people of God enabled by the Spirit to be God's children and God's church, and to be drawn into his presence.

It also requires the understanding and appropriate usage of Trinitarian terms in our songs, recognising the three persons of the Godhead as distinct and fulfilling different roles, yet being one in nature. As a British Council of Churches report stated,

"Our concern is not that Trinitarian words and phrases should be incorporated in hymns and liturgies in a merely cosmetic way, but that worshippers should be drawn to celebrate and be drawn into the life and relationships of the Triune God." [British Council of Churches, *The Forgotten Trinity, 1 The Report*, (London, BCC 1989) p. 28.]

Correct language has the power to draw people in to a more real, comprehensible life-changing relationship with God and one another. Clearly, worship is more than the words that we sing, and yet our words have such an influence on our attitudes, doctrines and lives, that we have a responsibility to express faithfully the fullness and reality of God's revelation through them. This is a high calling and an exciting challenge!