

## Reclaiming the Good News in Worship

### 1. Introduction

- Tonight I would like to share some thoughts on worship which may be of value in your context.

### 2. Starting the story at the beginning

#### 2.1. A new view of worship

- 2.1.1. **Eschatology** - They need to be written, because people need hope. They need a vision of a good future. They need to have in their imaginations images of the celebration, peace, justice, and wholeness towards which our dismal, conflicted, polluted, and fragmented world must move. This is much, much bigger than songs about me being in heaven. It's not about clouds and ethereal, other-worldly imagery. Dig into those passages, songwriters ... and let your heart be inspired to write songs of hope, songs of vision, songs that lodge in our hearts a dream of the future that has been too long forgotten ... the dream of God's kingdom coming, and God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.
- 2.1.2. **Mission** - You may be equally surprised to hear me suggest that we need songs of mission. Many of us believe that a new, larger sense of mission (not just missions, and not just evangelism, but mission - participating in the mission of God, the kingdom of God, which is so much bigger and grander than our little schemes of organizational self-aggrandizement) is the key element needed as we move into the postmodern world.
- 2.1.3. **Consumerism** - This strikes at the heart of our consumeristic culture, which is "all about me, all about me, me, me." Jesus came not to be served, but to serve ... and as he was sent, so he sent us into the world. The very heart of our identity as the church in the new emerging theology is not that we are the people who have been chosen to be blessed, saved, rescued, and blessed some more. This is a half-truth heresy that our songs are in danger of spreading and rooting more and more in our people - inadvertently, of course. No, the heart of our identity as the church in the new emerging theology is that we are the people who have been blessed (as was Abraham) to be a blessing, blessed so that we may convey blessing to the world.
- 2.1.4. **The bigger picture** - For many of us, the world exists for the church. It is like a strip mine, and people are mined out of it to build the church, which is what really matters. In the new emerging postmodern theology and spirituality, that image is terrible. It mirrors the raping and plundering of the environment by our modern industrial enterprises. In it, the church is another industry, taking and taking for its own profit. How different is the image of the church as the

apostolic community, sent into the world as Christ's hands, feet, eyes, smile, heart. We need songs that celebrate this missional dimension - good songs, and many!

- 2.1.5. **Scripture** - For inspiration, we have to again go back to Scripture, and read the prophets, and the gospels, and engage their heart for the poor, the needy, the broken. Shouldn't these themes be expressed in song? Don't they deserve that dignity? As I write, I am struck by this thought: perhaps we have so over-emphasized the role of songs in worship - to the exclusion of many other liturgical options (poetry, historic prayers, silence, meditative reading, etc.) -- that we have forgotten the role of song in teaching. Remember Colossians 3, where Paul talks about singing the teachings of Christ to one another in songs of the spirit?
- 2.1.6. **God's Character** - You will likely be less surprised to hear me say that we need songs that are simply about God ... songs giving God the spotlight, so to speak, for God as God, God's character, God's glory, not just for the great job God is doing at making me feel good. And similarly, we need songs that celebrate what God does for the world - the whole world - not just for me, or us. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, read the Psalms, because they love to celebrate what the Lord does for the whole earth, not just the people of Israel. Many of the songs we need will also celebrate God as Creator ... an important theme in Scripture, but not for most of our churches. We have lacked a good creation theology in the modern era, and we need songwriters/artists and theologians to join together in the emerging culture to celebrate God as God of creation, not only 15 billion years ago (or whenever) but today, now ... the God who knows the sparrows that fall, whose glory still flashes in the lightning bolt, whose kindness still falls like the morning dew, whose mysteries are still imaged in the depths of the ocean and the vast expanse of the night sky.
- 2.1.7. **Lament** - I should also mention songs of lament. The Bible is full of songs that wail, the blues but even bluer, songs that feel the agonizing distance between what we hope for and what we have, what we could be and what we are, what we believe and what we see and feel. The honesty is disturbing, and the songs of lament don't always end with a happy Hallmark-Card-Precious-Moments cliché to try to fix the pain. Sometimes I think we're too happy: the only way to become happier is to become sadder, by feeling the pain of the chronically ill, the desperately poor, the mentally ill, the lonely, the aged and forgotten, the oppressed minority, the widow and orphan. This pain should find its way into song, and these songs should find their way into our churches. The bitter will make the sweet all the sweeter; without the bitter, the sweet can become cloying, and too many of our churches feel, I think, like Candyland. Is it too much to ask that we be more honest? Since doubt is part of our lives, since pain and waiting and as-yet unresolved disappointment are part of our lives, can't these things be reflected in the songs of our communities? Doesn't endless singing about celebration lose its vitality (and even its credibility) if we don't also sing about the struggle?

## 2.2. Starting at the right point

- Central premise: Where and how you would begin the story, and when and how you end the story, shapes and determines what the story even is that you are telling;
  - *If you begin at Genesis...*

- 3, then the problem is the removal of sin; if at Gen 1 then it is the restoration of shalom;
- 3 what you aren't ; 1 what you are;
- 3 disembodied evacuations; 1 co-creating participation.

**2.3. Community versus individualism**

**2.4. Trust Dave with the song choice**

**2.5. Let's start to sing our own stories**

### 3. Conclusion

- A Christian, then, continually insists that through the resurrection of Jesus a whole new world is bursting forth right here in the midst of this one and everybody everywhere can be a part of it.
- A Christian, then, is learning more and more how to see this new creation with their own eyes.
- A Christian, then, has hope rooted not in escape but engagement, not in evacuation but reclamation, not in leaving but in staying and overcoming.
- A Christian, then, is never surprised when grace, beauty, meaning, order, compassion, truth and love show up in all sorts of unexpected people and places because it always has been God's world, it is God's world, and it always will be God's world.