

An Open Letter to Worship Songwriters

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Brian McLaren

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Greetings, fellow songwriters, fellow worshippers, fellow leaders in worship, fellow musician/artists, and fellow followers of Jesus:

For the last few years, I have been privileged to be “on the road” a lot, speaking mostly with young emerging leaders. I suppose I was asked to speak to them because of some over-forty quota system, and also because many emerging leaders are grappling with the issue of postmodernity, an issue I lost most of my hair grappling with myself – and about which I have written some books. Back home, I am a pastor serving a church that has committed itself to enter the postmodern transition and deal with its issues boldly and confidently. I say “boldly and confidently” knowing that there are as yet no maps to guide a church in this adventure – so we have no real idea where we’re going except that we’re trying to follow Jesus. I guess we feel very much like the children of Israel having left the Egypt of modernity and crossed the Sea into the unknown wilderness ... we’re trusting that a God-sent cloud-pillar and fire-cloud will guide us by day and night.

One of the side benefits of travel – as a musician myself, I have truly enjoyed hearing dozens of worship bands and worship leaders, and spending literally hours at almost every event being led in worship. There are many observations and affirmations I could imagine sharing with you who are worship leaders. There are so many encouraging trends, along with a few persistent problems. But one observation stands out. It is actually a request more than an observation: a request for the songwriters among us to explore and then lead us into some new lyrical/spiritual territory.

One hears a lot of complaints about lame music, trite lyrics, theological shallowness, etc., etc., in the world of contemporary Christian music. Some of these complaints come from people who secretly wish we would go back to singing hymns, like they did back in the -50’s (18- or 19-, your pick). I am not interested in complaining, and I have little interest in the -50’s (except maybe the 2050’s).

No, here’s what I’m after: Many of us believe that we are entering (or well into) a significant theological/cultural/spiritual transition period, very possibly as significant historically as the reformation period, when the medieval world gave way to the modern world. Now, as the modern gives way to the postmodern world, we should expect to see a revolution in theology (in the end, helping us be more Biblical, more spiritual, more effective in our mission – and, please God, more clear about what our mission is). But here’s the rub.

In the modern world, theology was done by scholars, and was expressed in books and lectures. In the postmodern world, many of us believe that the theologians will have to leave the library more often and mix with the rest of us. And the best of them will join hands and hearts with the poets, musicians, filmmakers, actors, architects, interior and landscape designers, dancers, sculptors, painters, novelists, photographers, web designers, and every other artistic brother and sister possible ... not only to communicate a postmodern, Christian theology ... but also to discern it, discover it. Because one major shift of this transition is the shift from left-brain to whole-brain, from reductionistic, analytic

rationalism to a broader theological holism – a theology that works in mind and heart, understanding and imagination, proposition and image, clarity and mystery, explanation and narrative, exposition and artistic expression.

Our songwriters could play a key spiritual role in the rooting of this more holistic theology in our people.

But sadly, as I have sat in scores of venues listening (and usually participating in) extended times of worship around the country, I have sensed that our song lyrics are too seldom leading us into this new territory. They are in some ways holding us back. Please, please, don't hear this as criticism, but as a suggestion – a gentle but heartfelt request – for change.

Let me make this specific: Too many of our lyrics are embarrassingly personalistic, about Jesus and me. Personal intimacy with God is such a wonderful step above a cold, abstract, wooden recitation of dogma. But it isn't the whole story. In fact – this might shock you – it isn't, in the emerging new postmodern world, necessarily the main point of the story. A popular worship song I've heard in many venues in the last few years (and which we sing at Cedar Ridge, where I pastor) says that worship is "all about You, Jesus," but apart from that line, it really feels like worship, and Christianity in general, has become "all about me, me, me."

If you doubt what I'm saying, listen next time you're singing in worship. It's about how Jesus forgives me, embraces me, makes me feel his presence, strengthens me, forgives me, holds me close, touches me, revives me, etc., etc. Now this is all fine. But if an extraterrestrial outsider from Mars were to observe us, I think he would say either a) that these people are all mildly dysfunctional and need a lot of hug therapy (which is ironic, because they are among the most affluent in the world, having been blessed in every way more than any group in history), or b) that they don't give a rip about the rest of the world, that their religion/spirituality makes them as selfish as any non-Christian, but just in spiritual things rather than material ones. (That last sentence may be worth another read.)

I don't think either of these indictments are as true as they would sound to a Martian observer; rather, I think that we songwriters keep writing songs like these because we think that's what people want and need. The scary thing is that even though I don't think these indictments are completely true ... they could become more true unless we take some corrective action and look for a better balance.

It's embarrassing to admit, but some of us are thinking right now, "If spiritual songwriting is not about deep, personal intimacy with God, what else is there?" Let me offer a list of Biblical themes I think we would do well to explore in our lyrics:

1. You'll be surprised to hear me say "eschatology" first – and let me assure you that I don't mean putting the latest apocalyptic novel to music. (Please! No! Not that!) By eschatology (which means study of the end or goal towards which the universe moves), I mean the Biblical vision of God's future which is pulling us toward itself. For many of you, raised like me in late-modern eschatologies, you'll be surprised to hear that there is a whole new approach to eschatology emerging (led by some theologians like Walter Brueggeman, Jurgen Moltmann, and the "theologians of hope"). This approach doesn't indulge in "modern" charts or shaky predictions. Rather, it bathes itself in the Biblical poetry of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Revelation ... poetry which, when it enters us, plants in us a vision of a world very much different from and better than ours. And when this hope grows and takes root in us,

we become agents of it. What joy I can imagine being expressed in songs that capture the spirit of Isaiah 9:2-7, 25:6-9, 35:1-10, 58:5-14! Who will write those songs?

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. 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.

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.

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!

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?

3. You may be equally surprised to hear me recommend that we re-discover historic Christian spirituality and express it in our lyrics. As Robert Webber, Thomas Odin, Sally Morgenthaler, and others are teaching us, there is a wealth of historic spiritual writings, including many beautiful prayers, that are crying for translation into contemporary song. Every era in history has rich resources to offer, from the Patristic period to the Celtic period to the Puritan period. On every page of Thomas a Kempis, in every prayer of the great medieval saints, there is inspiration waiting for us ... and when we look at the repetitive and formulaic lyrics that millions of Christians are singing (because that's what we're writing,

folks), the missed opportunity is heartbreaking. These “alien voices” will stretch our hearts and enrich them immeasurably ... and eventually, these voices will become the voices of friends, of brothers and sisters, because that is what they are – if we invite them into our worship through songs.

4. 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.

5. 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?

While I’m at it, may I offer a few stylistic observations and requests – again, not trying to be critical, but trying to be helpful, and to offer ways which you, with your gifts, can better serve the church and our mission in these transitional times? I’ll offer them in the form of some questions.

First, may I suggest that we fully and finally get over King James English in our new lyrics, even if we choose to retain it in our old? Enough said.

Second, may I suggest that we be careful about using gratuitous Biblical language – Zion, Israel, go forth, on high, etc., etc.? If there is a good reason to use such language – in other words, if we are using it intentionally, not just for a “spiritual feel,” then fine. Otherwise, if we can find contemporary language and imagery that would communicate more crisply, poignantly, immediately, and deeply to people who don’t already have a lot of pew time ... then let’s use it, in the spirit of I Corinthians 14, where intelligibility to the spiritual seeker is a gospel virtue.

Third, may I suggest that in an era of Columboes and Islamic fundamentalism, we be careful about the language of jihad and holy war? I suppose there is a time and place for

that, but I don't think this is it. We all need a strong dose of Anabaptist peace right about now, in my opinion.

Fourth, musically, am I the only one wishing for more rhythmic variety? Why is it that I am being blessed so much by creative drummers and percussionists wherever I go?

Fifth, can our worship leaders enrich the musical experience by reading Scripture, great prayers of the historic church, creeds, confessions, and poems over musical backgrounds? You may not like rap music, but it's trying to tell us something about the abiding power of the spoken word, the well-chosen spoken word that is. (We have far too many less-than-well-chosen spoken words already, I think you'll agree.)

And finally, can our lyricists start reading more good poetry, good prose, so they can be sensitized to the powers of language, the grace of a well-turned phrase, the delight of a freshly discovered image, the prick or punch or caress or jolt that is possible if we wrestle a little harder and stretch a little farther for the word that really wants to be said from deep within us? Sadly, while many of our songs have better and better music, but the lyrics still feel like "cliché train" – one linked to another, with a sickening recycling of plastic language and paper triteness.

Isn't our God, our mission, our community worthy of more lyrical quality than we are offering so far?

Thanks for considering these things. I hope this will be the beginning of an important and ongoing conversation.

Your fellow servant,
Brian McLaren