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# **‘It’s all about Jesus’: a critical analysis of the ways in which the songs of four contemporary worship Christian songwriters can lead to an impoverished christology**

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The last fifteen years have seen the rise of a new group of young prolific Christian songwriters whose worship songs have found a global audience, particularly in the UK where they all live.<sup>1</sup> Three of the songwriters – Matt Redman, Tim Hughes and Martyn Layzell, have close links with the Christian youth organisation Soul Survivor and its erstwhile parent New Wine; while one – Paul Oakley, has links with New Frontiers. Soul Survivor, New Wine and New Frontiers are all expressions of charismatic Christianity. New Wine and Soul Survivor grew out of the relationship between David Pytches (then minister at St. Andrew’s Chorleywood) and John Wimber, the then leader and founder of Vineyard.<sup>2</sup> The values of Vineyard, its emphasis on worship and signs and wonders are evident in both New Wine and Soul Survivor.<sup>3</sup> New Frontiers emerged out of the house-church movement of the 1970s under the leadership of Terry Virgo.<sup>4</sup> It was also influenced by John Wimber and Vineyard, and is shaped by a Calvinistic theology.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 This article is only able to look at four Christian songwriters. The four in this study were chosen because of their connection to worship aimed at young people (that is, those who are predominantly in their teens and twenties), which they pioneered from the mid-1990s onwards. A wider more diverse study of other Christian songwriters might produce some different conclusions from those that I make. I write as someone who attended the Soul Survivor summer festival during 1998-2004 and, despite the criticisms made here, still enjoys and uses many of the songs that are written by the songwriters here analysed.
  - 2 David Pytches, *Living at the Edge: The Autobiography of David Pytches* (Arcadia, 2002).
  - 3 For a critical examination of Vineyard see Martyn Percy’s study *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism* (London, SPCK, 1996).
  - 4 For a historical and critical description of the story see Andrew Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement* (Guildford, Eagle, 19984) and also William A. Kay, *Apostolic Networks in Britain* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2007).
  - 5 William Kay describes it as an ‘evangelistic Calvinistic theology coupled with a Pentecostal or charismatic theology of the Spirit’, *Apostolic Networks in Britain*, 2007, 66.

It is in these contexts that the four songwriters that are the focus of this study grew up and emerged. Between them they have written two hundred songs and produced over twenty CDs. Some have written books and run conferences and websites that train and encourage worship leaders and songwriters. As Lester Ruth remarks 'for many newer churches and younger Christians, [the songs from these songwriters] are the only music they know.'<sup>6</sup> Their influence on what many churches listen to and what they sing is extensive. Worship leaders are the new priests and as a result 'music has come to assume a kind of priestly role in much worship, insofar as it is regarded almost as the primary vehicle by which people enter the presence of God.'<sup>7</sup> At a worship service of New Wine, Soul Survivor or New Frontiers, up to thirty or forty minutes will be spent singing, followed by a talk/sermon, followed by a time of "ministry" (which consists of people being prayed for and more singing). Whereas in other traditions the liturgy is shared between prayers, readings, and songs or hymns, Robin Parry says that 'in churches that do not have liturgy, the burden of guiding the encounter falls heavily upon the songs. In many charismatic churches, the songs play the dominant role in shaping the worship-encounter.'<sup>8</sup>

Christian worship should tell the whole drama of salvation.<sup>9</sup> It should be a balance between objective and subjective, or as Matt Redman puts it, a balance between 'revelation and response.'<sup>10</sup> Christian worship should be participatory and not a spectator sport. Christian worship should be pedagogical, that is, forming the congregation as the people of God.<sup>11</sup> Christian worship is a balance between the two ancient doxologies: 'Glory to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit' and 'Glory to the Father with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit.'<sup>12</sup> The first doxology acknowledges that worship is something we participate in, as James Torrance says, 'worship is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father.'<sup>13</sup> The second doxology acknowl-

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6 Lester Ruth, 'Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi: The Trinity in the Most-Used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs' in Bryan D. Spinks (ed.), *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2008), 342.

7 Graham Redding, *Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ* (London, T & T Clark, 2003), 298 n.30.

8 Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2005), 14.

9 See Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

10 Matt Redman, 'Revelation and Response' in *The Heart of Worship Files*, (ed.) Matt Redman (Kingsway, 2003), 11-14. In a later chapter he talks about the need to find 'a good balance between the "content" and "engagement"', 'Content and Engagement' in *The Heart of Worship Files*, 2003, 154.

11 'For Christians the principal practice by which the moral imagination is formed, the principal form of discipleship training, is worship', Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London, SPCK, 2004), 82.

12 Geoffrey Wainwright, 'Trinitarian Worship' in *Worship With One Accord: where Liturgy and Ecumenism Embrace* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 238.

13 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1996), 18.

edges that we worship God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. While the Son and the Spirit enable and mediate our worship to the Father, they also share the Father's divinity and therefore 'they are equally to be given that which only God should receive... worship and honour and glory.'<sup>14</sup> Accordingly Christian worship should be both mediated *through* the Son and *in* the Spirit and be given to the Father *with* the Son and *with* the Spirit. To deny one or the other is to be in danger of either creating a distance between God and worshippers – no mediator – or to suggest the Son and the Spirit are not fully divine.

This study is a critical analysis of the christology found in the songs of the four particular songwriters named above. If there is one song lyric that sums up these four worship song writers it would be 'it's all about you Jesus'.<sup>15</sup> The common thread that runs through these songs is their Jesus-centredness. The vast majority of their songs are addressed to or about Jesus.<sup>16</sup> At first glance this is not necessarily problematic or heretical, the second doxology mentioned above, allows worship of the Son, and worship addressed to Jesus was developed as a reaction against Arianism and in support of the Son's *homoousios* with the Father. However this essay will argue that an overemphasis on worship to or about Jesus leads to an impoverished christology and as a consequence worship that can become distorted and in danger of ceasing to be Christian.

### Analysis of the songs

An analysis of these songs must acknowledge that '[songs] are theological, but they are not systematic theology.'<sup>17</sup> The songs of charismatic worship are songs of narrative encounter with God rather than an expression of doctrinal beliefs.<sup>18</sup> However, within charismatic Christianity 'a great deal of theology [received] is through song lyrics, and it is the nearest most Christians come to scripture memorization.'<sup>19</sup> The songs within this study cover everything each songwriter has written (and in some cases co-written) and recorded (either in studio or live) up to the end of July 2008.

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14 Colin Gunton, *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London, T & T Clark, 2003), 84.

15 The line appears in two songs – one by Paul Oakley ('Jesus Lover of My Soul', © 1995 Thankyou Music) and one by Matt Redman ('The Heart of Worship', © 1997 Thankyou Music).

16 In percentage terms around 59% of songs studied. This percentage could be higher, but in some songs it difficult to determine who is being sung to outside of 'Lord' or simply 'You'.

17 Pete Ward, *Growing Up Evangelical* (London, SPCK, 1995), 108.

18 Pete Ward, *Selling Worship* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2005), chapter 12.

19 Graham Kendrick, 'Worship in Spirit and in Truth' in Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (eds.), *Composing Music for Worship* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2003), 95.

*Matt Redman*

One of Matt Redman's<sup>20</sup> earliest and most well-known songs is 'I will offer up my life.'<sup>21</sup> The song is a song of worship to Jesus, expressing how the worshipper should give everything, but is unable to. Jesus is addressed as a 'faithful friend' and a 'loving king', both titles that are frequently used together in Redman's songs.<sup>22</sup> With reference to Philippians 2:8, the lyrics express Jesus as one who gives up his life to death, even death on a cross. Jesus is our Saviour, who removes our shame, defeats our sin and opens up the gates of heaven. In 'Once again',<sup>23</sup> Philippians 2 is used again with a hint towards the incarnation evident in the line – 'You became nothing, poured out to death' and in the second verse Jesus is now 'exalted to the highest place' and called 'King of the heavens.' Here is an example of how scripture (namely the New International Version) is treated – particular phrases are extracted from their context and used. Both these songs strongly focus on the cross.

Redman's most christological song – 'Light of the world'<sup>24</sup> is another direct use of scripture. Its lyrics are built around John 1 and Colossians 1:15-20. Jesus is the Son of God, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He is the Father's saving Word (John 1:1, 14). He is the one whose birth was prophesied by the prophets and, in a reference to the incarnation, 'who came and walked upon the earth.' The chorus then speaks of Jesus as the 'Light of the world' (John 8:12). The second verse speaks of Christ as creator, in whom all things were made and all things are held (Col 1:16-17). The incarnation is then referred to again – 'And yet you became flesh / living as one of us', before going back to Colossians and how through the blood of Jesus, God has made peace with the world (Col 1:20). The song represents Redman at his poetic best, weaving themes of creation, incarnation and cross together in a narrative.

Redman's christology is focused around the cross – Jesus is the 'Man of sufferings'<sup>25</sup> who saves us through his death. He does this because he's a faithful

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20 Matt Redman started leading worship at St. Andrew's, Chorleywood from which was later planted Soul Survivor, Watford, in the mid-1990s. Soul Survivor as well as being a church plant is an international organization, which began life as the youth-arm of the New Wine summer festival. He is the leading worship leader and songwriter that has emerged from Soul Survivor. He now spends of most his time leading worship at events across the UK and the world. For several years he ran a website called 'The Heart of Worship', which include articles on leading worship, both practical and theological. He has recorded eight albums and written or edited five books. As well as eight studio albums, he has featured on numerous live albums from Soul Survivor, New Wine, Spring Harvest, New Day and Passion.

21 (Matt Redman © Thankyou Music 1994).

22 See 'No longer just servants' (Matt Redman © 1993 Thankyou Music); 'Jesus is this song of love' (Matt Redman © 1995 Thankyou Music); 'O Sacred King' (Matt Redman © 1999 Thankyou Music); and 'Befriended' (Matt Redman © 2002 Thankyou Music).

23 (Matt Redman © 1996 Thankyou Music).

24 (Matt Redman © 1999 Thankyou Music).

25 'For the cross' (Matt & Beth Redman © 1998 Thankyou Music).

friend and a loving king. Redman understands worship song writing as a balance between content and engagement, revelation and response<sup>26</sup> and so there is an emphasis on the worshipper responding to Jesus with love songs.<sup>27</sup> Jesus is the 'lover of our souls',<sup>28</sup> whose beauty and majesty are far beyond compare.<sup>29</sup>

### *Tim Hughes*

Tim Hughes<sup>30</sup> most early songs speak of Jesus as our 'first love'<sup>31</sup> and our 'lifeline',<sup>32</sup> who has 'touched our thirsty souls'<sup>33</sup> – put simply, there is little theological content. However, with 'Here I am to worship',<sup>34</sup> he begins to develop something of a christology. The song has an incarnational theme: Jesus is the 'Light of the world', who 'stepped down into darkness' and 'humbly came to the earth you created' and in reference to 2 Cor. 8:9, 'all for love's sake became poor.' The response of the worshipper is to worship and acknowledge him as our God.

The chorus to 'Redeemer'<sup>35</sup> is based around the christological text Isaiah 9:6 and so Jesus is referred to as 'wonderful', 'counsellor', 'everlasting Father', 'mighty in the heavens', 'Son of God' and 'Prince of Peace.' The verses in a similar way use other titles – redeemer, friend, king, refuge, comfort, saviour, healer, just and true, most high and living God. There is no interpretation or explanation of these titles, that is, they divorced from any narrative context. This is the second song in which Jesus is addressed as 'God.'

Hughes tells us in the sleeve notes that 'Beautiful One'<sup>36</sup> was written after reading Isaiah 53:2, part of another frequently used christological text, where

26 See 'Revelation and Response' and 'Content and Engagement' in *The Heart of Worship Files*, 2003.

27 'I've got a love song' (Matt Redman © 1993 Thankyou Music), 'Jesus, is this song of love' (Matt Redman © 1995 Thankyou Music), 'This means I love you' (Matt Redman © 1995 Thankyou Music), 'Let my words be few' (Matt & Beth Redman © 2000 Thankyou Music), 'If I have not love' (Matt Redman © 2004 Thankyou Music).

28 'Lord, hear the music of my heart' (Matt Redman © 1998 Thankyou Music).

29 'Take the world, but give me Jesus' (Matt Redman © 2000 Thankyou Music).

30 Tim Hughes is worship director at Holy Trinity Brompton in Knightsbridge. He began song writing and leading worship at the Soul Survivor festival in 1997. He was previously the worship leader at Soul Survivor, Watford. He leads 'Worship Central', which is described as a new school of worship to train and equip worship leaders, musicians and worshippers. Their website claims that 'since launching in 2006, over 35,000 people have attended training events on three continents, and hundreds of thousands have visited this website for practical resources. Hughes has recorded four albums and written two books. Like Redman he now leads worship around the world and has featured on numerous live albums from Soul Survivor, New Wine and Spring Harvest.

31 'Jesus you alone' (Tim Hughes © 1999 Thankyou Music).

32 'My Jesus, my lifeline' (Tim Hughes © 1997 Thankyou Music).

33 'I just want to love' (Tim Hughes © 1998 Thankyou Music).

34 'Here I am to worship' (Tim Hughes © 2000 Thankyou Music).

35 'Redeemer' (Tim Hughes © 2001 Thankyou Music).

36 'Beautiful One' (Tim Hughes © 2002 Thankyou Music).

it says of the 'servant' that 'he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.' Hughes' reflection is that for those 'whose eyes have been opened to see Jesus for who he is, we can't help but sing of his beauty.' Jesus is the 'Beautiful One' who is 'wonderful' and 'powerful', whose mighty works are displayed for all to see – is this another reference to Jesus as 'God'? Jesus opens the worshippers eyes and captures their heart. Again like the previous song, there little to no explanation that roots the claims in the drama of salvation.

The songs of Tim Hughes tend to focus on the work of Christ. Where titles are used, they are used without any real reflection. The songs are addressed to Jesus, but I would argue their content tells us more about the worshipper than the one who is being worshipped.

### *Martyn Layzell*

In over twenty songs, in nearly every case addressed to Jesus, Martyn Layzell<sup>37</sup> has only one song that has some sustained christological reflection: 'Jesus Christ, Emmanuel.' The song is a list of titles for Jesus, based around Isaiah 9:6, Revelation 1:17c, Philippians 2:9-11, Colossians 1:16c. Like with Hughes the list of titles does not make any links with the person or narrative of Jesus. In several songs he picks up themes of incarnation, always in relation to the cross – 'Dying on a cross born to set man free / emptying yourself of all your majesty / Came into a world a light for all to see',<sup>38</sup> 'Came down from heaven above / endured the cross that I might know.'<sup>39</sup> In two songs, in narrative form, he explores cross and resurrection – 'You chose the cross with every breath... Up from the grave victorious / You rose again so glorious',<sup>40</sup> 'Turn my face again towards the cross / On the mount of Calvary.... Lead me to the place your body lay / Where the stone lies rolled away.'<sup>41</sup> Through the cross, the worshippers are 'crowned with eternal life',<sup>42</sup> they have access to the throne<sup>43</sup> and the price is paid.<sup>44</sup> For Layzell, there is a strong emphasis on Jesus as 'Saviour',<sup>45</sup> who obediently chooses the cross that the worshipper might have access to God, and Jesus as 'King'<sup>46</sup> who is

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37 Martyn Layzell is worship pastor at St Aldates, Oxford, having previously been a worship leader and an assistant pastor at Soul Survivor, Watford. He runs an organization called 'Fuel For the Fire' which is designed to equip and inspire those involved in worship. He has recorded three albums and also featured on numerous live albums, including Soul Survivor, New Wine, St. Aldates and Spring Harvest.

38 'Through your precious blood' (Martyn Layzell © 2006 Thankyou Music).

39 'You gave your only son' (Martyn Layzell © 2002 Thankyou Music).

40 'Lost in Wonder' (Martyn Layzell © 2002 Thankyou Music).

41 'Turn my face again' (Martyn Layzell © 2005 Thankyou Music).

42 'Lost in Wonder' (Martyn Layzell © 2002 Thankyou Music).

43 'Through your precious blood' (Martyn Layzell © 2006 Thankyou Music).

44 'You gave your only son' (© 2002 Thankyou Music); 'Turn my face again' (© 2005 Thankyou Music).

45 'You gave your only son' (©2002 Thankyou Music); 'Jesus Christ Emmanuel' (Martyn Layzell © 2001 Thankyou Music).

46 'King Jesus I believe' (© 2000 Thankyou Music); 'Sovereign Lord' (© 2002 Thankyou Music); 'You gave your only son' (© 2002 Thankyou Music).

now ‘enthroned’<sup>47</sup> and ‘clothed in majesty.’<sup>48</sup> In these songs Jesus does everything – almost ‘super-hero’ like – there is no reference to the Father or the Spirit.

### *Paul Oakley*

For Paul Oakley<sup>49</sup> Jesus is the ‘lover of my soul’, who is unique in history and is the one to whom history belongs.<sup>50</sup> He is the ‘Alpha and Omega’ and he alone is God.<sup>51</sup> Jesus is the ‘King upon the throne’, the ‘Friend of sinners’, a ‘Friend who won’t let go’, who ‘calms our fears’ and ‘goes beyond the grave.’<sup>52</sup> Jesus is ‘the One enthroned above the skies / The One who gave his life, was crucified.’<sup>53</sup> In Jesus we live, move and have our being.<sup>54</sup> In ‘How Sweet my Saviour’s name’ (which appears to be inspired by the John Newton hymn ‘How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds’) we find lots of titles strung together:

My Bread of Heaven come down / My food, my drink, my every need / My Pearl, my treasure found / My joy, my righteousness, my peace.

My Prophet, Priest and King / My boast, my hope, my victory / My Sacrifice, my Lamb / My song through all eternity.<sup>55</sup>

Oakley, in comparison to the other writers, uniquely describes Jesus as ‘Priest’<sup>56</sup> and also here as ‘Prophet and King’ – the three-fold offices of Christ. A line which appears to be taken from the John Newton hymn. While Calvin in the *Institutes* famously uses the three-fold offices to describe Christ as mediator,<sup>57</sup> there is no (clear) indication in any Oakley song of Christ as mediator between God and humanity. In another song ‘Father to the fatherless’, there is some confusion to who is being addressed. The first verse is clearly addressed to God the Father, the second verse might be addressed to the God the Spirit, although the word ‘Spirit’ is absent and some of the lyrics are arguably better attributed to the Father or the Son. The third verse is clearly addressed to the Son. Jesus is ‘Substitute’, ‘Sacrifice’, ‘perfect, spotless Lamb’, ‘risen Lord’, ‘Gift of Life’, ‘Saviour’

47 ‘Sovereign Lord’ (© 2002 Thankyou Music).

48 ‘Turn my face again’ (© 2005 Thankyou Music).

49 Paul Oakley is one of the worship leaders at Church of Christ the King, Brighton. This is the home church of New Frontiers. He has been song writing and leading worship since the early nineteen-nineties. He has recorded eight albums and featured on numerous live albums from Stoneleigh, Re.vive and New Day (these are festivals associated with New Frontiers).

50 ‘Jesus, lover of my soul’ (Paul Oakley © 1995 Thankyou Music).

51 ‘Jesus, lover of my soul’ (Paul Oakley © 1995 Thankyou Music).

52 All lines from ‘There is a voice that may be heard’ (Paul Oakley © 1998 Thankyou Music).

53 ‘As I am known’ (Paul Oakley © 2000 Thankyou Music).

54 ‘As I am known’ (Paul Oakley © 2000 Thankyou Music). An echo of Acts 17:28.

55 ‘How sweet my Saviour’s name’ (Paul Oakley © 2003 Thankyou Music).

56 See also ‘In the shadow of the cross’ (Paul Oakley © 1999 Thankyou Music) where Jesus is described as ‘my perfect Priest.’

57 See John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* II.xv.1.

and 'Friend.'<sup>58</sup> In 'Shepherd of a thankful heart' there are a range of other titles: 'Shepherd', 'Living Word', 'Emmanuel' and 'Maker of the stars above.' There is also a mention of the incarnation, which is linked directly to the cross – 'Heaven's song made flesh for us / Crucified upon the cross.'<sup>59</sup> A recent Oakley song speaks of Jesus as 'One with the Father / the beginning and the end'<sup>60</sup> which points toward a doctrine of the Trinity. An early song refers to Christ as 'ascended on high.'<sup>61</sup> Like Hughes and Layzell, Oakley has a tendency to string a list of titles together, without connecting them to any narrative roots.

Oakley's songs, reflecting the theology that is found in New Frontiers, are strongly focused on the crucified Christ and many of his songs are trying to find new ways of communicating the cross. Incarnation and resurrection are rarely mentioned, or where they are, they are undeveloped. There is a strong emphasis on Jesus enthroned – 'Seated on your throne',<sup>62</sup> 'a King upon the throne',<sup>63</sup> 'the One enthroned above the skies',<sup>64</sup> 'Jesus is king, seated in glory and majesty.'<sup>65</sup>

### Critical discussion

In a recent essay Christoph Schwöbel has argued that 'the continued existence of Christianity and the identity of Christian theology depend on how Christians understand the identity of Jesus.'<sup>66</sup> In other words, christology matters. A distorted or impoverished christology results in a distorted or impoverished theology.

As noted above, Christian worship is a balance between two ancient doxologies. The key criticism directed at these songs is that they fail to fulfil either doxology. There is little evidence of a mediatorial doxology – 'through Christ' – and in regard to the co-ordinated doxology Jesus is so exalted that the other persons of the Trinity are obscured and could appear redundant. Colin Gunton describes the incarnation of the Son as being 'on the initiative of the Father and through

58 'Father to the fatherless' (Paul Oakley © 2003 Thankyou Music).

59 'Shepherd of my thankful heart' (Paul Oakley © 2003 Thankyou Music). Incarnation is also mentioned in 'Unashamed' (Paul Oakley © 2001 Thankyou Music) – 'Could it be / that you should put on human flesh? / Your glory laid aside / Bruised for me / Majesty, upon the cross' – and 'Beauty Unspoken' (Paul Oakley © 2007 Thankyou Music) – 'God uncreated / Made yourself nothing / Carrying the cross of love.' In both cases linked again directly with the cross.

60 'Beauty unspoken' (Paul Oakley © 2007 Thankyou Music).

61 'Jesus is King' (Paul Oakley © 1992 Thankyou Music).

62 'Brighter than the sun' (Paul Oakley © 1999 Thankyou Music).

63 'There is a voice that may be heard' (Paul Oakley © 1998 Thankyou Music).

64 'As I am known' (Paul Oakley © 2000 Thankyou Music).

65 'Jesus is King' (© 1992 Thankyou Music). See also 'I see the Lord' (Paul Oakley © 1999 Thankyou Music); 'Holy Ground' (Paul Oakley © 2001 Thankyou Music); 'Angels Gather' (Paul Oakley © 2003 Thankyou Music); 'Love so amazing' (Paul Oakley © 2003 Thankyou Music).

66 Christoph Schwöbel, 'Christology and Trinitarian Thought' in Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1995), 114.

the enabling of the Spirit.<sup>67</sup> For Edward Irving, who is a central supporting voice in Gunton's christology, 'the event of the incarnation is understood in Trinitarian terms' and Gunton goes on, 'the same is the case for all Irving's writings on christology, a feature which gives them the breadth and comprehensiveness which is the mark of all great theology.'<sup>68</sup> Irving says:

My Christ is the Trinity manifested;... I have the Father manifest in everything which He doth; for He did not His own will, but the will of the Father. I have the Son manifested, in uniting his Divinity to a humanity prepared for Him by the Father; and in making the two most contrary things to meet and kiss each other... I have the Holy Spirit manifested in subduing, restraining, conquering, the evil propensities of the fallen manhood, and make it an apt organ for expressing the will of the Father.<sup>69</sup>

Christology should lead to the doctrine of the Trinity; the two doctrines are dependent on one another. Worship addressed to Jesus, must also be addressed to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. A study of the chosen songs in this research reveals a limited attention given to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit in relation to Christ. Less than 2% of songs demonstrate an explicitly Trinitarian understanding of God, by which I mean that they mention all three divine Persons.<sup>70</sup> 10% of songs mention God the Father, less than 4% God the Holy Spirit and Christ is described as 'Son' in 4%. References to the incarnation are only found in 4% of songs studied. Where the incarnation is referred to, only in the two songs of Matt Redman, do we see this as the initiative of the Father. Most clearly in 'Wonderful Maker': 'You made the world and saw that it was good / You sent your only Son, for you are good' and evident also in 'O Jesus Son of God': 'O Jesus, Son of God, so full of grace and truth / The Father's saving Word, so wonderful are you.' The Holy Spirit is never mentioned in connection with incarnation. Let us turn our attention to the resurrection. Gunton argues, 'as the one who does the work of the Father in perfecting of creation, it is the Spirit whom one would naturally see as the agent of the eschatological act of resurrection.'<sup>71</sup> The Father raises Jesus from the dead through the Spirit of life. 5% of the songs analysed mention the resurrection. Where the resurrection is described, it is expressed as an action of Jesus: 'in victory, from death you rose again';<sup>72</sup> 'Up from the grave victorious / You rose again so glorious';<sup>73</sup> 'Clothed in majesty and victory / You

67 Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1992), 79.

68 Colin Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1996), 155.

69 G. Carlyle, editor, *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes*, cited in *Theology Through the Theologians*, 1996, 155ff.

70 'Wake up my soul' (Matt Redman © 1993 Thankyou Music), 'Gifted Response' (Matt Redman © 2004 Thankyou Music), 'Centre of it all' (Tim Hughes © 2006 Thankyou Music) and 'Jesus Saves' (Tim Hughes and Nick Herbert © 2008 Thankyou Music).

71 *Christ and Creation*, 1992, 63.

72 'Here I am' (Paul Oakley © 1997 Thankyou Music).

73 'Lost in Wonder' (Martyn Layzell © 2002 Thankyou Music).

rose again...'<sup>74</sup> There is no reference to the Father or the Spirit. There is a danger that some worshippers unintentionally may be led to view Jesus as a 'romantic superhero'<sup>75</sup> who is entirely self-sufficient and without need of the Father or the Spirit. The songs lack any evident understanding of the economic Trinity (God in action). Lester Ruth makes a similar point in his study of the Trinity in the most-used contemporary songs, discovering that 'in the songs' economy of salvation the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ or to the Father is nonexistent. With respect to the dynamic between the Father and the Son, there is only the occasional passing association of Christ's saving activity to the Father.<sup>76</sup>

In a number of articles and lectures James Torrance has stressed Christ is the 'only one true Priest through whom and with whom we draw near to God our Father' and he is the 'only Mediator between God and humanity.'<sup>77</sup> He is concerned that 'too often we have neglected the continuing priesthood of Christ',<sup>78</sup> that is, worship is to the Father through Christ in the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Jesus is acknowledged as 'priest' in two songs, in neither is there a sense of his continuing priesthood.<sup>79</sup> A few songs speak of Christ's death giving access to the Father: 'you have opened a way to the Father',<sup>80</sup> 'Your great love the only way to the Father',<sup>81</sup> 'opened up the gates of heaven',<sup>82</sup> 'when I think of what it cost for you / to bring me to the Father's side.'<sup>83</sup> These are examples of what Torrance calls an 'experience model:' 'the work of Jesus is instrumental in our present faith and experience of salvation.'<sup>84</sup> The problem is that this can 'be asserted without any belief in the Trinity or the incarnation' and so 'we are then more interested in the blessings of Christ than Jesus Christ himself.'<sup>85</sup> This model emphasizes the vicarious work of Christ on the cross... [but] it fails to see the place of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ.<sup>86</sup> It is a soteriology without an adequate christology, which has no necessary need for a doctrine of incarnation, resurrection or ascension: three doctrines that are underemphasised and in the case of the doctrine of ascension, almost non-existent.<sup>87</sup>

74 'Turn my face again' (Martyn Layzell © 2005 Thankyou Music).

75 Martyn Percy, 'Sweet Rapture: Subliminal Eroticism in Contemporary Charismatic Worship', *Theology and Sexuality* 6 (March 1997), 99.

76 '*Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi*: The Trinity in the Most-Used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs', 2008, 349.

77 *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 1996, 8.

78 *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 1996, 5.

79 One exception to this is the song 'Gifted Response' (Matt Redman © 2004 Thankyou Music), which speaks of worshippers coming 'in the name of your Son, as he glorifies you [i.e. God the Father]'.<sup>80</sup>

80 'Thank you for the blood' (Matt Redman © 1999 Thankyou Music).

81 'Through your precious blood' (Martyn Layzell © 2006 Thankyou Music).

82 'I will offer up my life' (Matt Redman © 1994 Thankyou Music).

83 'Unashamed' (Paul Oakley © 2001 Thankyou Music).

84 *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 1996, 16.

85 *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 1996, 16.

86 *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 1996, 18.

87 The only reference is 'Jesus is king' (Paul Oakley © 1992 Thankyou Music), where the lyrics include 'and yes he is Lord, ascended on high.'

While certain biblical passages feature prominently and repeatedly – Philipians 2, Isaiah 9:6, Isaiah 53; Revelation 4-5; John 15; John 8:12 – others are overlooked and neglected – 1 Timothy 2:5 (Christ as mediator), Hebrews 8 (Christ as priest), 1 Peter 4:5 (Christ as judge), Luke 24:51 (Christ as ascended), Romans 8:34 (Christ as interceder), Mark 10:45 (Christ as servant), and of course many other gospel passages which speak of Christ as teacher. James Steven is right when he says ‘in charismatic hymnody the exalted Christ has almost completely overshadowed the gospel accounts of Jesus of Nazareth.’<sup>88</sup> I would argue that these passages are ones which would help develop a more trinitarian and incarnational Christology. The absence of these scriptures informing the lyrics only serves to give a distorted Christology, which views the worship leader (inspired by the Holy Spirit<sup>89</sup>) as leading the worship in response to what Christ did on the cross two thousand years ago and is now enthroned in heaven. Christ is solely an *object* of worship, whereas, as Torrance argues, ‘it is he who *leads* our worship, bears our sorrows on his heart and intercedes for us, presenting us to the Father in himself as God’s dear children.’<sup>90</sup>

If the songs fail to pay attention to the priestly office of Christ, they equally fail to pay attention to his prophetic office. Joel Shuman and Keith Meador argue that ‘the dominant religion of contemporary North America is radically individualized, radically self-interested, and radically therapeutic.’<sup>91</sup> I would argue this is equally true of all Western charismatic Christianity – Christian faith has been recast in therapeutic terms.<sup>92</sup> According to Shuman and Meador, ‘the language in many churches has become the language of needs,’<sup>93</sup> where Wannewetsch says, ‘worship itself is... judged and fashioned according to the criterion of the degree to which it increases individual well-being.’<sup>94</sup> The Jesus found in the songs studied is a therapeutic Jesus, who meets our needs and satisfies our desires:

(And) oh how I need you / Jesus I need you / You are the one that satisfies  
/ You are the one that satisfies<sup>95</sup>

Lord, since the day I saw you first / My soul was satisfied / And yet because  
I see in part / I’m searching more to find / Intimacy / O Jesus, intimacy /  
My treasure will be, O Jesus / Your intimacy<sup>96</sup>

88 James H. S. Steven, *Worship in the Spirit* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2002), 189.

89 Matt Redman, ‘The Real Worship Leader’, *The Heart of Worship Files*, (ed.) Matt Redman (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 2003), 75-77.

90 *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 1996, 18 [italics mine].

91 Joel James Shuman and Keith G. Meador, *Heal Thyself: Spirituality, Medicine and the Distortion of Christianity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 73.

92 Rob Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001. A Theological and Sociological study* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2007), 69-70.

93 *Heal Thyself*, 2003, 81.

94 Bernd Wannewetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 295.

95 ‘Nothing in this world’ (Tim Hughes © 1998 Thankyou Music).

96 ‘Intimacy’ (Matt Redman © 1998 Thankyou Music).

My Jesus, my lifeline / I need you more than I've ever known / There's no one quite like you / I'm crying out for your loving<sup>97</sup>

Cover me like a river / Rushing deep with life / Come to me like a lover / Returning in the night / You are truth, you are strength / You are love and you are Light / You are warmth, you are shelter / You are all I have / (chorus) I need you to surround me / So I can breathe again / I feel your kiss upon me / Burning through my skin<sup>98</sup>

(v.1) O Lord I am devoted to you / All that I am I give you / Nothing do I withhold / I am nothing with you / All my hope is upon you / Simply telling you I am yours / I am yours / (v.2) Every earthly distraction / Fades away to the background / I'm content just to be with you / Jesus you satisfy my longing / To you I cry, I'm coming / Kneeling before you throne / At your throne<sup>99</sup>

The Jesus presented in these songs is shaped less by the gospels than by Western culture: we have a Western Jesus for an individualistic and therapeutic culture. Andrew Walker has charted how "ascetic religion" (doing good) has given way to "hedonistic individualism" (feeling good).<sup>100</sup> Pete Ward says 'there has been a distinct shift away from the objective... towards more reflexive songs.'<sup>101</sup> Descriptions of Jesus are reduced to a small number of repeatedly used titles – 'Lord', 'King', 'Saviour' and 'Friend' – without any adequate christological reflection; the focus of the songs not being Jesus – the incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Christ – but the needs and desires of the worshipper. This is a Jesus who is accommodated to culture, rather than one who confronts culture as a prophetic voice. Geoffrey Wainwright says 'Jesus climaxes the prophetic line by being himself the very *dabar* of God... He is the personal address of God to humanity.'<sup>102</sup> Christ is God's word spoken to us, for us and against us (God's simultaneous 'Yes' and 'No'). I want to argue that the tendency in these songs is the reverse, of us addressing Jesus, of us making Christ in our (Western) image. Robin Parry argues that if the type of songs that make Jesus appear as a 'personal-therapist' or a 'mystic-girlfriend' '*dominate* worship meetings one has to ask at what point worship ceases to be Christian worship and degenerates into some mutant offspring.'<sup>103</sup>

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97 'My Jesus, my lifeline' (Tim Hughes © 1997 Thankyou Music).

98 'Cover me' (Paul Oakley and Martin Cooper © 1999 Thankyou Music).

99 'Devoted' (Martyn Layzell © 1998 Thankyou Music).

100 Cited in Nigel Scotland, 'Shopping for a Church: Consumerism and the Churches' in Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (eds.), *Christ and Consumerism* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2000), 144.

101 *Selling Worship*, 2005, 207.

102 Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ* (London, SPCK, 1997), 123.

103 *Worshipping Trinity*, 2005, 111. My italics.

## Further Reasons for an Impoverished Christology

I want to briefly look at five other reasons that underlie the impoverished christology that I have argued is evident amongst these songwriters. Firstly, the hymn or songwriter is no longer a theologian. James Steven remarks that ‘the majority of song writers in charismatic renewal lack [Charles] Wesley’s deep familiarity with the Christian theological tradition.’<sup>104</sup> None of the four songwriters have studied theology. All talk about the importance of being theologically-sound,<sup>105</sup> but there is little evidence of a familiarity with the theological tradition.

Secondly, the songwriter is primarily today an artist part of ‘a culture of production and consumption within English evangelicalism.’<sup>106</sup> For example, Tim Hughes on the 7 September 2008 wrote on his blog:

It’s only 9 days to go before we record our live CD & DVD from Shepherds Bush Empire... Please pray for us as we plan ahead. Pray for protection, a release of creativity and a night of worship that glorifies God and empowers His people. Also if you haven’t booked in then do so now. Only £5.<sup>107</sup>

There is a blurring of worship with the demands of producing albums to be consumed. Anne Harrison comments that ‘the commodification of worship has also brought the cult of celebrity into the sphere of Christian song, with the promotion of ‘star’ singer-songwriters and consequent commercial pressure on them to keep ‘producing the goods’.<sup>108</sup> This can mean that those writing songs are more concerned with the prospect of the next album, than the theological education of those singing the songs.<sup>109</sup> It can also lead to the worship of the worship leader. Nick Page comments ‘we are seeing a generation of ‘worship leaders’ who have the profile of rock stars.’<sup>110</sup> In acknowledgement of this, Matt Redman writes, ‘a worship leader needs as much as possible to be the unnoticed worshipper, simply encouraging the worship of God by setting an example for others to

104 James H. S. Steven, ‘Charismatic Hymnody in the Light of Early Methodist Hymnody’, *Studia Liturgica* 27:2 (1997), 227.

105 For example, in an interview between Matt Redman and Paul Oakley, Paul Oakley says ‘It’s very important that we do study theology. I think it’s very important that we realise there’s a responsibility on us as songwriters, because whether we like it or not, you are teaching doctrine.’ [http://www.pauloakley.com/webzine/webzine/article\\_index.php?id=64](http://www.pauloakley.com/webzine/webzine/article_index.php?id=64). Accessed 10 June 2008.

106 *Selling Worship*, 2005, 172.

107 <http://www.worshipcentral.org/blog/tim/live-cd-dvd-shepherds-bush-empire>. Accessed 24 September 2008.

108 Anne Harrison, ‘There Must Be More Than This’: Current Dilemmas Concerning Congregational Song’, *Anvil* Vol 23:4 (2006), 284.

109 Lester Ruth suggests ‘business concerns provide little motivation to address the omission of a theological dimensions in these songs. Good theology does not necessarily sell songs’, ‘*Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi*: The Trinity in the Most-Used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs’, 2008, 352-253.

110 Nick Page, *And now let’s move into a time of nonsense: Why Worship Songs are Failing the Church* (Milton Keynes, Authentic, 2004), 46.

follow.<sup>111</sup> There is a tension between not wanting to be seen self-promoting and the reality of being part of a culture of production and consumption.

Thirdly is the problem of a song's short shelf life: 'songs come into fashion and out again.'<sup>112</sup> Every year or two years a new live or studio album is released by each songwriter with another ten to twelve songs, which means songs from previous years get forgotten or neglected, as the new songs are promoted.

This is connected to the fourth reason: worship dominated by song is worship shaped around the songwriter's faith journey. The new album reflects the life situation of the songwriter at that moment. For example, Tim Hughes writes 'a while back I wrote a song called 'When the tears fall.' It was written at a time when life for me was hard. I'd taken a few knocks and suddenly my heart was filled with questions and doubt. One evening, feeling very low, I sat down and starting pouring out my heart to God.'<sup>113</sup> Lester Ruth argues that 'the economy of salvation in these songs is a personal story of salvation. In such personal expressions of the composer's experience and affections there would be little desire for theological reflection.'<sup>114</sup> Charismatic worship that is formed around the songwriter's faith journey is unable to tell the whole drama of salvation. Here is another tension between worship that tells, and draws worshippers into, the drama of salvation and the need to promote and market a new album of songs.

The fifth reason, in the words of Graham Kendrick, is that 'the rock-pop genre, into which category many worship choruses fit, is not always ideal for carrying extensive, deep, or content-rich lyrics.'<sup>115</sup> Redman, Oakley, Hughes and Layzell are constrained by the musical genre in which they write. The vocabulary of their songs is limited and so is the potential for theological, and in the case of this article, christological content. Redman admits that he would find it difficult to write a song with 'six or seven verses because I'm not sure how that would connect with culture today.'<sup>116</sup> The attempt to connect with culture results in songs that only reflect and reinforce the culture, what was described earlier as individualized, self-interested and therapeutic. In a stark critique, Graham Redding has claimed that '[worship has become] narcissistic, banal and trivial.'<sup>117</sup>

111 Matt Redman, *The Unquenchable Worshipper* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 2001), p.66. However, 'a worship culture modelled on the pop world demands it pop stars', *And now let's move into a time of nonsense*, 2004, 46. I have witnessed worship leaders giving autographs after a worship service!

112 *Selling Worship*, 2005, 170.

113 <http://www.worshipcentral.org/article/when-silence-falls-part-1>. Accessed 24 September 2008.

114 'Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi: The Trinity in the Most-Used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs', 2008, 352.

115 'Worship in Spirit and in Truth', 2003, 97.

116 Interview with Tony Cummings for Cross Rhythms, Wednesday 28th 2007. [http://crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Matt\\_Redman\\_Talks\\_About\\_His\\_New\\_Album\\_Church\\_Plants\\_Passion\\_And\\_Much\\_More/26788/p1/](http://crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Matt_Redman_Talks_About_His_New_Album_Church_Plants_Passion_And_Much_More/26788/p1/). Accessed 24 September 2008.

117 *Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ*, 2003, 298.

## Conclusion

The four songwriters and worship leaders which have been the focus of this essay have a huge responsibility. The shape and content of charismatic worship requires the songs sung to communicate the whole drama of salvation: the drama of the triune God. Worship is impoverished when it is divorced from the whole drama, where the story is only partially told. Worship that is limited theologically means a people who are poorly served and this is of concern, if Andrew Walker is right, when he claims modern Christians are illiterate about their faith and even more worryingly they have forgotten who they are.<sup>118</sup> The songs I have analysed present an impoverished christology, that is a christology without an understanding of the economic trinity and fashioned arguably more by Western culture than the Christian scriptures or tradition. Charismatic Christianity tends not to be rooted and nurtured in the traditions and liturgies of the historic church and this makes it 'incredibly free in their reactions to and inculcation of contemporary culture.'<sup>119</sup> The concern for cultural relevance means these songwriters, although perhaps wanting to be theological, are limited in their ability to provide a rich christology that points towards the priestly and prophetic offices of Christ, a christology that recognises that Christian worship is in the Spirit through Christ to the Father and worship of the Son cannot be separated from worship of the Father or the Spirit.

(All the songs referred to are Copyright © Thankyou Music tym@kingsway.co.uk and are quoted with their permission. For further information about these writers and their songs and/or to purchase the sheet music please go to [www.kingswaysongs.com](http://www.kingswaysongs.com).)<sup>120</sup>

## Abstract

This article examines the songs of four contemporary worship songwriters in regard to the christology they present. The article argues that although the majority of songs are focused on Jesus, they fail to articulate a sufficient christology. It is claimed that this is due to an inadequate attention given to the doctrine of the trinity and to Christ's priestly and prophetic offices. The article concludes by suggesting that the broader context and expectations of contemporary worship songwriters means that it is difficult for a richer christology to be developed.

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118 Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story* (London, SPCK, 1996), 48.

119 Martyn Percy, *Is There a Modern Charismatic Theology?* (Oxford, Farmington Papers, 1997), 4.

120 I am very grateful to Kingsway for giving me their permission to quote directly from the songs referred to in this essay.