

Worship: Poetry and Renewal

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Part One: Why the Church Needs Poetically Rich and Theologically Deep Music

If you walked into a contemporary evangelical church in the early 2000s, you would likely be greeted by the familiar sound of a worship team playing songs from the latest WOW worship CDs. Each WOW worship CD claimed to contain “today’s 30 most powerful worship songs”, and these songs seemed to be played everywhere for over a decade. But oddly enough, most of the songs on those albums have been left behind with our WWJD bracelets. Many of the songs I grew up singing are non-existent in the corporate worship of those same churches.

Why Do Some Songs Stay While Others Pass Away?

What is it that makes some songs stand the test of time and others fade? How is it that ‘Amazing Grace’ and ‘It is Well with My Soul’ have retained their relevance and impact for centuries? Why do some contemporary songs like ‘In Christ Alone’ and ‘Before the Throne’ find a lasting place in our churches? While there are various factors we could cite (such as melody and history), I propose that above all it is this – doctrinal depth and poetic power.

This should be no surprise. Any casual glance at the Psalms reveals the power and necessity of poetry to convey the depths of God’s dealings with His people. To describe God as infinite and incomprehensible exhausts the limits of human vocabulary. The Psalmists were by necessity theological

wordsmiths. They had a deep and abiding grasp of God's attributes and workings in history, and they could reflect on it in a way that penetrates the soul

Why Poetry and Theology Need Each Other

Poetry apart from theology is empty, but poetry can increase the effect and the depth of theology. This must be the pursuit of every would-be song writer – presenting deep truths in ways that resonate with the mind and captivate the heart to draw God's people to worship. In an age where catechisms are non-existent in most evangelical churches and doctrinal Sunday schools have nearly vanished, resurrecting and writing doctrinally sound and gospel-centered hymns has never been so crucial to the health and vitality of our churches.

There are two simple but profound reasons for this:

Poetry Makes Theology Personal

I have seen two ever-present dangers in the Christian mindset towards theology. One is the mindset that deep theology is reserved for intellectuals and is irrelevant and impractical for the average believer. The other is that we can pursue theology without doxology – it is all too common for our debates about doctrine to fuel our egos more than our worship. Theologically rich songs provide a powerful avenue to bridge these two destructive gaps between the head and the heart. They teach the soul to connect these realities so they do not seem distant or theoretical.

Songs with image-rich, gospel-centered lyrics drive theology home in a way that many other means cannot. Think for a moment, what resonates with you more? Hearing someone say, "God will take care of all of your needs," or hearing the first lines of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." The imagery and the poetry of that psalm help our dull hearts to feel and believe the truths we have likely already heard.

I'll never forget watching a family at our church clutching each other through tears singing, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll." They had just witnessed the death of a friend, and in that moment the reality of God's sovereignty and faithfulness resonated with their hearts in a unique and powerful way. When poetry and theology meet it helps us to understand the height and depth of Christ's love for us more fully.

Poetry Makes Theology Memorable

Singing has always had a central role in helping God's people to celebrate and remember what He has done. There are many notable instances of this – when the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, they burst into song reflecting God's deliverance; when David returned the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem, he gathered all of Israel in joyful worship; and, even on the night of the Passover,

we are told that Jesus sang psalms with his disciples – an experience that would no doubt be etched deeply in their minds. When sound theology is placed within our worship, we engrave truth upon our hearts in a real and lasting way.

During seminary I often found myself ditching cue-cards in favor of singing the Hebrew alphabet to the tune of the familiar ABC song. Singing allows us to effortlessly memorize ideas we would otherwise struggle with. This is a powerful tool that can be harnessed to increase the impact of our weekly worship. Choosing and writing songs that complement the message of the sermon or a series will allow people to continue to hum and sing the truths they've learned long after the three points have been forgotten.

Singing on Our Deathbeds

Several times each year I lead a group of youth to provide a worship service in a local nursing home. Many of the residents suffer from memory loss and other disabilities that make normal conversation nearly impossible. My ten minute message is often accompanied by the not-so-subtle snoring of the attendees. Yet, when we pull out their hymnals, it seems that they come back to life as they chant out in an unashamedly off-key chorus, "O precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow." It is clear that singing this poetic portrayal of the gospel for decades has left an inerasable imprint upon their minds and hearts.

Our churches need that. We need songs that impact our hearts with the truth; we need songs that remind us of Christ's redemption; and, we need songs that are worth singing on our deathbeds.

Part Two: When Worship Becomes Weak

Every believer at some stage has experienced a sense of worship feeling hollow – singing words that feel empty – and affections growing cold or distracted with other pursuits. What can we do when worship becomes weak? How can we rekindle a passion for God?

Renewing the Vision of God's Worthiness

Where better to learn than from those who have been worshipping since the dawn of creation?

In Isaiah 6 we are given a vision into the very courtroom of God, where our attention is immediately drawn to the most incredible of God's creatures – the seraphim, which means 'the burning ones'. Though they possess a degree of glory on their own, even they cannot look upon God; so, with two wings they continually shield their gaze from the brilliance of God's splendor, with two they cover their feet acknowledging their unworthiness as creatures, and with two they fly.

What inspires these beings to perpetually cry out, "Holy, holy, holy?" What keeps this song from become a rote and repetitive duty? The answer is evident – one shielded glimpse at the glory before them. In the thousands upon

thousands of years they have hovered before the throne, this glory has never become dull; the infinite worth of the one before them ensures there is always more beauty to behold, more wonder to experience.

Worship at its core is a response to worthiness; the very word ‘worship’ is just a shortened version of the old English phrase ‘worth-ship.’ When we become gripped by the intrinsic worth of something, it overflows in expressions of worship. God has created us in such a way that when our hearts become captivated, our tongue bursts out in joyful praise, our pockets open up to eagerly give, and our hands diligently serve. True worship is not something contrived but a natural response to worthiness. The greater our vision of God, the greater the fuel for our worship – both in song and in deed.

Renewing the Vision of Our Unworthiness

In response to this majestic scene, Isaiah falls flat on his face and cries out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” One glance at the Holy One before him overwhelms him with a sense of his own unworthiness and sinfulness. John Owen wisely stated, “He that hath slight thoughts of sin never had great thoughts of God.”

Perhaps this is what Adam and Eve lost sight of in the garden when Satan put forth that devastating lie, “If you eat of this, you will become like God.” Sin’s most delirious deception is to exalt ourselves to think we are more like God, all the while making God more like us. This is the folly of idolatry – we exchange worship of the creator for the creature, the infinite for the finite, the flawless for the flawed (Romans 1:18). The more we lose sight of the infinite separation between us and the Holy One, the more the weeds of entitlement multiply, leaving little soil for the precious flowers of true worship.

But if we were left here it could only lead to despair. How can those of unclean lips sing anything worthy of this King of glory? Even our highest thoughts are too low for Him, our finest melodies are off-key, and our greatest gifts are mere trinkets. Why would we even assume that God would listen to us and then actually delight in what He hears?

The Unworthy Made Worthy

We read on of a burning coal that a seraphim brings from the throne, and in Isaiah’s prostrate fear he hears these words of assurance, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” Isaiah would not dare to even lift his gaze to God’s throne, but God provides a way for him as a beautiful foreshadow of what He would do for Israel, and ultimately for all His people through the New Covenant.

God must initiate, we cannot. When Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, they were consumed (Leviticus 10). Likewise, when Uzzah reached out his hand to keep the ark of God from stumbling, he was struck dead by the Lord (1 Chron. 13). But now we see the reverse – God reaches out to man with a coal from His presence, and instead

of being destroyed he is purified. We must be made holy by the Holy One - only those set apart by God can stand before Him. There is a weightiness to God's glory that ought to keep us from frivolous, half-hearted worship.

We know the atonement in far greater clarity this side of the cross than Isaiah knew. The King has come down from his throne to cleanse us, to fully and finally bridge the gap between our unworthiness and His worthiness. Through His death Christ has torn the veil that long separated man from the blazing glory of God's presence, and through His resurrection and ascension He stands our Great High Priest, making it possible for all believers to enter God's presence with confidence (Hebrews 4:14-16).

The Heavenly Vision

The hymn we now know as "Turn your Eyes Upon Jesus", was originally titled, "The Heavenly Vision." Its well-known chorus was inspired by a few lines in a tract that said, "Turn your soul's vision to Jesus, and look and look at Him." And therein lies the remedy for weak worship – to look and look at Him and through this heavenly vision to remind ourselves time and time again of the great worth of our God, our unworthiness before Him, and what He has done to bridge the infinite gap.

Five Suggestions for Renewing the Heavenly Vision in Corporate Worship

1. Choose songs that exalt the Trinity, reflect on our need, and rejoice in the gospel. Alongside the tried and true hymns, there are many ministries producing sound, scriptural songs for our generation – Sovereign Grace, The Getty's, and Indelible Grace to name a few. Grace Community Church has published a hymnal entitled 'Hymns of Grace' which serves as a great resource.
2. Have worship leaders read a scripture that draws the congregation's focus to the heavenly vision. This can be especially impacting when the passage connects with the song following it. For examples of passages that lift up God's worthiness and our unworthiness see Psalm 90, Isaiah 40, Colossians 1:15-23, Ephesians 1:3-14, 2:1-10.
3. Pray in a way that reflects our stance before God during the worship service. Psalm 8 serves as great inspiration for this mentality.
4. Look into liturgies from the past. We can learn much from the Reformers and Puritans who seem to have had a clearer view of the heavenly vision. A recently published volume titled, *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* has provided these in an easily accessible format.
5. Cultivate an awe of God through personal reading, prayer, and meditation. The Church needs more worship leaders and pastors who like Moses come down from the mountain with a glimmer the glory of God radiating from their faces (2 Corinthians 3:7-18).

May we and our people gain the vision that Samuel Rutherford and many others once had:

... the very dust that falls from Christ's feet, His old ragged clothes, His knotty and black cross, are sweeter to me than kings' golden crowns, and their time-eaten pleasures. I should be a liar and a false witness if I would not give my Lord Jesus a fair testimonial with my whole soul. My word, I know, will not heighten Him, he needs not such props under his feet to raise his glory high. But oh that I could raise him the height of heaven, and the breadth and length of ten heavens, in the estimation of all his young lovers! For we have all shapen Christ but too narrow and too short, and formed conceptions of his love, in our conceit, very unworthy of it. Oh that men were taken and caught with his beauty and fairness! They would give over playing with idols, in which there is not half room for the love of one soul to satisfy itself (p.101).

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Confessions from a Pastor's Desk:

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In reflecting on many years in full-time ministry, two things are clear: I have messed up a lot and I have been burned badly. I have been in the black hole of burnout and depression. The struggles have not just been with ministry – but rather in trying to understand who I am – and coming to terms with that. I used to come away from pastors' conferences and fraternals thinking, "I am not like my pastoral brothers." It was a great concern and I started questioning whether I should even be in pastoral ministry. In explaining my journey of self-knowledge within ministry (as part of a Student Campus Ministry in my early days, seminary lecturer, church planting and full-time pastoral ministry in established churches), there are five imperatives I would like to highlight and shed some light on.

#1 Beware of 'busyness idolatry' / 'busyness righteousness':

One of the first things you pick up on when a group of pastors and church planters get together is how busy they are; conversations around hectic schedules and crazy busyness buzz around a room amid the required theological and doctrinal dialogues. Generally, in the business realm or marketplace, this is par for the course – movers and shakers are by definition busy people. Church planters and pastors are also famous for being busy; there's always so much to do - important stuff – it is 'ministry' and 'kingdom work' after all.

It has become a subculture. This sub-culture says that if you are not madly, crazy busy, you are not doing ministry properly. It comes with its own pastoral peer pressure.

This began to intimidate me. I was not hectically busy all the time. I had windows of free time. Was there something wrong with me? I wasn't always rushing off to the next big thing or meeting or conference or talk or camp or ministry trip or pulpit swap. I began to realise how this busyness subtly becomes a pride issue. It becomes an identity issue, and it soon becomes a righteousness issue – always the slippery slope. Busyness covers a multitude of shortcomings. Bragging or whining about how busy one is should never impress. It is dangerous to buy into this subtle lie – dangerous for you, your family and your church.

“There is enough time for what God has called me to do” is what I preach to myself often. God is not a cruel tyrant. He knows I am not Superman. He knows I am dust. For me, those windows of free time are more than fine; they are necessary.

As a pastor or church planter, is it vital and essential to say ‘no’ sometimes and to decline invitations to speak at conferences or camps, or take on extra ministries. Your reasons for saying ‘no’ are not due to laziness or a comfort-zone mentality but because you know what your primary calling and responsibility are, and you never want to compromise your faithfulness in that. It is not possible to do more and more without compromising something, without some area of your life or ministry suffering. It is fine to say “no”.

God, our Father invites us to this in Psalm 46:10: *‘Be still, and know that I am God’*. Jesus, our Chief Shepherd modelled this: *‘The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.’* [Mark 6:30-32]

#2 Begin your discipleship at home:

As pastors and church planters, the words of Jesus’ Great Commission are always at the forefront. We are seriously committed to meeting new people, getting to know them, sharing the gospel with them, seeing them converted, baptised and taught.

We are big on discipleship. It is probably part of your church’s mission statement. Discipleship, however, must always start at home. It starts with your spouse and your children. (And if you are crazy busy with ‘ministry,’ this will be the first casualty).

If Christianity doesn’t work at home – don’t export it.

Being early morning people, formal family discipleship in the Koning household took place before school, sitting in bed, reading the Bible and ‘Leading Little Ones to God’ (when our boys were youngsters), and praying and chatting through stuff. As a couple, we have prioritised praying for our children daily.

Informal family discipleship took various forms. Being a sporty family, lots of time was spent playing tennis, squash, cricket, running and mountain biking. It was not part of an agenda – it was just fun. As a family, camping adventures were always a favourite. Into their adult years, our boys cherish the memories of campfire made-up stories. We have unique and peculiar family traditions. While our sons were at school, we were avid supporters of their sporting events. We also enjoy listening to music together as well as dissecting and evaluating TV programmes. I cherish these informal discipling opportunities. It is Deuteronomy 6:6 fleshed out and contextualised.

I am thankful that I have spent more time with my wife and children than with any co-worker, colleague, elder or friend in church.

It wasn't an intentional thing; it was a pleasant and rewarding thing. But let me be realistic as to my shortcomings as a pastor husband/dad: I probably fared better on the informal side of discipling. (By Paul Tripp's standards, our formal training was below par. Paul Tripp gave me a guilt trip).

I regret the times our children were too aware of problems in the church and were privy to my complaints about people and circumstances in the church. I should have wisely protected them from that.

I often fell short in being a good example to my wife and children through my impatience, anger and sullenness. There were times I exasperated my children. At times I expected too much from them and moaned too much at them. (Perhaps ambushing my eldest while he was sleeping and setting his duvet alight with firecrackers was not the smartest thing to do!)

When it comes to my Ephesians 5 calling to love my wife, I try to spend lots of time with her, just chatting and connecting. This takes time. I try to protect her from unnecessary stresses and from any church attacks or unfair criticism. We go out to breakfast once a week. We eat suppers together. But most important, I have given her space to be her own person. This is where I have got it right.

But I have also got it wrong. My major shortcoming in loving my wife is not telling her I love her enough. I have also not always been wise in *what* I have unloaded on her, *when* I have unloaded and *how* I have unloaded. Sometimes it has been too much.

I have not always given enough care to her spiritual growth. I should be reading with my wife and not just with the eldership team. This is how I can build her up and encourage her.

We don't agree on everything, but one strength of our marriage is unity of conviction on the big things: *money, lifestyle, philosophy of raising children and philosophy of ministry*. We don't argue about these things. These are things that can and probably need to be discovered, to some extent, before marriage.

#3 Become self-aware:

It took me awhile to get to know myself (too long); to realise my strengths and weaknesses; and, to realise that I was not your typical pastor. (Is there a typical pastor?) I think churches probably have an idea of what a typical pastor is. I have discovered that it is ok if you don't conform to the typical church planter/pastor identikit.

But for many years I secretly struggled with my own temperament/personality and how God could use me effectively in pastoral ministry.

I am not a people person. I enjoy people: spending time chatting, listening, swapping stories, sharing big ideas and sometimes just talking junk. But sometimes I really struggle with people. I often need my space and time away from people to work through stuff in peace and quiet. This can be hard in full-time pastoral ministry.

I really don't like small talk, and in pastoral ministry there is no way to avoid it. An awareness of my need to be away from people and that I can become irritated by people has helped me to navigate ministering to people. I can still be a shepherd and pastor them.

Recognising your weaknesses doesn't make you a bad pastor. It makes you a real pastor who realises his dependence on the help of the Holy Spirit.

I am not a consistent worker. (That sounds worse than it actually is). The rhythm and the intensity of my work are not consistent from Monday to Sunday. They are not consistent from the early morning to the afternoon. I tend to work in fits and starts. I tend to work with great energy, almost manic, but I don't work like that all week. And if I don't start well, then I'm in trouble. So I work consistently in fits and starts. That is ok; there are others on the planet just like me.

I know my personal rhythms. I work best in the early morning, when I am the sharpest and at my most creative, or after exercise when the endorphins have kicked in. It therefore makes most sense for me to work on my sermon prep and writing in the mornings.

I have to guard that time. I cannot simply push that sort of work to early afternoon. Late in the afternoon I have a window where my creative juices come out of hibernation, but I have never been able to do sermon prep after 19h00. It doesn't work for me, but it may work well for you. Recognising your personal rhythms helps you to be wise with your schedule and commitments.

Self-awareness is a vital and helpful aspect to being productive in ministry.

#4 Be aware of a church's rhythms:

Weekly rhythms: Most of us have to produce one (or two) sermons a week. No matter how missional we are – Sunday is D-day, every week. That requires work – *reading, praying, preparing and researching* – careful, prayerful slog, week after week. There are no shortcuts for a faithful preacher wanting to correctly handle the Word of Truth in an expository manner. For me, Thursday is 'make or break.'

My sermon does not need to be complete by then, but it must have come together and have a framework of my main points and application. If not, I am

in trouble. So Thursdays are tough days for me. My family know that I am a different animal on Thursdays. (Probably best if I don't take many phone calls on a Thursday). I am distant, preoccupied and a bit tense. My wife graciously makes allowances.

It is very helpful to know these weekly rhythms and anticipate them. Of course, there might also be Bible study prep, visitation and other weekly church activities that require your attention.

Seasonal rhythms: Gospel ministry has very definite seasonal rhythms. There are holiday seasons that might involve a holiday club. There might be yearly camps or retreats. There are quarterly meetings or events. These seasonal events require unique planning, organisation and delegation. (*I am a poor planner – others help me*). The beginning of the year is strategic. People are well rested from holidays and full of New Year's resolutions and the church can tap into those good intentions to set a course or vision. It is a critical time, and you may well be feeling like the hamster on the wheel. You do not need to be discouraged; you just need to realise the rhythms of ministry and life.

A personal illustration: I find ministry during national holiday times (*mid-December to mid-January*) horrible and very tough. If you are not on leave, there is very little as far as the weekly rhythms going on. No midweek stuff, no small groups, no youth activities and people only want to see you in an emergency. So you are in limbo and on call. You are on duty, but there is not much to do. This can be frustrating and so it helps to understand that, anticipate that and make adjustments. It can be a real struggle. It is not you, or the church or Satan – it is just an inevitable rhythm of ministry. Use these times for ministry opportunities that you don't normally have time for (you could always alphabetise and organise your ever expanding book shelves and personal library).

#5 Be open to long-term change:

It is our preaching mantra – the Gospel means change and transformation. But that generally happens slowly. '*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*' [Philippians 1:6]

Firstly, we need to apply that to ourselves. I am not the man I was when I started out in full-time ministry 28 years ago. God has used different ministry situations to stretch, rattle and challenge me. God has grown me. I am grateful for that. Along the way, God tweaks us – slowly. I am in the process of being reinvented, by God's sanctifying hand, in small degrees. God is patient with me. Many of my initial ministry expectations and goals were ill-informed and immature.

My core theological commitments remain the same, but in terms of balance, emphasis and methods, there have been some substantial changes. Some of these might still evolve.

Secondly, we need to apply that to our congregation – the flock we are called to shepherd. Just as God is slowly and gently tweaking and sanctifying us, the same is true of those in our pews. Spiritual growth and knowledge cannot be microwaved. We need to patiently come alongside them, know them, love them, feed them, guide them, care for them, nurture them, pray for them and equip them for works of service for the building up of one another.

As a pastor or church planter, that is our high ministry calling. That is what we are to be faithful in. We can never be too busy for that. Too much is at stake. *'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.'* [1 Corinthians 3:6-7] May our great confidence be in the true and living God and in His unbreakable, tenacious, never-ending and never-changing love and favour to us. *'Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!'* [Psalm 115:1]

John is married to Moekie and they have 2 sons: Nick, married to Sarah and involved in full-time student ministry with REACH; and Michael, studying Physics at UCT. John was converted to Jesus Christ in 1984 while in the army. He then went on to study at the Bible Institute in Cape Town. He currently pastors Grace Bible Church (an Acts 29 Church) in East London, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Moekie is a Dentist and has always seen her vocation as an opportunity to glorify God. She is John's greatest supporter in full-time ministry and together they love being involved with God's people and serving them. (This photo offers a rare opportunity to see John dressed in a suit. Even an atypical pastor knows when to conform).

