

Don't Lose the Trinity! A Plea to Songwriters
By Lester Ruth

Let this piece serve as an earnest appeal to songwriters: please don't lose the Trinity as you write songs! Why would I say such a thing? Because my study of the most used contemporary worship songs in the last fifteen years shows that there is a danger our songs reflect love for a god who does not fit the message of the classic, scriptural Christian faith.¹ I grow fearful that our songs disclose intense feelings but do not worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. We are in danger of losing the Father and the Spirit in our worship. If songs have the power to form a people's faith, then we stand at the edge of losing scriptural worship.

I reached that conclusion after studying the songs that appeared on Christian Copyright Licensing International's (CCLI) top-25 lists for the years 1989 to 2004, the first lists available. There were two lists per year corresponding to the twice-a-year royalty payouts. I look at thirty lists. Only seventy-two songs appear on these lists. Titles appear in chart form below with average rank for the entire fifteen years and the last five years. I have included the number of times each song appeared on the lists for these same periods.

In a variety of ways these songs rarely contribute to the development of a Trinitarian faith. Take the issue of naming the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for example. None of the songs refer to the Trinity or the Triune nature of God. And only three songs refer to all three Persons of the Trinity: "Glorify Thy Name," "Father I Adore You," and "Shine Jesus Shine." This lack of naming is most obvious in the

¹CCLI neither endorses nor denies any conclusions I have drawn from the use of CCLI-obtained information.

absence of references to God the Father and the Holy Spirit.² Only four songs speak of God as Father and only six refer to the Spirit, none of which use the name “Holy Spirit.” I counted another seven instances where lyrics refer to God the Father without using “Father.” An example is “Because He Lives,” which notes “God sent His Son / They called him Jesus.”

Who gets named in these songs? There is one group, almost half, that makes clear reference to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in some way. Sometimes he is named explicitly. Sometimes the allusion is clear, for example, when worshiping the one who died on the cross. But there is another large group of songs where it is very hard to know who this God is. Many of these songs speak of some “Lord,” “God,” or “King” in a generic way. The term “functionally unitarian” comes to mind.³ In five songs there is no name or title for God at all, just a reference to “You.”⁴

While naming Jesus is wonderful, only when we name all three Persons will we establish an accurate understanding of the Christian God. I acknowledge that not every song needs to instruct in extensive ways, but that should not mean that any song should be exempted from working out of a Trinitarian perspective or “syntax.”⁵ Why should we be satisfied with something less than the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit? Why can’t our songs speak about God in the same ways and proportions as the New Testament? Not every

²This is similar to Robin Parry’s review of Vineyard CDs from 1999 to 2004. See *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 143.

³James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & The Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 20.

⁴“I Could Sing of Your Love Forever,” “Breathe,” “Above All,” “Draw Me Close,” and “When I Look into Your Holiness.” “Above All” does commemorate Christ’s crucifixion and eternal nature without naming him. “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever” refers to the “You” as “healer.” “As the Deer” and “You’re Worthy of My Praise” were not included because they speak (only) of the recipient as king.

⁵Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*, 131.

song needs to instruct, but every song does need to form God's people rightly. Songs will form faith one way or the other. That is why overt Trinitarianism is so important: the goal is being formed in a faith true to the New Testament. Being theologically sound is more than avoiding error or having some Scripture quotes in a song. It involves participating in the full, rich vision of the God disclosed in the New Testament.

The issue of naming leads to another tendency: directing worship toward Jesus Christ alone and neglecting to worship the Trinity as a whole, the Holy Spirit, or the Father. As one provocative essay ponders about worship today, "What ever happened to the Father?"⁶ The two songs that worship the entire Trinity are structured by naming each of the Persons ("Glorify Thy Name" and "Father I Adore You"). Only three address any worship toward the Holy Spirit at all, the same three that name all three Persons. The biggest surprise is how little God the Father is worshiped. Only a small handful worships the Father directly and explicitly. Such a gap contrasts with how Christians from New Testament times onward have worshiped: commonly worship is directed toward God the Father through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. In comparison what the seventy-two contemporary songs most tend to do is worship Jesus Christ or worship a generic deity.

Contemporary trends in naming God and directing worship evolve into another omission: failing to remember the activity of God—and each of the three Persons specifically—as the basis for Christian praise and prayer. The omission is there whether one looks for how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interact or how these three have

⁶For a broader investigation, see Susan J. White, "What Ever Happened to the Father? The Jesus Heresy in Modern Worship" available at [http:// www.gbod.org/worship/white.pdf](http://www.gbod.org/worship/white.pdf).

cooperated to save the world. The most frequent song trait is to remember what Jesus Christ has done and, perhaps, to involve God the Father in that activity. The biggest gap is to remember the Spirit's role in God's saving mission to the world.

A couple of factors contribute to the shaky remembrance of God's activity. The first is the songs' tendency to emphasize divine character traits or status but not divine activity. The God in many of these songs is high and mighty, but also appears highly passive, too. Another factor is the failure to put God's saving activity within a larger biblical framework. Few songs praise God the Father for remembering what he has done through Christ as part of a big biblical story. Why can't we sing songs that sound like Ephesians 1? Let us praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and then recite what this God has done through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is biblical praise. Instead, in these songs, the saving work is attributed to a single entity—whether God, the Lord (unspecified), or Christ—and spoken of as a simple historic event. The songs leave even the atonement underdeveloped in its Trinitarian aspects.

With no naming of the Trinity and no remembrance of the Trinity's activity, another thing happens in these songs: the songs do not contemplate worship as participation in the dynamics between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁷ The songs tend to objectify God as the recipient of our worship activity. If God seems passive in these songs, we are not. Humans usually get the good verbs in the songs. This approach contrasts with the classic Christian understanding that worship is first of all Jesus Christ's activity toward God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit and that we are graciously invited into a share of his worship. It is Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ongoing

⁷To see another framing of desirable Trinitarian aspects in worship, see John Witvliet, "The Opening of Worship—Trinity," in *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1-27.

heavenly ministry that ultimately is worship that is true and in the Spirit. The New Testament tends to take technical Old Testament worship words and apply them to Christ as he brings glory to the Father. He is the new temple, priest, sacrifice, Passover, and Passover lamb. Christ fulfills the scriptures in worship. These songs do something different: they tend to objectify Christ, turning adoration of him into its own end. Instead of Jesus as the mediator to worship God the Father, is music becoming a substitute mediator between us and the new object of worship, Christ Jesus?

Ironically, by making worship of Christ its singular end, I suggest the songs distance us from the truest intimacy with the divine, namely, being in Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, sharing in his death that brings glory to God the Father. As Matt Redman describes a proper Trinitarian approach to worship,

We praise Jesus the Son with everything within us—but we also join with Jesus in worship as He glorifies His Father. As the Holy Spirit reveals the Lordship of Jesus to the depths of our heart, He also takes us into the Son’s relationship with the Father....Worship is *to* Jesus, yes—absolutely. We glorify the Son and magnify His name. But worship is also *in* Jesus and *through* Jesus and *with* Jesus...When our heavenly Father receives our worship, He receives it in the person of His Son and in the power of His Holy Spirit.⁸

Songwriters, please help us do this more. There are some Trinitarian songs out there, but according to the CCLI data our churches tend not to choose them. Help us love

⁸Matt Redman, *Facedown* (Ventura: Regal, 2004), 52.

the Triune God. There is no greater spur of love and awe than to contemplate what the biblical God has done, who the biblical God is, and what our share is in the dynamics between the Persons of the Trinity. Give us songs that worship this God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—revealed in the New Testament. Give us songs that are true to God.

The 72 Songs Appearing on Top 25 CCLI Lists from April 1989 to March 2004
 (Note: Lack of data in 5 year columns means no appearance on those lists.)

<u>Title</u>	<u>15 year rank</u>	<u># of times on lists</u> <u>15 years</u>	<u>Last 5 years</u> <u>rank</u>	<u># of times on lists</u> <u>in last 5 years</u>
Above All	39	4	24	4
Ah Lord God	49	5		
All Hail King Jesus	10	22	42	2
Arise and Sing	71	1		
As The Deer	4	29	5	10
Awesome God	9	25	8	10
Because He Lives	53	4		
Better Is One Day	54	4	36	4
Bind Us Together	63	1		
Bless His Holy Name	38	7		
Breathe	30	5	16	5
Celebrate Jesus Celebrate	52	5	35	4
Change My Heart O God	22	17	13	10
Come Now Is The Time to Worship	24	7	9	7
Draw Me Close	47	4	30	4
Emmanuel	29	13	36	2
Father I Adore You	63	2		
Forever	45	3	29	3
Give Thanks	2	29	7	9
Glorify Thy Name	8	24	23	5

<u>Title</u>	<u>15 year rank</u>	<u># of times on lists 15 years</u>	<u>Last 5 years rank</u>	<u># of times on lists in last 5 years</u>
God Of Wonders	39	3	24	3
Great Is the Lord	33	18	34	5
He Has Made Me Glad	5	26	14	7
He Is Exalted	11	25	15	8
Here I Am To Worship	35	3	19	3
His Name Is Wonderful	51	6		
Holy Ground	26	20		
How Can We Name A Love	55	1		
How Majestic Is Your Name	23	19		
I Could Sing Your Love Forever	28	9	11	9
I Exalt Thee	12	25	31	5
I Give You My Heart	66	1	44	1
I Love You Lord	1	28	6	9
I Stand In Awe	66	1	44	1
I Will Call Upon the Lord	12	24	33	4
I Worship You Almighty God	56	3	43	1
In Moments Like These	61	1		
Jesus Name Above All Names	15	21	40	2
Joy to the World	66	1		
Let There Be Glory and Honor and Praises	66	1		
Lord Be Glorified	56	4		
Lord I Lift Your Name on High	6	21	1	10
Lord Reign In Me	56	2	39	2
Majesty	3	27	10	8

<u>Title</u>	<u>15 year rank</u>	<u># of times on lists 15 years</u>	<u>Last 5 years rank</u>	<u># of times on lists in last 5 years</u>
More Precious Than Silver	25	14	21	6
My Life Is In Your Lord	44	7	28	7
Oh How He Love You and Me	42	9		
Open Our Eyes	17	22	40	3
Open the Eyes of my Heart	19	9	3	9
Our God Reigns	27	10		
Praise the Name of Jesus	18	17		
Sanctuary	41	5	26	5
Seek Ye First	36	13		
Shine Jesus Shine	21	19	12	10
Shout to the Lord	14	13	2	10
Surely the Presence of the Lord	62	1		
The Heart of Worship	31	5	17	5
There's Something about that Name	59	1		
This Is The Day	16	22	36	4
Thou Art Worthy	34	8		
Thy Loving-kindness	60	1		
Trading My Sorrows	37	4	22	4
Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus	65	1		
We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise	7	26	20	6
We Fall Down	42	5	27	5
We Have Come Into His House	47	5		
We Will Glorify	45	9		

<u>Title</u>	<u>15 year rank</u>	<u># of times on lists 15 years</u>	<u>Last 5 years rank</u>	<u># of times on lists in last 5 years</u>
What a Mighty God We Serve	70	2		
When I Look Into Your Holiness	70	1		
You Are My All in All	20	11	4	10
You Are My King	31	5	17	5
You're Worthy of My Praise	50	4	32	4