Is Our Worship Narcissistic? **[1]**

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"Millenials are narcissistic," we are told. Social commentators, employers, even pastors lament how difficult it is to work with this generation. They continue to struggle to figure out how best to connect with them, because millenials are literally *the* next generation, and to them the reigns will necessarily be handed.

Some people may see the church which I attend to be the polar opposite of a charismatic church. Worship is, in my opinion, subdued. Great pains are taken to explain that singing does not grant some special access to God, and that it does not "invite His presence". I agree with both of these points: God is only accessed through Jesus, and God is omnipresent—He certainly does not need our permission to be around! Still, I—and the rest of the congregation—enjoy the singing, the music, and what its purpose is.

We are often told that the purpose of singing is to encourage and edify each other, rather than to have some mystical, one-to-one experience with God. I do not necessarily endorse this message wholeheartedly. But if this message is true, and looking at the content of the songs which we sing, one begins to wonder whether there is a clue of the churches' culpability in the rising tide of narcissism.

How a church does its music and worship is a sensitive topic. I may likely already have ruffled some feathers this far into the article. But I need to be clear that the observation which I am about to make transcend modern worship songs: even some of our classical favourites, such as *Amazing Grace* and *Be Thou My Vision*, can be at fault (if one accepts my theory).

It also needs to be said that a "generation" is not a homogeneous whole which crawls out of an egg one day: it develops over time, there is a considerable amount of "blurriness" "between" generations, and such categorisations are generalisations and stereotypes at best.

That all said, we finally arrive at what I want to say: when we worship corporately, we keep singing "I":

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like *me*!"

"Be Thou *my* vision, oh Lord of *my* heart."

"*I'll* bring You more than song, for a song in itself, is not what You have required. You search much

deeper within, to the way things have been, You're looking into *my* heart."

"Majesty! Majesty! Your grace has found *me* just as *I* am, empty-handed but alive in Your hands!"

"Oh that rugged cross, *my* salvation, where Your loved poured out over *me*. Now *my* soul cries out `Hallelujah!"'

See a pattern? These are not cherry-picked examples; they are literally some of favourite worship songs which I wrote down (mostly) from the top of my head.

Now, to be clear, I think there is nothing wrong with these songs as they are for private and individual worship. The above statements are *true*. I also do not blame them for being written that way, because I imagine worship song writing (which is not something that I have ever done myself) is typically a deeply personal and profoundly intimate endeavour. But I would like to ask the question: if we are doing corporate worship, should our emphasis be on the individual? Whether we consider our worship to be in service of other people (encouragement and edification), or presenting ourselves as the body of Christ (the Church) to our Groom, why do we choose to individualise our words to God at the time of our corporate worship? Do we not have more than a hundred waking hours in a week in which we can approach God on an individual basis?

May I propose an experiment: if not to actually change our worship songs, but at least to *think* about how they would change *us*. Worshipping corporately, collectively singing of *our* brokenness, *our* need for healing, *our* salvation, *our* joy, *our* happiness; subconsciously we won't be internalising our individual needs and desires, but *ours* collectively, enforcing the idea that *we are part of a larger body*: the very church to which pastors struggle to get millenials to commit.

I admit that it is a stretch to say that this concern of mine is the *cause* of narcissism. But it may well be a small gear in a large, and complex, machine that is our culture which ultimate produce our generations.

In the English language it is generally easy to substitute the first person singular pronouns "I", "me" and "my" with the first person plurals "we", "us" and "our", because these words are all single syllables. It might be more difficult in a language such as German where the verb conjugation can seriously mess with rhyming. So when singing, even if the original words are in front of you, do a mental substitution, and think about the host of saints with whom you are sharing this song!

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