

K: Boasting (Miscellaneous) – minus 8 pointsCan Do, Will Do

In 1895, aged 23, Edith Cherry, described as a simple little cripple girl, wrote the words, We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling, And needing more each day your grace to know. Two years later she had died. About 60 years later, Jim Elliot and four fellow missionaries would sing this before going as martyrs through the gates of [pearly] splendour at the hands of the Waorani Indians (Ecuador). They felt their own great weakness.

Boasting can flood the world with good intentions, and comes in many shapes and sizes. There is a generational boast, in which we feel proud to be in such fine company. I see a near revival in boasting, few on their knees in prayer, but many singing about their selfless praise. Or so 'tis sung. Have you noticed how certain songs exalt “our generation” to eschatological level? All other generations might have betrayed messiah, but Simeon's eyes may now close in peace, for we have come, and Jesus may return for the church triumphant—us. My generation is rising up to get the job done. Well, Jeremiah would have hoped for no less (Jr.28:6), though later in that story we see that Hananiah's optimism was ill judged. Perhaps a generation must mature first, before it can truly see if Yahweh has had a special message to it. I don't like to preach disillusionment, but if we build a house of cards, please God knock it down.

May I not believe that I am included in “my set”, and that me and my set are special? Funny, now I think about it. I can't think of any songs that say “your generation” shall be key. Me songs, egocentric songs, tend to concentrate on each singer as an outstanding individual.¹ They are often either about what I will do, or about God having acted for special me. Jesus died, but I was worth it. Boastful songs are about how great we are, how confident, how loyal. God should take heart. Indeed deity has my heart; it's God's heart that's a little harder to pin down, according to Martin Smith's *Lord You Have My Heart* (1994)! Boots on the wrong feet can foster egotism.

A humbler, perhaps more biblical approach, is to replace terms such as *I will*, with *I wish*, *I would* (the subjunctive), *I desire*. Statements of fact, not of pledge: I believe, help thou mine unbelief!² Let me backtrack a moment. The psalmists often boasted that they would greatly praise Yahweh. Does that make our boasting safe? I suspect that their meaning was not prediction, but intentionality, however the translations read. That is, not that it was going to happen, but that they reasonably expected it would be so. Whatever the case, as C S Lewis noted in *Reflections on the Psalms* (Imprecatory Psalms), *Psalms* contains salutatory warnings of unredeemed passions: the righteous, capable of great heights and great depths, can feel quite justified in calling down fire to revenge insults. Righteousness denounces the unrighteousness of the righteous (Lk.9:54f.). Might the psalmists' confidence in their commitment to praise, not be questionable? Paul's team member Demas, featured earlier with honour (Col.4:14/Phm.1:24), finally let down the team by misdirected *agapē* (love: 2 Tm.4:10). I neither preclude bitterness, nor boastfulness, from the psalms: they are an uncertain pattern for us of the new creation.

Anyway, I'm safe. Frankly, *I* wouldn't waste time boasting about other people anyway, for unlike me they might well abandon the way. Ring any bells? When Jesus spoke about being deserted, Peter protested: “*not by me you won't!*” (Mk.14:29). Who was right? After a good long talk with Peter, Paul later wrote that “...if you think you are standing firm, be careful that

¹ <http://lestyouforget.wordpress.com/2008/04/11/bad-worship-songs> covers this well, and suggests that non-Christians might not be impressed by our god.

² Mk.9:24 has a plea to overcome unbelief (NIV), to have more faith (CEV): strength with weakness.

you don't fall" (NIV: 1 Cor.10:12). Andreas Köstenberger, commenting of Peter's reinstatement, put it well: "*likewise, we should soundly distrust self-serving pledges of loyalty today that [portray] self-reliance rather than a humble awareness of one's own limitations in acting on one's best intentions*" (BECNT: *John*, 2004:598). What then of Matt & Beth Redman's *Blessed Be Your Name* (2002)? It clearly promises deity that singers he blesses will in turn pay him back in praise, even under severe trial.³ However, in my world, many blessing escape my notice, and many painful lessons can be blessings in disguise. If any Christian *turns back* (transforms?) every single blessing in praise, or even every blessing they recognise as blessing, they would be a most incredible exception to the rule, and, probably be about the least likely to boast in advance.

The spiritually mature know that they ought to thank deity for as many of his blessings that they manage to identify, even if through gritted teeth.⁴ And speaking of teeth, Page recounted Sunday School days in which the children sang their commitment to being eaten by large wild animals—Daniel in the Lions' Den? One might ask what all the other Jews had done wrong *not* to be in the same den, and whether under pressure we'd be with the majority people of God, or with the minority Daniel. Page quipped, "*If you ask someone, 'Would you mind being eaten alive by a large hairy animal as part of your faith?' I wonder how they'd reply*" (Page 2004:26). Many Christians were ripped to shreds in Rome's arenas, and the attitude in which some died impressed their pagan compatriots. But let those not vow to walk in the dark, who have not seen the nightfall. How would we fare? We're taught to thoughtlessly pledge deity, in song, what we would not pledge without the group seduction of a silly song. John lost his head, because Antipas lost his because the dancing Salome sizzled (Mt.14:6f./Mk.6:22f.). Heads still tumble through sizzling songs.

Heedless if not headless, I'm singing, what a lucky god has me, I'm faithful in all my ways. We frequently assure him that we'll give him *all* the praise and *all* the glory. Absolutely! Yet this imaginary god is not God, and our words' cash value is far far less than their face value. We can't give deity all that there is. We don't have it all (Ps.50:12), and even if I had it all I doubt I've give it all. Are we not really like a little boy commending Einstein for being able to work out $2 + 2$? Are we saying that God is no more praiseworthy than our puny minds perceive? We shouldn't overplay (nor underplay) our own penneth of praise. Does the whole universe, let alone our tiny little planet and our little self, know how praiseworthy he is? Also, only pride or fantasy believes that if we had all to give, we would give all. Jesus taught that, unredeemed, the greater the earthly riches, the greater the earthly enslavement.⁵ Are we very proud, and deity very small, that we imagine he has needs we can fulfil? It is he who bestows blessing, and we who should humbly receive. I hear prayers conclude that they ask what they ask for Jesus' sake. Jesus gave

³ This song also fails to turn back into the first person the third person line blessed be the name of the Lord, even when immediately followed by blessed be your name! Besides removing God's name from the plot—probably they meant the LORD, Yahweh, to whom the biblical words referred, rather than Jesus the lord—they should have changed the name to your name since the song's *to* deity, and not to one deity about another deity. We cannot *bless* God, and incidentally *the name of* was an ancient way of indicating the person. Fairly current English would be *praised be you*, instead of blessed be your name. Imagine someone saying to their spouse "darling your name is wonderful" instead of "darling, you're wonderful": counselling should follow. Finally, it can sound as if we're tempting God to bless us by pandering to his supposed vanity: "you want flattery? I'll give you plenty if you bless me." In reality, God's commands to praise him are for our blessing, since praising the most praiseworthy is good focus for our souls (Php.4:8). Yet the Redmans got a song onto the market that speaks of Christians suffering: a commendable achievement in spite of the problems noted above.

⁴ In fact, God seeks an attitude of grateful awareness, not verbal response each time.

⁵ Even C19 Christina Rossetti's *Bleak Midwinter*, with its humble if I were a shepherd I would give a lamb, assumes we would have been on the side of the angels. How many Jewish shepherds would have sided with Herod?

himself for our sakes, and has no need of us. We ask for our sakes (in Jesus' name), and rightly so. For our sakes, God would rather us see that what we have to offer him, including our praise, is at best a widow's mite. Rash assertions seldom enrich. Of course, some folk are careful to promise deity everything, not because they boast or bargain, but because they fear that otherwise he'll be angry. When David Wilkerson wrote, *I'm Not Mad At God*, he was recovering from years of misplaced fearful obedience. The fear of Yahweh can still be the beginning of wisdom, but some unwisely read too much into bad death in *Acts*, such as Agrippa 1's (12:23). They picture themselves as cringing servants of an intolerant sovereign. Such misinformation is sadly in the Christian domain, underplaying God's love. Pride and fear, *hubris* and *phobos*, are follies. Having shaken my head over one Redman number, I give a nod of commendation to his *Heart of Worship* (1999). Yes, I know it claims that, whatever *it is*, *it's* all about *Jesus*, not God, and that we can bless him, but I for one maintain that its challenge to self-aggrandisement is a very real good.

Temptation invites our pride to boast. Even if we do not run into temptation's arms as a lover, we sometimes crawl away hoping it will overtake us. We love to speak about our praise, and some Christian songs can be gratefully sung by Narcissus himself. One song sings that deity is worthy of *our* praise.⁶ Are we praising our praise? Should we not first ask whether our praise is worthy of deity? Paul encouraged us to use sober judgement about our missional roles (Rm.12:3), not to let egotism get the upper hand. We should be serious about what we should, and should not, do, and at what level. Sorry folks, not everyone's an apostle! But then again, Paul implied that underrating our missional call is wrong in the opposite direction. Please don't get me wrong. We are not spiritual worms, whatever our diet. We *are* praiseworthy, and our praise of deity does please him. In tandem with the spirit, we can do great good in God's will, as we yield to him. But I'm saying that even our humble yielding to God is imperfect, and that we should be daily aware of this. And also, thankfully, that deity can do a lot from even our imperfect surrender—our two fishes can feed a multitude. To be content that though he does not value us (all would be unequal), he loves us equally—so far as we let him. But if you feel you really must tell him he makes the grade in your books—as the disreputable beggar tells the princess she's worthy of him—he won't take the huff.

At my more sensible moments I ask myself, why boast of me when I can boast about God? Theocentric boasting, perhaps bragging (CEB), is good for us (1 Cor.1:31). So far as we know, Paul's only cited Jr.9:24 twice—to the same church (2 Cor.10:17). Did that church need a double dose? Do we? *"The current trend in praise, which begins with our thoughts and feelings, needs to be challenged for the good of the congregation and for the sake of God's glory"* (Prime & Begg, 2004:207). Let's highlight songs that hit us with God's glory. The more we sing of ourselves, the more likely to highlight songs that have either a direct or indirect egocentric boast. *"Predominance of the first person singular pronoun [(I)] in so so much recent writing, has concerned many people"* (Reform).

Boasting about God should be biblically sensible. The Jews, who boasted that he *could* save them, did not boast that he *would* save them (Dan.3:17f.). We may as well thank God that we live in cloud cuckoo land, as thank him that all is sweetness and light. James encouraged us to rejoice when troubles trouble us (Jas.1:2). Indeed he used the word often

⁶ It is better, with Nathan Fellingham, to sing that he *is worthy of praise*. Sadly, Fellingham's song descends into patripassianism. It misidentifies Jesus with the lord God, almighty (Rv.4:8). Ironically, after misidentifying the name, it invites us to lift up the wrong name. Rv.5 puts Jesus, as Apocalyptic Lamb, into the picture. He is them proclaimed worthy to open a new history, and the summary (13) pictures him at joint level *with* the lord, God Almighty.

translated as *temptation*—temptations test us. As Australia's Leo Harris used to say, we only have what we can keep under pressure. Difficulties and opposition can both be used positively and can show us our state of play. They can be a useful health check. Some songs, like John Gibson's (1987) *Jesus, We Celebrate Your Victory*,⁷ feed a dualism between real and idyllic life: "*Pentecostal theology and worship does not easily respond to the times of doubt and the seeming absence of God*" (Warrington 1998:196). This weakness isn't just in Pentecostalism. Warrington's point was about automatic removal of problems. Those who stand up, stand up, for Jesus, might be crucified. And even the bravest can deny him thrice rather than face death. Confronting the world is a very significant problem, and increasingly threatens careers in the public sector which seeks either avid agreement (homogeneity), or shameful silence. Boasting in God should be realistic. On God's side, some knew victory, some knew defeat (Heb.11). Praising him, thanking him, trusting him, should be based on a good dollop of biblical realism, not on treating him as a genie at our disposal. How absolute is our self-assurance and self-adulation?

Just One Cornetto?

Another absolute claim is one of absolute limitation—*only*, rather than *all*.⁸ We seem to sing about how easily we are satisfied, or how fully focused we are. How virtuous. C S Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* (ch.17), show how smug and vexatious our fussiness can be (gluttony of limitation). Such songs, of course, may simply be grammatical blunders, a dichotomy between feeling and words, what some call poetic licence, rather than real reflections of thinking. But what we think goes into words, and words go into what we think. Words are worth thinking about, and getting right. In 1984, Arthur Tannous just wanted to praise you—whoever you is, or was.⁹ *I just want this, I just want to do that, I just want to see the other, I just want everything*. Many actually pray like this: "*we just thank you for this, and just thank you for that, and just...as well!*" Meaningless padding, perhaps as they were taught to pray. But imagine saying the same to a mortal man—I just A, I just B, I just C.... *Just* really means A or B or C, not the whole job lot. If your shopping list says ice-cream, and spuds, and washing powder, you don't tell the shopping assistant that you *just* want ice-cream, and *just* want spuds, and *just* want washing powder, though you might say you *just* want apples, potatoes, and washing powder. But then that would be speaking in real world terms, where we're more likely to engage brain before opening mouth, and where we visualise—we see an actual shopping assistant, so talk sense. When I pray, have I really tuned in to deity as if he were if anything *more* real than a mere mortal, or have I a fuzzy vision hovering above my head? It's easy to try and impress him, myself, and others listening in, by the idea that I *only* desire him. As a Christian I married. In fact I should desire much more than God. God is not everything—that's Hinduism. God is creator, and creatures should desire creation, as well as its creator. Nor should I implicitly seek praise by the moderation of my requests—will just one Cornetto do me? No, it won't, so why say it will? Let's avoid even the appearance of boastfulness, except about God, of whom we should boast.

⁷ A good song, but to say that, *in his presence our problems disappear*, is debateable: at the Burning Bush Moses' problems became international.

⁸ On the social level, some, by asking others for just so and so, can be boastful. We can feel so virtuous, that *all* we ask for is so, so little, ignoring that the particularity of what we ask for can seriously inconvenience others to the point of tyranny. It can be a form of gluttony, not of excess but of exactness (C S Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, 1975:87).

⁹ *I just want to praise you / Lift my hands and say I love you / You are everything to me / (And) I exalt your holy name on high.*