

Apparently Chris Tomlin doesn't love the spotlight

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In the evangelical subculture of my youth, there were three categories of pop music. There was secular music, the avoidance of which was, as with alcohol, a nonessential of the faith. (My parents' approach was more tight regulation than outright ban.) There was Christian music, the Nashville-industry pop records that we heard on Christian radio during our school carpool and then saved our allowances up to buy. And then there was worship music, which we sang at church.

In those days I loved a good straightahead guitar-pop band, whether secular, weekday-sacred or Sunday-sacred. Nowadays I'd rather listen to almost anything else. So one big reason I avoid most praise music is that I personally don't like the musical style, just like I don't like fantasy literature or hamburgers. It's a preference, not a critique.

As for actual critiques, a lot of people like me—by which I mean mainliners who love liturgy—go after praise music for its alleged fixation on individualism. But when I hear this I always wonder whether they've paid even less attention to this music than I have in the last 15 or 20 years. This criticism just isn't as true as it used to be. Not just because of corners of the evangelical world like the retuned hymns movement, as exciting as a lot of that stuff is. Because whether you like the music or not—and I do not—the words of “How Great Is Our God” are a huge improvement on “Shout to the Lord.”

“How Great Is Our God” songwriter Chris Tomlin has been a big part of this shift. CNN just did a [short piece](#) on Tomlin, who gives them this quote about how he strives for simplicity:

“I'm trying to think, how can I form this so that everybody, people who are tone deaf, who can't clap on two and four, how can I form this song so they can sing it, so that it is singable?”

I couldn't agree more, and I aim for the same in my own songwriting for worship use. Later we get this:

The spotlight is on Tomlin even more than ever after starting the year atop the Billboard charts. As he tours the country at bigger and bigger venues, he would prefer to step out of the spotlight, away from the microphone, and let everyone else sing.

“People would be mad that they paid for a ticket for that. So I do that just occasionally, but that is what I love.”

He said the night before, at the Theater at Madison Square Garden, he took as much time as he could to step back and let everyone else sing.

“It was just so beautiful, because I feel like it says something. It's not just like, ‘Hey, listen to me sing.’ This is all of us together.

Again, I agree with a lot of his sentiment here. But then why is he playing ticketed concerts at all? Lots of us church musicians feel like it's important not to train a spotlight on ourselves. It's a little odd to hear this perspective from someone who tours big arenas and jumps around like a rock star in front of fans who pay to be there.

Of the three categories of pop music I grew up with, two of them—“Christian music” and praise music—have largely collapsed into one. It's hard to say whether the decline of an explicitly Christian market for music *not* intended/suitable for worship is a net loss or gain. But for the church's worship life, I have a hard time seeing an upside to this conflation of church music and entertainment.

Praise music isn't my cup of tea, but I have no substantive objection to a lot of the music itself. I find the “worship rock star” thing far more troubling: the music pitched too high for people to sing comfortably, the band drowning them out even if they can, the various ways the presentation emphasizes that these musicians are really cool, really talented performers. Stepping back from the arena-show mic and listening to the crowd sing is nice; it's also a classic rock star move that mostly just emphasizes the massiveness of the hits. If Tomlin's worried about too much spotlight, why not just shut the thing off altogether?