

Brian Doerksen

Raised on the west coast of Canada, Brian Doerksen knew as a teenager that his life focus would be to create music for the glory of God. In the late 90's he lived in England for 2 years where he trained worship leaders and songwriters in the UK and Ireland and produced 'Hungry' (Best Worship Project 2001 Praise Awards – Worship Leader Magazine) and 'Come, Now is the Time.' After returning to Canada, he continued to produce for Vineyard Music and then did his first recording with Integrity in Dublin, Ireland in 2002. Brian was presented with the "International Award" in 2003 by the Gospel Music Association in America. His songs, including Come, now is the time to worship, Faithful One, Refiner's Fire, and Hallelujah (Your love is amazing), have become classics in the church. In May 2005, Brian was honored for Worship Album of the Year and Male Soloist of the Year by Canada's People's Choice Gospel Music Awards. "Every day," says the soft-spoken artist, "I thank God for being able to serve his purposes on earth through doing what I love to do" Brian talked to Servant about his new album, 'Holy God' from Abbotsford, British Columbia where he lives with his wife Joyce and their six children.

Needs more

Servant: Tell us about your new CD. Is it any different from what you've done in the past?

Brian Doerksen: I've usually recorded my worship albums live at a conference or a concert. With this one we wanted to go into the studio and not have the noise level that you get when you do something live. When you go into the studio you remove the floor noise and it's just completely still. And out of that stillness you sing and you play. I think because of the subject matter of the songs, the holiness of God and wanting to have a bit more reverence or meditation, it leans a little bit more toward stillness. The record label and the publisher were a little nervous because the trends in the modern worship movement have been towards what I would see as a little excessive, hype and spectacle and I'm not moved by that. I'm moved by truth, by transparency. So I just took the risk because I self-financed it and I believe that I'm supposed to do this.

Is there a theme running through it?

The *Holy God* album is very much a call for us to return to the holiness of God and really dwell there. I guess one of the sub-themes would be the husband heart of God, that what God most yearns for is faithfulness from his people, that he longs for us to return to him saying, "The world can't satisfy us; you alone can do that. And so we're going to return to you." That's what was driving this project.

How did it all come about?

I knew I was going into the studio in the spring and it was January and I had a completely different album planned, a completely different set list of songs, everything. Usually in January I try and spend the first few days just seeking God and being quiet and saying, God, I've got my ideas for the year; what are yours? In that quiet I just began singing Holy, holy, holy and for a couple of days that's all I did. Every holy song I could think of, every hymn, every worship song, I exhausted them all and that's when the new song began to come, a new melody, holy, holy God. For several hours I just sang that and wept in the presence of God. I realized I needed to be re-filled with the holiness of God. Then after about day two I began thinking, how does a holy God act, what are his actions from the beginning to now? The first thing was his transcendence, the Almighty who creates and commands. Then he forgives. It's the incarnation, he redeems, the nail-scarred lamb. And then, to what end? Verse three, the husband heart of God, the romancing, pursuing, restoring, transforming--they're all action words.

I wonder if there's ever been a culture that's done a better job of drowning out the voice of God. The distractions are monumental. What keeps us as believers from getting past that to a fresh realization of the holiness of God?

I just preached a few weeks ago on Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 and on the lament leading into the Shepherd Psalm. I think part of what actually stops us is that when we suffer loss, when we don't get what we want, or go through hard times, everything within our culture deals with that suffering through denial or else distraction, entertainment—just fill me with something else so I don't have to think about the deeper questions. And sadly I think in some ways that a lot of church culture gets influenced by popular culture and buys into denial and distraction. I love the model in the Psalms where you see what I call the biblical lament woven throughout. It's remembering what God has done in the past and who he is, it's this incredible honesty in the moment—this is what I'm feeling; God, why is this happening, and then it's a

looking forward to the future saying, but I trust you. One day there will yet be deliverance. Why? Because I have enough knowledge of your character to know that even though it may not look like I think it should look, ultimately it will come through. But there's a cost to that. It requires digging deep. It requires honesty and transparency and sacrifice. Most of the time we're not willing to pay that price, so we'll settle for denial or distraction. Holiness doesn't shout. It's just there. It's who God is at the very core. In fact, all of his attributes radiate out from that and they're marked by it, they're infused with it. And because it doesn't shout I think it's easy for us to not dwell there, to not meditate on it.

You've experienced lament earlier in life than many. Tell us about that.

I was 12 when I first met the girl I would marry. Our lockers were side by side in high school and when I saw her on the first day I just looked at her and said, "I know she's going to be my wife." We started dating when I was 15 and one week after my 19th birthday we got married. From the very beginning we dreamed about having a big family. I only had one brother. Joy came from a family of 5 kids and we thought we were invincible, that we'd have a dozen. Then our first one arrived on 8/8/88 and another daughter a year and a half later, then a son a year and a half after that. We were on a roll, idealists in every way. Then we began to notice that Benjamin wasn't hitting the markers for a baby. Something felt odd. By the time he was almost four years old we realized something was seriously wrong and started to suspect Fragile X syndrome. We also found out that Joyce was expecting twins. Fragile X is the most common inherited cause of global mental impairment and the most common cause of autism. Down's syndrome is number one but it's not passed on genetically. We had blood tests done on the 5 kids and discovered Benjamin had Fragile X syndrome. We were also trying to launch a musical at the time. Then we lost our house and over a million dollars from people who invested money in the musical. It was a season of real blackness.

How did people respond to you at that time?

When the diagnosis came back and the musical collapsed, it was amazing how quickly everyone scattered. I had failed in a public ministry. Their prayers had not been answered. I prayed for deliverance but it didn't come and I think that made me more acutely aware of the Psalms, looking for the laments. Even in a modern worship repertoire, when was the last time at your local church you actually heard a song that was honest like the Psalms are? You can't think of any. And you start to think, either something was really wrong with the psalmist or somehow we in our modern western church world have bought into something that's not totally biblical: denial and distraction.

Could you write during that time?

After the musical collapsed we were offered a job in London, England to train musicians and songwriters. Right after we moved there, during the darkest point, I was out walking and praying one morning and I heard, "Come, now is the time to worship," just like that. I think a lot of people, when they hear the song, think the lyrics are going to be grand and triumphant, "Come, bring him your best, bring your glorious praise." But when Jesus spoke about worshipping in the spirit of truth, he was talking to an outcast woman saying, I know your deepest shame. So I worked in phrases like "just as you are" because I was trying to say that I can come even in my doubt and confusion. I can bring who I am. Our time in London began a wonderful new season of life and ministry and we were amazed at the grace of God in not 'writing us off.' His grace is so much wider and higher than our failures and detours.

What about your family?

Doctors told us Fragile X was definitely in our family and we shouldn't have any more children but we believed we were to have another child. If it was handicapped there would still be blessing in it because this child would be a gift from God. So we shared it with our pastors and prayer partners and they said ok, you're brave and we'll stand with you. We're going to pray that God gives you a healthy son. So we prayed and fasted and God gave us another son. Nine months later we found out that Isaiah had the syndrome as well. That rocked our world. I wanted to resign from public ministry but Joyce and I felt a strong leading that I was to continue with a 'limp', sharing God's heart through music and leading worship not just from a place of strength, but a place of weakness. God was allowing us to share some of the pain of a broken world.

Have some told you that you didn't have enough faith?

Yes. But I think we just live in a world where we all taste the effects of sin. These things exist and we can't just pronounce them away. It's not how our character is shaped.

Do you believe in healing?

My wonderfully spry grandmother became ill in her seventies and she was dying. But my wife believed it was not her time to go so we went over, knelt down beside Grandma, laid our hands on her and prayed for a few minutes, then got up and left. She fully recovered and lived for another ten years. So I've seen God

heal. I've also seen people pray and pray and pray and I think, ok, you've asked and God's not answering that way. It's time to surrender it. That's my agony right now, trying to figure that out, but it's beyond figuring out sometimes.

I think we look at life so differently than God looks at it, as if healing were the ultimate blessing here. It's not. Everybody that Jesus healed died.

And he didn't heal all. He could have. I'll hear people say there's a revival coming and all the hospitals are going to be cleaned out. So what you're telling me is that this revival will be an improvement on Jesus' ministry, because Jesus didn't do that?

Have you ever wondered what your ministry would be like if God fixed everything and everyone in your life was fine?

I really don't like the word 'success.' It feels like it's so loaded with the world's values. One of the key parts of my own personal private mission statement says that my life's goal is not to be successful but to be faithful. When I say the word 'faithful' that doesn't mean I'm just going to make it—like I'm not going anywhere, I'm here but I'm miserable. Holiness and faithfulness are not dour, miserable concepts. They're actually full of life. My goal is faithfully loving God, faithfully loving my wife as Christ loved the church, faithfully being there so that my kids know who I am, and then trusting God with the broader things like my career. And that's really difficult because opportunities come my way that would greatly increase the influence of my music and I turn down 90% every year. Sometimes I can almost taste them and I think, oh, I'm made to do that and I reach out for it in my heart. But then when I add up that I'm going to be gone for this and gone for that, and I'm going to have to prepare, I just have to say I can't do it. There's only one of me, it's all my family has. If my life's goal is to become more like Jesus, more godly, well, God's a success. I've heard a lot of preachers say Jesus was a failure because at the end of his ministry he only had a handful of followers. So call him a failure. That kind of a failure we'll take any day, right? So if people start talking about success based on performance, I say wait a minute. Why are we even discussing that? I'm not opposed to blessing or wealth or any of those things. I'm just opposed to seeking them as the goal.

How long have you been married?

Twenty-three years.

Tell me a little more about your romance, your marriage.

Joyce and I love sharing about it because we believe the enemy is having a huge heyday with marriage, especially in ministry. Marriage speaks to the character of God. He says in the Ten Commandments, you shall have no other gods before me. God is a jealous God. Even in the very beginning he's inviting us to this covenant relationship and revealing this husband heart that says you were made to forsake all others and be devoted to me. There's no other relationship on earth that more reflects the choice of responding to that initiative than that between a husband and wife. So in some ways it needs to be the most protected, revered relationship on the planet. We have a weekly date night and instead of our kids complaining as we head out the door we teach them to say, Have a good time. Because if we have time to connect and be in love and keep building our romance then all the other good things will happen for them. Some things are important so we plan them into the regular rhythm of our life. We're not going to wait for inspiration or for the feelings of romance to come and go. Feelings will ebb and flow so we keep on being present to each other in a weekly way. It's wonderfully addictive because the more you do it the more you realize it's so good and we figure out ways to sneak in mini-dates during the rest of the week. Like I'll quit work early and we'll go out for coffee. We just find ways.

What's a typical date?

It keeps on getting longer because we want it to. It probably started out making sure all the kids were fed and in bed and we'd go out for a late dinner. Good for awhile. Then we found that by the time we got to the restaurant we'd be exhausted. So we decided someone else could feed them and we'd leave earlier. Now sometimes we get the kids back from school and we're out of there by 4 o'clock in the afternoon. When the weather's good we'll go for a walk or coffee. We talk about life or each other or discuss issues with the kids. This is our time. For my wife it's especially important because she does so much cooking. There are 8 of us and often the kids have someone over so she's cooking for 9 or 10 people, so a meal out is definitely part of the date. When we were young and had no money we'd grab a peanut butter sandwich from home then go for a walk and find a nice place and sit and eat it together and talk. Probably quarterly we go away for a romantic overnight getaway and once a year we go away for a week, somewhere warm and quiet and we just hang out. It costs a lot in babysitting money but we believe it's vitally important in our relationship.

I would think with the special needs you have that it's even more important in your case.

We've heard that over 80% of couples with disabled children divorce. Joyce and I decided years ago that we weren't going to be part of that statistic.

Was there a crucial decision time that's helped you stay together?

I think the challenge of what we went through when the musical collapsed, when we found out about the handicaps, instead of putting those issues between us we decided to figure out a way that they would bring us together and be a way of bridging our two different worlds. We're very, very different people as far as our personality types and gifts. She's not a musician or even into music. A couple of times a year she'll go to a concert with me and about half way through the concert I'll feel this weight on my shoulder. So we go to fewer concerts than I'd like and we try and do some things that Joyce really likes that wouldn't be my first choice. We keep on trying to see where we can meet in the middle. I talked with a British drummer who just got married. It's wonderful, he says but no-one tells you that marriage can basically be summed up as learning to die to yourself. He had lived a single life for quite awhile and pretty much did what he wanted when he wanted. There is that reality that marriage is saying, I'd really love to do this but I'm willing to let that go if it's not going to be life-giving to you. I remember having a conversation with Chris Tomlin, a well-known worship leader. He's single and does about 150 concerts a year and I could tell by the conversation he just couldn't fathom my world. I could envy his music and ministry but you have to look at what he's given up in order to get to that point. He doesn't have a marriage or children. And it makes me so grateful for my life.

Would you trade it in?

I wouldn't. I love the music and creative things but some people lose themselves in creativity and lose their family in the process. It's not worth it.

I was talking to my neighbor the other night. He's not a believer and he and his wife are young, second marriage, little girls. I told him, Love your wife until you like her. You're so right, it's dying to yourself. "I no longer live but Christ lives in me"—that was a huge verse in my marriage, realizing that it's not about me.

But something happens. You come out the other side to a delight that's so much deeper than doing what you want.

Part of this issue of *Servant* is going to be on time and eternity, the brevity of life. Do you have anything to say along those lines?

There is joy in our hearts as we imagine our boys in heaven, walking up to us, looking us in the eye like they don't really do now and saying thank you for loving us, for changing our diapers. You just know there's this moment coming in eternity when these things are going to seem utterly momentary and we're going to be enveloped in gratitude and love. It's probably even greater for Joyce because there's just so much you do for a handicapped son. We believe in the reality of eternity and that gives us hope for the pain of today. There are some days when that truth feels far away and part of what I feel music can do is take that truth that sometimes feels distant and bring it forcefully to bear in your heart and your mind through the melody and lyrics and the poetry of it. There's something in your spirit that says this is true and it helps keep you on course, to keep your eyes on where you're going. That's one of the reasons I offer up songs that touch me and help me remember and maybe they'll help somebody else.

I've kept you longer than I intended.

It's been a delight.

One final question. When the last song has been written what do you want people to say about Brian? Or do you want them to say anything?

Probably two things. I'd like them to say I was a faithful husband, father, and friend. Secondly, it's like the best man at a wedding. Jesus is the bridegroom, the bride is the church. I hope that when people remember what they saw and heard of God in my life and my songs they'll see that he became greater and I became less.