

Contemporary Worship Music:
Roots and Impact on the Teenage Perspective of Christian Worship

by

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Growing Pains: An Introduction

The Christian church can sometimes be a bit like my grandmother. Ever the hobbyist, my grandmother has the interesting habit of avidly pursuing new trends for about as long as they're on TV, then dropping them immediately thereafter in pursuit of something more tantalizing. The history of the church suggests a similar tendency, which manifests itself particularly well in the area of music and worship. Certainly this is not a bad thing. The church is indeed a body, and just like any healthy organism, its ever changing and adapting in order to survive. But just like a body, the church must also undergo occasional checkups, especially when something large flares up. In the past few decades, a movement has begun in Christian worship that merits this special attention. The movement is commonly referred to as "Contemporary Worship Music" (from now on referred to as "CWM").

After gathering significant momentum in the early 90's, CWM has captured the attention of the church at large, and it's influence now reaches from Texas to Taiwan.¹ It's arguably one of the most widespread and influential forces in Christianity². This is why I believe it deserves especially meticulous criticism. Whether or not CWM is ordained by God and driven by the Holy Spirit is a complex argument; perhaps of more use is a discussion on how and why CWM has developed, and to what forces it owes it's current form. Equally relevant is the subject of how CWM is impacting teenagers in particular. While CWM is a phenomenon embraced by both young people and adults alike, it's influence on teens will serve as it's window of influence into the next season of

¹ Chou and Russell, "The Contemporary Worship Style Among Taiwanese Congregations".

² CCLI, a company which tracks CWM's song usage in churches for copyright purposes currently services over 170,000 churches worldwide. Visit www.ccli.com for more information.

the worldwide church. A number of Christian authors, speakers, and scholars have explored these subjects as well, and what follows is a synthesis of their perspectives with my own. It's therefore my intent to explore how history, culture, and consumerism have acted as shaping forces on CWM, as well as what potential implications that result could have for the teenage perspective on Christian worship.

In order to present the discussion in the clearest format possible, it will be broken into five sections. The first three sections will explore the shaping forces of CWM, and the last two will explore the implications of CWM for teenagers as they understand worship. It's also worth noting at this point a distinction between Contemporary *Worship* Music, and Contemporary *Christian* Music (CCM). While both fall into the category of Christian music, the focus of this paper will be explicitly on Contemporary *Worship* Music. With that being said, an understanding of how I define *worship* is also important for the sake of later arguments. Through reading a number of texts on the subject, as well as applying my own personal experience, my understanding of worship could be summarized in the following way: *To engage in Christian worship is to engage in any activity that brings glory to God.* This implicates music as a component, but only as a small part of the whole. That qualification will serve to be important later in our discussion.

As a final note, it's important to identify clearly what this paper is *not* attempting to do. I have no illusions about the subject of Christian worship styles being easy to digest. For that reason, I've made no attempt to advocate or condemn any specific style, CWM included. I'm also painfully aware of how many subjects I've left unaddressed.

This exploration is not at all comprehensive, and at the conclusion of the paper, it's my intent to raise more questions than I answer.

Dust on the Hymnal: The Influence of History on Contemporary Worship Music

“I’m surprised the doxology went over so big this evening.” I was immersed in wrapping up my guitar cables, and barely heard the singer’s comment. She continued, “I mean, we’ve tried it before. Everyone saw it when you handed out music at the beginning and groaned.” It was a borderline insult, so now she had my attention. “What’s so bad about the Doxology?” I asked, trying not to sound irritated. “Well it’s not the doxology...it’s just that this crowd isn’t much for hymns. We all prefer the contemporary stuff.” Before I could comment, she quickly added, “But your version of the Doxology was very contemporary - I think that’s why everyone liked it!”³

She wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know. It was common knowledge amongst the members of my church’s worship team that hymns were out and CWM was in. Of course, there were the occasional attempts to jazz up Amazing Grace, but the band could smell the dust on the hymnal from a mile away; any attempt from a leader to challenge the “leave the past in the past” mentality was met with skepticism at the very least. It’s an interesting case study on the progression of musical preference in Protestant churches. Since I didn’t have a personal history in such a church, I had to do some research in order to figure out exactly where these folks fit into the timeline of Christian worship. As it turns out, there’s a rather distinguishable pattern to things, and sorting through the history and development of church worship yields a few very interesting insights.

³ Paraphrased from a conversation in July, 2007

Music has always been a part of the church. In fact, music has always been a part of the people of God. In his detailed treatment of music in the Old Testament, T.C. Mitchell meticulously picks out hundreds of scriptural and historical references to music usage in Jewish culture and worship.⁴ Aside from naming a myriad of specific instruments and their applications, he also draws from other scholarly research. His summary of an argument from H.H. Rowley does well to communicate the point:

While there is evidence in the Old Testament that music, particularly singing, was used on secular occasions...the majority of references suggest it played a significant part in religion, particularly in the worship of the Jerusalem Temple.⁵

The Psalms serve well as a specific example of such usage of music. Consider that the subheadings in the New International Version of the Bible indicate that 52 of the 150 Biblical Psalm were originally submitted to the *director of music*. An even higher volume are categorized as songs; some even name the specific instrument designated to accompany the words. Though the date of their authorship is uncertain, it's generally understood by scholars that most of the Psalms were composed around the 4th century B.C., with the potential for authorship stretching back to 1000 B.C.⁶

The point of visiting on such a rich musical history here is to establish that there has never been much large-scale debate as to whether or not music has a place in gatherings of worship. Beyond that broad agreement, however, history tells a story of passionate opinions and spirited conflicts. As we'll explore in this section of our discussion, the conflicts yield an interesting pattern: Throughout the history of music in

⁴ Mitchell, "The Music of the Old Testament Reconsidered", 124-143.

⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁶ Feinberg, "The Date of the Psalms", 426-440.

the church, there seems to be a cycle of lethargy, reaction, and novelty. To get a handle on this pattern, we'll visit the place and time where it made its first obvious appearance, during the reformation of the 16th century.

Amidst the whirlwind of changes incited by Martin Luther's call to reform the church, there was a unified cry from emerging protestants to reform church music as well. By the 1500's, the Roman Catholic church had effectively established that worship was an intricate and formal affair. Professional choirs filled the rafters, and Latin echoed in the halls of the well-appointed cathedrals. The prevailing attitude was that God deserved the very best, and the very best required practice and precision. Congregants fell primarily into the role of reverent observers, standing and sitting as they were instructed, and listening attentively to the hauntingly complex performances of the church's polyphonic music.⁷ But as the reformation tore through the routine of the church, questions were raised. Why can't everyone sing? Why does it need to be so complicated? Why show up at all if everything is done for us? It wasn't long before a new form of church worship took root to match the growing preference for highly interactive church meetings. James Kirk, a professor of history, describes well this trend in the Scottish church,

In came a simple service based on preaching, Bible study, prayers, and metrical psalms sung to common tunes. The people were no longer passive spectators but were actively encouraged to sing God's praise as part of their worship.⁸

It was a revolution, and as Christian history rounded one of its most significant corners, church music went along for the ride, changing forever from the hopelessly complicated

⁷ Kirk, "Worship Before and After".

⁸ Ibid., par. 14.

polyphonies of Roman Catholicism. Hymns written to common tunes prevailed, and hymnals began flooding the aisles of church buildings all over Europe. The reaction to the previous generations was strong, and by the end of the 16th century, worship was a congregational affair.

It may not sound like an altogether unfamiliar story, and there's a reason for that. The arguments of the reformers tend to sound a bit like echoes from our own generation. Could it be that the church is once again experiencing a season of reform? My observations lead me to believe that music in the church develops according to a discernable pattern of reactions. Just as post-reformation music was a reaction to the complicated, inaccessible music of the preceding generations, CWM appears to be a reaction to the dry, inflexible music of hymns. It makes sense to imagine it this way. Reactions are a powerful catalyst, and reactions to old habits that have had time to lose momentum are the most powerful of all. They draw energy by feeding on the inadequacies of old ways. In an ever-changing culture, it's not at all surprising that the *old way* doesn't take long to become old. In fact, conversations have begun even now amongst friends of mine concerning the inadequacies of CWM and the need for a *new way* of worship.

But perhaps even more important to note than the content of the pattern is the form. It seems that the common thread in history concerning the fluctuations in church music has been the force of reaction. And just as reaction can prove to be the necessary motivation to insight beautiful change, it can also be clumsy and ill-advised. Consider the example of those on my church's worship team. As a reaction to the dry old hymns of their childhood, many of them had completely written off the validity of hymns as a

form of Christian worship. A hymn sheet was like poison in their hands, and it's probable that the mentality of *reaction* caused their perspective to form as it did. Traditionally speaking, hymns have a rather good track record. Aside from the initial stir they caused during the days of the reformation, they've blessed the church and rarely been the subject of heated Christian debate. Yet hymns have been powerfully rejected by many proponents of CWM. Why does it happen this way?

It's worthwhile to consider the power of reaction when thinking critically about CWM as a product of history. Which branches of CWM obviously stem from reaction to old ways? The obvious example is one we've just mentioned: the common distaste for hymns. They're few and far between in contemporary worship, and when they do reappear, they must be clothed heavily in contemporary garb lest they be recognized and thrown out immediately. The distinction is especially obvious in churches that divide their services according to worship styles. The most common split is between *traditional* and *contemporary*, which is typically a euphemism for "hymns at the first service for the old people, and CWM during the second service for everyone else."

Another noteworthy product of CWM's reaction to history is the simplicity of the lyrics in most contemporary songs. Gone are the days of intricate wordplay and ten-verse songs. Much more popular in CWM are simple, single verse choruses that repeat continuously. The popularity of bands like Australia's *Hillsong United* depends on songs being lyrically simple. Consider the words from one of their most popular choruses, released on their 2004 album, "More Than Life":

*One way, Jesus, you're the only one that I could live for
One way, Jesus, you're the only one that I could live for*

It smacks of the reformation's ever-progressing tendency to involve everyone possible in worship. If the song is simple, with only one or two lines repeating over and over again, it's unlikely that anyone will feel unprepared to sing if they stick around for a few minutes. Of course, advocates may cite a multitude of reasons for why such "praise choruses" are beneficial in worship, but regardless of their applications, their roots seem to lie in the soil of a reactionary mentality: Hymns are too complicated, and a hymnal is a crutch for a man or woman who desires to "sing out freely" to God.

But to imagine the history of Christian worship as something influenced entirely by a human mechanism like reaction is to commit a grave error. Worship is, after all, an activity which brings glory to God; it only makes sense to think that God may have had a hand in its historical development. While it's impossible to pinpoint precisely God's activity in the development of Christian worship, it's worth noting as a conclusion that He has indeed made appearances to affirm the worship emanating from his people. In Luke 6:43, the Bible talks about judging the quality of a ministry by the quality of its fruit. If such fruit is any indication of God's enthusiastic approval, it's undeniable that both the reformed music of the 16th century, as well as CWM, has been thoroughly enjoyed by God. And while the fruit of genuine worship itself is impossible to track, the fruit of new believers is not so difficult to record. Interestingly enough, the denomination in today's church which most readily embraces CWM has seen recent growth. Statistically speaking, one of the only denominations not experiencing decline is the Pentecostal church⁹, and taking a broad sweep of their worship style reveals a bend towards the contemporary unrivaled by other denominations.¹⁰ While it's unfair to say

⁹ John Bellamy and Keith Castle, *2001 Church Attendance Estimates*, 8.

¹⁰ Palm, *The Rising Tide of Pentecostalism*.

with certainty that CWM is a contributing factor in this apparent success, it's worth noting the potential correlation. All that is to say, God indeed seems to be moving in CWM, just as he seems to have moved in every trend of Christian worship since the dawn of history. The question of whether or not God gladly instituted the current trend, or is merely making the best of it can never be fully answered, but it's apparent fruit speaks volumes about his willingness to meet people on the grounds of CWM.¹¹

¹¹ Of course, measuring church attendance is not the ideal way to judge God's activity or approval. For the sake of the argument, it's assumed that at least some of that growth is the product of an earnest and orthodox response from the unchurched world.

The Force Behind the Freckle: The Influence of Culture on CWM

When I was a sophomore at Eastern University, I had an interesting discussion with a fellow student. He was one of the few classmates I had at Eastern who never hesitated to tell you exactly what thought. It's always fascinating to talk to people who don't filter their perspectives. It's very polarizing. In fact, it raises the suspicion that there are lots of people who think along similar lines, but it's only the few and the brave who express it in words. I remember talking with him about our chapels at Eastern. I was a chapel worship leader at the time, which makes for a helpful window into that topic of conversation. We got to talking about what makes chapel good, and after we agreed that the dance ministry wore morally questionable outfits, he told me that his take on the success of chapel was rooted mostly in his gut. "There are definitely good chapels and bad chapels," He told me, "There have been a few when I definitely didn't feel God, like he just wasn't there, and then there have been ones where you can really feel him powerfully."¹² His comment stuck with me. It wasn't the first time I had heard someone referring to the success of a worship time in terms of their personal feelings. In fact, there was a time when I felt that way myself, assuming that my emotional highs and lows signaled the activity of the Holy Spirit. A perspective like that is similar to a freckle. You can't really pinpoint when it showed up or how it developed. You just know it's there; it's a part of you, and as far as you're concerned, it always has been.

But something makes freckles happen. If you cornered a scientist and convinced him that you had a serious freckle question, you'd find out that freckles have a specific cause. Perspective have a cause, too. In fact, many sociologists have already given it a

¹² Personal conversation, 2005.

name. It's called culture. Phil Kenneson defines culture as "...shared practices, convictions, institutions, and narratives that order and give shape to the lives of a particular group of people."¹³ With that in mind, it could be said that my fellow student from Eastern is a product of his culture, and not surprisingly, he judged his act of worship through the lens of that culture. This turns out to be true for everyone, and that little voice inside my head that told me feelings were what made worship count was a cultural voice. It's not surprising that there are lots of people who don't like that. It's not uncommon to encounter people who cringe at the thought of being so heavily influenced by something they never consciously subjected themselves to. It's the primary reaction of the old guard, a group of Americans in particular who prefer to invest in "politics over poets".¹⁴ It's not uncommon even today for people to underestimate the power of culture in favor of other influencing factors. But if it's true that people are drenched in their host cultures, then certainly their activities are heavily influenced by the same cultural voices. Add the effects of globalization to those realities, and the reach of that cultural influence becomes tremendous. That's where it becomes critical to consider CWM in light of it's cultural backdrop. Whether or not it's recognized openly, the embryo of worship music has been incubated in large part by the culture it's developing in. As we examine the nature of our current cultural trends as they relate to CWM, this will become abundantly clear. It's a good thing. It's a bad thing. But more than anything, it must be consciously recognized if CWM is to be critically molded as a product of the church and not become a product of the dominant culture.

¹³ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 21.

¹⁴ Gienow-Hecht, "A European Considers the Influence of American Culture".

So what does the dominant culture look like? What are the voices saying, exactly? It's helpful to consider the work of Walt Mueller, who outlines a breakdown of cultural movements over the timeline of the civilized world. It's rather accurate to divide human history into three movements: Premodernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. In the Premodern world, just about every event had supernatural implications. As Mueller explains it, "It was a theistic world where the existence of deity was unquestioned."¹⁵ But all of that changed as mankind developed in its intricacies and inventions. Hope shifted from the abstraction of God and found a new home in the infinite potential of the human mind. Mueller puts it plainly in saying, "man replaced God, and science replaced religion."¹⁶ Modernism was the mindset of a people during a period commonly referred to as the Enlightenment. But the balm of human intellect proved to be insufficient. The world found no salvation in the triumphs of human achievement, and hope began giving way to despair. Not content to revert back to the theistic mechanisms of our ancestors, we now find ourselves in the midst of an ever-developing cultural mindset known as Postmodernism. And just as the enlightenment period rejected the spiritualistic belief system of the premodern period and replaced it with hope in human achievement, the postmodern movement rejects the hope of modernism and replaces it with a dark skepticism that leaves little room for hope at all.

Postmodernism is a strange force. Because we're a people still in the midst of Postmodernism's influence, writing about it is a bit like writing about your cheeks without a mirror.¹⁷ But accurate assessments are not out of reach, and the question of how postmodern culture is shaping CWM is far from unanswerable. One factor in

¹⁵ Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

particular seems to have played a significant role, and shedding light on it inevitably sheds light on why CWM has taken its current form.

Pop artist Rob Thomas recently released a song called “Little Wonders”. I remember hearing it on the radio and getting goose bumps. There are a few songs that will do that to me, and although I don’t know how it happens, I’m beginning to understand *why* it happens. As it turns out, one of the marks of postmodern culture is that it highly values feelings. In fact, it values feelings above reason. This is a shift that’s not difficult to record. Mueller uses an example from the advertising world. In 1964, Norelco advertised a shaving cream by demonstrating its superiority over the leading brands with a scientific test. In advertising today, the focus is rarely on the physical superiority of a product. Mueller explains that instead, “marketing creates a desirable experience or positive feeling that is associated with their product.” He cites the example of a current Norelco advertisement that positions its razors in such a way as to evoke a sexual image. The caption on the side reads, “Get a close, comfortable shave whenever you’re in the mood.”¹⁸

Combine the Postmodern inclination towards emotion with music’s natural ability to evoke strong emotions in its listeners, and it’s not surprising that Christian worship has undergone a musical overhaul in recent years. A little lesson in music theory helps to clarify the point. Contemporary songs typically have several clearly identifiable sections. The average song has a verse or two, a chorus that’s repeated several times, and a bridge. In most songs, those three sections are musically different, with the emphasis being placed naturally on the chorus. In listening critically to a number of songs that seemed to intentionally evoke an emotional response, I began noticing a pattern in the choruses.

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

The common thread, in musical terms, is a 1/5/4 progression, with a minor 6th on occasion.¹⁹ Regardless of whether or not the average person can decode that observation, the point remains: Contemporary music in general makes use of an easily identifiable pattern to evoke emotion in it's listeners. The pattern carries over into the world of CWM. In 2007, five of the top ten most popular worship songs²⁰ made use of this pattern, and the other five varied it only slightly. Consider those five songs in conjunction with five popular songs from the secular world, all of which use the 1/5/4 pattern of music. From the world of CWM, the list is as follows:

Here I Am To Worship, Tim Hughes
Blessed Be Your Name, Matt and Beth Redman
Holy Is The Lord, Chris Tomlin; Louie Giglio
Shout To The Lord, Darlene Zschech
Lord I Lift Your Name On High, Rick Founds

All falling somewhere on Billboard's "Hot 100" list²¹, the following five songs from the world of secular pop music sound startlingly similar to their musical counterparts on the scene of CWM. Consider also that their lyrical content suggests an intent from the artist to evoke a strong emotional response from the listener:

Bubbly, Colbie Caillat
Tattoo, Jordin Sparks
Our Song, Taylor Swift
Don't Blink, Kenny Chesney
Girlfriend, Bow Wow & Omarion

¹⁹ For more information on music theory, consider visiting this helpful website:
<http://library.thinkquest.org/15413/theory/theory.htm>

²⁰ CCLI, "Top 25 Songs"

²¹ Billboard.com, "The Billboard Hot 100", December 15, 2007.

The pattern is more commonplace than even these numerous examples suggest, and the result for Christian worship isn't hard to track. With culture communicating that feelings are what really count, and music communicating that it knows just the way to turn on our emotional floodgates, CWM has understandably begun embracing a very emotionally-charged format. "Worship concerts" are a case in point, where dancing, crying, screaming, and falling to the ground are not altogether uncommon. The air is thick with human emotion, so much so that it's become an expectation. My fellow student from the Eastern chapel service proves the point, and a consideration of his words in light of what we now know about Postmodernism reveals what might be going on in his thinking. Because he wasn't able to engage in the music on an emotional level (or "feel God", as he put it), his conclusion was that God was not present there at all. Never mind the theological implications of one college sophomore being able to discern the physical presence of the living God like a dowser using an emotional diving rod; reason seemed never to play a role in his conclusion.

But the postmodern bend towards feelings and emotion, and the subsequent emphasis of such in worship shouldn't be understood as an entirely negative thing. After all, as we've learned from the history of worship music, the intense emphasis on emotion is in large part a reaction to worship that was seemingly devoid of emotion in past generations of the church. A teary-eyed teenager singing with hands raised to the sky is an arguably beautiful picture, whether or not the influence of culture played a role in her demeanor. In considering the experiences of Billy Graham, Dr. Ronald Feuerhahn helps bolster a word of caution against undervaluing the role of emotion in worship:

One occasion, early in his ministry, Dr. Billy Graham was accused of exciting the emotions in his crusades. "The emotions are certainly involved," he replied, "for I speak to people about God's love, and love is an emotional thing!" So when we hear the word of God's gospel in the divine service, we too respond with the emotion of love for him who so loved us. We are grateful for opportunities to use our intellect, our bodies, our whole being in his service. When we come to God's worship, we are there in our whole being. We respond to God's message intellectually and emotionally.²²

In addition, a conversation with one of my college professors revealed that in examining the influence of postmodernism's emotional emphasis on CWM, language must also be a consideration. Dr. Eduardo Ramirez, in addition to being a Professor at Eastern University, has been working with a church youth group for ten years. As we discussed the role of emotion in Christian worship, he began teaching me just how narrow the English understanding of the word "emotion" truly is. A native of Argentina, Dr. Ramirez explained to me that in Spanish, there are several words to describe varying degrees of emotion, ranging from shallow, mindless emotion, to the deep, heartfelt emotions of love and trust. He went on to explain that in worship of God, emotion is a necessity, but the conclusion "you need to be emotional in worship" is hindered by the weakness of the English language²³. Through our discussion, I began to understand that my personal skepticism towards emotion in worship was actually a negativity directed towards *shallow* emotion, the kind a person might embrace periodically for their own sake. But there is a marked difference between the emotional high of watching a Disney movie and the deep emotional intensity of encountering God through singing words that describe him well.

²² Feuerhahn, "Lutheran Worship and Emotions", par. 2.

²³ Personal Interview, October 31, 2007.

The question of whether or not this current trend is healthy is a complicated one. Perhaps even more important than a conclusion on that matter is a resolve to remain ever aware of Postmodernism's voice in CWM, and in fact the church as a whole. Kenneson expresses well this sense of necessity:

Christians have no choice but to be diligent students of their host cultures...One critical issue concerns the inability of many Christians to identify the important differences between native flora and flora of God's kingdom. For too long we have wrongly assumed that indigenous plants pose no serious threat to a Christian way of life. As a result, many churches routinely and unwittingly cultivate these indigenous plants, brining to harvest fruit that bears within it the seeds of some other kingdom.²⁴

An awareness of the cultural voices around us is the only way to keep Christian worship in a healthy place. And given the ever-changing nature of Postmodernism as it develops, consistently updated study of cultural trends as they pertain to CWM is a must.

But in addition to the cultural emphasis on emotion, there's another cultural voice that we haven't yet considered. It may be the biggest and most insidious of them all, and for that reason, it deserves special emphasis. It's the reason sports stadiums are being bought out by banks. It's the reason Santa Clause and the Coca Cola company are best friends. It's loud, it's convincing, and it's relentless. It's the cultural voice of consumerism, and it's been whispering promises to the folks driving CWM for some time now. An exploration of it's influence indicates that perhaps a few of those folks have begun to listen.

²⁴ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 26-27.

Hands in the Cookie Jar: The Influence of Consumerism on CWM

The bass pounded into a crescendo with the kick of the drums following in tight succession. The guitars whined into action as the singer stepped up to the microphone to sing the final chorus of a popular worship song. He looked to be entirely caught up in the spirit of the gathering. He lifted his hands, and thousands of people in the audience followed suit. His voice was barely audible over the cries of the masses, all singing the same chorus. But a few seconds into the last line, the singer's voice dropped out entirely. He had stepped away from the mic. He was shaking his head back and forth, and when the bassist saw him, he stopped playing completely. The drummer stuttered to a halt as well. The people kept singing strongly, assuming his pause was to emphasize their involvement. But then he spoke.

"I'm sorry...everyone...just stop. I have to be honest with you all." His voice reverberated through the auditorium, and the crowd fell silent instantly. Nothing like this had ever happened before. The singer continued. "I just feel like we're going through the motions here. For one, my heart isn't in it - I sing this song every night and I'm not even thinking about the words anymore. I was thinking about what I'm going to have to eat when we're done here. That's not fair to you. It's not okay to play make believe. And I don't want you to think you're worshipping just because I'm pretending to worship. I think it would be better if we just spent some time in prayer...let's just be honest with God for a little while, because I don't really think he cares if we're putting on a good show. He just wants us to be honest and open before him."

Imagine the headlines in the aftermath: “Band Manager Strangles Worship Leader.” “Popular Worship Band Takes Nosedive After Lead Singer’s Breakdown.” “The Show Must Go On: Band Ditches Introspective Leader Mid-Tour.”

Thankfully or not, this particular scenario is fictional, and occurrences like it don’t seem at all to be commonplace. It would indeed be a death sentence for the worship band. Their ticket sales would likely plummet after being marked as an unpredictable and abrasively honest band. That’s not what the people seem to want in the world of CWM. But why not?

In society today, consumerism is more than a cultural trend; it’s a mentality.²⁵ The church is not immune, and likewise, CWM owes a good deal of it’s current success to the savvy of it’s advertisers. It’s undeniable that contemporary worship in the church has been influenced by the consumer mentality. Anyone who has ever paid \$35.00 to buy a ticket for a Chris Tomlin concert would have to agree. In fact, CWM was the only genre still making a climb during an overall decline in Christian record sales back in 2003.²⁶ There’s an understanding of this success amongst Christian artists as well. I recently sat in on a talkback session with popular Christian band *Building 429*. While talking about their recent recording projects, the band leader openly admitted that worship was the genre that was selling at the moment, and thus they were advised to produce a *worship album*.²⁷

There’s no doubt that CWM has dipped it’s hand in the cookie jar of consumerism. In a highly competitive market, anything that didn’t cater to such a mentality would almost certainly sink, at least from the business perspective. But how

²⁵ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 46.

²⁶ Leland, “Christian Music’s New Wave”, *The New York Times*, August 17, 2004.

²⁷ This talkback took place in October of 2007 during the “Revelation Generation” Tour in Frenchtown, NJ.

has CWM's accommodation of a consumer mentality influenced it's development?

We've already considered how history and postmodern culture have acted as shaping forces on CWM. In both cases, there seems to have been both a positive and negative impact. Can the same be said for consumerism's influence? A more detailed exploration of consumerism's fruits in CWM lends some insight into this question. For ease of understanding, consumerism's influence on CWM can be divided up into four trends. The first is the apparent preoccupation with the self in worship. The second is the trend of advertising CWM. The third is the trend of worship as a form of entertainment, and the fourth is the trend of crowd manipulation during worship gatherings.

Consumerism in CWM: The Preoccupation with Self

“Hey, this was really great, Chris - thanks for doing it!” I was honored to receive a compliment from an elder in the church. He was referring to a special, mid-week worship night we had just finished up with. Before I had too much time to soak in the encouragement, he continued on. “I could really use a recharge about this time in the week. We should do it every week!”²⁸

I nodded, but later when I thought about it, I realized that in that moment, what he really said was, “This has been great for me, and as long as it's always this great for me, I could definitely do it more often.” The mentality that worship is good for the worshipper is not uncommon. In many church gatherings, worshipers will frequently rate the quality of their experience based on how much they've been edified afterwards. But this is problematic. As Phil Kenneson points out,

²⁸ Paraphrased from a conversation on September 12, 2007.

We gather for worship not because we need a spiritual ‘pick me up’, but rather to focus our love and attention on God and thank him for the innumerable ways he has made life what it is.²⁹

It’s then fair to say that a man or woman concerned with how worship improves his or her quality of life may be missing the mark entirely. How does this happen? It seems that one of consumerism’s fruits in CWM is a preoccupation with the self in worship.

Kenneson explains this relationship well:

[Christians] often cast themselves, whether knowingly or not, in the role of consumer, expecting churches to woo them with programs and services that appeal to their particular interests. In response, many churches have self-consciously incorporated marketing strategies into their ways of being the church, pitching their programs and services to prospective seekers who are well-versed in such habits of thinking.³⁰

When worship is imagined as a product to be hyped up and dispersed among it’s participants, it’s not surprising that worshippers begin to misunderstand Biblical worship.

Kenneson explains the Biblical image of Christian worship in terms of a gift as opposed to an exchange.³¹ The implication is that worship of God is worship for God’s sake.

Whether or not the worshipper is edified in the process is of secondary importance.

But the worshipper isn’t entirely to blame for this tendency towards self-interest. A closer look at many of the lyrics to popular worship songs reveals that self-interest is built right into the songs themselves. Consider, for instance, that 8 of the top 10 most popular songs on KLOVE radio make use of first-person personal pronouns.³² In essence, they’re *me* songs, not *you* songs. A specific example from a popular song by the

²⁹ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³² “Top Songs” as of December 10, 2007, <http://klove.com/Music/>.

band *Rush of Fools* makes the point well. It appears at first glance to be a song entirely focused on God, but read carefully:

You are infinite worth
 When we've not the words
 Our hearts will sing
 We are here on the earth
 And somehow we 're heard
 When our hearts sing to You
 You are more than words on our lips
 We are poor, with nothing to give
 But we want to bring
 More than the song we sing to praise You,
 We praise You³³

A close look at the syntax of this chorus reveals that 10 of the 11 lines contain some derivative of the pronoun “we”. In fact, the only line God gets all to himself is the first one! Is the song bad? That’s debatable. Does it betray an insidious preoccupation with self? That argument seems easy to make. Robert E. Webber, a professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, notes the same tendency. He comments,

A lot of [CWM] is interfacing with narcissism. The dominant word in these songs is I. It's 'I enthrone you,' 'I love you.' The focus is not on God but how I experience God. We congratulate God for being God. Theologically, that says I, a creature of God, have something to contribute to God's well-being.³⁴

Whether intentionally or not, a large number of popular worship songs convey the underlying idea that the story is about us, and God plays a role intended to bolster that story and make it better. It’s not surprising, then, that consumerism’s influence in the shaping of CWM manifest’s itself largely in the form of advertisements. After all, if

³³ From “When Our Hearts Sing”, by Rush of Fools

³⁴ Webber, qtd. in John Leland, “Christian Music's New Wave”

we've been convinced that worship is for us, it's not hard for advertisers to pitch it just as they pitch any other product designed to enhance the human experience.

Consumerism in CWM: The Effects of Advertising

On the advertising front, two trends stand out rather clearly. The first is a focus on the production rather than the intent of worship gatherings. Consider a recent conference series geared towards teenage girls called *Revolve*.³⁵ The advertising blitz for the conference series included a number of flyers and pamphlets, as well as videos and a website. Prevalent in the majority of its materials were the artists and speakers making appearances and performing over the course of the weekend. The website's main page, for instance, contains a picture, and the words "INSIDE OUT: The 2007-2008 Event for Teen Girls from Women of Faith / Amazing Speakers / Fab Music".

Considerably harder to find was information on the *content* of the weekend. What does "inside out" mean? What would the speakers be talking about? What would the bands be singing about? The underlying assumption in the advertisements was that youth would be more interested to see that the *production* included certain elements. The *intent* of the gathering seemed to be of secondary importance.

The second trend in relation to the advertisement of CWM is the glorification of the novel. Our example from my church's worship team once again helps to make the point. Hymns are old news; CWM is fresh and new, thus it must be better. It's an assumption rooted deep in the cultural perspective of consumerism. Kenneson expresses it in plain terms: "One of the dominant culture's deepest prejudices is that the new is

³⁵ For more information, visit www.revolveour.com/tour/.

always better than the old.”³⁶ But there is a problem inherent in this perspective on Christian worship. Granted, improvements should always be welcome, new ideas should likewise pass through a fire of criticism that advertisers prefer not to acknowledge. Consider Apple’s media program, iTunes. In September of 2006, Apple released iTunes 7, a revolutionary new version of the program, which made it possible to buy entire movies online.³⁷ The release got a lot of hype, and the advertisements did a good job of conveying the image of a solid program with necessary improvements. But when the release was made available, users soon found the program to be wrought with *bugs*. Several mistakes had been made in it’s programming, and it took Apple several months to release subsequent versions of the program and correct the errors.³⁸

In the end, the program worked just fine, and most would argue that it is indeed better than it’s predecessor. But there was a testing period. Even in the midst of positive messages being sent by Apple’s advertisements, the plain reality of things was that the program wasn’t ready for use. In the world of computer media players, this oversight is minimal. After all, what’s the worst that could happen? A few folks lose some audio files, a few computers freeze; there’s no real harm done. But in the world of Christian worship, a new idea that hasn’t yet received the appropriate Biblical evaluation³⁹ has the capacity to do immense damage if it still has *bugs*. If the success of CWM is dependent on the quality of it’s advertisements, those inadequacies will be intentionally overlooked in order to convey a product that’s ready for market. With that in mind, Christian worship stands at risk of becoming something that looks less like a Christian discipline

³⁶ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 67.

³⁷ Apple Inc, “Apple Announces iTunes 7 with Amazing New Features”.

³⁸ Mann, “iTunes 7 bugs causing headaches?”.

³⁹ As per 1 John 4:1.

and more like the rest of the musical genres that depend on the same advertising medium for success, which leads us to another of consumerism's fruits in the world of CWM: the idea that worship of God should be thoroughly entertaining.

Consumerism in CWM: The Emphasis on Entertainment

Every year at Eastern University, the campus holds a sort of church fair. The basic idea seems to be that local churches get a chance to pitch a tent somewhere student traffic is high, and for one day they can do their best to lure you in with videos, flyers, and pleasant-looking representatives. Perhaps that perspective is a bit jaded (certainly the churches participating had good intentions, and many students were able to connect with church families as a result of that day). Still, I was surprised to see how intentionally some churches pursued the idea that worship at their church would be more entertaining than worship with *those other guys*. One flyer I was handed literally read in bold letters down the front; "We have drums, bass, and guitars!" The assumption of the church seemed to be that if worship didn't feel like a rock concert, no discerning college student would be interested.

An example helps to make the point. A great litmus test for the genuine nature of a *worship time* would be a power failure. Imagine it: The band is rocking, the singers are really belting it out, the pre-chorus swells and the drums stumble into the chorus and then...blackness. A loud pop signals a power failure in the speakers, and suddenly the band careens off course with all the momentum it had just moments before. The singers trail off and the guitarists stop strumming. The drummer freezes like a deer in headlights,

not wanting to be the only one still making noise. And then what? For a congregation looking to be entertained, the ride stops there. But a congregation determined to glorify God would carry that song through to the end, singing even louder than before. For those people, the instruments were only ever a pleasant and welcome help in doing the thing they showed up at church to do.

Of course, staging a power failure at your local church could get you into trouble, especially because if what we've already explored about the immense impact of consumerism on CWM is true, the congregation isn't likely to pull through in fine style. If the mentality that worship ought to be entertaining is predominant, it's much more likely that you'll have a room full of disgruntled congregants waiting for the show to start back up again.

It's worth acknowledging that some large scale worship events appear to have taken a step away from this bend towards entertainment. In recognizing the danger of such expectations, they instead foster an entirely different set of expectations. In place of promises to entertain, some events promise to connect the worshipper with God directly.⁴⁰ In the world of *worship events*, the expectation of an *experience* with God is not uncommon, but that raises another often unexplored question. In an industry that stakes its livelihood on its ability to meet expectations, how much of CWM's success is God's activity? How much might instead be the forces of coercion and manipulation?

⁴⁰ Consider as an example the "Passion Experience Tour", a worship concert series that puts the expectation of "Experience" right there in the title. See www.thejesusunderground.com for more details.

Consumerism in CWM: Crowd Manipulation in Gatherings of Worship

It's important to note at this point that the nature of CWM is not and should not be entirely confined to how it's utilized in concert settings. That being said, CWM's form and function in those settings is often what trickles down to the congregational level, so if something like crowd manipulation runs rampant at larger venues, it will inevitably rear its head in the local church if CWM is the common thread between the two settings. With that in mind, there's an interesting dynamic present when a band stakes its livelihood on the success of its *worship times*. Say, for instance, a big-name worship leader is holding an event purported to be an intense time of meeting with God, but God decides he doesn't want to show up. Granted, it's only hypothetical, but God *can* do whatever he wants, after all. Imagine, then, that God tells this worship leader that he's not coming. The worship leader at that point can do one of two things. Option number one is honestly saying to his audience, "Folks, I don't know why, but God's not here tonight. I encourage you to pray and ask for his presence, but you might only end up with some nice music at the end of this thing." Option number two is for the worship leader to convince himself, along with everyone else, that God is powerfully present and moving. He could easily convey it with his words and actions, and at the end of the night, everyone may be convinced that they experienced God, regardless of whether or not they actually did. It's a hard position to be in if you're the worship leader, because if you choose the road of total sensitivity and honesty, you might have bad nights, which translate to a bad image, which translates to bad ticket sales. Professional musicians who stake their livelihood on the success of their worship music *need* it to be successful,

which means that they *need* people to believe that what they're experiencing has real power. It seems that under those circumstances, anyone with charisma could easily become a manipulator, willingly or not, out of sheer necessity.

This is cause for concern both on the concert level as well as the individual church level. We've already established that CWM caters well to the postmodern emphasis on personal feelings and emotion. This may not be a bad thing on it's own, but it seems that when CWM's emotional potency is used as a tool to create *experiences* that draw people in, it ceases to be a tool of the Holy Spirit and borders on a carnival trick. Of course, whether or not this is happening in any given instance is difficult, if not impossible to detect. The presence and activity of God are notoriously hard to note, statistically speaking, so the issue remains one of individual discernment. Daniel Frankforter sums it up well by saying,

Compulsion of God is impossible, but manipulation of God's people is not. Worship leaders must, therefore, constantly guard against the temptation to fabricate facsimiles of religious experiences for their followers.⁴¹

⁴¹ Frankforter, *Stones for Bread*, 19.

Protecting the Future:

CWM's Potential Implications for the Teenage Perspective on Christian Worship

Every summer a close friend of mine would go to a small town in England to do youth ministry. She would always come back with a mix of enthusiasm and disappointment. Last year was the worst of all. After she finished showing me pictures of the trip, we got to talking about why she was so frustrated.

“It’s just that there’s no support from the church at all,” She told me, “They just...put up with the kids. They don’t really care if they come. In fact, they’d probably be glad if kids *didn’t* show up.” I was quite for the most part. It was one of those moments when contributing would have been a hindrance. I could tell she needed to vent. “They just don’t see it. They’re all so old! In ten years, *there won’t even be a church*. All they care about is keeping things the way they are. They don’t care about the kids and they can’t see that those kids are the future of their church!”⁴²

I’ve heard similar comments before, but understanding it in the context of a church sinking in it’s own stubbornness made it all the more potent. Young people really do play a significant role in the future of the church. Understanding the context they live in and ministering to them on terms they understand isn’t just a novel idea on the list of potential ministries the church might want to consider. Youth ministry is part of the lifeblood in a church - it’s the promise that in ten years, the church won’t be completely gone.

That being said, it’s critical to spend some energy in consideration of the implications the current form of CWM has for teenagers, both those in the church

⁴² Paraphrased from a conversation in August, 2007.

currently and those who may eventually become a part of it. How has the teenage perspective on Christian worship been informed by the rising popularity of CWM? We've established that in its current form, CWM is an entity influenced primarily by history, culture, and consumerism. It's then fair to assume that it's likely manifesting itself both negatively as well as positively in the minds and hearts of teenagers. By reentering into conversations with several scholars and youth workers from the first half of our study, we'll explore both ends of CWM's potential spectrum of influence. By considering how CWM in its current form might be affecting the teenage understanding of worship both negatively as well as positively, it's well within the realm of possibility for the leaders of that rising generation to do away with the negative and reinforce the positive.

Negative Implications

Walt Mueller muses about an experience he had at a youth conference concerning student ministry. The story was about a youth worker who, every day on his way to his office, would see the same group of teens talking outside the church where he worked. He could see them through his office window, and he would often pray for wisdom concerning how to reach them. Ironically, the man ended up in the same conference session as the teenagers he was trying to reach. In a moment of boldness, he openly asked them in front of everyone how he could reach out to them. Their answer was startlingly simple: "Just come out and talk to us!"⁴³ The underlying message of Mueller's story is the idea that genuine ministry requires personal contact. Most youth workers

⁴³ Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 171.

would agree, and it's been my own experience that personal discipleship with students seems to be far more effective than large-scale, "event" style activities. But that raises an interesting question in respect to CWM's large-scale worship concerts. Is worship in this generation being modeled largely by on-stage personalities? If the words of the students in Mueller's story may in some way summarize the attitudes of an entire generation, the cry of "come out and talk to us" is certainly not met adequately by the inaccessible *superstar worshipper* on stage at a concert. It's worth considering that one of CWM's negative fruits is a teenage preoccupation with Christian pop superstars over more accessible role models of the faith. Regardless of the content in those meetings, and whether or not God is receiving worship during the concerts, teens are inevitably subjected to a concert environment which may very well leave them a bit *star struck*.

My own experience supports this pattern. I've been to several concerts, both Christian and secular. In a secular concert, the anticipation builds as the headliners take their turn warming up the crowd. Then, when the main act marches up, the audience explodes with praise and excitement. They sing and shout and clap because the source of their anticipation and joy has finally arrived. Of course, the average Christian response to that scenario might be something like, "And at a Christian concert, that excitement is directed at God!" But that doesn't seem to be the way it usually happens. In my experience, Christian concerts look just like secular concerts in that moment when the main act shows up. The audience explodes, and it doesn't really matter how many times the lead singer points to the sky; they're all cheering for him. A generation raised to believe that these people are the ones most deserving of influence over their lives are at

risk of missing the power in things like small groups and mentoring relationships. If CWM is aiding that trend, it may be in need of some re-evaluation.

On a similar note, CWM may be communicating to teenagers that worship, and indeed Christianity as a whole, requires very little of them aside from their attendance. When worship is conceived as a form of entertainment, a reality we've already identified, teenagers could easily come under the assumption that worship happens on the stage, and their role is one of support and ascent from the safety of the audience. The musical style of CWM may be a contributing factor to this threat. Consider the picture painted by Daniel Frankforter as he reflects on an experience he had during a worship time at a large church in the Midwest:

In place of traditional hymns, the people sang 'praise choruses'. Each of these consisted of a few phrases, repeated endlessly and set to a simple, swinging melody that lulled the singer into a dreamlike state. Whatever emotional intensity the choruses had was derived from their elaborate instrumental accompaniments. Worshippers never sang alone, but provided backup for a cantor whose amplified voice soared over theirs. A cantor would, from time to time, break loose with an improvised cadenza - to the delight of the audience.⁴⁴

In an environment of worship so seemingly self-sufficient, it would be easy for a naturally hesitant teenager to check out completely, sit back, and enjoy the show. When worship concerts are so well produced as to create an atmosphere of worship with or without a worshipping audience, teens may find it all too easy to leave the worship to the professionals and text message their friends instead. Kenneson talks about the delicate balance between God's gifts and our initiative. He reasons, "Grace and effort, gift and

⁴⁴ Frankforter, *Stones for Bread*, 58.

work: these must be held together.”⁴⁵ This balance mustn’t be left out in the world of CWM. Might teens be hearing from their worship leaders, “Just show up and we’ll do the rest. If you didn’t meet with God, then we’ll revamp our strategy for next time!” It’s a problem in part because underneath those assumptions is the assumption that genuine worship doesn’t necessitate any premeditated alterations in lifestyle. It’s a *come as you are* mentality, but can a young man in youth group really expect to honor and glorify God in worship if he’s sleeping with his girlfriend every night? Somebody needs to communicate to him that it’s about grace *and* effort.

CWM has also begun exhibiting another interesting tendency. It could be the result of it’s commercial success, or perhaps it’s due to it’s extraordinary potency in post-modern culture. For one reason or another, CWM has begun monopolizing the language of worship, creating an understanding among young people in particular that it’s the very definition of Christian worship. The effect is such that if a teenager dislikes singing, they’re likely to rule out worship as an available Christian discipline. If they dislike CWM’s selection of songs, the result is the same: worship becomes an inaccessible entity. The implications are twofold. First and foremost, any teenager who finds CWM to be distasteful may mistakenly assume that the thing they dislike is worship of God, when in reality they’re distastes are much more temporal. The second implication is that when CWM is presented as the sole form of Christian worship, a sort of dualism will likely flare up. Mueller describes it as the splitting up of life into two spheres: one sacred, and one secular.⁴⁶ When worship can be ended cleanly at the end of a four minute song, it becomes much too easy for it’s participants to revert back to *life as usual*,

⁴⁵ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 19.

⁴⁶ Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 160.

or at best, anxiously await the next *time of worship*. The teenage tendency to “emphasize the letter of the law over the spirit” makes them even more susceptible to this mentality of compartmentalization.⁴⁷

Another factor in CWM that we’ve already explored is its tendency to dilute the theology of modern worship songs for the sake of simplicity. It’s especially interesting because only decades ago, songs used for worship in the church contained comparatively high theology, and the trend towards simplicity runs in parallel to the postmodern trend of emphasizing emotion over reason. The emphasis of emotion in and of itself is not altogether bad, as we’ve already discussed. But a generation that worships God entirely with their hearts and never mentally assents to his attributes could be troublesome. In my discussion with Dr. Ramirez, he cited his own experiences to further clarify the issue:

...if you want to have something that speaks of God: the person of God and the attributes of God, there is no contemporary music. Then you turn around and you have 100 songs about Jesus. And they speak mostly about the relationship between “me and Jesus”, which makes them “me” centered, rather than Jesus centered. So out of the 100 you start with, you find about 20 that concern Jesus and his attributes. That’s a very imbalanced theological spectrum.⁴⁸

Although we’ve already established that the primary function of worship is not teaching, the malleable nature of teenagers invariably causes them to consider everything they participate in as a teaching experience. Whether or not a young person sets out to re-imagine God based on the songs they sing about him, it’s inevitable that their view will change (or fail to change) based on the content of the music they utilize in worship. For this reason, the *narrow theological spectrum* of CWM as a result of postmodernism’s de-

⁴⁷ Tripp, Paul qtd. in Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 31.

⁴⁸ Transcribed from a personal interview on October 31, 2007.

emphasis of reason could stunt the spiritual growth of a generation that embraces such music.

The final danger of CWM is perhaps the most potent, because it risks not only doing damage to the teenage perspective on Christian worship, but also doing damage to itself by misrepresenting its intended purpose. The danger is a confusion of goals in Christian worship. A story from a youth group I helped to lead several years ago helps to clarify the issue. The group was made up mostly of curious junior high students who had no formal roots in the church. They came from a multitude of backgrounds, were highly energetic, and had no exposure whatsoever to CWM. From the perspective of the youth leaders, this was problematic, their assumption being that if the teens didn't learn CWM, they could never worship God. Being a musician is both a blessing and a curse, and in this instance, it manifested itself as the latter. Because I was the only guitar player, I was repeatedly urged to "teach them some worship songs". I was hesitant, but the argument from the leadership was passionate and relentless.

"They've had no exposure to worship," they would say, "They need to hear a music style they're familiar with. Maybe they'll invite their friends. You've got to help us get them into it." Never mind the obvious assumption that I, as the musician, was the only one qualified to teach teenagers about worship. The bigger issue in this case was the confusion of goals. All too often, CWM is utilized less as a tool to worship God in song, and more as a method of youth evangelism. The style of CWM contributes well to this misunderstanding. It's often a musical style that's extremely relevant to young people, so youth leaders understandably connect the dots and assume that getting their teens involved in CWM will change their hearts and draw in their skeptical friends. The

trouble is that when worship is imagined as the means to another end, the means to worship are often overlooked. The result is a room full of confused teenagers with little or no understanding of what worship actually is. The intent of CWM is rarely explained clearly, because often it's intent is evangelism, and telling a teenager that you're about to evangelize them may very well spoil things. It boils down to a question of goals. If the goal is to help cultivate a lifestyle of worship, then CWM is indeed helpful. But if the goal is to help a student understand who they are, who God is, and how they go together, Contemporary *Worship* Music typically falls short of addressing those needs.

But it's the nature of CWM, and indeed the nature of God, to defy expectations. It's only fair to admit that in the world the spiritual, absolutes are for God and God alone. With that being said, there are instances when CWM has powerfully positive effects on young people in spite of the reasonable concerns we've already explored. My own story is a witness to this strange power, and it serves well to demonstrate the last angle of our discussion: In some instances, CWM has contributed beautifully to a healthy teenage perspective on Christian worship.

Positive Implications

I remember clearly my first exposure to CWM as a teenager. I was on a weekend retreat at an Evangelical Bible camp, and the band was playing an acoustic version of Darrell Evans' "Let the River Flow". I remember seeing people around me raising up their hands and thinking to myself, "Well this is certainly an inappropriate time for questions!" But about halfway into the song, something happened to me. I stopped

analyzing my surroundings. I stopped thinking about what I might look like to my Catholic parents. I stopped thinking about what I might look like to the people on either side of me (their eyes were closed anyway). It started as merely moving my mouth in the shape of the words, and it never grew louder than a whisper. *But I was singing.* At the end of that night, something inside of me had changed. I had been contemplating change the entire weekend, but in that moment when my lips began to move, there was an outward expression that set a new pace for my life. I've been going strong ever since, and even though I'm almost sure I didn't understand a word of what I sang that night, I still believe that worship happened. The band had somehow managed to speak my language long enough to give me a chance to respond back to God in the familiar tongue of pop music. The conclusion from my own experience is undeniable. On some levels, CWM is powerfully effective and wonderfully blessed. While it's immensely important to be critical of something so novel, criticisms taken seriously will inevitably leave holes in the object of their criticism. If the positive elements of CWM are not taken into account with the negative, there will be nothing to compensate for its inadequacies, and the ministry of CWM will be forever incomplete. Consider the following unlikely scenario as an introduction to our discussion:

“Pastor, I have a problem.” The youth pastor welcomed the obviously concerned mother into his office. She had two students in his senior high ministry. “Jeremy has been listening to worship music on the bus ride to school. I caught him with it this morning.” Confused, the youth pastor made a face to convey his puzzlement. The bereaved mother continued. “I just don't think he understands what worship music *is*. He's listening to it like it's some kind of song you hear on the radio. I don't think he's

really worshipping at all. It has to stop, but he has so many worship CDs - I'm not sure I can confiscate them all. What should I do?"

This story is obviously fictional, the point being that no Christian parent in their right mind would question their teenager's preference of worship music over secular. It's one of CWM's most obvious benefits in terms of how young people understand the worship of God. Worship music is typically pleasing to the ear, fun, and done in a style that young people can easily connect with. If nothing else, teenagers embracing CWM are embracing the word "worship" with a myriad of positive associations. In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. There is, of course, a valid concern from the perspective of discerning leaders that teenagers may be misunderstanding worship entirely. But consider a similar scenario from the Bible: In Philippians 1:17-18, Paul addresses the concern from his congregants that people are ministering in Jesus' name for the wrong reasons. Doing some very loose exegesis shapes the scenario to look similar to our concern about CWM. In both cases, the issue is that a Christian ministry may potentially be perpetuated for motives other than those behind the ministry originally. But Paul's response could easily be the same today as it was in Philippians: "Whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."⁴⁹

Along similar lines, CWM has the very helpful tendency of putting Christian worship into a language and context that teenagers can easily connect with. The most popular language is rock music, and the subsequent context is that of a concert. With the criticisms of this format we've already explored in mind, it's worth acknowledging that if the discipline of worship isn't made available to teenagers in the language they speak, it's unreasonable to expect them to worship God at all. That being said, CWM does a

⁴⁹ Holy Bible, Philippians 1:18b

tremendous job of taking a traditionally stoic and inaccessible thing like the music of Christian worship and putting a party hat on it. Consider Walt Mueller's example from the world of evangelism. He explains that our failure to effectively share the gospel is fundamentally a failure to understand the unique perspective of young people. It's our "inability or unwillingness to hear the nuances of their unique worldview and experience *before* attempting to answer their cries."⁵⁰ The same principle applies to the realm of Christian worship. If worship leaders are unable or unwilling to dive into the world of the postmodern teenage mind and better understand how it works, they'll never be effective as catalysts for Christian worship among that age group.

A recent experience I had at a ministry conference serves as a very tangible example of this idea. In between songs, the worship band's leader made several comments on the contemporary nature of their band, and their effort to worship in a format that was accessible to today's generation. His comments centered around a particular instrument - the Gibson SG electric guitar. He first explained that it's traditionally been used by heavy rock bands such as AC/DC. Then he made the interesting comment that the SG is not inherently evil just because it's been traditionally used to play what many would consider to be "the Devil's music". In his words, "The SG is a good guitar, but the enemy has been using it. Well, we're taking back the SG." Without naming it directly, this worship leader was responding to the popular criticism that, in making use of rock, CWM presents itself in a format that's doomed from the start. The argument is that the language itself, the language of pop/rock music, is inherently evil. The argument is too lengthy to explore here, but imagine applying that logic to everything. Certainly, the first building ever created was not a church, and yet the church

⁵⁰ Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 19.

makes use of the form, because the *idea* of a building is itself good. It's arguable that when Christians meet inside of it, the building is sanctified and becomes an instrument to glorify God. In the same way, the argument could be made that the language and context of contemporary rock music is sanctified by its application in CWM. Its positive fruits in my own experience indicate that this is the case.

In all of our comments on CWM's tendency to run with the grain of postmodern culture, there are a few instances in which it is a beautifully countercultural phenomenon. Two trends stand out among the rest as radical contrasts between CWM and the dominant culture. Looking more closely at the trends of community over fragmentation and hope over pessimism is a fitting way to conclude our exploration of the positive elements of CWM concerning the teenage understanding of worship.

Phil Kenneson talks about postmodern culture's tendency to divide the world into fragments of personal, miniaturized worlds, each containing specific interests and relationships. His conclusion is an appropriate way to summarize a troublesome reality:

Thus we have personal pan pizzas, personal computers, and personal relationships with Jesus...The church is nice if it helps, but it certainly isn't essential to who I am as a Christian.⁵¹

But this is where CWM, maybe for the first time, looks less like an accommodation of cultural realities and more like a solution for cultural ailments. CWM is a powerfully communal experience. Whether in a concert, a church service, or a youth group, CWM is almost always imagined as something you do *together* with your peers. By making the songs easy and fun to sing, it can be remarkably easy to engage an entire room full of timid teens. For students in the midst of a cultural ocean that does everything within its

⁵¹ Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 92.

power to isolate them from each other, understanding worship as a communal activity can be beautiful and refreshing.

Consider the rise of the internet as an example of enforced fragmentation. As of 2006, roughly 60 million people were reported to be using the internet regularly in America alone.⁵² And yet in a digital world, some of the most popular internet applications are those which foster the development of community. According to a 2007 national survey of teenagers conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 55% of all online American youths ages 12-17 use online social networking sites like “Facebook” or “MySpace”.⁵³ Both of those websites are seeing tremendous growth as the internet itself grows in size and popularity. Mueller recognizes the same trend, naming postmodernism as a cultural mindset that “fosters a longing for connections and permanence.”⁵⁴ The reality that teens are being systematically isolated makes CWM’s application in churches and youth groups all the more effective and important.

Along the same lines, it’s worth mentioning that effective youth ministry must be unanimously approved by the youth themselves. Mueller notes the teenage habit of moving in clusters. The underlying point of his observations concerning youth ministry is that nothing works if it’s not approved by the majority.⁵⁵ It’s reminiscent of watching young children play soccer. In a children’s soccer game, an interesting group dynamic takes place that coaches often call “the beehive effect.” The general idea is that since no child is completely sure of their role in the game, they just follow the pack. The result is a hoard of children avidly toting after a soccer ball up and down the field. The teenage

⁵² Horrigan and Rainie, “The Internet’s Growing Role in Life’s Major Moments”.

⁵³ Lenhart and Madden, “Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview”.

⁵⁴ Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 72.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

mindset concerning life direction is not much different. Naturally self-conscious, no teen wants to himself standing in the middle of the field by himself. To combat the potential for such embarrassment, he watches carefully to see what has gained popular approval. In the world of Christian ministry, CWM has already begun to enjoy that privilege, and it seems to be using it's influence in fine style. It's a much-needed push in the direction of community. It's a unified goal: singing to God together, as a community. In a culture that longs deeply for community, CWM meets that need in one of the healthiest ways possible.

The other cultural trend towards which CWM acts as a healing balm is pessimism. Not long ago, the History channel ran a special entitled "1968 With Tom Brokaw". It was essentially a socio-historical survey focused on the period of time leading up to the tumultuous year of 1968. To watch it was to gain insight into why postmodern culture, at least in America, currently has so few manifestations of hope. In 1968, America was losing a war in Vietnam, had recently lost a visionary president, and was in the final leg of the civil rights movement. For many, it was a grim picture, and it's not surprising that the mentality born in those tumultuous times was one of extraordinary pessimism.

Today, that pessimism manifests itself in the lives of teenagers in countless ways. Perhaps one of the most obvious is Mueller's observation that teenagers today are very skeptical of metanarrative.⁵⁶ The idea that a story might exist which is grander than anything teens can imagine on their own is not a picture typically painted by the generations before them. Add to that the unlikelihood of that story being completely good and completely true, and it's not surprising that when CWM focuses it's content on such a metanarrative, it has received a tremendous response from it's participants.

⁵⁶ Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 63.

Consider the example of Australia's *Hillsong United*. The lyrics of their songs drip with the language of metanarrative, and their most recent album release, *All of the Above*, quickly became Number 1 on iTunes' chart of Christian music digital album sales after its 2007 release.⁵⁷ A block of lyrics from one of that album's recent songs is a good example of how *Hillsong United* effectively communicates the truth of a Biblical story that's powerfully optimistic:

Only you can mend the broken heart
 And cause the blind to see
 Erase complete the sinners past
 And set the captives free
 Only you can take the widows cry
 And cause her heart to sing
 Be a father to the fatherless
 Our savior and our king
 We will be your hands, we will be your feet
 We will run this race
 In the darkest place, we will be your light
 We will be your light⁵⁸

Words like these stand in drastic contrast to the overtly pessimistic songs of their secular counterparts. As CWM embraces a sort of eschatological optimism, the response from teenagers seems to be overwhelmingly positive. In a generation which is hearing over and over again, "Things are only getting worse", the cry from CWM seems to be, "God will make it better." From the perspective of Biblical worship, this can hardly be assessed as anything but good.

⁵⁷ Jackson, Kevin, "Youth Movement Boosts Hillsong United Album to No. 1".

⁵⁸ From "Solution", by Hillsong United.

The Sun is Still Rising: A Conclusion

Understanding how CWM has taken its current form and forecasting what its effects might be on the next generation is only the beginning. As one called to be a worship leader in the church of the 21st century, I understand this especially clearly. As we've seen, CWM is an entity with many sides. As a result, an argument for or against its use in the church becomes anything but easy. But perhaps the most appropriate response to CWM is not be one of absolute allegiance or stubborn disapproval. Perhaps the best medium in which to approach this particular trend is the medium of discussion.

For this reason, I've drawn no ethical conclusions about CWM or its impact on teenagers. The discussion is not yet over. Likewise, the development of CWM itself has not yet come to completion. The format is still changing rapidly, and some of its weaknesses are already being acknowledged and corrected.⁵⁹ There's a breadth perspectives on what CWM should look like for young people, and an exploration of those varying perspectives would be worthwhile. Might it even be fair to say that CWM is still in its infant stages? If such is the case, what might we expect as it comes to full maturity? Even without knowing the answer, it's reasonable to claim that it would be unfair and unwise to criticize CWM too harshly at its start.

In the mean time, it's my opinion that discernment will prove to be the key ingredient to success with CWM. As the discussion continues, and the genre matures, worship leaders will have to be on the lookout for how the shaping forces of CWM

⁵⁹ Louie Giglio, for instance, is a contemporary worship leader who's taken up the mantle of emphasizing a life not lived for the self (See www.268generation.com for more information). It's a radical step in the right direction considering some of the tendencies towards self-interest that we've already touched on.

impact their congregations. What exactly should the role of CWM be in a church service? There are certainly risks to letting something so heavily influenced by cultural forces inside the walls of the church. As we've discussed, those shaping forces can have a powerfully negative impact on not just the music of the church, but the life of the church itself. If any of CWM's more insidious influences should penetrate the walls of sound Christian doctrine (as surely they already have in some instances), reforms are in order. But even in reform, the mindset of discernment will protect CWM from being dismissed entirely. By acting both critically and compassionately, firmly and flexibly, the Christian church of the 21st century could usher in an intensity of musical worship unrivaled by generations before it. CWM has the potential to be a tool in that process. It's my belief that CWM can become beautiful. In some instances, it looks to have already shown itself to be. What happens next will be a combination of God's activity and man's prayerful discernment.

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