

CHAPTER 1



Orientation

Time magazine recently noted that Christian Contemporary Music (CCM) is making a major impact upon the popular recording industry. More and more radio stations are adopting “religious music” formats, consisting largely of CCM. For twenty-five years, many churches have been using CCM worship songs (which I will call Contemporary Worship Music, or CWM).¹ Yet both CCM in general and CWM in particular have been quite controversial among Christian writers, especially those who deal with the theology of worship.

The Purpose of This Book

In this book I would like to try to sort out some of the issues surrounding CWM and to defend a limited use of it in Christian worship. In my view, some of the criticisms of CWM are valid up to a point; but they are usually overstated and not adequately balanced in relation to other legitimate considerations. When seen in proper perspective, these criticisms should keep us from naively accepting everything in the CWM literature. Certainly it would

not be right to abandon traditional hymnody entirely in favor of CWM. But CWM may, and should, in my judgment, play a significant role in the worship of the church.

I also intend to look closely at the assumptions and methods lying behind the current critiques of CWM. For as I indicated in the preface, I believe that these background questions have an importance beyond that of CWM. Some of those issues are

- the relation of Christ to culture,
- the relation of Scripture to tradition in theology,
- the relative priority of evangelism and nurture in the life of the church,
- the relation of divine sovereignty to human responsibility,
- the issue of contextualization (communicating in the language of our hearers),
- the relation of the intellect to the emotions,
- the place of aesthetic judgments in matters of worship,
- the nature of the Christian maturity we seek to encourage in worship,
- the nature of fairness in theological debate.

I fear that there is much confusion today on these matters among even the better evangelical theologians.

Where I Am Coming From

My position on CWM is bound to be controversial in the ecclesiastical and academic theological circles I inhabit. I am a Reformed² theologian, an enthusiastic subscriber to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. As a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, I also subscribe to the “Three Forms of Unity” of the continental European Reformed churches: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. In these Reformed circles, there is very little sympathy among theologians, or even among popular writers, for CWM, though it has made some inroads into the worship of the churches.

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The reader should understand, therefore, that my support of CWM has not been a reflex of my history. I have come to this position somewhat in defiance of my environment. I'm familiar with the arguments of confessional Protestants against the "dumbing down" of traditional worship caused by CWM. But I have not been persuaded. I believe that some of my confessional brothers and sisters have done injustice to CWM, and I hope in this volume to take some steps toward righting that wrong.

I also come to my position somewhat in defiance of my musical background. I took private lessons in classical piano for eight years; organ for five; clarinet for two; and harmony, counterpoint, and improvisation for three or four. In school I played in both band and orchestra, and in church sang in the choir. My mother wanted me to learn to play popular music as well, and I did take some lessons in that, too, for a while. But they never made much of an impact on me. I did enjoy the pieces, but my "popular" playing was always clunky, uninspired, inept. I sounded like an amateur classical musician trying to play popular pieces, and indeed that is what I was.

As a classical pianist and organist, I never came near to recital quality, but I did become a somewhat above average church musician. Given my other interests and limited talents, I probably could not have reached a higher level of performance. But, by God's providence, I have been able to use my musical training to serve the church.

Although I took no music courses in college, I continued to practice classical music. Grieg's A Minor Piano Concerto had been the apex of my piano studies in high school. After that I worked from time to time on concerti by Mozart, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff, along with Beethoven sonatas and pieces by Bach, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, and others. In my younger days, I would often spend one evening a week playing two-piano and four-hand pieces with a pianist friend or joining another friend in pieces for clarinet and piano. I have played over half of the organ works of Bach, my favorite composer, the complete organ works of Mendelssohn, Franck, and Brahms, and more recent music of composers such as Widor, Dupré,

Mulet, and Langlais. (My teacher was a student of Dupré, hence the emphasis on the French composers.) I have accompanied Handel's *Messiah* on a number of occasions, and other works such as Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and several Bach cantatas and motets. Most everywhere I have been, I have served as organist, pianist, and/or choir director in a local church. Until 1980, I worshiped exclusively in churches that were very traditional in their liturgical orientation. My serious exposure to CWM did not begin until age 41; I am now 58.

To this day I love classical music far more than any other musical genre, though I also enjoy at least occasional exposure to jazz and to older pop music. I don't have much of an ear for contemporary rock, and I don't like the moral and spiritual messages it tends to convey; hence we don't play it at home. I listen to classical CDs³ and the local classical music station. I listen to CWM only to keep somewhat abreast of the movement, and to get ideas for songs to use in worship. CWM is not one of my personal musical passions.

I don't like to boast about my relatively small musical accomplishments, but I do want readers to know something of the background I bring to this study. Although I am not a professional musician, I don't think that I can fairly be regarded as a musical ignoramus or cultural Philistine. I believe that I know music at least as well as the average Reformed theologian. Nevertheless, I do think there is musical, as well as theological, value in CWM, and I will try in these pages to justify that appreciation.

So my views of CWM contradict what you might expect to hear from someone of my theological and musical background. But in a deeper sense, readers should not be so surprised. For one of the most important functions of scholarship, whether theological, musical, or whatever, is to rethink the conventional wisdom. We revere Luther and Calvin because they had the courage to rethink, from the ground up, the current traditions about salvation and worship. They were respectful of tradition, as all Christians should be. But they were not bound to it, only to the God of Scripture. In this volume, I hope, in a small way, to emulate their example.

What Is CWM?

In this section I will seek to define CWM descriptively, leaving evaluation to later points in the book. I know that description and evaluation cannot be completely separated. Some readers may think that this section amounts to positive evaluation simply because it fails to include criticism. But my goal here is primarily to achieve some common ground between critics and defenders of CWM. If we can agree on what we are talking about, then we can proceed more seriously to debate its merits. I fear that many critics of CWM base their criticisms on a few examples rather than on a thorough study of the music. I will seek to describe the broad shape of the genre, mentioning both points that are conducive to criticism and others that I shall find useful to my defense.

I shall define “CWM” fairly narrowly. The phrase will not serve to label all worship music that is both contemporary and Christian. Krzysztof Penderecki, for example, has written “esoteric church music” for our time, but his music is certainly not CWM.⁴ Rather, CWM designates a particular movement in Christian music, which originated in California in the late 1960s.⁵

About that time, many young people from the sixties’ counterculture professed to believe in Jesus. Convinced of the barrenness of a lifestyle based on drugs, free sex, and radical politics, “hippies” became “Jesus people.” Doubtless there were many among them who looked on Jesus as just another “trip.” But many became genuine disciples of the Lord.⁶

Historically speaking, awakenings of this kind typically bring changes to the church at large. Unfortunately,⁷ they also tend to create new denominations, as they did in this case. Many joined the new “Calvary Chapels,” founded by the Rev. Chuck Smith, which were particularly focused on reaching and teaching the youth culture. Others joined already-existing fellowships, sometimes by their very presence precipitating change in those bodies, changes of worship, music, and overall church life.

Revivals also tend to produce new outpourings of music. Many biblical references to music occur at spiritual high points in the history of God’s people (see 1 Chron. 16; 2 Chron. 15; 23; 29; 35).

In church history, events such as the Protestant Reformation, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Awakenings, and modern crusade evangelism have all produced new forms of worship music. And the newly evangelized Jesus people of the 1960s produced CWM.

CWM is distributed by a number of publishers and record companies, such as Integrity's Hosanna! Music, Scripture in Song, Birdwing Music, and Mercy Publishing (connected with Vineyard Ministries). The largest publisher-recorder is Maranatha! Music, which grew out of the Calvary Chapel movement.⁸ One can keep fairly abreast of CWM by listening to Maranatha's⁹ series of "Praise" recordings and by looking through the *Maranatha! Music Praise Chorus Book* (hence, MMPCB)¹⁰ which comes out in a new edition every four or five years. This volume serves, practically, as the CWM "canon" for many churches. It is also useful to listen to various CWM recording artists such as Michael Card, Amy Grant, the late Keith Green, Steve Green, Rich Mullins, Twila Paris, Sandi Patty, Michael W. Smith, John Michael Talbot, and James Ward.

Many CWM songs have words from Scripture. The Bible texts are often short, "snippets" as critics like to say. But there are longer texts as well, such as versions of the Lord's Prayer and shorter psalms in their entirety. Leonard Smith's "Our God Reigns"¹¹ paraphrases Isaiah 52:13–53:12, with some interpolations, as does James Ward's pair of songs, "Isaiah 53" and "He Shall Be Satisfied."¹² There are also versions of the Apostles' Creed, such as "This Is What I Believe" by Walt Harrah and John A. Schreiner,¹³ and "In God the Father I Believe," by Frank de Vries, set to music by George Miladin.¹⁴ Graham Kendrick's "We Believe" is not the Apostles' Creed, but it is very much a credal summary of the gospel.¹⁵

In other songs, the words are extra-scriptural and nontraditional, but often very similar to the praises of the Psalms, such as "Great Is the Lord" by Michael W. Smith and Deborah S. Smith.¹⁶ CWM songs are often called "Praise Songs" because praise is such a dominant theme of their texts. But the topical index of MMPCB indicates also calls to worship; songs of assurance; songs about the church or family of God; songs of comfort, commitment, com-

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munion, confession; and so on. I shall have more to say later on the variety of biblical themes reflected in CWM.

Most of the songs are one-stanza “choruses.” Others contain several stanzas with only slight variations between them, such as “Father, I Adore You” by Terrye Coelho.¹⁷ In this piece, the three stanzas are the same, except that the first word changes from “Father” to “Jesus” to “Spirit.” However, there are also a number of songs in MMPCB that have several stanzas and that read much like traditional hymns. Many of these are by Graham Kendrick, such as his “The Servant King”¹⁸ and “Shine, Jesus, Shine.”¹⁹

The tunes and musical arrangements tend to reflect a popular style somewhat like the “soft rock” of the early 1970s.²⁰ It is this style which serves to define CWM in the minds of many, but it would be an exaggeration to say that CWM totally lacks stylistic variety. Even the “soft rock” style permits variation in tempo, major or minor mode, volume, melodic interest, harmonic possibilities, etc., at least as much as the more traditional styles of church music.

And CWM (defined, say, by the above-mentioned books and singers) is not always “soft rock.” James Ward’s music is deeply influenced by African-American gospel music (indeed, by many *kinds* of gospel, as he has pointed out). In MMPCB it is hard not to hear that influence in, for example, Bill Batstone’s “Stand in the Congregation.”²¹ And we must not forget the Messianic Jewish music, popularized by the Liberated Wailing Wall and other Hebrew Christian singers, such as “Trees of the Field” by Stuart Dauermann and Steffi Karen Rubin.²² That music is quite distinctive, with minor keys, yet joyful rhythms, the heritage of a long folk tradition—not at all fairly described by the phrase “soft rock.”

MMPCB also contains country-western influenced music, such as the Gaithers’ “Because He Lives,”²³ and “There’s Something About That Name.”²⁴ There are also older choruses like “I Will Sing of the Mercies,”²⁵ “This Is the Day,”²⁶ “Spirit of the Living God,”²⁷ and “His Name Is Wonderful.”²⁸ And we should not ignore the fact that some of the songs are very reminiscent of traditional hymnody, such as Steven L. Fry’s “Lift Up Your Heads.”²⁹

CWM is, therefore, not totally different from past traditions of

church music. But it is not difficult to distinguish in a general way between CWM and the styles of music found in traditional hymnals: (1) CWM is far more contemporary and popular in its literary and musical idioms, rather than traditional or classical. (2) Most of it consists of one-stanza choruses as opposed to the multi-stanza poetry of traditional hymnody. (3) The texts of CWM tend to be far simpler than those of traditional hymnody. (4) In CWM there is far more emphasis on praise (as opposed to lament, confession of sin, teaching, personal testimony, or supplication) than in traditional hymnody, though other aspects of worship are also present.

CWM and Contemporary Worship

One of the problems in evaluating CWM is taking proper account of its relationship to the broader phenomenon of “Contemporary Worship” (CW). CW is generally understood to be a form of worship that is more “seeker-friendly” than traditional worship models, placing more emphasis on evangelism in worship. CW tends to avoid historic liturgies and old-fashioned language in order better to communicate with modern people.

I shall say more about CW in later chapters. Many critics of CWM deal with it as a mere aspect of CW in writings that concern CW generally rather than CWM in particular. In my opinion that is an inadequate analysis. CWM originated in a particular historical context of revival. It is not the product of someone’s strategy to make worship more contemporary. Indeed, I think that CWM songs can fit well into worship services that are structured along traditional lines; you can have CWM without CW.

Nevertheless, for many people CWM stands or falls with CW. And they are right to the extent that CWM seems to fit *best* into a style of worship in which all the elements, not only the music, speak the language of today. I had hoped that I could deal with CWM independently of CW, without getting into the debates surrounding the latter. But the more I read and think about the subject, the more that hope seems impossible. So in this book I will have some things to say about CW, mostly in its defense. I hope

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the reader will understand, however, that CW is not the *main* concern of this volume, and I don't pretend here to deal adequately with all of the issues surrounding CW. But questions about CWM are regularly intertwined with questions about CW, and so I am reconciled to some level of engagement with the CW controversy.

Notes

1. In my original draft of this book, I called what I was defending CCM. But several readers thought that was much too broad, even though I made plain that I was not defending the use of *all* CCM in worship. "CCM" refers to everything from Christian heavy metal to Maranatha praise choruses, including much that nobody, not even the CCM artists, would recommend for use in worship. And so, I learned, the use of "CCM" would mislead knowledgeable readers. I thought about using the standard phrase "Praise and Worship" (P&W), but I resisted that. This phrase is redundant, since praise is, after all, part of worship. So I have settled on CWM.

2. In my view, "evangelical" is a broad category embracing many more specific ones, such as Lutheran, charismatic, dispensational, fundamentalist, and Reformed. My concern in this book is specifically with Reformed theology, my own tradition, but also with evangelical theology, the broader tradition to which I adhere. I will therefore describe my position either as "evangelical" or as "Reformed," as is appropriate to the context.

3. Mostly the above-named composers and recent church choral music. I do have certain "guilty pleasures" such as Delius and Grainger.

4. Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 167. Dawn also cites an unpublished paper of Thomas Gieschen, which presents a taxonomy of ten different kinds of contemporary worship music.

5. There were other factors, too, in the origin and development of CWM, such as (1) the use of "testimonial music through the leadership of Bill Gaither in the early sixties" (Robert Webber, "Enter His Courts with Praise," in *Reformed Worship* 20 [June 1991], 9), (2) the "body life" movement of the 1970s (Ray Stedman, *Body Life* [Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1972]), (3) the charismatic movement, in which worship styles hitherto distinctive to Pentecostalism were introduced into churches of other traditions. To put the matter in broader perspective: since the Protestant Reformers insisted on congregational singing in the vernacular languages, there has been movement in the churches toward greater congregational participation, less formal structure, more contemporary language, and more popular styles of music. In every generation there has, therefore, been some conflict between advocates of the old and of the new. See my *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), chap. 10.

6. Some of my correspondents have urged me to be more critical of this movement since it was not, of course, characterized by the distinctives of Reformed theology. Some, on this ground, even question whether it was a genuine work of God. I do think that the Jesus people would have been better off had they been taught Reformed theology from the beginning. Nevertheless, in this book I take it as a given that God does work outside the channels of my own tradition. (For some argument to this effect, see my *Evangelical Reunion* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991].) And after seventeen years of living in California and coming to know many of those converted in the 1970s revival, I have no doubt that God was working through that movement. Among many of these people there remains to this day a great love for God's Word and for the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

7. I have argued in *Evangelical Reunion* that denominations are a result of sin, either on the part of existing denominations, or on the part of those forming new denominations, or both. Many otherwise friendly critics have taken my position to be extreme, but I am unmoved. I challenge them to find any scriptural justification for the formation of new denominations. There is *one* church in the New Testament, which Christ bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28), founded on the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), governed by elders whom believers must obey (Heb. 13:17). How could anyone, apart from sin, have dared to found an alternative to that glorious body of Christ?

8. Maranatha! is now part of Word Publishing Company.

9. Or is it "Maranatha!'s"? One hardly knows what to do with exclamation marks attached to words. It is interesting to deal with an industry in which Hosanna! competes with Maranatha!

10. I shall be referring to the Third Edition (in red), published in 1993.

11. MMPCB, 219.

12. In *James Ward His Songs* (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Celebration Press, 1975), 57–60, 54–56.

13. MMPCB, 22.

14. In the *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta and Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), no. 741. But is this CWM? Given its atypical musical style, it is hard to say. There are a number of gray areas in the distinction between what I'm calling CWM and other kinds of contemporary worship music.

15. MMPCB, 65. Other creedal settings worthy of note (thanks to Reggie Kidd): Wes King's "I Believe," Amy Grant's "We Believe in God," Rich Mullins's "Creed." The latter is a studio piece, on Mullins's CD, "Liturgy, Legacy, and a Ragamuffin Band," perhaps not really practical for congregational use, but memorable in many ways.

16. *Ibid.*, 11.

17. *Ibid.*, 151.

18. *Ibid.*, 150.

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19. Ibid., 2. Over the last ten years there has been a “rediscovery of hymns” in CWM publications and recordings. Maranatha’s *100 Hymns, 100 Choruses* (Nashville: Distributed by the Benson Company, 1987) includes songs of both genres, with suggestions for medleys including both. Several recent CDs and tapes from Maranatha! and Hosanna! have included traditional hymns. Occasionally these are arranged with a more CWM style; but sometimes they are presented with pipe organ sounds or other traditional settings.

20. Dawn, *Reaching Out*, 167.

21. MMPCB, 313.

22. Ibid., 103.

23. Ibid., 20.

24. Ibid., 233.

25. Ibid., 66.

26. Ibid., 210.

27. Ibid., 277.

28. Ibid., 108.

29. Ibid., 153.