
Contemporary Worship

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Introduction

The room is electric with anticipation. Filling the auditorium are over two thousand Christians gathered from across a wide metropolitan area, including children, teenagers, and adults. There is the usual buzz of human connection preceding a big event—friends embracing and finding their seats, introductions between attendees, and exchanges of mutual enthusiasm for this night’s purpose. Over thirty congregations from half as many denominations are represented. There is a palpable sense of expectation in the air that has three people gathered in one corner of the auditorium praying for one another, groups laughing in friendship, and a lead worshiper and her musician-team members praying quietly. What is the reason for the gathering? It is not to hear a political pundit or to experience a pop concert, not to rally over a social agenda or dutifully to observe a finely tuned worship service order. The entire reason for the gathering is summed up in the opening words of the first song, known and loved by virtually every person of every age and denomination gathered in the room. It is sung with robust passion that begins to thunder in melody throughout the large hall. Instruments of the age—energetic drums, ethereal keyboards, delayed guitars, and voices in harmony—lead the unison anthem these believers of varied backgrounds choose to sing:¹

Come, now is the time to worship,
Come, now is the time to give your hearts;
Come, just as you are to worship,
Come, just as you are before your God, come.

One day every tongue will confess You are God,
One day every knee will bow;
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
Who gladly choose You now,
Come.²

Exploding across the landscape of the international church is an enigma that demands our attention. Modern worship songs have emerged as a primary discipleship vehicle, guiding

¹ Each of the stories used within this chapter represents experiences at any one of hundreds of contemporary worship events the author has either led, participated in, or been involved with over the past two decades. More personal stories are extracted from dialogues with contemporary worship leaders around the world.

² Brian Doerksen, “Come, Now Is the Time to Worship” (Vineyard Music UK, 2001).

contemporary churches on their courses over the past fifty years. These songs, and the churches that enlist them, have grown in influence and number, radically impacting the grass roots of Christian faith in our generation.

The psalmist asked the question, “Where can I go and meet with God?” The contemporary worship leader responds with a simple answer: “What about here? What about now? Let’s meet with God.” Through simple songs of thanksgiving, celebration, adoration, petition, reflection, and love, believers all across the world are meeting with God in a fresh and living way.

Embracing the Challenges

As we delve into the riches of contemporary worship expression, they present us with a number of immediate challenges. These challenges should, in some way, help us realize why understanding worship and its foundational theology has never been a bloodless enterprise.

First, the contemporary worship movement that has now cascaded into the twenty-first-century human experience may be considered representative of a vast array of forms, liturgies (formal and informal, defined or assumed), styles, and ministry philosophies within Christ-worshipping congregations globally. Conservatively, hundreds of contemporary worship service styles now exist on the church map of today, stretched taut from pegs of ethnic backgrounds, stylistic preferences, theological distinctions, and diverse demographic communities. Our first challenge is to reflect elements of guiding philosophy, practice, and epicentral values moving these faith communities across such a wide, and wild, cultural and theological terrain.

Second, what most of us think of as being “contemporary worship expression” in our day is stagnant in neither form nor style. Our current expressions have been subject to historical process, just as every other mode of worship has been since the inception of Christian faith. To take a snapshot of contemporary worship and its values would be much like pulling out a photo of oneself as a toddler, adolescent, teenager, adult, or senior and declaring that photo to be stylistically reflective of who one has been, is now, or is becoming. There is simply too much to the human personality trudging through time to draw decisive parameters that capture such a “once-and-for-all” glimpse. Contemporary worship is a soul in process. Our second challenge is to pull out a few snapshots, discuss what has not changed and what has, and develop an impression that at the very least entwines our present ideas about contemporary worship expression with a corporate soul in formation.

Third, we must note that what exists as the present worship expression, experience, and exchange with God in the church of today—in all of its streams and forms—is by definition contemporary worship. In other words, worship expression that is contemporary (in existence now) is that in which we all engage at present, encompassing all the shapes and forms of worship expressed across the span of church history. Those expressions are occurring across a living, dynamic church. This living mosaic must be celebrated, expected, and affirmed as we thoughtfully analyze how diverse human communities worship God in culture. Our third challenge is to keep in mind the whole of the church tapestry as we focus on the singular thread of contemporary worship.

There will always be the need for a continual flow of both a vertical and horizontal grace when it comes to the questions of worship. These challenges should evoke the same in this setting.

The Watershed of Music

When most of us think about “contemporary worship,” we think about the music that defines it. What is it about music that makes it such a central topic in worship discussions? Why have the worship enactments of the Eucharist, the public reading of Scripture, and the celebration of other sacraments stood in the shadows while contemporary worship music gets the spotlight? Music has a way of bypassing the mind and engaging the heart. Music has the capacity to stir deep passions and harness the energies of zeal. Music has a way of drawing a community into a deep sense of shared belief and galvanizing that community’s consciousness before God. Music has a way of giving us fresh language with which to interact with God. Music has inherent power and demands our attention both inside and outside of the church.

The musical palate of this generation is very refined, diverse, and highly preferenced. If we ask the question, “Do you like a form of music?” we will inevitably hear the answer, “Yes.” If we then ask the question, “What form of music do you like?” we will inevitably hear divergent answers. One will love Bach, another will love U2, and still another will prefer jazz. Music is passionately loved by the listener, making our opinions about music strong and diverse.

As a result, the music of contemporary worship has become the “face that launched a thousand ships” in the worship tensions of the past decades. For this reason we will focus our discussion primarily on the music of contemporary worship. This will target our thinking toward an individual block that seems to make an entire philosophical and theological Jenga wood block tower wobble. A focus on worship music will beg the “high culture” versus “low culture” debate related to contemporary worship forms, expose the apparent “thinking” and “feeling” divide, and, I hope, build bridges toward understanding contemporary worship that transcend preferences.

A Question of Philosophy

As contemporary worship thrusts itself deep into the heart of the twenty-first-century church, I believe that it precipitates worship dialogues that are fundamentally *philosophical*. I do not believe the issues arising when comparing contemporary worship patterns with other models are primarily issues of direct *biblical* interpretation.

While I purport a strong biblical, practical, and experiential belief in the strength of the contemporary worship expression in the church today, I have no intention of suggesting that contemporary worship music and its expressions are more biblically “correct” than other forms. I believe we would be naïve to think that, in juxtaposing liturgical worship and contemporary worship, we would clearly find one form to be more biblically based. As hard pressed as we would be to read a singular form of liturgy back into the life of a radically diverse early church,³ we would be as equally hard pressed to suggest that early Christian worship was simply a matter of singing highly experiential songs. We may indeed have strong thoughts on the content of either liturgical or contemporary worship, on one’s saturation with culture or lack thereof, on each model’s historical precedent, or on what the long-term implications are of a form of worship. It must be stated, though, that historic worship models have always been *culturally* influenced, born and bred by tradition (and human instinct), and typically resonant with some degree of biblical tenor—whether of the formal ceremonies of Jewish worship or the emotive lyricism of the Psalms.

The power of contemporary worship experience hinges on a philosophical view of human culture and the church’s relationship to that culture. Debates over worship seem to pivot largely

³ Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship,” in *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 4.

on our divergent philosophical views on this topic (though we emphatically lace our arguments with biblical language). Embodying much of the contemporary church's connection with culture, and even defining many contemporary Christians' views of God and faith, is the music flowing from contemporary churches. This music is informed by the evangelical congregational and theological life out of which it flows.

Given these realities, our exploration of contemporary worship will take a particular path toward our goal that will require some patience: An initial "Christ and culture" discussion is in order to give us context. This section will reflect on the church's biblical relationship with culture, on contemporary worship practice, and on the contemporary church that is its womb. An exploration of the values driving contemporary worship expression will follow this, prefaced by a practical discussion on the liturgical preparations for a contemporary worship experience. We will then conclude with a few thoughts on where the contemporary worship movement is headed and the challenges presently facing it. May it be said of us by our journey's end that we did not attach all of our own opinions to God and that our preferences did not become prejudices while we were unaware.

Important Definitions

We will need to define exactly what cross section of our contemporary worship we are addressing, being as internationally and interdenominationally inclusive as possible. Contemporary worship, for our narrowed and working definition, will be this:

Contemporary worship is that expression of worship within the Christian church today marked by the primary usage of contemporarily written worship lyrics and music, is sonically concurrent (to some degree) with the music of popular culture, and is used widely and increasingly across the Protestant (and to some degree, Roman Catholic) spectrum of today's globally worshipping congregations. These expressions of Christian worship music and liturgy are rooted in multiple contemporary cultural idioms, contemporary cultural soundscapes, and contemporary cultural mindsets. Contemporary worship music is typically, and increasingly, used in some proportional mix with more classic forms of worship music.

Additionally, there are a few assumed, biblical definitions of worship that I surmise to be generally shared (though on varying levels emphasized and understood) across the contemporary worshipping church. These will give our adventure a context:

- Worship is the overflow of a life devoted to the glory of God (Acts 2:28).⁴
- Worship is a posture of the heart and is therefore not essentially defined (though it is shaped) by the forms through which we express it (John 4:21–24).⁵

⁴ "You have revealed the paths of life to me; You will fill me with gladness in Your presence" (Acts 2:28).

⁵ "Jesus told her, 'Believe Me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, because salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth' " (John 4:21–24).

- Worship is a living act that encompasses all spheres of life (Rom 12:1).⁶
- Worship is possible because the ultimate worshiper, Jesus Christ, lives within us and draws our hearts toward this ultimate act of allegiance (Col 1:27).⁷

Other points of clarification may have a lesser degree of explicit biblical reference yet are no less vital to our understanding of contemporary worship's place in the historic life of the church:

- Worship expression will, and must, change over time and space.
- Worship is a foundational impulse built into all human beings and will be expressed in some way, shape, or form, proximate or far from its ordained focus.
- Worship is all about God and pertains to me only in that I, in relationship with Him, share in this privileged act of communion.
- Worship is a corporate act in which individuals engage. It is not centrally a private act in which groups engage.⁸

We Come from Somewhere

Finally, I note that I am not a liturgiologist, theologian, or historian. I approach contemporary worship as a studied practitioner of contemporary worship expressions and as a writer of contemporary worship music. I was raised in a Methodist church tradition, came to a decisive faith in Christ in high school, wrestled with God through my university studies in religion and philosophy, and have found myself both pastoring and leading people in worship for the past twenty years. Most of that time I have served within the Vineyard family of churches, which has been a significant catalyst in the modern church's worship renewal. Yet my heart beats strongly for the whole of today's church. I am a great lover of beautiful liturgy, hymnody, community, image, and symbol. My personal movement toward more contemporary forms of worship did not emerge from a negative reaction to traditional forms of worship. Rather, I was drawn to these contemporary forms because they most accurately reflect an identity I hold as a twenty-first-century Christian and artist, and something of the culture that I am called to reach.

I therefore approach contemporary worship on three levels: as a *practitioner* of contemporary worship expression (I am a worship leader); as a *pastor* of contemporary worship expression (I am a pastor and mentor of worship and creative leaders); and as a *perpetuator* of contemporary worship expression (I am a songwriter, teacher, writer, and influencer). I count many of today's

⁶ "Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).

⁷ "God wanted to make known to those among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). It should be noted here that much of contemporary worship music in the past forty years has had a strong emphasis on "our" work in relation to worship, rather than the vital fact that our capacity to draw near to God is itself a gift from God.

⁸ I would contend that the biblical story emphasizes that worship is about a people in relationship to a Person, not primarily about individual persons in relationship to a Person. The psyche of the Eastern writers of the Scriptures, and the overall communal consciousness of the Bible, war against the rampant individualism of Western Christianity. The Reformation regained for us a personal encounter with a gracious God, but alternately convoluted our understanding of the "holy nation" of 1 Peter 2:19 that is the people of God. We may have much to learn from our Orthodox, Catholic, and Celtic mothers and fathers in this regard.

most influential worship leaders, songwriters, and visionaries among my friends, and because of this, I will draw them vicariously to this discussion.

The Guiding Questions of Contemporary Worship Expression: Where We Have Come From

It is the middle of a stormy night on March 9, 1748. A young captain on a slave ship is awakened by cries of “The ship is sinking! The ship is sinking!” Recalling words from a book he is reading called *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, the young man begins a process of conversion that takes years to culminate. Finally, moved by the merciful act of God in extending grace to the worst of sinners—he, a slave-ship officer—John Newton devotes his life fully to the service of Christ. A new song is born in his heart and then into the world. The opening words become a fresh anthem for his day:

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.⁹

The simple song takes on a surge of life in English congregations and feeds both an evangelical revival and the abolition of the slave trade throughout the nation.¹⁰

Why Is Singing So Important?

In a personal interview with Brian Doerksen, respected contemporary worship leader and author of the song, “Come, Now Is the Time to Worship,” Doerksen and I dialogued over the question of why singing is so vital to the worshiping life of a congregation. His reflection introduces us to the essential vitality of contemporary worship expression and our ongoing generational urge to sing songs that we know, love, and own together. Here are Brian’s thoughts:

Why do we sing songs in the first place? We do it because it is something that we can do *together*. There are probably other things that we could do to express our love and our worship to God that would be, in one sense, just as valid. But they’re not easy for us to do together. Yet we can get ten people, or a hundred people, or a thousand, or a hundred thousand—whatever number we choose—and we can all get together and sing a song. That song reflects what is going on in our hearts and our minds, together. There is truth that we’re affirming, but there’s also affection that we’re expressing. That’s why I think that singing as an expression of worship has stood the test of time.¹¹

Is There a Place for a New Song?

The fact that music and worship expression are a welcome part of Christian worship is an assumption we may all share. That creative worship must, and should, arise from human beings in response to the character of God is a celebrated idea across church worship forms. From

⁹ John Newton, “Amazing Grace” (public domain). This hymn was written and published in 1779.

¹⁰ Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 28–31.

¹¹ Brian Doerksen, personal interview, Winter 2000.

Genesis to Revelation, the Scripture itself resounds with the music of our allegiance to one King, and whether the musical expression of worship is implied or overt, we embrace its vitality in the life of the people of God.

- But I have trusted in Your faithful love; my heart will rejoice in Your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord because He has treated me generously (Ps 13:5–6).
- Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; play the lyre to our God (Ps 147:7).

To a lesser degree, today's church embraces the fact that other, more demonstrative expressions of musical and music-related worship may have their place as well across the span of history. We assent, at least mentally, to the reality that dancing and more celebrative music have some type of place historically among the community of the faithful.¹²

- Let them praise His name with dancing and make music to Him with tambourine and lyre (Ps 149:3).

Yet there remains one area of musical worship expression that has traditionally evoked passionate emotions, and even the most virulent of language, within the historic fellowship of Christ. What has inspired such passionate postures of the heart? That arena we might designate as the “new song.” Numerous verses from the Old and New Testaments highlight the presence of this particular worship phenomenon.

- Sing a new song to Him; play skillfully on the strings, with a joyful shout (Ps 33:3).
- He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD (Ps 40:3).
- Sing a new song to the LORD; sing to the LORD, all the earth (Ps 96:1).
- Sing a new song to the LORD, for He has performed wonders; His right hand and holy arm have won Him victory (Ps 98:1).
- Hallelujah! Sing to the LORD a new song, His praise in the assembly of the godly (Ps 149:1).
- Sing a new song to the LORD; sing His praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea with all that fills it, you islands with your inhabitants (Isa 42:10).
- And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; because You were slaughtered, and You redeemed people for God by Your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9).
- I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of cascading waters and like the rumbling of loud thunder. The sound I heard was also like harpists playing on their harps. They sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders (Rev 14:2–3a).

In each of these Old and New Testament passages, the adjective *new* modifies the noun *song*. These words together speak of a joyful expression that is musical, vibrantly *fresh*, and born in the moment. “New,” in this context, can even intimate the themes of “renewing,” and “rebuilding.”¹³

¹² For an excellent series of articles on this topic, see Derek Morphew, “The Restoration of Celebration,” *Inside Worship* 51–54 (2003–04). This full article is also located on the Web at: http://www.insideworship.com/library/Articles/2144/1/The_Restoration_Of_Celebration.aspx.

In other words, God gives a gift to His people through the ages. That gift is the capacity to respond to the present work of God with a heart-song that is fresh, immediate, current, renewing, and rebuilding. It is a song that is pleasing to the One we worship and by extension is a strength to our souls. That heart-response song, that *new* song, will take on both the musical and lyrical languages that we speak in any given moment of acclamation. A new song may be simple and accessible in its music and lyric. A new song may be complex and refined in its music and lyric. A new song may be new, or it may be an old song to which we are newly awakened. Simple or complex, reflective or jubilant, a new song as defined here will always be an *honest* song—a song that simply flows from a heart responding to God.

Why Must We Sing New Songs?

The songs we love to sing are also songs we must sing. We sing for the pleasure of God, in words and melodies that are current in time, place, and vocabulary. We must also sing for our own Godward orientation in a disorienting world. New songs can orient us to God, as old songs can. Yet songs born in our day and spiritual climate are uniquely branded, among all the riches of historical music from which we draw, as *our* songs of contemporary worship.

Who is giving us the new, contemporary songs with which we worship? Are we so lost in the *Zeitgeist* of the postmodern age that we fail to see it is the culture handing us our contemporary worship ingredients? Psalm 40:3 above explains clearly the source of fresh, new songs: *God Himself has put the new song in our mouths*. Why? The Lord has given His church fresh songs over time to enable us to convey the renewed music bursting from our hearts. He gives new songs to us for different purposes. One song is a theological wonder, richly and poetically voicing the worship of many generations past and present. Another song is a simple miracle born in a time and in a place, fulfilling the need of a moment (lasting years or centuries), and giving simple voice to a worshipful phrase that we love to sing to God over and over again. God's people will *always* find a fresh song with which to worship Him, because He will give us the new song we need for the moment.

What Is Contemporary Worship Music's Historical Precedent?

By necessity, there always must be, and will be, an embodiment of Christian truth that is in every sense *popular* and that is embraced by the common person aided by common language, style, and even cultural imprint. The great hymns we sing traditionally today were, at one point, the contemporary music of a season of life in a particular culture. Contemporary worship music of other ages has been injected into the life of the communion time and time again throughout history. A contemporary worship has always imposed itself on the life of the church, no matter how hard the organized church sought to stem the tide of popular worship expression. St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, the Wesley brothers, Isaac Watts, and many others have ruffled the feathers of church traditionalists in their quest to invoke the common voice of the culture in their crafting of fresh, new worship music.

Robin A. Leaver aptly addresses the impulses brewing in Isaac Watts, author of such great hymns as “Joy to the World” and “Jesus Shall Reign,” that propelled him to bring change to the hymnody with which he and his contemporaries worshiped.

³¹³ James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Lake Wylie, SC: Christian Heritage, n.d.), 37.

First, Watts was concerned that the poetic quality of the psalms sung in worship be improved. Second, if congregational songs were to invoke spiritual responses, then these psalms and hymns should reflect the spiritual insights of the author. Third, the way that spiritual insights and responses can be made is by interpreting the Old Testament psalms by the theology of the New Testament. Fourth, both Testaments of Scripture should be interpreted in contemporary terms. Fifth, Christian congregational song should not be confined to the biblical psalms but should also include freely composed hymns on biblical themes.¹⁴

Whether we speak of Francis of Assisi crafting songs laced with nature themes, Martin Luther's kingdom adaptations of the familiar folk tunes of his day,¹⁵ or the groundswell of Negro spirituals born in the dark days of American slavery,¹⁶ we are speaking of a continual process of change in the way that biblical, spiritual worship is expressed throughout time and culture. With regard to the need for biblical truth to be re-presented in artful ways within every generation's cultural milieu, George MacDonald wrote these words: "The life, thoughts, deeds, aims, [and] beliefs of Jesus have to be fresh expounded every age, for all the depth of eternity lies in them, and they have to be seen into more profoundly every new era of the world's spiritual history."¹⁷ Such innovation, however, is typically met with some degree of suspicion in the church. Even the hymns we sing today came into prominence with much ado in the church of England:

The church of England did not officially approve the singing of hymns until 1820. Dissenters and Methodists had been singing hymns. Why was the church of England so slow to recognize the power and usefulness of "hymns of original composition"? We easily forget that hymns were written and sung by men and women who lived their lives and practiced their faith on the margins of conventional English Christianity. Anglicans - resented, even hated, Dissenters (those who separated from the established church of England) and Methodists. Thus, hymn singing, which Dissenters and Methodists practiced, came to stand for all that was wrong with non-orthodox faith.¹⁸

In the hymn writers mentioned above, we find the historical predecessors of the contemporary worship songwriter.

Anytime we suggest that the contemporary worship of one age (including our own) is simply the highest and best of all ages, and therefore should set the bar for worship in this age and every other age, we should be challenged on the basis of our modern hymns alone. The reforming of words, phrases, and music erupting in the powerful hymns of a few hundred years ago caused

¹⁴ Robin A. Leaver, "The Hymn Explosion," *Christian History* 10 (1991): 15.

¹⁵ Luther is often considered the philosophical hero of contemporary worship because of his usage of the folk tunes of his day. Some scholars suggest that Luther's actions can be overstated in order to strengthen the case for worship songs being rendered in contemporary idioms.

¹⁶ For an excellent resource on this topic, see Angela M. S. Nelson, "The Spiritual," *Christian History* 10 (1991): 30-31.

¹⁷ Quoted in Rolland Hein, "Life and Religion Are One," *Christian History and Biography* 86 (2005): 17.

¹⁸ Madeleine Forell Marshall, "Irrational Music Sung by a Mob of Extremists?" *Christian History* 10 (1991): 35.

great consternation to those believing that their earlier psalmody was both sufficient and in no need of improvement.

The content of one age's worship music may indeed have superior and enduring qualities that can be remarked on and integrated into another age's expression. However, in panels in which I have participated, I have heard it said that one must sing hymns in order to be theologically "mature," or that one must sing contemporary worship music in order to be truly "spiritual." These are both spurious conclusions in my estimation. The ongoing re-creational work of God in inspiring and infusing His church with fresh spiritual metaphor is a process for which we stand grateful today, as we worship with hymnody reborn in times and places throughout faith history, including our own. We are all after the character in a Christian's heart that makes one rise to God, rise for the good and against the evil of the age, and rise up as community-minded people of God in a generation. What is shaping that character in believers in our time? Worship has a primary place in this activity of the Spirit.

What Forces Shape Contemporary Music?

In considering our present age and the contemporary worship music that is beginning to dominate many streams of the international church, we turn to the sociocultural factors powerfully influencing the last fifty years of contemporary worship music. Bishop N. T. Wright, in a lecture at Calvin College titled "Freedom and Framework, Spirit and Truth: Recovering Biblical Worship," addressed some of the shaping cultural factors precipitating much of today's contemporary worship culture. He noted three major cultural movements that have skewed our understanding of what the Reformation was essentially about and have shaped our modern worship paradigm. First, Wright purports that the Enlightenment offered us the split of religion and real life. Second, he notes that the Romantic movement elevated feeling above form, the heart above the head and body. Third, Wright contends that the Existentialist and self-actualization movements of the twentieth century have taken us back to Gnosticism. He suggests that large portions of contemporary culture are built on a pursuit of self-discovery that has been swallowed hook, line, and sinker by both conservative and liberal churches.¹⁹

To summarize Wright's point, we as a contemporary Western people have in many ways privatized faith, elevated feelings, and pursued self-actualization—no more so in the world than in the church. Add to this strange cultural brew the ongoing fragmentation, isolation, and hopelessness of the postmodern individual, and you have a culture that is in many ways less concerned with what is true and substantive and more concerned with what is real and heartfelt. Some have suggested that this generation has virtually lost its capacity to think long and hard thoughts and has become fixated on anything that will generate short bursts of euphoria and emotional ecstasy.²⁰

Now, on some level, detractors of modern worship might be fairly sure that I am about to take their side in decrying contemporary worship expression on the basis of what Wright has proposed. Indeed, I am going to affirm the import of many of the challenges being brought to the modern worship community. However, I believe that the contemporary streams of the church are

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, "Freedom and Framework, Spirit and Truth: Recovering Biblical Worship," *The January Series of Calvin College* as transcribed by <http://ntwrightpage.com> (23 January 2003), <http://www.calvin.edu/january/2003/wright.htm>.

²⁰ For a vibrant dialogue on this topic, read the interchange between authors Brian McLaren and Charles Colson at <http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000160.html>.

not the only expressions of the body of Christ in dire need of examining the social womb from which they were born. Emotion-filled songs of love may be an appropriate response to God as He course-corrects church culture, just as complex songs of praise may be a fitting response to God in an age renewing its faith in reason. I am allowing Wright to lead us somewhere we may not steadily go, to face a topic we may not steadily face: the integration of Christ and His worship with the reality that He has moored His worship, at least on this planet, in human civilization.

A Worship Counterpoint

I believe that the lyrical simplicity, emotion, sound, and values of contemporary worship are serving a purpose of God in the church. It is possible that the cultural reaction that postmodernism is to modernism is less to be reviled, and more to be understood as a poignant (if not necessary) *contra*-movement to the modern age. The musical responses of contemporary Christian churches and worshipers to what they perceive to be a more formal, cerebral, and somewhat culturally dissociated approach to worship in previous ages may be a necessary interjection on the church's course. Contemporary worship music, in this light, can be seen as a necessary worship *counterpoint*, pushing us toward a more integrated approach to the way that we worship a living God active in postmodernity. Again, we come back to our questions regarding the culture in which the church finds itself.

If we can approach the topic of Christ and culture here with a listening heart, often turning our thoughts to the powerful forms of media involved in music, we may find strong biblical foundations for the values that make simple contemporary worship the vital kingdom-building force it is in today's world.²¹

What Is the Relationship of Christ to Culture?

In his now famous work, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr timelessly captures the tensions that Christians face any time we broach this topic.

A many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and civilization is being carried on in our time. Historians and theologians, statesmen and churchmen, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and anti-Christians participate in it. It is carried on publicly by opposing parties and privately in the conflicts of conscience. Sometimes it is concentrated on special issues, such as those of the place of Christian faith in general education or of Christian ethics in economic life. Sometimes it deals with broad questions of the church's responsibility for social order or of the need for a new separation of Christ's followers from the world.... Christ's answer to the problem of human culture is one thing, Christian answers are another; yet his followers are assured that he uses their various works in accomplishing his own.... Christ as Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts.²²

²¹ For some excellent thinking on the topic of Christ and culture, and the language we use related to "the world," see R.C. Sproul, *Lifeviews* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1986), 32-33.

²² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 1-2.

In other words, as human beings we are engaged in historical process along with the rest of humankind. We will wrestle with each other over truth and in the end, we hope, find that we each brought something to the tussle that strengthened both parties. Niebuhr goes on to declare that neither complete rejection of culture nor unthinking embrace of culture will in the end suffice as a tenable mode in which to live out the life of Christ in the world. Rather, it is in the arena of *engagement* with culture that we not only bring the transforming presence of Jesus to the world but also find our interactive home. Contemporary worship engages culture on the levels of language, music, intimacy, emotion, simplicity, and story—and subverts worldviews in the process.

The “homeland” of the believer is where it seems to have been for Jesus: on the borderlands of contemporary culture, where the most current questions of the human spirit are both heard and listened to, and are then met with the even more beautiful questions of faith. Questions are indeed the stuff of wonder, and if Jesus is content to be both the greatest Answer and the most profound Question at the same time, then we are at our best when His mystery is on the same playing field as the questions of the age. The church was built for speed, made to dwell on these borderlands—Christ and culture, heaven and earth, one hand in the kingdom community and one hand out in the broader community. Contemporary worship music lives on those borderlands and has invited the church into the messy arena of discernment that comes with such a commission.

To illustrate, I offer a personal story. A few years ago, I had a unique experience at the edge of a cliff in New Zealand on a blustery day. Our guide had taken us to see one of the highest sea cliffs in the country. Seeing the possible view that awaited me, I desperately wanted to snap a picture looking straight down over the precipice. Mingled with my sense of adventure was a clear call for wisdom—windy days and sharp overhangs do not a safe combination make! Sensing my lack of confidence, a wise friend suggested, “Why don’t you crawl to the edge?” With this advice, I could see the vista I so wanted to capture, yet in a way that protected me from potential harm. It was humbling, but I went to the edge tethered to my friends and grounded on the soil beneath me. I captured the view, but in the humblest of postures.

In many ways, we as the church variously respond to “the edge” as well. Some of us have heard there is a beautiful view to be seen where Christ and culture meet head on—and redemption wins the day. Others of us choose the safety of community, tradition, and familiarity over the temptation to see a fresh view. Still others of us attempt the edge with boldness and even arrogance and have found it to be a precarious place of death and destruction. The challenge for the contemporary church is to see the revelatory vista waiting for us and yet to do so in humility, tethered to the historic church community and the theological anchor of the Scriptures. The edge is a tenuous and unforgiving place, but it seems to be the place where Jesus and His disciples lived. This edge of engagement with culture requires discernment and is a necessary part of impacting the world with the good news of the kingdom of God. Contemporary worship expression has chosen to live on that edge.

What Is the Church in Culture?

Most worship thinkers are in essential agreement over whether or not worship should take on contemporary form. I am convinced that varied views of the church’s interaction with culture are at the center of the worship discussion, and our positions on music’s “theological substance and devotional efficacy” are often a cover-up for deeper issues we are wrestling through together.

The church was born when Jesus, inaugurating the kingdom of God, gave cosmic rebirth to the people of God. The eternal kingdom of God was now proximate and within our temporal

reach. An eternal kingdom with no borders of time or space—the everlasting, ever-present rule and reign of God the King—came among us in Jesus Christ. That inbreaking kingdom has been eternally existent. Yet now, in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, was embodied on earth in the messianic visitation of Christ. I interject that Jesus was not an Anglican, Catholic, or charismatic. He was not a Baptist, Methodist, or Orthodox adherent. He was not American, British, African, or Asian. Jesus was a Jew and as a Jew inaugurated the fullness of the visitation of the kingdom of God on earth.

While some of the Jews at the time searched for a king who was a political-spiritual revolutionary, Jesus came on the scene as a prophetic-spiritual revolutionary.²³ In His coming, He was declaring that Israel’s exile was finished, and that God was fulfilling the great Jewish hope of God’s rule and reign being established once and for all on earth.²⁴ Thrust into the very heart of the culture of His day, having been raised in its environs, Jesus secured the freedom of the human heart from rebellion, sin, and death. He engaged the images, idioms, and stories of His day in order to enlist both the hearts and minds of His hearers. Then, having engaged the whole person and the whole community, He powerfully subverted their misguided value system.²⁵ Piercing the soul of both Jewish culture and Roman culture, He became our bridge, our living reconnection with the Father. His work by His Holy Spirit is to redeem the human person to His glory and ultimate honor.

We as the church are the community of His empowered followers. The church is His redemptive agent in human culture—His kingdom “virus” in the world. We are co-missioned with Him to transform every person we touch by the power of Christ living within us—through all the creative means He has given us. Jesus is the Mighty Leader of the church triumphant. Such truths should lead us, even as they are leading me now, to pause in ecstatic thanksgiving and adoring worship.¹

³²³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 150.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 369.

1 J. Ligon Duncan et al., *Perspectives on Christian Worship : 5 Views : Ligon Duncan, Dan Kimball, Michael Lawrence & Mark Dever, Timothy Quill, Dan Wilt* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 143–161.