

THE INFLUENCE OF POP MUSIC ON WORSHIP THEOLOGY  
IN AMERICA IN THE FIRST DECADE  
OF THE 21st CENTURY

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## **Introduction**

This research paper seeks to discover the influence of popular music on worship theology in America during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because music is an important aspect of most Christian worship services, it is possible that pop music has influenced the way these services are conducted and the theology behind the worship. Understanding the influences on contemporary worship theology can help worship leaders avoid potential problems. The impetus for this paper grew out of a desire to discover the influence of pop music on the music sung in churches across America. First the method in which pop music influences worship theology will be addressed. The relationship between pop music and worship theology is not obvious, nor is it immediately apparent how one exerts an influence over the other, so space must be devoted to uncovering the connection. After the relationship is established, the resulting theological shifts will be discussed.

This paper is focused solely on the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2000-2010). It does not seek to trace the entire history of pop music's influence on worship theology. Also out of scope are any developments after 2010. The reasons for this date range are twofold:

1. This decade was a formative time in the lives of individuals who are currently rising to leadership in churches across America.
2. A lot more research has been done on this time period than on the intervening years.

Some of the findings presented may have first taken place before the dates under consideration (in fact many of them did) and this paper does not address other influences on worship theology, of which there are many.

### Method of Influence

The primary avenue through which secular pop music made itself felt in worship theology was through its influence on the writing of worship music. Beginning with the Jesus movement of the 1970s, worship music was written in popular music styles.<sup>1</sup> This led to the rise of “Praise and Worship” music in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Since the lyrics of these contemporary worship songs are based on the Bible or the Christian faith tradition, it seems that the influence of secular music would be minimal. However, there are values inherent in American pop music that worship songs writers must contend with.

Marsh and Roberts wrote in *Personal Jesus*: “[T]he rise of praise and worship music, seem[s] to be in direct response to (and even a reflection of) consumer culture.”<sup>3</sup> Writers of praise and worship music sought to emulate popular music styles; their goal was to fit in with the then-current trend in music styles, often for commercial reasons.<sup>4</sup> This led to music leaders choosing songs simply because they were new. The term “contemporary” in reference to a church’s worship service indicates that the primary value by which to determine what music is used in that service is that it is new, or at least sounds new.<sup>5</sup> Pop music is a huge business, and in order to keep the money flowing, new songs must be produced constantly, and the idea that the

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<sup>1</sup> Patrice Risi, “Pop Goes the Worship: The Influence of Popular Music on Contemporary Christian Music in the Evangelical Church” (Florida Atlantic University, 2007), 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts, *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Kahn-Harris and Marcus Moberg, “Religious Popular Music: Between the Instrumental, Transcendent and Transgressive,” *Temenos* 48, no. 1 (2012): 98.

<sup>5</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2010), 124.

new songs are to be preferred over the old songs must be maintained.<sup>6</sup> This is the nature of the music industry, and this nature was reflected in the desire to sing new worship songs in churches.

Pop music tends to focus on the feelings of the singer, often written about romantic love between individuals. In *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns*, T. David Gordon wrote about pop music: "It is immanent in the sense that it celebrates the present moment and situation, divorced from past and future, and lives viscerally in that moment."<sup>7</sup> He went on to explain that pop music must be accessible in order to be profitable.<sup>8</sup> Listeners must be able to relate to the lyrics of a song without much thought. Nick Page made the case in *And Now Let's Move Into a Time of Nonsense* that worship song writers in the early 2000s followed the singer-songwriter model of pop music, in which the same person writes the lyrics and the music and records the song for mass consumption.<sup>9</sup> He wrote "Worship song writing has bought into this model big time."<sup>10</sup> The lyrical style and content of contemporary Christian worship music followed the pattern set by pop music.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 105–109.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Page, *And Now Let's Move into a Time of Nonsense: Why Worship Songs Are Failing the Church* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2003), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns*, 59–63.

## Results of Influence

The previously mentioned avenues of influence could turn out to have minimal impact on worship theology. Some things may change in practice, such as style of music, and possibly even lyrical content. Has pop music truly influenced worship theology, and if so, what are the effects? Marsh and Roberts maintained that pop music did indeed influence worship practice and theology.<sup>12</sup> There appear to be changes in two major areas in worship theology: a change in the focus of the corporate worship service, and a change in the meaning of worship.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, music rose to a place of prominence in the worship service.<sup>13</sup> The prevalence of the sub-genre of contemporary Christian music known as “Praise and Worship” led to the term “worship” being almost synonymous with “praise songs.” Sanctuaries were constructed like music auditoriums to facilitate the performance of contemporary worship music. Rather than placing the emphasis on the gathering of believers or the reading of God’s word, holding a worship service in a music performance venue communicated that the point of the gathering was the music.<sup>14</sup> This also placed the focus of the worshippers on the individuals performing the music. Music sung in church services was seen as entertainment, which led to the church services themselves being treated as a form of entertainment.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marsh and Roberts, *Personal Jesus*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Risi, “Pop Goes the Worship,” 88.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), 329.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

The influence of pop music also led to a shift in the perceived meaning of worship. Music can create strong feelings, including feelings of moving beyond or outside of oneself.<sup>16</sup> Many concertgoers experience such feelings, and whether they associate them with God or something else, many people enjoy that feeling.<sup>17</sup> Because of this, individuals expected the same experience within Christian worship services. They expected that singing about and to God should produce the same or stronger feelings than attending a secular concert. Music leaders responded to this desire and began choosing songs and arrangements that invoked these feelings, rather than songs that taught doctrine or otherwise increased the congregation's knowledge of God.<sup>18</sup> Rather than focusing on transferring information (doctrine), services set out to create a mood or environment that engendered feelings of togetherness and transcendence. This shared worship experience is reminiscent of a ritualistic view of communication dominant before the modern era.<sup>19</sup>

Nick Page wrote that “most singer-songwriters are better musicians than poets.”<sup>20</sup> He argued that this led to poor, shallow, or misguided lyrics.<sup>21</sup> Andrew Goodliff studied the lyrics of four prominent songwriters in 2009 and found that their songs mostly focused on the relationship of the singer with Jesus, placing the emphasis on the worshipper rather than the one being

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<sup>16</sup> Kahn-Harris and Moberg, “Religious Popular Music,” 92.

<sup>17</sup> Marsh and Roberts, *Personal Jesus*, 82–83.

<sup>18</sup> Page, *And Now Let's Move into a Time of Nonsense*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Marsh and Roberts, *Personal Jesus*, 9–10.

<sup>20</sup> Page, *And Now Let's Move into a Time of Nonsense*, 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

worshipped.<sup>22</sup> These songs tended to focus on the work of Jesus, sung from the perspective of the beloved to the lover.<sup>23</sup> Goodliff also found that the songs featured numerous references to Jesus and his work of salvation, to the exclusion of many other theological topics, including God as Father, the resurrection, and the Holy Spirit. Of the four songwriters whose songs Goodliff surveyed (Matt Redman, Tim Hughes, Martyn Layzell, Paul Oakley), all talked of the importance of theologically sound lyrics, but none had formally studied theology or seemed to be familiar with theological traditions.<sup>24</sup> Goodliff expressed concern that the pop music style does not lend itself to deeply theological lyrics.<sup>25</sup> This narrow lyrical focus led to a theology of worship that emphasized the one singing the song rather than God. Rather than focusing on God's transcendence, contemporary worship music writers preferred to dwell on his immanence. Their songs focused heavily on praising God for what he had done in the lives of the singers, emphasizing a sort of self-help or self-fulfillment theology.<sup>26</sup> Bernd Wennenwatsch writes "Worship itself is then judged and fashioned according to the criterion of the degree to which it increases individual well-being." The author would like to note that this monumental shift in the theology of worship (and Christianity as a whole) is not solely attributable to the influence of

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Goodliff, "'It's All about Jesus': A Critical Analysis of the Ways in Which the Songs of Four Contemporary Worship Christian Songwriters Can Lead to an Impoverished Christology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (July 2009): 295.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>26</sup> John S. McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2011), 168–169.

pop music, but pop-influenced worship music certainly accelerated the movement in that direction.

The changes to worship theology brought about by the influence of popular music are neither all bad nor all good. Incorporating more music in the worship service is not necessarily bad, if it remains balanced with other aspects of the service such as prayer, reading of the Bible, and Communion.<sup>27</sup> Music that creates strong feelings can be a good way to encourage devotion. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that the congregation understands that faith is not merely a feeling. The worst offender was probably the narrow theological emphasis of worship song lyrics and the focus on the feelings of the singer rather than God. A.W. Tozer addressed this problem in a sermon on Ezekiel: “I’m always suspicious when we talk too much about ourselves. Somebody pointed out that hymnody took a downward trend when we left the great objective hymns that talked about God and began to sing the gospel songs that talk about us... where everything is about ‘I.’”<sup>28</sup> This trend of which he spoke began a long time ago, but it grew ever stronger with the influence of pop music.

### **Conclusion**

Pop music has influenced the way the church thinks about worship. Worship songs became part of the Christian music industry, and as part of the music industry, they reflected the consumer culture cultivated by that industry. As Christian songwriters wrote new songs in popular styles, the lyrical styles affected the content of the songs, focusing on just a few aspects of theology. Worship music was expected to stir up feelings of love and transcendence. Although

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Sharp and Argile Smith, *Holy Gatherings: A Leader’s Guide for Engaging the Congregation in Corporate Worship* (Denver, Col: Outskirts Press, 2009), 32–46.

<sup>28</sup> A. W. Tozer and James L. Snyder, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, New edition. (Camp Hill, Pa: Wingspread, 2006), 96.

not all bad, the influences of pop music have led to some questionable shifts in worship theology. Worship leaders should be mindful of these influences as they plan and lead corporate worship services.

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