**The Imminent Decline of Contemporary Worship Music: Eight Reasons**

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By imminent *decline*, I do not mean imminent *disappearance*. Commercial forces have too substantial an interest to permit contemporary worship music (CWM) to disappear entirely; and human beings are creatures of habit who do not adapt to change quickly. I do not predict, therefore, a disappearance of CWM, sooner or later. Already, however, I observe its decline. Several years ago (2011) Mark Moring [interviewed me](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/march/popgoesworship.html) for *Christianity Today*, and in our follow-up communications, he indicated that he thought the zenith of CWM had already happened, and that the movement was already in the direction of traditional hymnody. He did not make any claims about the ratio of CWM to traditional hymns; he merely observed that whatever the ratio was, the see-saw was now moving, albeit slowly, towards traditional hymnody. If the ratio of contemporary-to-traditional was rising twenty years ago, it is falling now; the ratio is now in decline, and I suspect that decline will continue for the foreseeable future. What follows is a painfully abbreviated list of eight reasons why I think this change is happening.

1. CWM hymns not only were/are comparatively poor; they *had* to be. One generation cannot successfully “compete” with 50 generations of hymn-writers; such a generation would need to be fifty times as talented as all previous generations to do so. If only one-half of one percent (42 out of over 6,500) of Charles Wesley’s hymns made it even into the Methodist hymnal, it would be hubristic/arrogant to think that any contemporary hymnist is substantially better than he. Most hymnals are constituted of hymns written by people with Wesley’s unusual talent; the editors had the “pick of the litter” of almost two thousand years of hymn-writing. In English hymnals, for instance, we rarely find even ten of Paul Gerhardt’s 140 hymns, even though many musicologists regard him as one of Germany’s finest hymnwriters. Good hymnals contain, essentially, “the best of the best,” the best hymns of the best hymnwriters of all time; how could any single generation compete with that?

Just speaking arithmetically, one would expect that, at best, each generation could represent itself as well as other generations, permitting hymnal editors to continue to select “the best of the best” from each generation. Were this the case, then one of every fifty hymns we sing should be from one of the fifty generations since the apostles, and, therefore, one of every fifty should be contemporary, the best of the current generation of hymnwriters. Perhaps this is what John Frame meant when, in the second paragraph of his book on CWM, he indicated that he had two goals for his book: to explain some aspects of CWM and to defend its “limited use” in public worship. Perhaps Prof. Frame thought one out of fifty constituted “limited use,” or perhaps he might have permitted as much as one out of ten, I don’t know. But our generation of hymnwriters, while talented and devout, are not more talented or more devout than all other generations, and are surely not so by a ratio of fifty-to-one.

2. Early on in the CWM movement, many groups began setting traditional hymn-lyrics to contemporary melodies and/or instrumentation. Sovereign Grace Music, Indelible Grace, Red Mountain Music, Reformed Praise all recognized how difficult/demanding it is to write lyrics that are not only theologically sound, but significant, profound, appropriate, memorable, and edifying (not to mention metrical). If the canonical Psalms are our model, few hymn-writers could hope to write with such remarkable insight (into God and His creatures, who are only dust) and remarkable craftsmanship (e.g. the first three words of the first Psalm begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, aleph (א), each also has a shin (ש), and two of the three also have a resh (ר), even though each is only a 3-letter word. Even those unfamiliar with Hebrew cannot miss the remarkable assonance and alliteration in those opening three words: “ashre ha-ish asher”).

3. As a result, the better contemporary hymns (e.g. “How Deep the Father’s Love,” “In Christ Alone”) have been over-used to the point that we have become weary of them. These two of the better CWM hymns are sung a half-dozen times or a even a dozen times annually in many CWM churches; whereas “A Mighty Fortress” may get sung once or twice (if at all); but neither of the two is as good as Luther’s hymn. What is “intrinsically good” (to employ Luther’s expression about music) will always last; what is merely novel will not. Beethoven will outlast 50 Cent, The Black Eyed Peas, and Christina Aguilera. His music will be enjoyed three hundred years from now; theirs will be gone inside of fifty years.

4. It is no longer a competitive advantage to have part or all of a service in a contemporary idiom; probably well over half the churches now do so, so we have reached what Malcolm Gladwell calls the “Tipping Point.” CWM no longer marks a church as emerging, hip, edgy, or forward-looking, because many/most churches now do it. Churches that do not do other aspects of church-life well can no longer compensate *via* CWM; they must compete with *other* churches that employ CWM. Once a thing is commonplace, it is no longer a draw. And CWM is now so commonplace that it is no longer a competitive advantage; to the contrary, smaller churches with smaller budgets have difficulty competing with the larger-budgeted churches in this area.

5. As with all novelties, once the novelty wears off, what is left often seems somewhat empty. In a culture that celebrates what is new (and commercial culture always does so in order to sell what is new), most people will pine for what is new. But what is new does not remain so forever; and once it is no longer novel, it must compete by the ordinary canons of musical and lyrical art, and very little CWM can do so (again, because its authors face a fifty-to-one ratio of competition from other generations). Even promoters of CWM prefer some of it to the rest of it; indicating that they, too, recognize aesthetic criteria *beyond* mere novelty. Even those who regard novelty as a virtue, in other words, do not regard it as the *only* virtue. And some, such as myself, regard novelty as a liturgical vice, not a virtue because of its tendency to dis-associate us from the rest of our common race, heritage, and liturgy.

6. Thankfully, my own generation is beginning to die. While ostensibly created “for the young people,” the driving force behind CWM was always my own Sixties generation of anti-adult, anti-establishment, rebellious Woodstockers and Jesus freaks. Once my generation became elders and deacons (and therefore those who ran the churches), we could not escape our sense of being part of the “My Generation” that The Who’s Pete Townsend had sung about when we were young; so *we* (not the young people) wanted a brand of Christianity that did not look like our parents’ brand. Fortunately for the human race, we are dying off now, and much of the impetus for CWM will die with us (though the commercial interests will “not go gentle into that good night,” and fulfill Dylan Thomas’s wish).

7. CWM is ordinarily accompanied by Praise Teams, and these have frequently (but by no means always) [been problematic](http://secondnaturejournal.com/the-problem-with-praise-teams/). It has been difficult to provide direction to them, due to the inherent confusion between whether they are *participants in* the congregation or *performers for* the congregation. In most circumstances, the members of the Praise Team do the kinds of things performers do: they vary the instrumental or harmonious parts between stanzas, they rehearse, etc. In fact, if one were to watch a video of the typical Praise Team without any audio, they ordinarily *look* like performers; their bodily actions and contrived emotional expressions mimic those of the entertainment industry.

Theologically and liturgically, however, it is the congregation that is to sing God’s praise, and what we call the Praise Team is merely an accompanist. But there is a frequent and ongoing tension in many CWM churches between the performers feeling as though they are being held back from performing *for* the congregation, and the liturgists thinking they’ve already gone too far in distinguishing themselves *from* the congregation. Many pastors have told me privately that they have no principial disagreements with CWM, but that they wish the whole Praise Team thing “would go away,” because it is a frequent source of tension. I have elsewhere suggested that [the Praise Team is not biblical](http://secondnaturejournal.com/the-problem-with-praise-teams/), that it actually obscures or obliterates what the Scriptures command. I won’t repeat any of those concerns here; here I merely acknowledge that many of those who *disagree* with my understanding of Scripure *agree* with my observation that the Praise Team is an ongoing source of difficulty in the church.

8. We cannot evade or avoid the “holy catholic church” of the Apostles’ Creed forever. Even people who are untrained theologically have some intuitive sense that a local contemporary church is part of a global and many-generational (indeed eschatological and endless) assembly of followers of Christ; cutting ourselves off from that broader catholic body may appear cool for a while, but we ultimately wish to commune with the rest of the global/catholic church. Indeed, for many mature Christians, this wish grows as we age; we become aware that this particular moment, and our own personal life therein, will pass away soon, and what is timeless will nonetheless continue. Our affection for and interest in the timeless trumps our interest in the recent and fading. We intuitively identify with Henry F. Lyte, whose hymn said, “Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me.” We instinctively wish to “join the everlasting song, and crown Him Lord of all” (to use Edward Perronet’s language). Note, in fact, the opening lines alone of each stanza of Perronet’s hymn, and observe how, as the stanzas move, our worship is connected to both earthly and heavenly worship, past and future worship:

*All hail the power of Jesus’ Name! Let angels prostrate fall;…  
Let highborn seraphs tune the lyre, and as they tune it, fall…  
Crown Him, ye morning stars of light, who fixed this floating ball;…*

*Crown Him, ye martyrs of your God, who from His altar call;…  
Ye seed of Israel’s chosen race, ye ransomed from the fall,…  
Hail Him, ye heirs of David’s line, whom David Lord did call,…  
Sinners, whose love can ne’er forget the wormwood and the gall,…  
Let every tribe and every tongue before Him prostrate fall…*

*O that, with yonder sacred throng, we at His feet may fall,  
Join in the everlasting song, and crown Him Lord of all!*

It is not merely that some churches *do* not sing Perronet’s hymn; they *can* not do so, without a little dissonance. Everything that they do intentionally cuts themselves off from the past and future; liturgically, if not theologically, they know nothing of martyrs, of Israel’s chosen race, of David’s lineage. Liturgically, if not theologically, everything is here-and-now, without much room for angels or seraphs, nor every tribe and tongue (just those who share our particular cultural moment). To sing Perronet’s hymn in such a setting would fit about as well as reading Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech at a Ku Klux Klan gathering.

“Contemporary worship” to me is an oxymoron. Biblically, worship is what angels and morning stars did before creation; what Abraham, Moses and the Levites, and the many-tongued Jewish diaspora at Pentecost did. It is what the martyrs, now ascended, do, and what all believers since the apostles have done. More importantly, it is what we will do eternally; worship is essentially (not accidentally) eschatological. And nothing could celebrate the eschatological forever less than something that celebrates the contemporary now. So ultimately, I think the Apostles’ Creed will stick its camel’s nose into the liturgical tent, and assert again our celebration of the “holy catholic church, the communion of the saints.” The sooner the better.