

The Most Used Contemporary Worship Songs
Their View of God and our Love of God

The Method

- Use twice-a-year “top 25” song lists from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) from 1989 to 2004.
- CCLI receives license fees for music copying and use from over 136,000 churches in the U.S.
- CCLI lists based on report from sample of churches holding licenses.

The Method

- Spreadsheet developed listing the seventy-two songs which appear on the thirty CCLI lists (2 lists per year X 15 years)
- Rank for each reporting period marked on this data sheet.
- Average rank for the 15 year period calculated twice (with and without factoring in non-appearances)
- Average rank for the last 5 year period calculated in the similar manner

Determining the “Heart” of CWM

- To determine which songs constitute the core of this seventy-two song repertoire the following additional ranking was used:
 - 1 point for occurring in the top 25 in each of the following: each of the 15 years averages, each of the 5 year averages, frequency of occurrence in the lists for the 15 and 5 year periods
- 16 songs scored 5 or 6 points out of a possible 6
- All seventy-two songs were analyzed theologically.
- The core 16 were used to determine the key composers.

Rationale for the Study

- God’s own revelation: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- Why should we settle for less in the content of our worship?
- Beyond worship “true” to us and a fear of theological worship

A Fuller, Richer Vision of God

- Theology can give us more reasons to love God, not less
- Theology can take lyrical form
- Doctrine of Trinity not just some abstract concept
- Doctrine is a vision of God as well as our greatest longings and deepest hopes: the gift of participating through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father

Is There a Risk in Losing the Trinity?

- Idolatrous worship?
- Less-than-orthodox worship?
- Worship less than true to God?
- A different God than the one revealed in Scripture

Trinitarian Questions Asked

- Do the songs name the Trinity or all three Persons of the Trinity?
- Do the songs direct worship toward the Trinity as a whole or toward one of the Persons of the Trinity?
- Do the songs remember the activity of the divine Persons among themselves?
- Do the songs see worship as participation in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity?
- Do the songs use the character of inter-Trinitarian relationships to explore a desired character for church relationships?

Trinitarian Assessment:

Naming the Trinity

- None of the songs refer to the Trinity or the Triune nature of God.
- Only 3 songs explicitly refer to all three Persons of the Trinity (Glorify Thy Name, Father I Adore You, and Shine Jesus Shine)

Naming the Trinity: The Gaps

- The difficulty comes in few references to God the Father or the Holy Spirit.
 - Only 4 name God as “Father”
 - Only 6 refer to the Holy Spirit
- Including those with an explicit reference to the “Father,” 11 songs make clear reference to the first Person of the Trinity.

Naming the Trinity:

A Focus on Jesus Christ

- 35 songs make explicit reference to the second Person of the Trinity
 - 27 speak of Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ
 - 8 speak of “Lord,” “God,” or “King” but context points to the second Person

Most Used “Generic” Titles for Divinity

- 44 occurrences of “Lord”
- 25 occurrences of “God”
- 17 occurrences of “King”

- 7 occurrences of singing to “You” with any other explicit divine name or title.

The Nine “Name” Songs

- 1 shows an explicit intention to worship the entire Trinity.
- 6 focus on Jesus Christ.
- 2 are generic contemplations of the divine Name.

Trinitarian Assessment: Worshiping the Triune God

- Worship to the Trinity as a whole or to the Holy Spirit the most minimal aspect.
 - Only 2 approach worshiping the whole Trinity (Glorify Thy Name and Father I Adore You)
 - Only 3 songs direct worship of any sort to the Holy Spirit

Worshiping the Triune God

- Worship to God the Father:
 - Of the 11 songs that make clear reference to the first Person, only three explicitly worship the Father in direct address. (1 other possible)
 - Probably also some of those that speak of “Lord,” “God,” or “King” generically

Worshiping the Triune God

- 35 songs explicitly mention Jesus Christ
- Of these 32 refer to Christ as the recipient of worship.
- Basis for worshiping Christ:
 - 11 acknowledge divine nature, explicitly or implicitly
 - Christ’s exalted status (piling up titles of honor)
 - Christ’s redeeming activity, most usually death and resurrection

Trinitarian Assessment: Remembering Trinitarian Activity

- Because so little naming of Trinity, the songs are “functionally unitarian.”
- Few “Two-Person” Songs:
 - 8 songs clearly mention Father and Son; 1 other possibility
 - 2 songs mention the Son and the Spirit
 - 1 possibly mentions the Father and the Spirit

Remembering Trinitarian Activity: Traits, Characteristics, and Tendencies

- Father/Son songs: most common theme is that the Father has given the Son, whose death saves us. (6 songs)
- Son/Spirit songs: only the loosest connection
- Tendency is to emphasize traits or status of the Deity but not contemplate the dynamics of the Trinity
- Relative de-emphasis on commemorating God’s saving activity

Trinitarian Assessment: Participation in the Trinity

- Virtually no vision of Christian worship as participation in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity
- Tendency: an objectifying of God as the recipient of worship, distinct and separate from us although worthy of receiving our worship

Participation in the Trinity: The Nature of Prayer in CWM

- Virtually no prayer addressed to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit
- Prayer songs overwhelmingly address Christ in prayer.

Trinitarian Assessment: Trinitarian Character in the Church

- The songs do not explore how the character and relationships of the Trinity might shape Christian relationship.
- Generally extremely low explicit consciousness of the church
- Only 1 song (Bind Us Together) seeks to pattern the church’s life after Trinitarian unity.

Trinitarian Focus in the Broader CWM Corpus

- These 72 songs only a small fraction of CWM
- 80,000 songs with lyrics available on CCLI website.
- Just the 16 composers of the core 16 songs have around 1,600 songs in the CCLI database.

More Trinity in the Broader CWM Corpus

- More explicitly Trinitarian songs are available, even from the same composers, but are not used as much.

Song Comparison: Other CCLI Songs

- Searching the CCLI database, another 85 songs are listed as having “Trinity” as one of their themes.
- Other explicitly Trinitarian songs also found, even without this thematic designation.
- Traits:
 - Recently written (1/2 with copyrights within the last 5 years)
 - Clear naming of all three Persons, especially the Holy Spirit
 - Greater commemoration of God’s activity
 - More dependent on antecedent material

Reasons for Trinitarian Omission in the 72 CWM Songs

- Acts of omission, rather than commission
- Robin Parry (*Worshipping Trinity*): “If there is a problem with Christian worship songs, it is more a failure to bring out the Trinitarian dimensions of the God we worship than a problem of violating Trinitarian faith.”
- Omission occurs at all levels: the composers, the industry that promotes, and the churches that use.

What Has Priority?

- If not the Trinity, then what?
- The priority of a commonly shared and expressed affective experience in the worship of God.
- In the CWM liturgical world, worship is expressing our hearts and “ministering to the heart of God.”

The Composers and How They Composed the 72

- The prevailing opinion: “As songwriters, our job is to hook people’s hearts and emotions for the Lord...So a worship song, more than almost any other type of song, needs to express a universal sentiment, something we can all agree on as our own expression of love to Him.”

Composing the 72 Songs

- The desire for “authentic,” expressive lyrics, paralleling the rock-pop genre, seldom led to Trinitarian contemplation.
- At least 29 songs were composed spontaneously: there was no time for theological

reflection.

Other Compositional Factors Eroding Theological Reflection

- Many composers feel song was given by God: if a song was directly given, there was no need for further theological reflection.
- Many songs express a turning point in the composer's life situation: if a song was an authentic expression of a perceived encounter with God, there was no desire for further theological reflection.
- Many songs taken from Scripture (particularly Psalms) in whole or in part: if a song was derived from biblical passages, there was no reason for further theological reflection.

The CWM Industry and How It Promotes the 72 Songs

- The same piety which composed the songs is the same piety behind their marketing.
- Multiple outlets (4 major companies, various independent companies, direct web marketing, conferences and other large scale events)
- Common song history: song written and receives ever expanding use; a threshold is reached where company records the song and distributes it; church musicians become aware by electronic recording or large scale event

The CWM Industry

- Attuned to the same piety, an industry executive notes: "When listening to songs for the first time I try to turn off my brain and turn on my heart. A song can break all the normal rules of songwriting but bear such a touch of God that you can't ignore it."
- The piety makes Trinitarian reflection and content a peripheral matter.

Churches and How They Select and Use the Songs

- Explicit Trinitarian content is a peripheral concern in the manner of selecting and using.
- Primary concern: an experience of God's presence in and through the music
- Criteria for discerning: affective

The Musical "Set": A Journey into God's Presence

- One explanation (mainly Pentecostal or Charismatic): a typology based on the Temple or tabernacle, emphasizing entrance into the Holy of Holies
- Reinforced by biblical proof texts, especially Psalm 22:3

The Musical "Set": A Journey into God's Presence

- Another kind of explanation: from praise ("high praise") to worship
 - Worship=intimacy, intimate communion with God
 - "worship" as synonym for music
- This understanding shows why "I Love You Lord" is the top-ranked song for the period.

"Flow" as Journey into God's Presence

- In actual selection and construction of musical set, church musicians emphasize the

following:

- Tempo
- Key
- Linkage by theme (preoccupation with nouns and adjectives)
- Result: other theological considerations marginalized

Auxiliary Features of the Songs that Create Sense of Journey into the Presence

- Expressiveness of the songs and qualities of authenticity, honesty, and passion
- Cyclical quality: getting beyond the words
- Strong beat that rings as “true.”

Being in a “Place of Worship”

- Peter Sanchez, composer of “I Exalt Thee”: “If they are in a time of worship and things are down, and they can’t get the people up, all they have to do is pull out ‘I Exalt Thee’ and people will get back into a place where they can be led into worship.”

A New Liturgical Mediation?

- Instead of “to the Father through the Son”
- Perhaps now “to the Son through the music”?

15 Year From Now: More of the Same?

- Signs of change:
 - Growing acknowledgement by composers of usefulness in having songs reviewed by theological conversation partners
 - A growing “motto” among composers: “the way Christians think about God is more shaped by songs than by sermons.”
- An unanswered question: Will theologians be used not only to avoid “error” but also to embrace a vision for a fuller remembrance of the Triune God?

15 Years From Now: More of the Same?

- A sign of change: more intentional Trinitarian contemplation by composers
- Matt Redman, a British composer: “We praise Jesus the Son with everything within us—but we also join with Jesus in worship as He glorifies His Father. As the Holy Spirit reveals the Lordship of Jesus to the depths of our heart, He also takes us into the Son’s relationship with the Father....Worship is *to* Jesus, yes—absolutely. We glorify the Son and magnify His name. But worship is also *in* Jesus and *through* Jesus and *with* Jesus...When our heavenly Father receives our worship, He receives it in the person of His Son and in the power of His Holy Spirit.”

15 Years From Now: More of the Same?

- A sign of change: calls for more Trinitarian content in songs by theologians and pastors respected within the CWM world, including:
 - Robert Webber
 - Brian McLaren
 - Bert Waggoner, National Director of the Vineyard Churches USA

15 Years From Now: More of the Same?

- The key? Not just a more Trinitarian theology but a more Trinitarian piety.
- The role of love or affection for God will not go away.
- Brian Doerksen, another influential composer: “The aim of a song is to unlock the language of a people’s hearts and for them to say, ‘This is exactly what I wanted to say to God’.”

15 Years From Now

- A change can occur in the CWM world as these Christians learn to love the Triune God for being Triune.
- The Trinity must become the language of their hearts for change to occur.

For further reading: Robert Woods and Brian Walwrath, eds. *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.