

# Perhaps Contemporary Music is Not That Contemporary

*Comparing Classic Evangelical Hymnody and the Hottest  
CCLI Worship Songs*

*Part I: Nouns*

*(What They Say about the Trinity)*

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# Rationales

- Conflict and worship wars rooted in music
- Complaints about contemporary choruses specifically, especially as contrasted with older hymnody:
  - “They’re just 7/11 songs: 7 words sung 11 times.”
  - “They don’t say anything substantial, not like the old hymns.”
  - “There are too many ‘Jesus-is-my-boyfriend’ songs.”

# To Be Honest, Song Lyrics Can Get Quite Romantic, Even Erotic

*One praise song example:*

The song opens:

*“My God, my life, my love!  
To you, to you, I call;  
I cannot live without you;  
You are my all in all.”*

# To Be Honest, Song Lyrics Can Get Quite Romantic, Even Erotic

*One praise song example:*

The song resolves in an ecstasy of desire:

*“You are the sea of love  
Where all my pleasures roll,  
The circle where my passions move,  
And center of my soul.*

*To you my spirit flies  
With infinite desire;  
And yet how far from you I lie!  
Dear Jesus, raise me higher.”*

*Another praise song: beyond “Jesus-as-my boyfriend” to “Jesus-as-my-husband.”*

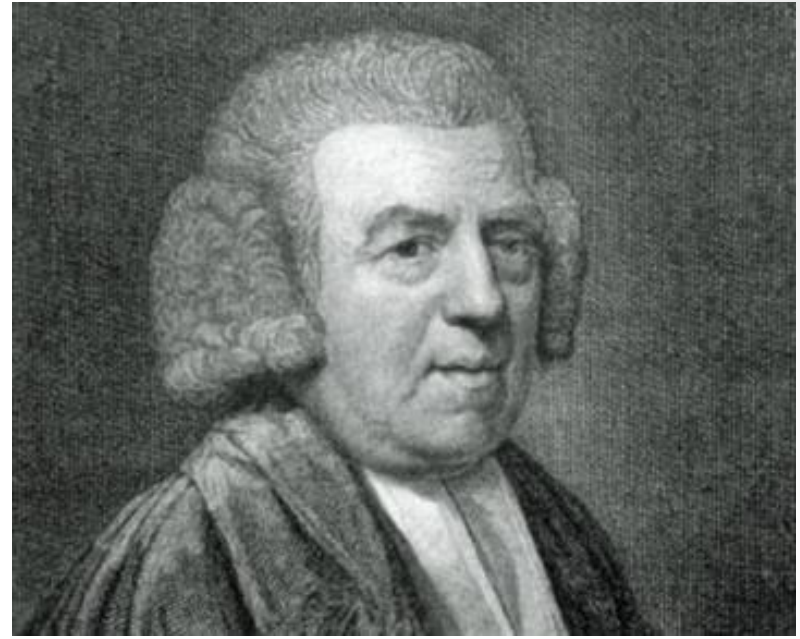
*“Jesus! my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,  
My Prophet, Priest, and King;  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.”*

# Contemporary Praise Choruses?

By love-struck, romance-obsessed  
composers?







John Newton

Isaac Watts

# The Two Bodies of Song

- The most republished Evangelical hymns (hereafter EH) from 1737 to 1860: 70 hymns from 86 hymnals (List from Stephen Marini, “Hymnody as History: Early Evangelical Hymns and the Recovery of American Popular Religion,” *Church History* 71:2 (June 2002): 273-306.)
- The most used contemporary worship songs (hereafter CWS) from 1989 to 2012 on the twice-a-year Top 25 lists from CCLI: 98 songs





# 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?



# Trinitarian Questions Asked

- 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?

# EV and CWS on the Trinity

- Summary comparison:
  - The explicit Trinitarian dimensions of both bodies of song are relatively weak.
  - Where weak, the two bodies tend to share patterns:
    - Relatively little explicit referencing of the whole Trinity
    - Diminishment of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Persons
    - Intense focus on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person
- General observation: with a few exceptions, practices within one body of song can be found in the other; the differences tend to be a matter of degree, not absolute or diametric opposites.



## Comparison

# Explicit Naming

## CWS

- All 3 Persons named within song: 4 songs (4%)
- Explicit reference to 1<sup>st</sup> Person, including use of “Father”: 14 songs (14%)
- Explicit use of “Father”: 5 songs (5%)
- Explicit reference to 3<sup>rd</sup> Person: 8 songs (8%)

## EH

- All 3 Persons named within song: 3 songs [clearly] (4%)
- Explicit reference to 1<sup>st</sup> Person, including use of “Father”: 16 songs (23%)
- Explicit use of “Father”: 11 songs (16%)
- Explicit reference to 3<sup>rd</sup> Person: 10 songs (14%)



## Comparison

# Explicit Naming

## CWS

- Explicit reference to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person: 48 (49%)
- Explicit use of “Son,” Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ: 36 (37%)
- Use of other names where context makes these refer to 2<sup>nd</sup> Person: 12 (12%)

## EH

- Explicit reference to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person: 52 (74%)
- Explicit use of “Son,” Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ: 39 (56%)
- Use of other names where context makes these refer to 2<sup>nd</sup> Person: 13 (18%)



# Comparison

## Generic Naming

### CWS

- Occurrences of “Lord”: 58 (59%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 34 (34%)
- Occurrences of “God”: 43 (44%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 21 (21%)
- Occurrences of “King”: 22 (22%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: about 7 (7%)
- No explicit name or title: 8 (8%)

### EH

- Occurrences of “Lord”: 41 (58%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 16 (23%)
- Occurrences of “God”: 41 (58%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 20 (29%)
- Occurrences of “King”: 17 (24%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 4 songs (6%)
- No explicit name or title: 1 (1%)





## Comparison

# Worshiping the Trinity

## CWS

- Songs worshiping God for being Triune: 1
- Additional songs worshiping the whole Godhead, naming all 3 Persons as recipients of worship: 2

## EH

- Songs worshiping God for being Triune: 1
- Additional songs worshiping the whole Godhead, naming all 3 Persons as recipients of worship: 1



# Comparison

## Worshiping the Persons

### CWS

- Worshiping the 1<sup>st</sup> Person:
  - Of 14 clear references to the 1<sup>st</sup> Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 4 (4%)
- Worshiping the 3<sup>rd</sup> Person
  - Of 8 clear references to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 4 (4%)

### EH

- Worshiping the 1<sup>st</sup> Person
  - Of 16 clear references to the 1<sup>st</sup> Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 6 (8%)
- Worshiping the 3<sup>rd</sup> Person
  - Of 10 clear references to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 4 (6%)



# Comparison

## Worshiping the Persons

### CWS

- Worshiping the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person:
  - Of the 48 songs that make distinct reference to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person, songs that directly address this Person as the recipient of worship: 40 (41% of the 98 songs; 83% of the references to Christ)

### EH

- Worshiping the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person:
  - Of the 53 songs that make distinct reference to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person, songs that directly address this Person as the recipient of worship: 28 (40% of the 70 songs; 53% of the references to Christ)



# Comparison

## Two-Person Songs

### CWS

- In the entire corpus, 16 songs (16%) make possible mention of two Persons within the same song.
- Of the 16 songs, 12 are 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Person songs (12% of the total; 75% of this subset)
- Of the 16 songs, 3 are 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Person songs (3%; 19%)
- 1 indeterminable

### EV

- In the entire corpus, 17 songs (24%) make possible mention of two Persons within the same song.
- Of the 17 songs, 10 are 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Person songs (14% of the total; 59 % of this subset)
- Of the 17 songs, 7 are 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Person songs (10%; 41%)



# Comparison Internal Divine Persons Activity

- Very, very little
- Compare to the sermons in the book of Acts and the first chapters of the letters of Peter and Paul.



## Comparison

# Liturgical Participation, Ecclesial Fellowship, & the Trinity

- Both bodies of song share little reflection on worship as an activity of the church and on the ecclesial fellowship, especially as either might be defined by engagement with the Triune life and activity of God.





# Where the Two Bodies of Song Do Differ with Respect to Naming the Triune God

- The differences are subtle.
- The differences are usually relative, not absolute; it is a question of level of degree, not stark contrast.



Difference

# Increasing Instance of Direct Prayer, Regardless of Name

- Number of songs including direct prayer:
  - EH: 33 total (47%)
  - CWS: 61 total (61%)
    - Result: In EH there is not quite the same objectifying of God as the recipient of worship as in CWS
    - Rather there is more of an objectifying of God as the instigator of that which brings about worship



Difference

# Personal Pronouns

- A clear distinction between EH and CWS:
  - In EH the second person personal pronoun for divine/human address is “thou/thee.”
  - In CWS the pronoun is overwhelmingly “you.”
- If you are appropriate cultural idioms for expressing the relationship to God, e.g., romantic, do you have a way of making it clear that you are addressing God and not a human?



# Couple Pronoun Issue with How Poetic Tension is Created

- Recurring feature to create tension in CWS: the greatness of the Divine and the non-greatness of the human singer
- Feature to create tension in EH: a stronger, more recurring acknowledgment of human sin and failing with related issue of Divine provision for this problem



Difference

# Decreasing Frequency of Divine Redemptive Labels

- In EH: “Redeemer,” “Savior,” “Lamb,” and “Incarnate” occur with greater frequency



Difference

# Decreasing Identifiability of the Divine King and Friend

- EH: Overwhelming use of “King” makes a clear connection to Jesus Christ (CWS: often a more generic reference)
- EH: 5 instances of “Friend” all specific reference to Jesus Christ (CWS: friendship is with God more generally)





# General Pastoral Suggestions

- There is a need to develop reasonable Trinitarian expectations for worship services as a whole and for individual acts of worship.
- Every act of worship does not need to be explicitly Trinitarian but every service should create a sense that God is Triune with ever increasing sensibility to this revelation over time.
- Does the service as a whole create that sense in a way that mimics and resonates with New Testament modes of expression?



# Specific Pastoral Suggestions

- Contemplate the sermons in Acts and the first chapters of letters by Peter and Paul: what names are used for the three Persons and what verbs are used to relate the Three? Learn to pray like this spontaneously and look for worship materials that reflect these dynamics.
- Naming: Use To<sup>3</sup> materials (name all three Persons in symmetry and worship all Three).

# To Go Further

- Robin Parry, *Worshipping the Trinity*
- Calvin website