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November 8, 1994

### **Contemporary Christian Music: Misunderstood Melodies**

For centuries, contemporary Christian music has been the subject of controversy. It's referred to as anything from mind control to the Devil's own music. From traditional chants, psalms, and hymns to the Christian rock, metal, rap and ska styles of today, forefront Christian music has and always will bring on some form of discord. Yet today, modern Christian music styles have proven popularity and positive effectiveness.

Contemporary Christian music has more supporters today than at any other point in history. Carman, a top-ranked Christian artist, made history at the Texas stadium in Dallas, Texas, when 71,000 people attended his concert. This is the most people to attend a Christian concert anywhere. This is also a higher attendance than any Dallas Cowboys game. Donald P. Hustad, a professor of church music, surmises that we are seeing "the most significant new development in Christian witness music since Ira Sankey popularized the gospel song more than 100 years ago" (qtd. in Miller 173). However, some groups are still reacting in less than a positive manner.

New secular music forms are usually met with little resistance while contemporary Christian music always moves headlong into it. There are three reasons for this resistance: first, preconceived ideas and a general lack of knowledge of the subject causes misconceptions; secondly, the value of this essential form is not clear; and thirdly, they do not see the positive impact it makes on society as a whole. A proper assessment of these three areas clears all misunderstandings.

Various groups of people react adversely to Christian music for a variety of reasons. Understanding the origin and history of such music helps explain why. Since the beginning of the early church, music had to be proven trustworthy at every turn before considered sacred. In Steve Miller's apologetic book, The Contemporary Christian Music Debate, he points out that church music was resisted at every stage of development and that several so-called sacred forms led a bit of a checkered past. For instance, the chants of the early church are fashioned after certain heathen temple expressions (109). During the reformation, common people adapted songs originally written for heathen deities to Christian worship. Later, they wrote hymns of their own along with the closed, sacred collections (111). From the days of John Calvin to William Booth, pub tunes were combined with new lyrics, so the newly converted could pick the songs up quicker. Booth

took the tune from “I traced Her Little Footsteps in the Snow” and changed the words to “O, the Blood of Jesus Cleanses White as Snow” (135). A modern example of the concept is Mark Farner’s remake of “Some Kind of Wonderful.” The original recording, as performed by the late sixties group Grand Funk Railroad, was made over with lyrics that reflect a love for Jesus. It is important to remember that all of these trend-setting and controversial music forms replaced their forerunners and were deemed the new “sacred standard.” Today is no exception.

Ironically, the traditional religious community has been and always will be the greatest opposition to contemporary Christian music forms. The major concerns about the new music are: the sanctity of the new music with the so called “arousing rock beat”; and likewise, fear of the new and unexpected unknown. When religious leaders should be embracing the new forms as a fresh, new move, they forbid it instead. Miller makes the observation that “tradition drives in stakes that are difficult to remove” (146).

Since the early church’s origin, its leaders have viewed those things proven by time as sacred, and that which is new as worldly, unclean, or of the Devil. This is particularly true concerning the music produced for worship, along with the newer instruments introduced to it. Unfortunately, the church never learns from its past. Even the religious leaders during the ministry of Jesus could not comprehend the importance of overcoming their faults. The error embedded within the doctrine of the Sanhedrin caused them to egg-on the crucifixion of Christ--they could not accept change.

Today’s church communities are no different except for one slight variation: instead of one level of contemporary Christian music expanding over another, there are three to four inter-linking waves of music involved. Gospel, praise and worship, and pop-rock styles are trying to stake a claim as to which will become the next “sacred standard.” Some orthodox churches are still trying to hold onto the traditional hymns; however, due to the age of the congregations who desire such a style, combined with the fact that younger generations abhor traditional music, such churches will virtually die off. This is not to say that any style of Christian music should be condemned or eliminated. Each form is useful and meaningful in its own way. Even today’s youth understand the need to be mindful to all age and culture groups. Still, today’s churches considered to be cutting edge or contemporary are falling behind.

The church of today must examine itself and be prepared to change in the paradigm of what it sees. Praise and Worship style, considered to be the premier new church music, is quickly becoming like the hymns of yesterday. Ask any youth, and they'll tell it in this way. It's mom and dad's praise and worship--not theirs. Parents are moved by the praise and worship style, while the grandparents long for the hymns. The children sit with arms folded and wait for the music to end. They think, "If only they could play a little ska." While style is a problem, the ever-present view of traditional-over-creativity continues onto the instruments used to produce the music.

Hustad points to the organ as an example of tradition over timeliness. Its first recorded use or appearance traces back to the third century B.C. He speculates, "this early organ may even have accompanied the slaughter of early Christians in the Roman arena" (qtd. in Miller 139). Because of its tainted beginning, Miller points out that organs met serious opposition after entering the churches of England and Scotland. Organs were introduced into church worship during the thirteenth century, then dubbed the "Devil's bagpipe" in the fourteenth century, and nearly all destroyed by the fifteenth century. Even the coming of the piano was disdained (140).

Obviously, the organ and the piano have both become deeply entrenched within the strictest of church tradition. Almost every church in nearly every major Christian denomination has at least one set. They are displayed prominently in the front of the sanctuary. These instruments are icons indicating that we will eventually accept all things that prove to be good--arriving much too late to be wholly useful.

Today, Christians debate over issues concerning which instruments are acceptable for use in Christian music and which ones are not. If Christians would only take note of the past historical struggles, then much time and energy could be saved. Instead of fighting over organs and pianos, the discussions are over drums and electric guitars. Secular groups have had little trouble in determining the usefulness of such instruments. They have seen the good in them all, and so have our children.

Considering the environment of Christian music, the Bible is the guidebook that must be considered. Whether viewed by a Christian, a member of another major religion or agnostic, contemporary Christian music must be measured by its own foundation. Christian affiliated groups and churches have failed to hold onto the youth for one very important reason: "Where

[there is] no vision, the people perish...” (Proverbs 29:18). The ingrained tradition of Christianity fails to look forward toward the future of the younger generation growing up in a modern world. The elder generation tends to look back at their own experience just as the others before them. Once the forerunner generation of leaders establishes a system of acceptable standards for worship, they have no desire to change it. It’s much easier to blame the “Devilish rock beat.”

Here is a scripture that is often confused when considering it in terms of renewal: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Some tend to think of the Devil as a creator as well. John 10:10 says that the Devil is a destroyer and creates nothing. Also, according to Genesis 1:26, God gave the whole Earth to mankind to rule over it. From just these scriptures alone, it can be determined that everything--every sound and every beat--must be considered an original creation of God intended for His good works. This is the critical point: It is up to the heart of every person whether they will purpose to use music for good or evil intentions. Has history not bared this out in the various church music forms as true?

Advocates who back modern Christian music do so because they have overcome the common pitfalls of tradition and the misunderstandings of music form. Moreover, they see the value of contemporary Christian music. Yet secular music has not gone without having a dramatic impact of its own. In a Seattle Times article, Koch and MacDonald made this following report: in September 1993, grunge rocker Kurt Cobain of the group Nirvana, followed the advice of his own suicidal masterpieces by taking his own life with a shotgun blast to the head. As if this episode was not tragic enough, a Nirvana groupie soon followed down Cobain’s path by ending his own life in the same way.

Secular music continues to discover new ways to be crude, tasteless, and demoralizing. Suicide is obviously one of the most extreme examples of influence some secular groups have on young men and women. Life styles that most parents prefer their children not to take up--sex, drugs, violence, and murder--are often glamorized by secular groups. Today’s youth needs an alternative music to listen to that will provide them with positive and wholesome values. Christian music certainly doesn’t cause an individual to do something against their will, but it does offer a choice of a higher quality product of which to add to a lifestyle. Everyone has a choice. Most younger men and women that listen to contemporary Christian music claim that it is a source of encouragement to have higher moral standards, help them to do what is right, and to think better

of themselves. The contemporary Christian music festival is one outlet that is popular with youth today.

Christian music festivals have become more popular than ever before. Teens love them because they can get away from the peer pressure for three or four days and have a good time without getting into trouble. They can see several big-name Christian artists at one location. But a weekend's entertainment is not all the youngsters experience. These events have expanded to include workshops that help teens get answers to questions concerning their personal lives. Concerts also provide them with information about issues they face today. Most importantly, there are plenty of opportunities for youth to commit their lives to Christ, should they desire to do so. Christian music festivals give the younger generation an avenue of escape from the entrapment of secular music. Christian radio does this as well. There are various groups that have caused contemporary Christian music to become better known.

Only recently has Christian radio considered modern Christian music "safe." During a Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) magazine interview with Devlin Donaldson, Amy Grant said she mostly struggles with "Where the church is right now and how the stage fits into it (qtd. in Styll 54). Miller observes that even Petra--Christian rock's most popular group ever--suffered as a little-known group during their first three albums due to a lack of air-play. He says, "Christian radio shied away from the rock style; secular radio couldn't stomach the Christian lyrics" (174). What changed the minds of radio station managers and owners? Supporters and advertisers did. Such businessmen and women recognize the character of the contemporary Christian music audience, and they like what they see. Most profit and non-profit Christian radio stations get very little church or denominational support. Instead, most of a station's revenue comes from the business community. Business owners like the clients that respond to the advertising they air on Christian radio. The impact this has on the music community as a whole is evidenced by the number of cross-over Christian entertainers and groups that have made it over to the secular pop and rock charts. Stars like Amy Grant, Stryper, and others have made a significant impact on both markets.

It has been Christian and non-Christian business people that made the contemporary Christian music industry explode. As usual, the formal church will continue to have nothing to do with this move until it is practically over and something else rises up to take its place. The

informal church--individual's who have a burden for the youth--will continue to be the supporters. Modern-day evangelists have a lot to say to today's youth, and they are doing it in a powerful way.

Most Christian entertainers, on the whole, are accused of being gold diggers who are only in it for the money. Miller refers us to the rocky past of today's Christian super groups: "Those who accuse these bands of delusions of grandeur and financial gain need to remember the dismal market for a Christian rock band in the early seventies" (174). When this tactic does not work, Christian music artists are accused of producing obscure, washed-out lyrics that are meaningless. The paraphrased Apostle's Creed make up the words of Petra's song "Creed." These lyrics are anything but mediocre:

I believe in God the Father--maker of heaven and earth  
 And in Jesus Christ His only Son  
 I believe in the virgin birth  
 I believe in the Man of Sorrows, bruised for iniquities  
 I believe in the Lamb who was crucified and hung between two thieves  
 I believe in the resurrection on that third and glorious day  
 And I believe in the empty tomb and the stone that the angel rolled away  
 He descended and set the captives free  
 And now He sits at God's right hand and prepares a place for me. . . . (qtd. in Miller  
 176,177)

Lyrics such as those contained in "Creed" can hardly be called a shallow compromise. After reviewing hundreds of Contemporary Christian music recordings, I find that strong, unveiled messages are the industry standard. Some will still insist that the lyrics cannot be understood over the "clamor of noise" and therefore are not of any value.

Some groups do make it hard to understand the lyrics of their music due to heavy artistic style. This is not altogether a bad thing. Children have an incredible need to obtain information. This is amplified when it comes to music, and they *are* going to know exactly what the artist is singing. This applies to secular, Christian, or any other music form as well. Every contemporary Christian artist or group lists the words to their lyrics in the recording jacket. While kids read the

lyrics, they learn a wealth of good information. Parents also get a chance to see what the group is about. The artists include the lyrics because the integrity of their reputation is at stake.

Because people have such an intense interest in what Christian artists are doing, most of them subscribe to accountability services where they openly disclose their personal income from a ministry (if any), and the financial status of the ministry they are involved with. The Christian music industry does not tolerate anyone who is not genuinely committed. In a CCM magazine interview with John Styll, Carman replied to the question on how he was accountable: “We have a very strong system of accountability.... We have a pastor who oversees this ministry specifically--Pastor Bob Yandian.... Also we are accountable to each other” (29). Christian artists are more than willing to maintain their integrity to bolster the opinion critics have of them. This is important so they can meet their objectives both on and off stage.

Mylon LeFevre, leader of the Christian rock band Mylon and Broken Heart, believes alongside all other Christian entertainers that contemporary Christian music is a vehicle, or a tool of the trade. He feels it is to be used to present the gospel message to the world. In a 1986 interview he said “There are 52,000 people who have signed a little card that says...I want Him [Jesus] to be my Lord.... I believe we are speakin’ life into people’s hearts” (Styll 83). Since 1986, Lefevre has seen many times over 52,000 people commit to the gospel message at his concerts alone.

I personally had the opportunity to talk with Christian artists and groups; such as, Newsong, 4-Him, Harvest, Al Denson, and the production cast of *Toymaker’s Dream*. All of these entertainers have an intense desire to share the gospel account, and help the children of today cope in a violent world. Kids who come to Christian concerts are not always perfect cherubs who grew up in a church all of their lives or have never been in trouble. Children come telling their shocking stories of drug abuse and attempts of suicide. Most often, they are looking for a way out of their situation and feel they have no one to turn to. Christian events, as those mentioned, help to get young people pointed in the right direction that will lead them to the solution to their problem.

Not all of these adolescents will become totally committed, and some will in time return to their old life style. Nobody will ever know how many of them will make another attempt to regain control of their lives, but several of them do. One young success story I had the pleasure of working with, attempted suicide twice before committing his life to Christ. He is now attending

The Assembly of God Southwestern College and preparing to become a youth pastor. He greatly desires to help young kids who can relate to his testimony. This young man attributes much of where he is today to contemporary Christian music and the associated concerts. He uses Christian music as a strengthening tool and recognizes it as the vehicle that got him help.

Contemporary Christian music isn't traditional--it's radical. It's not political--it's controversial. It's one of the most enduring and dynamic music forms of the ages, and it will undoubtedly be around for an eternity. It has become ingrained in our society, unwilling to fade away. It's a style that may not appeal to everyone. It will never make it to the top with popularity, but it will never outlive its usefulness. Therefore, new models of Christian music will always be around to debate on, new instruments to squabble over, and greater reasons for upholding what hearts of good intention create. Contemporary Christian music will never be understood by all. It will marvel some in how it manages to endure. For those who see value in it, and realize that it is more than just music, they will appreciate what it has to offer. Contemporary Christian music is not the evil force it is made out to be. It is merely a collection of misunderstood melodies.

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