THE RISE OF CORPORATE INDIVIDUALISM

IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WORSHIP

By

Russell Allen Robbins

Liberty University

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF WORSHIP STUDIES

Lynchburg, Virginia

August 2020

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ABSTRACT

Western society has experienced a monumental paradigm shift which has influenced the way in which the church worships in the twenty-first century. Postmodernism has led to an increasingly self-focused individualism in corporate worship which overvalues personal experience and undervalues the communal aspect of corporate worship. Despite much discussion concerning postmodern generations, the influence of postmodern thought upon the rise of corporate individualism in worship has yet to be examined. The purpose of this qualitative, historical study is to examine the factors that have led to the rise of corporate individualism in worship, the indications of corporate individualism in worship, and the ways in which corporate individualism has affected worship practice in evangelical churches. The rising focus on individualism in corporate worship is redefining what it means to worship in community. This study is important for worship leaders and pastors as they make decisions about song selection, language use, and worship environment. Additionally, this study is important to church members as it addresses subjects that affect their participation in worship, connection with other worshipers, and theological understandings. Every church must decide how they will address this societal change in order to reach present and future generations. This study could benefit the twenty-first century church in understanding how and why worship practices have changed with this cultural shift and determine if there needs to be a course correction. Further, this study could encourage further research into effects of corporate individualism on church architecture, liturgical structures, and worship technology.

Keywords: corporate individualism, postmodernism, corporate worship, individualism, contemporary worship music

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,

according to His power that is at work within us,

to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations,

for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21 NIV).

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

Western society has experienced a monumental paradigm shift that has begun to

influence the way in which some evangelical churches worship. The effects of postmodernism,

which began in the latter half of the twentieth century,[1] have now begun to fully manifest

themselves within the church of the twenty-first century.[2] The focus on personal experience and

feeling as a means of understanding has led to a rise in a phenomenon that Rory Noland calls

corporate individualism. While the term is typically used in business, he fittingly applies this

term to describe a self-focused individualism taking root in corporate worship in evangelical

churches. He explains that "early in my songwriting career, I received a rejection letter from a

publisher explaining that they were looking exclusively for praise songs addressed to God from a

personal point of view. . . . I didn't think much of it at the time, but have since noticed a

disturbing trend within the worship movement: corporate individualism replacing corporate

worship."[3] The focus on self and personal experience has reshaped how worshipers view

themselves and their participation in corporate worship, thus redefining what it means to worship

in community. The impetus for this reshaping is embedded in Western culture's shift to a

postmodern worldview.

In addressing the direct association between the changes in society and the culture within

the church, Robb Redman recognizes that "philosophical and cultural shifts historically have had

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[1] R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), chap. 1, sec. 10, accessed August 11, 2019, EBSCOhost.

[2] Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 132–134.

[3] Rory Noland, *The Worshiping Artist: Equipping You and Your Ministry Team to Lead Others in Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 209.

a dramatic impact on the theology and practice of Protestant worship. One impact of postmodernism on worship is its rejection of absolute truth and the resulting emphasis on personal experience as the arbiter of truth."[4] It is important to note that postmodernism is not a monolithic movement and, while there is not a consensus among scholars concerning the essence and scope of postmodernism, Redman explains that "despite their disagreement, postmoderns all share a rejection of modernism and its belief in unified, objective truth that can be fully known."[5] Fundamentally, postmodernism is a reaction to modernism; thus, understanding modernism is crucial to understanding postmodernism. The worldview of modernism posited that there is one objective and universal truth that can be known through rational thought and observation. It is a movement based on intellectual thought and reason and characterized by the scientific method. The belief system in modernism can be stated as: what is true for one person is true for everyone.[6]

Postmodernism rejects the assertion of modernism by insisting that there is no single, universal truth that can be applied in every situation. The belief system has shifted to become: what might be true for one person may not be true for another. Truth, then, is subjective and is only interpreted by one's own experience and perception. Postmodernism emphasizes differences, as it believes that multiple worldviews are equally valid. It is a movement based on feelings and characterized by relativism. As the culture has embraced relativism, personal experience has become the ultimate authority and determiner of truth.[7] Leonard Sweet explains

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[4] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 132.

[5] Ibid., 133.

[6] Ibid., 131–134.

[7] Ibid., 132–133.

that "*in postmodern culture, the experience is the message*. Postmoderns literally 'feel' their way through life."[8]

Postmodernism took hold in the middle of the twentieth century and was fueled by the disillusionment in the years following World War II. According to Andrew Fabich, "society experienced an existential crisis in the post-war years, which unleashed postmodernism. . . . Contrary to modernists who denied the supernatural, postmodernists retorted, 'I am god; I make the rules. Forget social norms.'"[9] The Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964,[10] and their influence on the worship practices of evangelical churches has been indelible. In their book, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth declare that "contemporary worship has been shaped by the baby boomer generation."[11] They explain that "the common characteristic of baby boomers was a questioning of tradition . . . , [thus] traditional liturgies became suspect in a search for new forms of worship that seemed more authentic. Indeed, authenticity as determined by the worshipers became an underlying ethos throughout contemporary worship: whatever worship is, it must be 'true to us.'"[12] As the first postmodern generation charted new territory and pushed the boundaries of tradition, corporate worship began to be shaped by a consumerist mindset that focused on the tastes of the

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[8] Leonard Sweet, "A New Reformation: Re-Creating Worship for a Postmodern World," in *Experience God in Worship: Perspectives on the Future of Worship in the Church from Today's Most Prominent Worship Leaders*, ed. Michael D. Warden (Loveland, CO: Group, 2000), 177.

[9] Andrew Fabich, "What My Generation Needs," *Answers* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 76, EBSCOhost.

[10] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 118. Scholars differ on the exact birth date ranges defining the generations. This birth date range of 1946-1964 for the Baby Boomer generation reflects the conventional view, however William Strauss and Neil Howe most notably assign slightly different date ranges for each generation (for Baby Boomers, 1943-1960). See William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future* (New York: Morrow, 1991).

[11] Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 25.

[12] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 25.

individual.[13] In referring to evangelicalism of the late twentieth century, Soong-Chan Rah observes that "life and ministry in the local church . . . became the race to please the individual so that the pews might be filled."[14]

Baby Boomers and subsequent generations (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z) continued along the path of consumerism and individualism unabated and, as Lynn Barber Elliott asserts in her essay, "Generational Theory and Faith Communities," the Baby Boomers "ushered in a culture less committed to the values and norms of collective society and moved the focus toward individual preferences."[15] Individualism thus affected postmodernists' view of community, and what it means to be in community has shifted from generation to generation. Baby Boomers' view of community is no longer tied to their immediate surroundings (as in previous generations), but rather, they seek community with like-minded individuals desiring similar personal experiences.[16] Gen Xers do not view belonging to a community as a lifetime commitment, and "membership is approached with caution as the distrust around institutions and the desires to protect family time have increased."[17] With rapid advancements in technology, Millennials do not require face-to-face connection for a sense of community to occur. As pragmatists, Gen Zers view their need for community in conjunction with their value upon multitasking and time efficiency. According to Elliott, "Generation Z is accustomed to

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[13] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 129.

[14] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 30, accessed August 5, 2019, Ebook Central.

[15] Lynn Barber Elliott, "Generational Theory and Faith Communities," in *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), chap. 4, sec. 3, accessed August 9, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

navigating multiple networks at once, so this generation needs the church to offer a sense of belonging, *coupled with* a meaningful use of time and connection."[18] Thus, these postmodern generations enter into the church community based on their individualistic needs and desires. Soong-Chan Rah warns that the "excessive emphasis on individualism is crippling to American society, but even more so to the body of Christ."[19]

Statement of the Problem

Postmodernism has led to an increasingly self-focused individualism in corporate worship which overvalues personal experience and undervalues the communal aspect of corporate worship. Soong-Chan Rah emphatically proclaims that "the Western priority of the individual determines the approach to worship over the biblical guidelines for worship. Worship is oftentimes a collection of individuals who happen to be in the same room. Worship is just between the individual and God, and the church service exists to help facilitate that individual communion."[20] Although it is necessary for the individual congregants to offer their personal worship to God for corporate worship to occur, it is important for the body of Christ to maintain the communal nature of corporate worship. Rory Noland clarifies that "while there's nothing inherently wrong with personalizing worship, we should always be careful . . . not to diminish the power of togetherness, which lies in the fact that *we* declare God's worth; we pray, '*Our Father who is in Heaven*' (Matthew 6:9 NASB, emphasis mine)."[21]

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[18] Elliot, "Generational Theory," chap. 4, sec. 3.

[19] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 38.

[20] Ibid., 35.

[21] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

The problem of corporate individualism is complicated further for evangelicals in the United States. According to Anna Nekola, American ideology adds an additional layer to the discussion when she claims that "the confluence of Protestant Christianity with the democratic ideology of the United States has helped to produce a particular spiritual climate wherein religion has become increasingly individualistic."[22] Soong-Chan Rah agrees that the unique cultural ethos of American individualism contributes to corporate individualism in American churches when he argues that "from the earliest stages of American history, individualism has been the defining attribute in understanding our nation's ethos. The American church . . . has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual."[23]

Although there is a vast body of literature pertaining to postmodernism, there is limited research concerning the effects of postmodernism on corporate individualism in worship. A knowledge gap exists as to how postmodernism has influenced the rise in corporate individualism in worship and corporate individualism's resulting influence upon worship practice in twenty-first century evangelical churches. Understanding more about the relationship between postmodernism and corporate individualism may contribute to the understanding of worship practices in twenty-first century evangelical churches. This study examines that relationship.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, historical study is to examine the factors that have led to the rise of corporate individualism in worship, determine the indications of corporate

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[22] Anna E. Nekola, "US Evangelicals and the Redefinition of Worship Music," in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (London: Routledge, 2011), 132, accessed July 19, 2019, https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4324/9781315594590.

[23] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 29.

individualism in worship, and ascertain the ways in which corporate individualism has affected worship practice in evangelical churches. While the influences upon the development of any cultural movement are multifaceted, postmodernism is a primary influencer upon the rise of corporate individualism in worship. This study identifies and examines the main characteristics of postmodernism that have affected the growth of individualism in corporate worship. This study also determines the indications of corporate individualism that could be present in the worship of many evangelical churches. Postmodernism has manifested itself in identifiable ways in corporate worship, and this study explores some of these indications. Further, this study identifies the ways in which corporate individualism has affected worship practices in many evangelical churches. The rise in corporate individualism in the twenty-first century has brought marked changes to corporate worship practices, and this study explores some of these changes.[24]

Significance of the Study

This study is important for worship leaders and pastors as they make decisions about song selection, language use, and worship environment. Additionally, this study is critical to church members as it addresses subjects that affect their personal experience of worship, connection with other worshipers, and theological understandings of worship. Because of the monumental shift that has occurred in our culture due to postmodernism, every congregation must decide how it will address this societal change in order to reach present generations. This study could benefit the twenty-first century church in understanding how and why worship practices have changed with this cultural shift and in determining if there needs to be a course correction in corporate worship in the twenty-first century.

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[24] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

This study is relevant for worship leaders and pastors as they develop and shape their personal leadership style, particularly in the language they use. When the worship leader or pastor speaks, especially in the prayers, use of "I" and "me" rather than "us" and "we" fosters a climate of individualism in corporate worship.[25] Additionally, this study is beneficial to both worship leaders and pastors as they make decisions on the worship space and environment that is created for corporate worship. From the intentional use of lighting and sound to the staging and surroundings, environmental factors can contribute to a sense of community or can establish a context for individualism.

Further, this study is important for worship leaders (and sometimes pastors) as they select songs that will be sung by the congregation. These song selections are crucial because the congregation learns much of their theology through the songs they sing. Spiritual formation is one of the primary purposes for congregational song because, according to Andrew Roby, the songs we "sing in worship shape our theological understandings and thus are formative of our faith. Since musical expressions possess a higher degree of memorability than most other kinds of content in liturgy, the texts and meanings those musical expressions carry will shape and form us in our theology and faith more powerfully than other kinds of content we employ."[26]

This study is valuable to church members, in addition to pastors and worship leaders, as they make decisions in the renovation or new construction of a worship space. Lim and Ruth explain that "certain qualities have tended to show up in spaces for contemporary worship. Perhaps the most striking and pervasive has been the centrality of musicians—vocalists and instrumentalists alike—in the space. Contemporary worshipers are used to seeing their musicians

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[25] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist,* 208–209.

[26] Andrew Roby, "Worshipful Singing: Four Roles of Song in Worship," *The Choral Journal* 57, no. 3 (October 2016): 60, accessed August 7, 2019, EBSCOhost.

as they lead front, center, and usually elevated in the space."[27] This study may help church members and leaders as they make decisions concerning the design of their space for corporate worship.

This study is most beneficial for the church member because the issues that are examined affect their personal experience in corporate worship and their connection with other worshipers. Craig Peters warns of the dangers of individualism when he states that "these are the hollow and deceptive philosophies of life being all about 'me' and what I want. . . . We are settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves."[28] As noted above, the words that are sung by the congregation greatly influence and shape their theological understanding of God, themselves, other believers, and the world. This study also reveals important implications for churches who are seeking to follow an intergenerational model of corporate worship. Central to this model is the interaction between all generations[29] as "one generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts" (Psalm 145:4).[30] Corporate individualism, however, focuses on the individual worshiper rather than the community of believers that have gathered to worship, thus reducing the opportunity for the various generations to interact.

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[27] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 45.

[28] Craig E. Peters, "Recapturing the Transformational Power of the Church: Moving Beyond Consumerism and Individualism to Experiencing Life-Changing Christian Community" (DMin diss., Northeastern Seminary, 2018), 10, accessed July 15, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[29] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 20–21, accessed August 11, 2019, Ebook Central.

[30] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

Statement of Research Questions

Research questions concerning individualism in corporate worship should address the indications of its presence and its impact upon corporate worship. The primary research questions for this study are:

Research Question 1: What are the indications of corporate individualism in worship in evangelical churches?

As postmodernism has taken hold in Western culture, focus on the individual, rejection of absolute truth, and emphasis on personal experience has seeped into the culture of many evangelical churches. Evidence of this can be observed in their corporate worship. This study identifies ways in which corporate individualism has been manifested in many evangelical worship services in the twenty-first century.

Research Question 2: How has the rise in corporate individualism in worship affected worship practice in evangelical churches?

After identifying the indications of corporate individualism that have appeared in the worship services of many evangelical churches, this study will examine how this phenomenon has affected their worship practices. As there is little research on corporate individualism in worship, worship leaders and pastors may be limited in their understanding of its effects upon church members and, therefore, upon the corporate worship of the church. A qualitative historical study will be used to provide insight into the role of postmodernism in the rise of corporate individualism in twenty-first century worship and the resulting influences that individualism has had upon corporate worship.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses that answer the research questions are as follows:

Hypothesis 1. The indications of corporate individualism in worship in evangelical churches include self-focused worship songs, overvaluation of personal experience, and ambiguous worship songs.

A primary indication of corporate individualism in worship is found in the texts of the songs that the congregation sings. There is an increasing body of literature that analyzes the textual content of contemporary worship songs. The growing trend of reflexive songs (text "focused specifically on the worshipper's experience of worship in the present moment"[31]) places the focus of the congregation's attention upon themselves. In Christine Longhurst's study, she observed that "the steady rise of reflexive song texts is interesting. Although these types of texts are not new (we can find similar expressions all through the Psalms), their popularity in contemporary worship music is worth noting."[32]

Emphasizing each individual's personal experience is a characteristic of postmodernism.[33] This overvaluation of personal experience in today's culture is now being exhibited in the corporate worship of many evangelical churches, thereby devaluing the nature of community in corporate worship. This indication is also evidenced in the lyrics of contemporary worship songs. According to the study conducted by Lester Ruth, "on the whole, a corporate consciousness permeates Evangelical hymnody but is lacking in contemporary songs. . . . [T]his acknowledgement of other people is linked with some sort of charge or instruction, often to come

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[31] Christine Longhurst, "The Words We Sing: An Exploration of Textual Content in Contemporary Worship Music," *Direction* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 169, accessed July 22, 2019, EBSCOhost.

[32] Ibid., 170.

[33] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 132.

to God to worship him or accept grace. While this sort of corporate awareness can be found in CWS [Contemporary Worship Songs] . . . it is generally less prevalent in the newer songs."[34]

The exaltation of personal experience in postmodernism leads to an acceptance of many worldviews as being equally valid and true.[35] In the church, this relativism is exhibited in the lyrics of ambiguous worship songs. When personal experience is the only way to discover truth and various "truths" are equally valid, the lyrics of congregational songs become less theologically and doctrinally specific. This allows the lyrics to mean different things for different people, depending upon the personal experience of the individual. Ambiguous lyrics are problematic because, according to Michael Walters, they "draw the person into the presence of God, but there is no understanding of who God is, and there is no grasp of who or what is being worshipped."[36]

Hypothesis 2. Corporate individualism has affected worship practices in evangelical churches in terms of song selection, congregational participation, and platform presence.

The texts of the songs that are selected for the congregation to sing in worship are very important, because the church's theology is influenced and shaped by the words we sing. Randall Bradley recognized that "the importance of congregational song in shaping the theology both of the lay worshiper and trained theologian has been and continues to be significant; therefore, the

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[34] Lester Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences between Historic Evangelical Hymns and Contemporary Worship Songs," *Artistic Theologian* 3 (2015): 74, accessed July 22, 2019, http://artistictheologian.com/journal/artistic-theologian-volume-3-2015/some-similarities-and-differences-between-historic-evangelical-hymns-and-contemporary-worship-songs/.

[35] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 132–133.

[36] Michael Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday: Leading Your Congregation in Authentic Worship* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 57.

need to use the gift of congregational song appropriately has never been greater."[37] The songs that are selected make a tangible difference to the community of believers in the congregation, and the increased use of reflexive texts in worship songs strengthens corporate individualism among the worshipers.

Corporate individualism also affects the congregation's participation in worship—their active participation and their interactions with those worshipping around them. Noland recognizes that "worship is participatory; it is not something done to me by a worship band. In fact, worship is not about me at all; worship is all about God."[38] Additionally, in corporate worship there is a recognition of the Family of God that is gathered to worship in community. Sweet describes the paradox of the postmodern generation when he professes that "relationship issues stand at the heart of postmodern culture. . . . At the heart of postmodernists lies a theological dyslexia: Call it 'me/we,' or the experience of individual-in-community."[39]

For the purposes of this study, platform presence refers to both the leadership on the platform as well as the worship environment that the congregants see and experience in corporate worship, such as staging, lighting, projection, audio, and architecture. Rory Noland recognizes that the words the worship leader uses directly affect the congregation's focus when he attests, "I've sat through worship services in which every song, even the prayers, were presented in the first person singular. It was as if the worship leader forgot he was leading a community of people into God's presence and praying as their spokesperson. I could have had the same experience by

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[37] C. Randall Bradley, "Congregational Song as Shaper of Theology: A Contemporary Assessment," *Review & Expositor* 100, no. 3 (2003): 369, EBSCOhost.

[38] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

[39] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 182.

myself at home or at the park."[40] Additionally, as churches are striving to appeal to those in today's postmodern culture, many churches are adapting their existing worship space or creating a new worship space to appeal to their aesthetic. Lim and Ruth explain that "although language and relevance to present-day concerns have been two of the central elements in adapting worship to fit contemporary people, they have not been the only areas in which the desire to adapt has been shown. Updating architecture, leadership style, and technology have been the most common within contemporary worship, not to mention music."[41]

Research Methods

A qualitative historical study will be performed to understand the development, indications, and impact of corporate individualism upon twenty-first century worship in many evangelical churches. A qualitative research design is appropriate to this study because, according to John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, it "involves emerging questions and procedures . . . data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data."[42] This study examines the existing literature to discover prevalent themes within and correlations between the core concepts of corporate individualism and postmodernism. Further, a historical approach is appropriate to this study because, according to Edward Hallett Carr, "historical research is a continuing dialogue, an endless exploration between generations of historians, between different interpretations of the significance of historical events, and between established opinions and challenges arising from

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[40] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

[41] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 15.

[42] John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 4.

new discoveries about the past."[43] This study will draw upon existing literature and interpret the data.

Research Plan

In order to address the research questions, existing literature will be examined pertaining to postmodernism, corporate individualism, textual studies of congregational song, and platform presence. First, to establish the context for the rise in corporate individualism in worship, research will be conducted to gain an understanding of the factors that led to this rise—primarily postmodernism. Any additional factors discovered during the research phase will also be explored. Second, literature pertaining to corporate individualism will be examined to identify the indications of this phenomenon when it appears in corporate worship. One major indication that is commonly present in worship that focuses on the individual can be found in the text of congregational songs used in worship. Thus, third, an examination will be conducted of the existing literature containing textual studies of both hymns and contemporary worship songs that have been prevalent in evangelical churches from the end of the twentieth century through the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Fourth, existing literature pertaining to platform presence—both leadership and worship space—will be examined to ascertain some of the ways in which corporate individualism has affected worship practice in twenty-first century evangelical churches. More details about this specific design are provided in chapter three.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to help the reader understand the context of each term in this study:

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[43] Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Random House, 1961), 35.

Ambiguous Worship Songs: Songs in which the lyrics can mean different things to different people or in which the one being addressed is not clearly identified.[44]

Corporate Individualism: A focus upon the individual's personal worship of God while in corporate worship to the exclusion of the other worshipers that are present.[45]

Corporate Worship: A gathering of believers who worship God together as one body.[46]

Modernism: A worldview stemming from the Enlightenment which posits a unified, objective truth that can be known through reason and is characterized by the scientific method.[47]

Postmodernism: A worldview which posits that there is not a universal objective truth, only subjective personal experience, and is characterized by relativism. Fundamentally, postmodernism is a reaction to and rejection of modernism. Postmodernism is not monolithic and celebrates diversity; thus, multiple worldviews are accepted as valid.[48]

Reflexive Lyrics: A song text in which the worshipers sing from their perspective about themselves—what they are doing in their personal experience of worship at that moment— typically in first-person singular.[49]

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[44] Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 62.

[45] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

[46] Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 12–13.

[47] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 131–132.

[48] Ibid., 131–133.

[49] Longhurst, "The Words We Sing," 169.

Relativism: The belief that truth and morality are determined by each individual and/or community, not by objective standards.[50]

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[50] Lauren Collier-Spruel et al., "Relativism or Tolerance? Defining, Assessing, Connecting, and Distinguishing Two Moral Personality Features with Prominent Roles in Modern Societies," *Journal of Personality* 87, no. 6 (2019): 1171, accessed May 10, 2020, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jopy.12466.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature pertinent to the issues surrounding the rise of corporate individualism in worship in the twenty-first century. As stated previously, there has been a steady increase in the pervasiveness of individualism in corporate worship in many evangelical churches. This notion of *corporate individualism* as a term to describe this phenomenon was introduced by Rory Noland in his book, *The Worshiping Artist: Equipping You and Your Ministry Team to Lead Others in Worship.* In discussing the power and importance of the community of believers gathering to worship corporately, Noland explains that

> when people come together to praise God, we experience the power and blessing of community, a dynamic so unique it simply can't be replicated when we're alone, by ourselves. . . . [Thus] the worshiping artist must never lose sight of the communal aspect of leading worship. Early in my songwriting career, I received a rejection letter from a publisher explaining that they were looking exclusively for praise songs addressed to God from a personal point of view. . . . I didn't think much of it at the time, but have since noticed a disturbing trend within the worship movement: corporate individualism replacing corporate worship.[51]

This trend of individualism in corporate worship that Noland noticed is evidenced in the results of a survey conducted by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research in 2018. The State of Theology surveyed three thousand Americans and asked whether or not they agreed with the statement: "Worshiping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church."[52] Fifty-eight percent of respondents agreed with the statement. The sponsors of the survey report that "a majority of Americans downplay the importance of the church's gathering together to worship God. This shows a characteristic American emphasis on individuality, an

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[51] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

[52] "The State of Theology," The State of Theology, Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research, accessed May 27, 2020, https://thestateoftheology.com.

individuality that runs counter to the Bible's teaching."[53] Ligonier and LifeWay believe that relativism—a postmodern ideal—led to these results.[54]

This literature review is divided into two main sections. The first section examines literature regarding postmodernism: its relationship to modernism, its adherence to relativism, its acceptance of many worldviews, its dualism of individualism within community, and its reliance upon personal experience. The second section reviews literature pertaining to the indications and effects of corporate individualism in worship: congregational participation (overvaluation of personal experience and interaction with other congregants), song selection (self-focused worship songs with reflexive texts and ambiguous worship songs), and platform presence (language use of the worship leaders and the worship environment).

Postmodernism

Many books have been written about postmodernism, and these authors have found it challenging to define in simple terms what postmodernists believe. In its essence, postmodernism accepts an infinite number of worldviews as valid and true, thus it is difficult to describe the entirety and complexity of this philosophy. In Andrew Randall's dissertation, *A Practical Guide for Creating a Group Environment to Reach a Postmodern World*, he quips that "for all intents and purposes trying to define the common elements that distinguish this new generation from the previous one is like trying to nail a piece of Jell-O to the wall."[55] His statement is an apt description of the complications in trying to understand the postmodern mindset. Redman asserts

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[53] Ligonier, "The State of Theology."

[54] Ibid.

[55] Anthony Randall, "A Practical Guide for Creating a Group Environment to Reach a Postmodern World" (DMin thesis, Liberty University, 2016), 18, accessed May 29, 2020, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

in his book, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church,* that postmodernism is a mixture of many worldviews, derived from the influx of diverse racial and ethnic groups with varying cultures and beliefs into Western society. Additionally, Redman notes that "many Baby Boomers and Generation Xers have rejected the worldview of their elders for Eastern religion and New Age philosophy. The result is that contemporary culture has become a tossed salad of often-competing attitudes, values, beliefs, and perspectives. . . . [T]he movement is far from monolithic."[56] As detailed later in this chapter, the inherent contradictions in postmodernism contribute to the difficulty in understanding the development of corporate individualism in worship.

For these reasons, there is no adequate definition to unify all facets of postmodernism; however, there are some common characteristics that can be found in, and broad concepts that can be applied to, this worldview. For the purposes of this study, the selected characteristics of postmodernism examined in this chapter most directly relate to and affect corporate individualism.

Rejection of Modernism

In beginning an examination of the concepts common to postmodernism, it is necessary to establish the historical context for its development. Like any cultural movement, postmodernism did not come into being in a vacuum. It is a product of the history and culture from which it was born and cannot be understood apart from its philosophical predecessor, modernism. Stewart E. Kelly and James K. Dew, Jr. maintain in their book, *Understanding Postmodernism: A Christian Perspective,* that postmodernism should be understood both

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[56] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 131.

philosophically and historically. Philosophically, it is a worldview that "includes a number of

beliefs about the nature of knowledge and reality,"[57] while historically, it is a worldview that

"follows Enlightenment modernism."[58] As noted earlier, scholars disagree about how to define

postmodernism and what postmodernists actually believe, but there is broad consensus that it is

fundamentally a reaction against modernism. In his book, *A Primer on Postmodernism,*

theologian and professor Stanley Grenz explains that "at its foundation . . . the postmodern

outlook is anti-modern. . . . Postmodernism refers to an intellectual mood and an array of cultural

expressions that call into question the ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the

modern mind-set."[59]

Modernism is a product of the Enlightenment, which elevated human reason to the status

of sole determiner of objective truth. Redman observes that the modernistic view was in stark

contrast to medieval Europe's traditional view of truth "as a matter of divine revelation,

accessible only through the teachings of the Church. Modernists reject religion—Christianity in

particular—as the foundation of human understanding and put faith in objective truth that can be

known by autonomous human reason."[60] Postmodernists, however, do not believe that a single,

universal and objective truth exists, much less is knowable.[61] From a Christian perspective,

which views Jesus as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:1), this mindset is difficult to

comprehend. But Leonard Sweet, theology professor at Evangelical Seminary and renowned

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[57] Stewart E. Kelly and James K. Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism: A Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 4, accessed May 28, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 12.

[60] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 132.

[61] Ibid., 133.

commentator on postmodernism and the church, explains how historical events led to this new belief:

> Postmoderns no longer trust the human powers of reasoning to solve everything. . . . Postmoderns feel badly burned: badly burned by science, badly burned by modernists, badly burned by the church, badly burned by philosophy, and so on. Reason didn't usher in the "kingdom of God," much less the "kingdom of man." If anything, reason ushered in the kingdom of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. Zygmunt Bauman argues that the Holocaust and its camps were some of modernity's highest expressions of Enlightenment thinking, and the supreme example of the Enlightenment project.[62]

Andrew Fabich agrees with Sweet's assessment when he proclaims, "Society experienced an existential crisis in the post-war years, which unleashed postmodernism."[63] The atrocities of the Second World War, and the capabilities of human nature they revealed, fractured the modernist mindset, leaving Western society to question everything they believed to be true—even truth itself.

Relativism

Like most aspects of postmodernism, the issue of truth is complex. While modernists believe that truth is objective and knowable, postmodernists reject that claim. Sweet posits that "postmoderns," as he calls them, do not "reject all understandings of truth. They allow for certain kinds of truth. Just not absolute truth that applies equally to all cultures."[64] This relativism is at the heart of postmodern thought: what is true for one person might not be true for another. Jimmy Long describes relativism as a matter of preferences. In his book, *Emerging Hope: A Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations*, Long submits that "instead of human reason that

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[62] Leonard Sweet, "Outstorming Christianity's Perfect Storm," in *The Church of the Perfect Storm* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 11, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[63] Fabich, "What My Generation Needs," 78–79.

[64] Sweet, "Outstorming Christianity's Perfect Storm," 12.

leads to truth, postmodernism posits multiple truths that lead only to preferences. . . . Truth is not

so much found as created. What is true is what one believes to be true. The saying 'To each his

own' could be the motto of postmodern culture."[65] The subjectivity of truth in postmodern

thought elevates the individual's perception of reality, understood through the lens of their

personal experience, as the sole arbiter of truth. Redman asserts that "the postmodern view of

truth is thus both radically subjective and radically relative. It is radically subjective because

what is held to be true depends on who perceives it. . . . Because human knowing is severely

limited and completely subjective, truth is therefore also radically relative."[66] Because

modernism claims that truth can be objectively observed, reality is independent of the observer.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, contends that reality is always dependent upon the

subjectivity of the observer and relative to the individual.[67] Thus, truth, like beauty, is in the eye

of the beholder.

For modernist Christians, objective truth is a crucial element of their faith and a

necessary prism from which to view the world around them. However, for postmodernists,

objective truth is not a priority, nor is it their desired goal. Randall explains that, for the

postmodernists, "It is not a question of if objective truth can be obtained; it is really that

objective truth is not desirable."[68] Since objective truth is highly valued among modernist

Christians, the idea that objective truth is not sought after by some is a foreign concept to them.

Randall further states that "the hardest thing for some people from the modernist generation to

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[65] Jimmy Long, *Emerging Hope: A Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2004), 73.

[66] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 133.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 21.

understand is that unlike them, truth is not where value is placed. Instead, in the postmodern generation, the journey to truth is what is most valuable, and in fact even if the journey does not lead to truth, it is still viewed as being more valuable than the truth it was seeking."[69]

Closely connected to relative truth is the concept of moral relativism. Theologian James Emery White describes moral relativism as a "functional atheism," which avows that the circumstances of a person's situation and the culture in which they live determine how their life should be lived. White further contends that even if a postmodernist believes there is "a higher power, that higher power is not fleshed out in terms of authority. As a result, moral values become a matter of personal opinion or private judgement rather than something grounded in objective truth."[70] This view is at odds with the traditional Christian belief that the Bible is the ultimate authority on how Christians should live. For the postmodern Christian, moral relativism should cause internal conflict if he or she truly believes that the Bible should be their guidebook for life.

The seismic shift in Western culture to postmodern thought has made an indelible mark upon the church. Leonard Sweet refers to postmodernism as a tsunami that has engulfed the entire planet and urges the church to understand the nature and reality of the culture in which it lives in order to reach it with the gospel of Christ.[71] Relativism has pervaded society to such an extent that it has begun to seep into the church. Research conducted at Barna Group reveals that among Christians in America, "almost one-quarter of practicing Christians (23%) strongly agree

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[69] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 21.

[70] James Emery White, *The Church in an Age of Crisis: 25 New Realities Facing Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 19, accessed May 16, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[71] Sweet, "Outstorming Christianity's Perfect Storm," 6.

that 'what is morally right or wrong depends on what an individual believes.'"[72] According to

Randall, this perspective is understandable as postmodernists consider the wide range of

diverging, and often conflicting, beliefs among the numerous Christian denominations. He

recognizes that

> each denomination, church, and even sometimes person within the church has a different
> set of truths that they hold to. The postmodern sees these differences and, as a result,
> rejects them all because if they all seek to show one overarching truth that is true for all
> people at all times, then the assumption would be that the methods derived by the modern
> generation would have proven those truths by now.[73]

Multiple Worldviews

Because truth is relative for the postmodernist and each individual can possess their own

truth, it is a natural extension for the postmodernist to believe that an infinite number of valid

worldviews exists, even if they contain competing claims. Long notes that the modernist "search

to find the central theme of life or to distinguish the grand narrative has given way to multiple

alternatives and competing viewpoints."[74] Consequently, it is easy to see why scholars disagree

on many characteristics of postmodernism. Stanley Grenz emphasizes that the postmodern

"phenomenon marks the end of a single, universal worldview. The postmodern ethos resists

unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations. It replaces these with a respect for

difference and a celebration of the local and particular at the expense of the universal."[75] The

acceptance of multiple worldviews as being equally valid explains why postmodernists place a

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[72] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians," Barna, May 9, 2017, https://www.barna.com/ research/competing-worldviews-influence-todays-christians/.

[73] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 21.

[74] Long, *Emerging Hope*, 73.

[75] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 12.

high value on diversity. As stated earlier in this chapter, Redman attributes the mixture of

worldviews that characterizes postmodernism, in part, to the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity

that has integrated with Western society through immigration.[76]

Later in this chapter, the author will demonstrate how the postmodernist's rejection of

objective truth, the resulting embrace of relativism, and the acceptance of multiple worldviews

influences the increased use of ambiguous lyrics in corporate worship and the design of the

corporate worship space.

Individualism within Community

The most vexing aspect of postmodernism (at least, with regard to this study) is the

tension between individualism and community. This confusion should not be a surprise since,

according to Jimmy Long, we are in a period of transition where "the state of continual change

that characterizes the postmodern era should be expected. . . . It is going to take scores of years,

not just a few years, to bring about this transition. A time of transition entails confusion,

differences of opinion and uncertainty, not stability."[77] Additionally, the postmodern ethos of

accepting multiple worldviews compounds this confusion between individuality and community.

In his article, "What My Generation Needs," Andrew Fabich, professor of biology at Truett

McConnell University, addresses these issues as a scientist and as a member of the

postmodernist Millennial generation. He claims that "today, you'll see elements of both modern

and postmodern thinking because my generation has fused them together."[78] Even Sweet, who

champions the shift to postmodernism, admits that "the relation between premodern, modern,

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[76] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 131.

[77] Long, *Emerging Hope*, 72.

[78] Fabich, "What My Generation Needs," 78.

and postmodern is not sequential, but simultaneous. The tsunami of postmodernity did not wash

away all outcroppings of premodern or modern."[79]

Most scholars, however, believe that a major tenet of postmodern thought is a shift away

from individualism toward an emphasis on community. Leonard Sweet submits that

postmodernism rejects the individualism that is central to Enlightenment modernism. In his

essay, "A New Reformation: Re-Creating Worship for a Postmodern World," Sweet postulates

that "the future promises a second coming of communal customs and values. Postmoderns are

disillusioned with the hyper-individualism of modern society."[80] Long agrees that

postmodernists have turned away from individualism when he affirms that they "view life from a

communal perspective, not from the Enlightenment perspective of the autonomous self."[81] He

describes the autonomous self as the "queen of the Enlightenment . . . sovereign and self-

sufficient."[82] However, the twentieth century saw, according to Long, the inevitable

consequences of this philosophy:

> In the Enlightenment the autonomous self was the center of philosophical thought,
> culminating in Friedrich Nietzsche's superman. In the twentieth century two of
> Nietzsche's supermen ascended to power—Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler. These two
> men did what they wanted to do and made up the rules as they went along.
> Philosophically, no one could challenge them because they were taking the autonomous
> self to its logical conclusion. After seeing the devastation these two men brought, people
> began to realize the necessity for a community that can hold individuals accountable.[83]

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[79] Sweet, "Outstorming Christianity's Perfect Storm," 8.

[80] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 183.

[81] Long, *Emerging Hope*, 220.

[82] Ibid., 65.

[83] Ibid., 70.

Long proposes that postmodern society is "moving away from reason by the autonomous self and moving toward a relationship in community."[84] He believes that this societal shift toward an emphasis on community is a step in the right direction because it is more in alignment with "God's intention of how we should function in relationships. God created us to live in community."[85]

While postmodernists are drawn to a sense of community, individualism is still pervasive in the culture. This confusion is exacerbated in the United States because of the deep-seated individualism that has characterized American society. In her essay, "US Evangelicals and the Redefinition of Worship Music," musicologist Anna Nekola posits that "much of the discourse surrounding contemporary worship assumes an individualistic ideology where individuals seek truth, authenticity, fulfilment and experience. . . . [I]t also belongs within an American national ideology where individuality, self-determination, self-discernment and, most recently, consumer choice have come to define the American experience."[86] Many scholars, however, indicate that the roots of individualism extend far beyond American culture and are integrated into Western society as a whole. Craig Peters argues in his dissertation, "Recapturing the Transformational Power of the Church: Moving beyond Consumerism and Individualism to Experiencing Life-Changing Christian Community," that "the foundation of the Western view of life is the centrality of the individual. This is not something new but something which has developed over

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[84] Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1997), 61.

[85] Long, *Emerging Hope*, 89.

[86] Nekola, "US Evangelicals," 134.

centuries and penetrates the very fabric of who we are. It is the atmosphere in which we have lived and moved and developed our being."[87]

Peter's viewpoint is echoed by Soong-Chan Rah in his book, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity.* Rah insists that "from Hellenistic philosophy to medieval thought to the Enlightenment and postmodernity, each phase of Western philosophy has put forth as its central tenet the primacy of the individual."[88] Rah traces the philosophies of Plato, Rousseau, Thoreau, Rand, and Derrida to reveal a golden thread of individualism in Western thought. He sets America squarely into this context, stating that "from the earliest stages of American history, individualism has been the defining attribute in understanding our nation's ethos."[89] Rah extends this criticism to the American church, which he laments has followed the individualism of Western culture and "has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual."[90] In his view, the American church is trapped in a type of cultural captivity where "the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces Christian faith to a personal, private and individual faith."[91]

The combination of the postmodern predilection to community and a lingering Western view of individuality reveals that the nature of how an individual views himself or herself in the context of community has changed. Leonard Sweet offers the best explanation of this dualism of

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[87] Peters, "Recapturing the Transformational Power," 63.

[88] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 29.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 29–30.

individualism and community in postmodern society when he refers to this phenomenon as "individual-in-community," or "me/we" for short. He asserts that "at the heart of postmodernity lies a theological dyslexia: Call it 'me/we,' or the experience of individual-in-community."[92] He illustrates this point by describing the collective memory of mounds of flowers left in front of Buckingham Palace and around London after the death of Princess Diana. Sweet maintains that before modernism, in medieval times, mourners would have simply piled flowers on top of one another because "everything was communal and nothing was individual."[93] In modern times, "where everything was individual and little was communal,"[94] mourners would have placed the flowers in individual vases at the grave. However, Sweet attributes the actions of Princess Diana's mourners to a postmodern culture, where they placed the "flowers back on the communal pile, but wrap[ped] them in cellophane or plastic to separate them from the crowd. A postmodern 'me' needs 'we' to 'be.'"[95]

The changing sense of what it means to be in community in a postmodern generation is further complicated by the advent of the internet and social media. James Emery White posits that "there can be little doubt that the defining mark of the new generation is that it has never known life without the internet."[96] The internet and social media have changed the way in which individuals relate to others as they amass an unlimited number of "friends" to become a virtual community. Anthony Randall argues that the postmodern emphasis on community has given rise

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[92] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 182.

[93] Ibid., 182–183.

[94] Ibid., 183.

[95] Ibid.

[96] White, *Church in Age of Crisis*, 138.

to and driven the success of these social media platforms.[97] However, these relationships are inevitably superficial because of the sheer size of the community and since the vast majority of these infinite number of "friends" will never come into physical contact with one another. No other generation in history has encountered a situation such as this. Randall believes that

> here is where the postmodern generation most differentiates itself from the previous generations. While the modernist sought to have a manageable number of deep relationships, the postmodern generation seeks to have an infinite amount of people associated with their particular community. These large circles, tribes, or followers are considered to be the individual's friends, confidants, and councilors. . . . [However,] the individual will never have to meet any of these people in real life for them to become part of their community.

Postmodernists are creating a new paradigm for how they view themselves in relation to their community.

Later in this chapter, the author will show how the postmodernist's perception of individual-in-community influences song selection (use of self-focused worship songs with reflexive texts), interaction with other congregants in corporate worship, and the worship leaders' language use.

Personal Experience

Arguably, the characteristic of postmodernism with the greatest influence upon the development of corporate individualism in worship is the exaltation of personal experience. The four characteristics described above—rejection of modernism, relativism, multiple worldviews, and individualism within community—find their ultimate expression in a focus upon personal experience. Regarding the first characteristic, rejection of modernism, Redman explains that "postmodernism advocates a holistic and experiential approach to receiving information and

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[97] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 23.

perceiving the world around us. This approach is grounded in rejection of modern rationalism and its unitary view of the self."[98] Modernists view the self as being completely controlled by reason and the intellect, as encapsulated by René Descartes' famous quote, "I think, therefore I am."[99] Postmodernists, however, take a more holistic approach to knowing truth that centers on an individual's personal experience. Sweet clarifies this postmodern approach as he describes two ways of "knowing" a flower:

> one way (more Western) of 'knowing' a flower is to be full of oneself, one's wits and wisdom, and to throw oneself against the flower as an object. The other way (more Eastern) of 'knowing' is really a way of 'unknowing': to be 'empty' of oneself and to let the flower reveal itself as it is. The first way of 'knowing' a flower is to experiment with it as something separate, to stand at a distance from it, and pick it apart. The second way of knowing a flower is to experience it, to enter in rather than stand back; to stand under . . . and participate in its beauty. . . . In one you are a distant observer or critic. In one you are an intimate lover."[100]

Undoubtedly, experiencing as a means of knowing affects the postmodernist's approach to worship. Sweet proposes that "for the postmodern worshipper, objectivity can no longer be the sole objective of the pursuit of truth. Love can be as much a mode of knowledge as the old scientific method's detachment. Thus, a worshipper is both active and reflective, participating and observing, both in and out of the experience."[101]

The second characteristic, the embrace of relativism, necessitates that personal experience becomes the only means of determining truth. In his book, *Soul Tsunami*, Leonard Sweet compares modern knowledge with postmodern knowing: "Whereas modern seekers

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[98] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 138–139.

[99] René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637), quoted in Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 139.

[100] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 186.

[101] Ibid., 186–187.

sought the knowledge of the truth, postmodern seekers want to *know* the truth in the biblical

sense of that word 'know'—that is, *experience* the truth."[102] It is difficult to overestimate the

importance of personal experience for the postmodernist. According to Redman, in

postmodernism, one's subjective personal experience is all there is. He notes that postmodernists

"argue that nothing can be known as it really exists, but only as someone observes it. There can

be no objective reality, only our subjective experiences."[103] Speaking as a member of the

Millennial generation, Fabich affirms that postmodernists "trust only what [they] think or

perceive. After all, our own experiences are the only things we know. So me, myself, and I must

be right—regardless of what others think."[104]

Third, relativism reaches its logical conclusion with the acceptance of multiple

worldviews as being equally valid because, according to Randall, "postmoderns cannot assume

that one truth for one individual can supersede the claims of truth that others proclaim. . . . Truth

then is more of a personal journey, and when truth is personal, there is no desire to convince

others that one's personal truth applies to others."[105] In postmodernism, if everyone's personal

experience determines their truth, then it follows that anyone's worldview is acceptable as truth.

Therefore, all worldviews are equally acceptable.

Fourth, the postmodern dualism of the individual within community places high

importance on personal experience. Randall observes that in "dealing with truth, this generation

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[102] Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 380.

[103] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 133.

[104] Fabich, "What My Generation Needs," 79.

[105] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 32–33.

. . . values the personal experience of the individual."[106] However, when the individual shares his

or her narrative with others, "this creates more of a community for truth, where people are free to

communicate and interact with other's claims in a way that can help the individual on the path of

knowing. . . . Truth for the postmodern generation is in one sense very personal and individual,

but at the same time, truth can only be experienced within community."[107] This dichotomy is an

excellent example of Sweet's understanding of the postmodern concept of "me/we."

Corporate Individualism in Worship

While there is little written about the concept of corporate individualism in worship, there

is existing literature that discusses many of the specific elements that indicate the presence of

corporate individualism in a congregation and that reveal its effects upon corporate worship.

These elements include self-focused worship songs with reflexive texts, ambiguous worship

songs, overvaluation of personal experience, lack of interaction with other congregants, language

use of the worship leader and pastor, and the worship environment.

Congregational Participation

As Western society has shifted from a modern worldview to a postmodern one, the

influences of this new paradigm are becoming more evident in many evangelical churches in the

twenty-first century. The exaltation of personal experience in postmodernism has influenced the

congregation's participation in corporate worship in two primary ways: the overvaluation of

personal experience in worship and the undervaluation of the congregants' interaction with each

other. There are two axes in corporate worship, and they are both vital; however, an imbalance is

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[106] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 37.

[107] Ibid., 38.

occurring in many evangelical churches. Each individual must be engaged in his or her personal worship of God—the vertical axis of worship—for worship to be occurring. However, when the family of God is gathered for worship, the communal nature of corporate worship—the horizontal axis—must also be valued.

Overvaluation of Personal Experience

The postmodern emphasis on personal experience has produced an overvaluation of an individual's personal experience in worship while the communal aspect of corporate worship is being undervalued. While many worshipers do not recognize their immersion in the tenets of postmodernism, they are, nonetheless, affected by this overwhelming cultural influence. Walters recognizes that the church cannot escape the cultural tidal wave "any more than a fish can stay dry in the ocean. We must be aware of the culture and how it shapes people, especially those attending our worship services."[108] Redman agrees that Christians are immersed in a cultural environment that will inevitably affect the way they approach worship when he asserts that "postmodern culture is an experience-oriented environment that affects the Protestant church, whether realized or not. Unchurched visitors and longtime members alike approach the worship service from a postmodern experience orientation."[109]

Redman's assertion is illustrated resoundingly in an article by Andrea Lucado in *RELEVANT,* a magazine for young adult Christians in their twenties and thirties. She recounts how, when attending a friend's church for the first time, she was convicted about her personal

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[108] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 51.

[109] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 144.

experience in worship. The church was very different from her own: smaller, intergenerational, and with (in her terms) "mediocre" worship. Lucado describes her epiphany:

> The conviction I felt during this church service stemmed from the reality of what I have allowed worship to become for me: an experience that makes me feel good.
> I like churches with amazing worship bands—they make me feel good. I like churches where my friends go—they make me feel good. I like church to be entertaining and the sermon to be engaging—this makes me feel good.
> I had to stop and ask myself, *since when was worship about making me feel good?*
> R.C. Sproul says, "As fallen creatures, it is one of our most basic and fundamental inclinations to worship something, or someone, other than the true God."
> Could it be that, sometimes, the thing we are drawn to worship apart from God is worship itself? The act of it as it takes place in our church services? The music, the dark lighting, the instruments playing behind the prayer? Is this what I crave more than God?
> I do not believe the elements of a worship service are wrong or bad, but I do believe we can begin to worship our worship experience over the almighty God, and this is not true worship.[110]

Walters echoes this concern when he warns that when personal experience and feelings in worship are exalted above all else, "the danger is . . . we will stop worshiping God and start worshiping worship."[111]

Walters uses the term "romanticism" to describe this phenomenon because he believes it more accurately portrays what he has "observed in many modern churches. By romanticism, I mean the elevation of subjective experience—namely personal experience—is the controlling factor in the approach to worship."[112] Walters declares that personal experience has become a safe haven for postmodernists, who are bombarded and overwhelmed with information from a technology-driven culture. He argues that postmodernists "are numb from an overload of information. . . . Romanticism says, in effect, 'If I experienced it, it is real.' This love of feeling

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[110] Andrea Lucado, "Do You Worship Your Worship Experience?," *RELEVANT Magazine*, April 3, 2015, accessed June 6, 2020, https://relevantmagazine.com/god/do-you-worship-your-worship-experience/.

[111] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 58.

[112] Ibid.

and experience is the same as that seen in preteens who 'fall in love with love.' They are more enamored with the experience of being in love for the first time than with the actual person who is the ostensible object of their love."[113]

The exaltation of personal experience in the culture can also be seen in Christian worship services. In fact, it is so prevalent in church culture that the term "worship service" has been replaced with "worship experience" in the common nomenclature of many churches. Nekola documents the emphasis on "worship experience" in advertisements from the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry beginning in the late 1990s. As this emphasis continued into the 2000s and 2010s, Nekola observes that this terminology began to enter church nomenclature as well.[114] Monique Ingalls, renowned scholar and researcher of contemporary Christian congregational music, reiterates this development. In her book, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community,* Ingalls declares that "in tandem with the growth of this new participatory Christian popular music subgenre, a new term for the divine encounter mediated in congregational singing insinuated its way into the evangelical vernacular: the 'worship experience.' This term is endemic within early twenty-first-century evangelical discourse about congregational singing."[115]

Nekola's and Ingalls' work reveals an interesting dichotomy within contemporary worship music. Nekola establishes that from the late twentieth century and continuing

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[113] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday,* 58.

[114] Anna E. Nekola, "'I'll Take You There': The Promise of Transformation in the Marketing of Worship Media in US Christian Music Magazines," in *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (London: Routledge, 2016), 129–133, accessed June 19, 2020, https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4324/9781315571850.

[115] Monique Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.

throughout the twenty-first century, the rising popularity of the CCM industry "reflected and helped solidify a particular understanding of 'worship' as an increasingly individual (rather than corporate) act achieved via material products and technology."[116] Meaning, the ability to listen to worship music at home, in the car, and on a phone (oftentimes isolating oneself using earbuds) helps create an individualized experience of worship. However, as mentioned in Ingalls' statement above, there is an important factor in "this new participatory Christian popular music subgenre"[117]—the positive emphasize on participation. Worship by its very nature is participatory, and Ingalls maintains that active participation in congregational song helps build community. Noting that contemporary worship music is inherently highly participative, she submits that "participatory music-making powerfully imparts a sense of community and is a 'strong force for social bonding,'[118]"[119] thus, this community-building characteristic is the reason "congregational singing is one of the central participatory and experiential practices in the worship of local church congregations."[120] Consequently, contemporary worship music can both promote an individual understanding of worship and, due to its participatory nature, help build community in corporate worship.

As the CCM industry grew and the emphasis on a "worship experience" became more pervasive, Ingalls identifies another trend occurring that leads to an individualistic approach to worship—a pursuit of "authenticity" in the worship experience. Ingalls notices that

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[116] Nekola, "I'll Take You There," 125.

[117] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 6.

[118] Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29, quoted in Monique M. Ingalls, Singing the Congregation, 17.

[119] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 17.

[120] Ibid., 107.

in the early 2000s, coinciding with worship music's rapid commercialization, the category of authenticity became the standard for evaluating the overall performance of both worship and of worship music. Evangelical pastors, worship leaders, and worshipers filled books, magazines, and blogs with thoughts on what qualities or actions constituted worship—and worship music—that was "authentic," "genuine," or "real."[121]

Songwriters of contemporary worship music recognize the quest for an authentic worship experience and respond in their music. In her journal article, "Intimacy and Orthodoxy: Evaluating Existing Paradigms of Contemporary Worship Music," Michelle Baker-Wright claims that "the prevailing issue to which songwriters of contemporary worship music have sought to respond is the need for authentic worship in the church, which has primarily resulted in a predominance of songs describing Jesus' ability to meet individual needs."[122] While she believes these songs have a place in corporate worship, Baker-Wright suggests that they have been "overemphasized. As a result, this has led [to] . . . an individualistic approach to worship."[123]

Due to the participative nature of contemporary music that Ingalls describes, coupled with the postmodern captivation of personal experience, postmodern Christians are naturally drawn toward Pentecostalism, which is also inherently highly participative. Sweet underscores that "the perpetual openness to experience of postmoderns is such that one can never underestimate the e-factor: experiential. . . . They are hungry for experiences, especially experiences of God."[124] The experiential worship postmodernists hunger for is intrinsic to Pentecostalism. Redman observes that from the 1960s, when Pentecostalism began to make its

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[121] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 47.

[122] Michelle K. Baker-Wright, "Intimacy and Orthodoxy: Evaluating Existing Paradigms of Contemporary Worship Music," *Missiology* 35, no. 2 (April 2007): 172, accessed May 21, 2020, EBSCOhost.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 174.

way into the mainstream, "for many established churches, the charismatic renewal movement was a breath of fresh air. People welcomed the focus on personal experience of God through worship and prayer . . . because they felt the experience of God had been underemphasized in their own church[es]."[125] According to Ingalls, Pentecostalism continues to be one of the fastest growing segments of Christianity in the twenty-first century with almost one in four Christians identifying as pentecostal/charismatic.[126]

Sweet demonstrates that the pairing of postmodernism and Pentecostalism is befitting because "postmoderns want interactive, immersive, in-your-face participation in the mystery of God. That's why they are attracted to the power and mystery of Pentecostalism."[127] Redman explicates these factors attracting postmodernists to Pentecostalism when he attests that "the most obvious common features are emphasis on personal experience and suspicion of modern rationalism. . . . The core of Pentecostal and charismatic worship is the conviction that we can experience God directly through speaking in tongues, prophesy, healing, and other manifestations of the Holy Spirit."[128] Because postmodernists are driven by their quest for personal experiences, Redman believes that "the promise of a personal experience of God for anyone is likely to continue to draw postmoderns to the Pentecostal or charismatic service."[129]

Redman, however, cautions that the Pentecostal/charismatic "emphasis on a personal experience of God has some drawbacks. For one thing, the stress on experience means lack of

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[125] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 32.

[126] Monique Ingalls, "Introduction: Interconnection, Interface, and Identification in Pentecostal-Charismatic Music and Worship," in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 1.

[127] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 179.

[128] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 149.

[129] Ibid.

emphasis on doctrine. As Donald Miller sees it, the strength of many charismatic churches is their ability to make the sacred real to worshipers. But this 'postmodern primitivism' emphasizes experience of God more than correct belief about God."[130] Many Pentecostal theologians would disagree with Redman's statement and would, almost certainly, characterize it as an overgeneralization. However, Redman's statement can be interpreted as a commentary on the lack of balance between experience and doctrine, rather than the mere absence of doctrine. The head versus heart debate is nothing new, but in order for worship to be faithful to biblical teaching, there must be engagement of both heart and head to "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). According to theologian Donald Bloesch, "Worship that glorifies God is animated by his Spirit and informed by the truth of his revelation in Jesus Christ. True worship is grounded in the paradoxical unity of logos and pneuma."[131] Bloesch describes the negative consequences of bifurcating head and heart (in his terms, "rationalism" and "mysticism") in worship:

> We need always to guard against two opposite dangers: rationalism and mysticism. In rationalism we have an emphasis on the Word but to the neglect of the Spirit. In a rationalistic milieu the worship service is cerebral rather than affectional, didactic rather than kerygmatic. . . . Sermons in this tradition frequently have a polemical or apologetic ring and are intended to persuade more than to convert. . . .
> In mysticism the worship service is designed to lead us into the presence of God but without providing a rational grasp of who or what this presence is. The sermon offers illumination on progressing in the Christian life but not on clarifying the mysteries that constitute the foundation of faith. *Pneuma* and *praxis* take priority over *logos* in a radical or consistent mysticism.[132]

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[130] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening,* 149. In Donald Miller's book, *Reinventing American Protestantism,* Miller explains that "Religious 'primitivism' has a long history of appeal, with individuals abandoning the encrusted form of religion and searching for its earliest expression, before it was encased in doctrine and ritual." Thus, his use of "postmodern primitivism" in this context refers to the Pentecostal/charismatic practice of looking back in history, bypassing the modern era, to an earlier form of Christianity unhindered by the doctrine and ritual imposed by modernism. Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 181, accessed June 12, 2020, EBSCOhost.

[131] Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 118, https://tcr1-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/cgi-bin/TCRT/hub.py?type=entity&browse=full&entity_id=2295839.

[132] Bloesch, *The Church*, 133–134.

Redman offers an additional critique of the Pentecostal emphasis on personal experience in worship when he identifies that "another weakness among Pentecostals and charismatics is the frequently blurred line between experiencing God in worship and emotional release in worship. . . . For one thing, emotionally expressive worship has a strangely addictive quality for many. This may lead some to worship their worship experience, rather than worship God."[133] This phenomenon, however, is not exclusive to charismatic churches. It was illustrated in Andrea Lucado's story discussed earlier where she describes being convicted over placing her personal experience of worship above God. This conviction leads her to ask, "If I stand and sing 'Oceans' with a thousand other people in a church building, but I leave feeling unchanged, with no desire to reach out to my neighbors or spread the Gospel further than my own heart, have I truly worshipped God, or have I simply worshipped an experience?"[134] Walters forewarns of the predictable outcome of overvaluing personal experience in worship when he argues that "worship guided by romanticism will eventually be divorced from its proper object, God, and fixed instead on some subjective state of mind or heart."[135]

Fundamentally, the problem that Walters is describing and that Lucado details in her story is one of idolatry. Walters believes that "the ultimate expression of sin is idolatry, and idolatry reveals itself as the enthronement of self."[136] The Western ideals of individualism and consumerism and the postmodern exaltation of personal experience places the self above all else. As Walters recognizes,

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[133] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 150.

[134] Lucado, "Do You Worship Experience?"

[135] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 58.

[136] Ibid., 62.

When people leave our churches each week evaluating the worship service on the basis of what they experienced or how they felt about it, they are acting upon romantic notions about God that are in fact an obstacle to worship. Even more problematic, that approach to worship easily becomes the worship of self. . . .

Too often corporate worship is lost in the attempt of individuals to plug into God at their own level. While the move toward experiential worship is clearly a trend in the church that must be taken seriously, pastors would be foolish to ignore the danger of allowing yet one more manifestation of the self curved back on itself. As one old preacher put, "Satan doesn't mind us worshiping, he just doesn't want us worshiping God."[137]

The image of the self, curved back on itself, is a striking image that illustrates the problem with overvaluing personal experience in corporate worship. When this occurs, both the vertical and horizontal axes of worship have converged and transformed into a circular arrow pointing back to the individual as the object of worship. Walters warns that "it is extremely dangerous to enthrone the self as the object of worship so that intense personal experience becomes the magnetic attraction to worship, rather than the reality of God. The lesson to pastors and worship leaders is clear: Focus on God, not the feelings of the people. The presence of God will generate all the feeling and experience anyone could desire."[138]

Interaction with Other Congregants

As mentioned earlier, corporate worship travels along two axes: the vertical axis (between the worshiper and God) and the horizontal axis (between the congregants). Both are important when the church gathers as the family of God; however, the horizontal axis is being undervalued as corporate individualism has increased. The distinctiveness of corporate worship has been written about by numerous scholars and theologians, but a brief description here is

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[137] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 59–60.

[138] Ibid., 60–61.

necessary before examining the issues associated with the decreased interaction among the congregants.

In the third book of her worship architect trilogy, *The Music Architect,* Constance Cherry informs that the word "corporate," from the Latin *corpus,* refers to the human body. She adds that the term implies a cooperation—a functioning interaction—between its various parts.[139] Therefore, a functioning interaction between the members of the body of Christ is intrinsic to corporate worship as the individual congregant unites with fellow believers to offer a single, unified expression of worship to God. While Cherry supports the use of the word "corporate" to describe public worship, she prefers the term "communal" because it "suggests a deeper emotional relationship."[140] She notes that the apostle Paul uses a form of the word "corporate" in constructing the metaphor of a "properly functioning human body"[141] to describe the church— the body of Christ. However, she points out that Paul also uses the word *koinonia* to denote the church as a "community of believers."[142]

Cherry describes corporate, or communal, worship as tridirectional: from the people to God, from God to the people, and between the community of worshipers. She posits that

> the Scriptures are very clear that *three parties are actively involved in corporate worship*: God, individuals, and fellow worshipers. Worship is actually tridirectional in nature. Worship is always vertical (God speaking to the people and the community directing worship to God) and at the same time horizontal (the community in fellowship at worship). If worship is only vertical, only flowing in two directions (God to people/people to God), we risk becoming worshipers that operate independently. However, biblical worship is depicted as interdependent worship—worship that actually depends on the full participation and investment of each member of the community while

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[139] Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprint for Engaging Worshipers in Song* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 57.

[140] Ibid., 58.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid.

together. Mutual dependency among members of the body of Christ is a hallmark of Christian worship. Worship, then, is best understood to be tridirectional in nature. It flows in three directions at once: from God to the community, the community to God, and the community in conversation with its members.[143]

Contrary to this mutual dependency, however, Cherry perceives that "an erroneous teaching has emerged recently (and is gaining traction) in which worship is described strictly as vertical only. The conclusion is that songs must be only addressed to God, not to others."[144] She notes that those who support this view cite the book of Revelation as their prooftext, "where only songs to God and Christ are represented. Presumably, all the music of eternity is directed to God and therefore must be the model for the church now. This is an unfortunate viewpoint for it fails to take into account the clearly horizontal nature of worship, as expressed so emphatically in the New Testament."[145]

The clearest passage in the New Testament describing the vertical and horizontal axes of worship is found in Ephesians 5:19-20: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, *addressing one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody *to the Lord* with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything *to God the Father* in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *submitting to one another* out of reverence for Christ" (italics mine). The vertical axis is clear as the worshipers sing "to the Lord" and give thanks "to God the Father." The horizontal axis is also clear as the gathered body of Christ is "addressing one another" with their songs and "submitting to one another" in the process. Bob Kauflin discusses this horizontal axis, affirming that corporate worship does not occur "just through songs and words directed to God. The New Testament Christians gathered in

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[143] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 55.

[144] Ibid., 56.

[145] Ibid.

large part to strengthen each other for the purpose of glorifying God in their daily lives. . . . Even our songs of praise are a way we minister to each other for God's glory."[146] Kauflin references the passage in Ephesians to illustrate that this interrelation in corporate worship is "evident from Ephesians 5:19, where Paul says we're to be '*addressing one another* in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs,' while at the same time 'singing and making melody *to the Lord*.' We aren't having our own little worship experiences independent of each other."[147]

This emphasis on the body of Christ being in community versus living in isolation resounds in much of the literature. In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life,* Donald Whitney declares, "The thought that the Church at worship is an accidental convergence in one place of a number of isolated individuals who practice, in hermetically sealed compartments, their own private devotional exercises, is foreign to the New Testament picture."[148] Tim Stafford agrees that "the Bible simply does not know of the existence of an individual, isolated Christian."[149] He recognizes in his article, "The Church: Why Bother?," that "people need people. God's people need God's people in order to know God. Life in Christ is a corporate affair. All God's promises were made to God's people—plural."[150] Using the metaphor of the worshiping church as a family gathered around the dinner table, Ross Parsley, contends, "I don't believe that being alone is the design God has in mind. He wants us consuming Him and sharing Him together. He wants us vulnerable with one another, sharing the intimate details of

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[146] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 178.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 77.

[149] Tim Stafford, "The Church: Why Bother?," *Christianity Today* 49, no. 1 (January 2005): 47, accessed June 19, 2020, EBSCOhost.

[150] Ibid.

our hearts. God designed us to live in a community of selfless serving, sharing, and correction."[151] Rory Noland affirms that when someone begins a new life in Christ, he or she has become a part of a new family—the Family of God—which necessitates participation in community. He instructs that "God invites us to worship him, abide in Christ, and walk in the Spirit, not just for our benefit, but ultimately for the sake of others. Intrinsic to the Christian faith is this idea that we no longer live for ourselves, but for others. . . . We are called to live out our faith in the context of community. As God's character is formed in us, we become increasingly others-oriented."[152]

However, corporate individualism produces the opposite outcome: rather than strengthening the community ties, individualism isolates one from another. In the quote that began this chapter, the trend that Rory Noland recognized, which he labeled as "corporate individualism," causes the individual congregants to focus solely on their personal experience of worship to the neglect of the community around them. Bob Kauflin, however, believes that individualism is not what God has in mind for His people in worship, rather "He wants to knit the fabric of our lives together. For many, church has become all about me—what *I'm* learning, what *I'm* seeking, what *I'm* desperate for, what *I* need, how *I've* been affected, what *I* can do. We see ourselves as isolated individuals all seeking personal encounters with God, wherever we can find them."[153] Kauflin contends that this attitude "reflects our individualistic, me-obsessed culture. Rather than seeing ourselves as part of a worship community, we become worship

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[151] Ross Parsley, *Messy Church: A Multigenerational Mission for God's Family* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 63.

[152] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 162.

[153] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 126–127.

consumers."[154] Soong-Chan Rah attributes this individualism to the broader Western culture and laments that "worship is oftentimes a collection of individuals who happen to be in the same room. Worship is just between the individual and God, and the church service exists to help facilitate that individual communion."[155]

In his ethno-phenomenological study, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," Gordon Adnams discovers that the postmodern quest for authenticity in worship encourages individualism by diminishing the importance of the surrounding congregation. Adnams recognizes that the other congregants become "a necessary ingredient for personal participation but they need to be backgrounded for personal worship to occur—to be aware of only God and self. In this desire for isolation, the social context, the affiliation with fellow worshippers, has become instrumental to personal aspirations and at the same time essential to authentic worship or really worshipping."[156] This finding echoes Charles Taylor in his book, *The Malaise of Modernity,* where he maintains that "one of the common axes of criticism of the contemporary culture of authenticity is that it encourages a purely personal understanding of self-fulfillment, thus making the various associations and communities in which the person enters purely instrumental in their significance. At the broader social level, this is antithetical to any strong commitment to a community."[157]

Ironically, congregational worship music—which, as noted earlier, has the power to build community—can be a major factor in creating this sense of isolation. As will be discussed in

[154] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 127.

[155] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 35.

[156] Gordon Alban Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing: An Ethno-Phenomenological Approach" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, Canada, 2008), 180, accessed June 20, 2020, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[157] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi, 1991), 43.

more detail later in this chapter, much of congregational worship music is written from an individual's perspective using first-person singular pronouns. Baker-Wright identifies two assumptions present in this individualistic perspective: "The first assumption is that the starting point of worship is the emotional state of the individual. The second assumption is that worship is solely an expression of an individual relationship with God: I cry out to God and God responds to my needs. In a congregational worship service, each person is in their own 'phone booth with God,' engaged in a personal, isolated dialogue."[158]

Individualized lyrics are not the only aspects of congregational worship music that contribute to a sense of isolation; the way in which the songs are presented by the band and sung by the congregation can contribute as well. Anna Nekola informs that around the turn of the millennium, "the marketing of Christian music echoes worship leaders who urge their congregations to bring ecstatic, spirit-filled worship into everything they do . . . [which produces] an individualized charismatic faith."[159] In commenting on Nekola's assertion, Ingalls concludes that this marketing resulted in "collapsing the boundaries between public and personal worship through the medium of contemporary worship music that ran as a common thread through both."[160] In other words, with the increased use of Contemporary Christian Music in both public and private worship, what individuals experience in private worship, they now expect to occur in public worship as well, thus, contributing to and enhancing the individuation of corporate worship. Nekola further explains that "these artists' relocation of worship music onto albums of

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[158] Baker-Wright, "Intimacy and Orthodoxy," 173.

[159] Anna E. Nekola, "'I'll Take You There': The Promise of Transformation in the Marketing of Worship Media in US Christian Music Magazines," in *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (Routledge, 2016), 134, accessed June 19, 2020, https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4324/9781315571850.

[160] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 8.

music intended for consumption *outside* of the church challenges the traditional understanding of worship as a corporate activity. This relocation suggests that worship, long understood as the coming together of a religious community, could in fact be individualized and commodified."[161]

Ironically, while the music that the congregation sings can promote individualism and isolation within corporate worship, congregational worship music also has the power to create a congregational identity that can unify a community of believers. In the introduction to their book, *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, Monique Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner assert that "music-making is an important means of individual and group identity formation. . . . Music often serves a central role in processes of identification within religious communities."[162] Ingalls expounds upon this principle in her book, *Singing the Congregation*:

> Music does not simply emerge from communal experience but rather is an integral part of creating an experience responsible for bringing people together in the first place. . . . [M]usical repertories and the discourses associated with them can constitute a community by drawing people together in a shared musical experience. Music is a crucial element in constituting church congregations because it provides the basis for the powerful worship experiences that shape individuals within it and by attracting people with shared values and common expectations of worship.[163]

Jen Wilkin believes that the church is living in an age where it desperately needs to emphasize its shared values in corporate worship. In her article, "The Sunday Gathering Is Not about You: Here's How Churches Can Make Their Worship Services a Shared Experience," she advocates

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[161] Nekola, "US Evangelicals," 136.

[162] Monique Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner, "Prelude: Performing Theology, Forming Identity and Shaping Experience: Christian Congregational Music in Europe and North America," in *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (London: Routledge, 2016), 5–6, accessed June 19, 2020, https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4324/9781315571850.

[163] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 6.

that "we need a movement from *me* back to *us*, re-envisioning corporate worship as a place that purposefully points us away from individual experience toward tangible reminders of our shared faith."[164] Wilkin recognizes the individualism pervasive in society and the need for a communal identity when she insists that "our post-Christian cultural shift heightens the church's need to reclaim its historic emphasis on *us*. We need the weekly reminder of corporate belief more than ever. Spending six days a week in the wilderness of cultural unbelief, the church needs that seventh-day gathering to do what it was designed for: reminding us that we are not alone."[165] The music that the congregation sings, when carefully chosen, has the potential, according to Ingalls, to accomplish this goal and create a communal identity.

<div align="center">Song Selection</div>

One of the greatest tasks given to worship leaders is selecting the songs that will be sung in corporate worship. The songs we sing shape our theological understanding of who God is, who we are, our relationship with Him, and our relationship with others. Congregational singing is faith formation. Scholar and church musician, Andrew Roby, explores this concept in his journal article, *Worshipful Singing: Four Roles of Song in Worship,* when he proclaims that congregational songs "shape our theological understandings and thus are formative of our faith. Since musical expressions possess a higher degree of memorability than most other kinds of content in liturgy, the texts and meanings those musical expressions carry will shape and form us in our theology and faith more powerfully than other kinds of content we employ."[166] Therefore,

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[164] Jen Wilkin, "The Sunday Gathering Is Not about You: Here's How Churches Can Make Their Worship Services a Shared Experience," *Christianity Today* 62, no. 5 (June 2018): 22, accessed May 15, 2020, EBSCOhost.

[165] Ibid.

[166] Roby, "Worshipful Singing," 60.

it is critical that the worship leader carefully selects lyrics to be sung in corporate worship that are theologically sound and give us an accurate picture of God, ourselves, and our relationship to each other.

Self-Focused Worship Songs / Reflexive Texts

As discussed earlier in this chapter, emphasis on personal experience and dualism of individualism within community are two of the primary characteristics of postmodernism. One manifestation of these characteristics upon corporate individualism can be seen in the increase of self-focused worship songs containing reflexive texts. In her study of lyrics in contemporary worship music, Christine Longhurst credits Lionel Adey, scholar and professor of English literature, as the first to identify reflexive texts. She reports that "Adey differentiated between objective, subjective, and reflexive texts, suggesting that the latter were distinct in that they focused specifically on the worshipper's experience of worship in the present moment (e.g. "I will worship," "I will lift up holy hands," "I will enter Your gates," and so on)."[167] Bob Kauflin echoes these distinctions in his book, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God.* He defines objective lyrics as texts that "tell us something true about God that helps us know him better. . . . *Subjective* lyrics express responses to God such as love, longing, conviction, or adoration. . . . *Reflective* [*sic*] lyrics describe what we're doing as we worship God."[168]

Self-focused and reflexive lyrics are characterized by extensive use of first-person singular pronouns (i.e., I, me, my, and mine). Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra admit that

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[167] Longhurst, "The Words We Sing," 169.

[168] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 101.

contemporary worship music has received much criticism for being written almost exclusively

"in the first person. 'It's all "me-n-Jesus,"' people complain. This is not entirely true, of course,

but worship music . . . has indeed tended to emphasize a personal, emotive expression of

devotion."[169] Rienstra and Rienstra argue that "this is partly a function of how this music gets

created: musicians have been using a singer-songwriter model taken from folk and pop music,

which tends to produce lyrics in what is called, in fact, the lyric mode—that is, the expressions of

a single voice."[170]

    Cherry calls for a return to "communal music making." She underscores that when this

transition occurs,

> the language of worship moves from personal to corporate references, from exclusive
> language to inclusive language. If we truly believe that we are a community at worship,
> we will move from fewer first-person pronouns to more corporate pronouns. "I" will
> become "we"; "my" will become "ours." . . . These shifts are important because our use
> of language conveys what is in our hearts. Words matter.[171]

However, Kauflin does not view the use of first-person singular pronouns as problematic. He

cautions, "Don't assume that a song that uses a lot of first-person pronouns is man-centered.

Psalm 86 uses the personal pronouns "I," "me," and "my" thirty-one times in seventeen verses.

But you're never left wondering who the focus is."[172] Cherry responds to this assertion by

recognizing that "occasionally someone will argue that personal pronouns should be used

prominently in the songs of worship because many of the psalms use personal pronouns."[173] She

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[169] Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 51.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 61.

[172] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 101.

[173] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 62.

contends that, although personal pronouns are often used in the book of Psalms, two things must

be considered. First, Cherry contends that singular and plural pronouns are intertwined in the

psalms, giving an overall sense of community. Cherry quotes from Mark Roberts who affirms

that the psalms "weave together personal piety with corporate liturgy. . . . The Psalms are deeply

personal and, at the same time, profoundly corporate."[174] Second, Cherry argues that "though a

singular voice is used, it is often understood to be a communal voice, given Israel's cultural view

of society. The Middle Eastern understanding of community is pervasively communal."[175] She

quotes Mark Roberts again to substantiate her claim, "Because the Psalms give voice to the faith

of a community, they also support and strengthen communal dimensions of worship. . . . [T]he

whole of the Psalms links the singular to the plural, the individual to the communal. Thus, the

Psalms offer a crucial corrective to our tendency to write or use in worship only songs that

express the 'I' but neglect the 'we.'"[176]

There has been scholarly debate concerning the individual versus corporate nature of the

psalms. Since many refer to the book of Psalms as a primary justification for utilizing first-

person singular pronouns in worship today, it is necessary to examine the prevailing scholarship

on this subject. In his book, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological*

Introduction, Old Testament scholar, C. Hassell Bullock points out that "whether the psalmist is

speaking as an individual or on Israel's behalf . . . has been a controversial issue in Psalms

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[174] Mark D. Roberts, "The Psalms and the Community of God," *Worship Leader*, January/February 2011, 22.

[175] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 62.

[176] Roberts, "The Psalms and the Community of God," 22.

studies since Hermann Gunkel introduced his view of the psalms as temple songs, speaking with

the corporate voice of Israel."[177]

Bullock outlines the development of historical criticism as it applies to the interpretation

of the book of Psalms. He establishes that, in the early twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel

developed the form-critical method (which has become the standard method for interpreting the

psalms) in order to determine the "*life situation* (*Sitz im Leben*) out of which the different psalms

arose."[178] Gunkel postulates that the psalms were written as private expressions of worship but

later adapted for use in Israel's corporate expressions of worship. He categorizes the psalms

based on their liturgical function and, consequently, approaches their interpretation through the

lens of their corporate functionality. Bullock explains that, in Gunkel's view,

> even though their origin was a private hymnody . . . , their use in the temple and
> synagogue made the public function the primary concern of exegesis. The Psalms,
> according to this form-critical view, had their origin in the sociological network of
> ancient Israel. The Psalter as a collection was the product of the religious community,
> particularly the temple priests and Levites. Even though Gunkel urged that the Psalms
> were used liturgically in the temple, he did not insist that all of the Psalms were originally
> written for that purpose. Rather some of them had been personal in their original
> composition and were subsequently adapted to a liturgical use. To say it another way, the
> "I" of many of the psalms was the psalmist himself and not a collective "I" for the
> congregation or nation, even though it later came to be corporate.[179]

Sigmund Mowinckel takes this view of the psalm's corporate function a step further and claims

that the psalms were originally written with the intention of being used in corporate worship,

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[177] C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 58, accessed June 11, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[178] Ibid., 55.

[179] Ibid.

thus, strengthening the position that the use of "I" in the book of Psalms should be interpreted as the collective voice of the corporate body.[180]

Bullock further describes the nature of Israel's individual and corporate identity, supporting Cherry's assertion that Israel's culture was a communal one. He contends that "the psalmist could not see himself as an individual apart from Israel. His self-identity was bound up in his participation in the community of faith."[181] Moreover, Bullock attests that "in Old Testament theology there is no such thing as individuality in isolation from community, nor is there community apart from the individual. The one contributes to the nature of the other and shapes its life."[182] Bullock addresses how this understanding of biblical community can influence Christians in Western society today. He advocates that "where individualism has become the defining philosophy of personhood, this insight can help us as Christians to find a proper balance between our individual self and the community of faith to which we belong. Our personal identity is only part of who we are—the community of faith in which we live and worship is another vital part, and one is incomplete without the other."[183]

While all of these arguments are valid and can be supported through scholarship, in practice, when "I," "me," and "my" are used in corporate worship in the songs that are sung, the Scriptures that are read, and the prayers that are prayed, the congregation will internalize these words as personal expressions of worship rather than corporate ones. With the focus upon personal experiences in postmodern generations, it is important to revive the use of plural

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[180] Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms,* 55. For a more detailed discussion of these interpretations, plus a description of Claus Westermann and Erhard Gerstenberger's approaches to the form-critical method, see Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 55-56, 58-60.

[181] Ibid., 59.

[182] Ibid., 184.

[183] Ibid., 59.

personal pronouns (we/us/our) in corporate worship and minimize the use of singular personal pronouns (I/me/my) to remind the congregation that they are part of the larger family of God. In her article, "The Sunday Gathering Is Not about You," Wilkin recognizes the need to make this transition. She believes that the words chosen to be sung, prayed, and spoken in unison in corporate worship must be reevaluated because prayers and songs that use "we" and "us" rather than "I" and "me" connect the family of God. Wilkin attests that these "opportunities for shared professions draw us together, such as reading Scripture aloud together. Corporate gatherings that cater to personal experience diminish the life-giving message of salvation as the entrance into the family of God."[184] Furthermore, Wilkin stresses the importance of fostering community in the church because "an emphasis on the individual will not serve us as we move into a post-Christian culture. Only a shared faith will carry and comfort us."[185]

Ambiguous Worship Songs

Because postmodernism rejects the concept of objective truth and embraces the principle of relativism, personal experience becomes the means by which truth is discovered. Consequently, multiple worldviews are accepted as being equally valid. As this paradigm has entered the church, one inevitable result of this viewpoint is the appearance of ambiguous worship songs whose texts are not theologically or doctrinally specific. When lyrics of congregational songs are theologically ambiguous or vague, the text can mean different things to different people. Consequently, the lyrics are interpreted based on the personal experience of the individual. Kauflin cautions that "vague ideas of God don't serve us or the people we lead. If

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[184] Wilkin, "Sunday Gathering Is Not about You," 22.

[185] Ibid.

most of our songs could be sung by Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus, it's time to change our repertoire. . . . [O]ur songs don't have to be obscure or ambiguous. They should help us accurately identify and praise the only true God who has revealed himself in the Savior, Jesus Christ."[186]

Exacerbating the prevalence of ambiguous lyrics due to postmodernism is the ambiguity of lyrics due to the globalization of worship music produced by megachurches such as Hillsong. As Hillsong's influence spread from its local congregation to extend worldwide, the lyrics of their music has intentionally become less doctrinally and theologically specific in order to be used across denominational lines.[187] Steve McPherson, head of Hillsong Music Publishing, recalls, "I do believe we initially set out to write music for our congregation but as time went on and we saw the impact our songs were having across all denominations, we became more and more aware of the responsibility and the privilege to be speaking into the broader church, and I believe our songwriting changed accordingly. Our focus went from being purely local to global."[188] In Mark Evans' view, the worldwide reach of Hillsong's music necessitated a "generalist theological foundation."[189] In his essay, "Hillsong Abroad: Tracing the Songlines of Contemporary Pentecostal Music," Evans indicates that "many churches that would not necessarily adhere to the theology of Hillsong Church were nonetheless content to sing its music.

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[186] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 62.

[187] Nelson Cowan, "'Heaven and Earth Collide': Hillsong Music's Evolving Theological Emphases," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 39, no. 1/2 (March 2017): 93, accessed May 22, 2020, EBSCOhost.

[188] Steve McPherson, email message to Mark Evans, June 25, 2009, quoted in Mark Evans, "Hillsong Abroad: Tracing the Songlines of Contemporary Pentecostal Music," in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 183.

[189] Evans, "Hillsong Abroad," 183.

This speaks to the generalist theological foundation of the music . . . , which allowed it to be used in a wide range of evangelical churches, from traditional mainstream churches to smaller breakaway denominations and groups."[190]

Whether due to the postmodern acceptance of multiple worldviews or the intentional use of theologically and doctrinally vague lyrics by global song producers, there has been a rise in the use of ambiguous worship songs in corporate worship. Bob Kauflin warns of the danger in this trend:

> If our songs aren't specific about God's nature, character, and acts, we'll tend to associate worship with a style of music, a heightened emotional state, a type of architecture, a day of the week, a meeting, a reverent mood, a time of singing, or a sound. We'll think of all the things that accompany worship rather than the One we're worshiping. Worse, we'll create our own views of God, portraying him as we like to think of him.[191]

When congregational songs are ambiguous or vague, the lyrics can become misleading or, even worse, an inaccurate portrayal of who God is. Thus, ambiguous worship songs offer the worshipers no true understanding of the God they are worshiping.

Platform Presence

Corporate individualism has influenced a wide variety of worship practices in twenty-first century evangelical worship. Its influence also reaches the pastor's and worship leader's word choice and the environment of the worship space. For the purposes of this study, platform presence refers to both the leadership on the platform and the physical presence of the worship environment. More specifically, the worship environment pertains to three characteristics of the space in which the congregation worships: architectural design, sound, and lighting.

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[190] Evans, "Hillsong Abroad," 183.

[191] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 62.

Word Choice of Worship Leaders and Pastors

The choice of words used by the worship leader and the pastor during corporate worship can help unite the body of Christ as they worship God together or it can help foster a sense of individualism within the congregation. In their book, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry,* Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra emphasize the importance of the words used in worship because "worship is the central shared action in a congregation's life. What we do there matters because we do it together, and we do it repeatedly. The formative nature of worship and of worship words in particular is a compelling reason to pay careful attention to our weekly practice."[192] Similar to the earlier discussion concerning self-focused songs with reflexive lyrics, the use of "I" and "me" versus "we" and "us" in spoken prayers, spoken introduction to songs, and other spoken moments in worship will accentuate either the individual or the community. Rienstra and Rienstra believe that "we ought to ask about *all* our worship words: How do these words, over time, instruct worshipers?"[193] They acknowledge that "sometimes our words do not reflect what we actually believe about God, ourselves, the church, and the world. For example, if we believe that God calls us not only as individuals but as a *community* of Christians, then we ought to sing and pray with the pronoun *we* sometimes and not only with *I.*"[194]

As mentioned in chapter one, Rory Noland is disturbed by the trend in both worship music and worship leadership to exclusively focus upon the individual in corporate worship. He recalls attending worship services where all the prayers "were presented in the first person singular. It was as if the worship leader forgot he was leading a community of people into God's

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[192] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 29.

[193] Ibid., 35.

[194] Ibid., 36.

presence and praying as their spokesperson. I could have had the same experience by myself at home or at the park."[195] Rienstra and Rienstra (who, as will be discussed below, believe both plural and singular pronouns should be used in worship) agree that "*we* is the appropriate choice in prayers spoken aloud together by the congregation as well as in prayers spoken by a leader on behalf of the congregation. If the leader is praying his or her own prayer in front of the congregation, he or she is not leading. Leading means guiding the congregation to pray along with the leader, through the leader's words."[196] Because corporate prayer represents the collective body, they maintain that "the use of *we* is both an invitation to pray along and a reflection of the purpose of communal prayer."[197] Jen Wilkin agrees that we must reevaluate "the words we choose for corporate prayer and song lyrics, as well as the words we speak in unison. Corporate prayers and song lyrics that favor the use of *we, us,* and *our* over *I, me,* and *my* represent the collective cry of the family of God."[198]

Rienstra and Rienstra, however, caution against either extreme of using only plural pronouns or only singular pronouns in worship. They observe that "free-church Protestants" almost exclusively use singular personal pronouns in corporate worship because "we come to worship expecting a subjective, emotional, and individual experience of God's presence. We are looking for intimacy with God, and meanwhile the other people nearby—well, they're doing the same thing for themselves. We wind up having personal devotions together in the same room."[199] However, this emphasis on the individual was foreign to the Protestant Reformers who "strongly

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[195] Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 209.

[196] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 53–54.

[197] Ibid., 54.

[198] Wilkin, "Sunday Gathering Is Not about You," 22.

[199] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 51.

emphasized that in worship, God forms us *as a people*. It's a matter not of doing personal devotions in the same room but of *becoming* the community, the body, that God desires us to be."[200] The concern for Rienstra and Rienstra in exclusively using "I" and "me" in corporate worship is the suggestion it gives

> that there is nothing distinctive about the body gathered for worship. It suggests that we are merely a group of individuals with something in common, and we go away from worship as individuals. But this view of ourselves ignores passages like 1 Corinthians 12 from which we learn that we are Christ's presence in the world as a body of believers. We go to worship partly to be formed into that body by the Spirit. So it is appropriate that we use *we* in our prayers and songs in worship in order to remind us that God calls us as a people, together.[201]

Confusing the issue of singular versus plural pronouns is the relatively recent interpretation (which, as mentioned earlier, Cherry maintains) that the "I" in the book of Psalms should be considered communal rather than individual. In her book, *Finding Words for Worship: A Guide for Leaders,* Ruth Duck suggests that it is now common to assume that when "I" is spoken or sung in corporate worship that a "communal consciousness" is implied. She offers the example from African American congregations that identify with the "African proverb: 'I am, because we are.' At the same time, using 'we' and 'us' may be better in some churches that appear to be overly individualistic in their approach to Christian faith."[202] While this concept of an implied communal consciousness corresponds well with the postmodern concept of "me/we" that Sweet advocates, it is doubtful that the average evangelical in worship will correlate the words "I" or "me" with the community of believers.

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[200] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 51.

[201] Ibid., 51–52.

[202] Ruth C. Duck, *Finding Words for Worship: A Guide for Leaders* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 22, accessed June 27, 2020, EBSCOHost.

Rienstra and Rienstra do, however, affirm that "the use of *I* is also appropriate in worship."[203] They offer two reasons why: "First, one legitimate purpose of worship is to help us gain the devotional vocabulary we need for our individual relationship with God. Second, the *I* in worship can become a communal 'I' when used appropriately."[204] Since worship strengthens our personal relationship with God and, concurrently, forms us into the unified body of Christ, Rienstra and Rienstra believe that it is appropriate to use both singular and plural pronouns in corporate worship, noting that "on any Sunday, Christian worship fulfills its purposes best when it invites worshipers to interweave the "I" of their individual devotion with the "we" of the assembled people of God."[205]

Worship Environment

The space dedicated for corporate worship is reflective of the theology, philosophy, and methodology of that local community of believers. Whether it is newly constructed or an adapted space, the worship space and the environment it creates directly enhances or diminishes the communal aspect of corporate worship. Theologian Ron Rienstra asserts that the configuration of the worship space will shape how the congregation perceives the vertical and horizontal axes of worship:

> I find helpful the concept of "theophanic expectation." (The roots are Greek: *theos* = God; *phainein* = to show.) How does the particular configuration of architectural space and the elements placed within it shape a congregation's expectations about how and when and where God "shows up"? When you step into the room, what is the first thing your eyes are drawn to? Where do your eyes move? What does the room put at the "center" of the assembly of the people? If the horizontal axis of the building says

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[203] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 52.

[204] Ibid., 53.

[205] Ibid., 54.

something about how we relate to one another, and the vertical axis represents the in-breaking of the Divine, how do those two axes align? Are their foci clear and strong?[206]

In his book, *Essential Worship: A Handbook for Leaders,* Greg Scheer understands Rienstra's "theophonic expectation" as an instrumental component of three "fundamental questions: What does your worship space say about God and God's people? What does your worship space encourage? What does your worship space discourage? . . . No worship space can do everything equally well. Instead, each space will emphasize one aspect of worship and minimize others."[207] Any congregation seeking to design a worship space, or adapt another space for worship, must make choices, which will reflect their philosophy of worship. In contemporary churches, one feature has become dominant. Lim and Ruth observe that "certain qualities have tended to show up in spaces for contemporary worship. Perhaps the most striking and pervasive has been the centrality of musicians—vocalists and instrumentalists alike—in the space. Contemporary worshippers are used to seeing their musicians as they lead front, center, and usually elevated in the space."[208]

The historical development of contemporary church architecture is directly influenced by the theological and philosophical approach to evangelism held by many evangelical churches beginning in the late twentieth century. According to Richard Kieckhefer in his book, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, as early as 1962, architect Lance Wright advocated for churches to be designed in the style of the current culture in order to reach

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[206] Ron Rienstra, "Sanctuary Architecture and Theophanic Expectation," *Reformed Worship*, last modified February 11, 2016, accessed June 25, 2020, https://www.reformedworship.org/blog/sanctuary-architecture-and-theophanic-expectation.

[207] Greg Scheer, *Essential Worship: A Handbook for Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 155, accessed June 22, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[208] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 15.

those living in that culture. In this philosophy, "churches should thus be indistinguishable from secular buildings. When the Church uses distinctive architectural dress it separates it from the world it is meant to mold and inspire, thus making its work more difficult. . . . In keeping with this counsel, churches soon sprang up that looked little different from secular buildings, sometimes serving as multipurpose space."[209] For newly designed churches, this architectural development came to full fruition in the megachurches at the turn of the millennium; for adapted spaces, this philosophy led many churches (especially new church plants) to take over movie theaters, malls, schools, office buildings, and warehouses.[210]

Lim and Ruth trace the history of contemporary worship space and note that the 1990s was a pivotal point in its development as contemporary worship was being shaped and refined. Thus, congregations were beginning to envision what type of space would best suit this new style of worship. They also acknowledge that "the growing prominence of several 'contemporary' megachurches provided a model for contemporary worship. Attending a megachurch conference offered church leaders from around the nation a chance to become familiar with this way of worship and the type of space that housed it."[211] Louis Nelson, Professor of Architectural History, claims in his journal article, "Placing the Sacred," that "the megachurch is the major contribution to American church architecture of the late twentieth century."[212] He also posits that the megachurch is

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[209] Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, *Theology in Stone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 271, accessed June 22, 2020, Oxford Scholarship Online.

[210] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 45.

[211] Ibid.

[212] Louis P. Nelson, "Placing the Sacred: Reflections on Contemporary American Church Architecture," *Institute of Sacred Music: Colloquium Journal* 4 (2007): 70, accessed June 21, 2020, https://ism.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Placing%20the%20Sacred.pdf.

the clear byproduct of late-twentieth-century post-modern culture. The clearest expression is the dissolution of any boundary demarcating sacred and quotidian space. The megachurch has no visible signs setting it apart from the everyday—it is the everyday. In a remarkably post-modern way, the megachurch becomes a blank slate awaiting the inscription of meaning by the viewer. These buildings are usually without stylistic referents, because unlike their mid-century counterparts post-moderns know that style no longer conveys any stable meaning.[213]

Additionally, the megachurch—and the smaller contemporary churches it influences—is the quintessential example of "post-modern 'mediated' space."[214] Worshipers in the twenty-first century have witnessed exponential growth in technology. Large projection screens, flat-screen televisions, and LED walls are commonplace in contemporary churches of all sizes. Nelson contends that these large screens are "emulating practices at rock concerts and basketball arenas."[215] The use of IMAG to display the preacher, the worship leader, and the band allow those on the stage to be seen more clearly at the back of the worship space; however, Nelson believes that these screens, similar to the congregants' screens at home, convey a message of consumerism and individualism. He believes these screens "participate in communicating viewer choices; if dissatisfied one can simply change the channel, or turn the show off entirely."[216] With television ministries—and more recently, livestreaming worship services—the screens "emulate the experience of the home viewer, emphasizing the importance of personal consumption of the event and, by extension, eroding the significance of the community."[217]

The issue of sound volume in corporate worship has garnered much attention in the literature, almost exclusively negative. The prevailing concern lies in how sound volume affects

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[213] Nelson, "Placing the Sacred," 75.

[214] Ibid., 76.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid.

congregational participation and interaction with one another. Michael Walters submits that "amplification is a useful and necessary factor in worship. Yet far beyond helping people to hear and understand the text of music, amplification often takes on another agenda, which has no place in worship."[218] This agenda, whether intentional or unintentional, results in less congregational participation with the "liturgy" being performed by the leadership. In his essay, "Amplified Versions: Worship Wars Come Down to Music and a Power Plug," Andy Crouch maintains that, historically, Protestants have embraced congregational singing because of their emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. However, he contends that "today we are witnessing the rise of a new priesthood—the ones with the (literal) power. Armed with microphones and amps, gleaming in the multi-hued brilliance of spotlights, the amplified people do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: make music, offer prayers, approach the unapproachable."[219]

Due to the intensity in volume levels (as well as dramatic stage lighting, the design of the staging, and extensive projection systems), many scholars are comparing corporate worship in many evangelical churches to rock concerts. Theologian and philosopher, James K. A. Smith, author of *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom,* wrote an "open letter" to worship bands seeking to help them understand the ramifications of imitating rock concerts. In this letter posted online, Smith addresses the issue of overamplification in worship:

> If we, the congregation, can't hear ourselves, it's not worship. Christian worship is not a concert. In a concert (a particular "form of performance"), we often expect to be overwhelmed by sound, particularly in certain styles of music. In a concert, we come to expect that weird sort of sensory deprivation that happens from sensory overload, when the pounding of the bass on our chest and the wash of music over the crowd leaves us with the rush of a certain aural vertigo. And there's nothing wrong with concerts! It's just that Christian worship is not a concert. Christian worship is a collective, communal,

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[218] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 135.

[219] Andy Crouch, "Amplified Versions: Worship Wars Come Down to Music and a Power Plug," in *Worship at the Next Level: Insight from Contemporary Voices*, by Tim Dearborn and Scott Coil (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 129–130.

congregational practice—and the gathered sound and harmony of a congregation singing as one is integral to the practice of worship. It is a way of "performing" the reality that, in Christ, we are one body. But that requires that we actually be able to hear ourselves, and hear our sisters and brothers singing alongside us. When the amped sound of the praise band overwhelms congregational voices, we can't hear ourselves sing—so we lose that communal aspect of the congregation and are encouraged to effectively become "private," passive worshipers.[220]

Smith's concern of the congregation not being able to hear one another, thereby creating passive worshipers, is reiterated in much of the literature. Walters recalls attending rock concerts "where the music was so loud you couldn't hear yourself scream."[221] He relates this experience to "more recent memories of such painful overamplification during worship services. I attended a service recently at which the music was so loud you couldn't hear yourself sing. Not surprisingly, no one did."[222] Crouch also affirms this sentiment when he rhetorically asks, "When you can't hear yourself singing, why even try?" The problem of congregations becoming passive spectators rather than active participants has been an issue for many churches for some time, and these authors warn that the inevitable consequences of overamplification in corporate worship is the encouragement of passivity of the congregants. Walters concurs with Smith's conclusion that "when the music is too loud, the congregation becomes passive and simply watches the performance by those holding microphones. The tendency toward passivity in worship is already too great."[223]

In his article, "Why Has Church Become a Concert?," pastor Will Graham echoes these concerns and contends that the structure of church needs to be renewed. He observes that the

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[220] James K. A. Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands," *Fors Clavigera* (Blog), February 20, 2012, accessed June 21, 2020, http://forsclavigera.blogspot.com/2012/02/open-letter-to-praise-bands.html.

[221] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 135.

[222] Ibid.

[223] Ibid.

"music style I witness on my preaching travels is turning more and more 'concert like'. . . . By that I mean music where it's no longer a congregation singing unto God in one heart and a united spirit. Rather, it's intense music that drowns out the noise of the people's voices with the high-volume beat of the drums, (bass) guitars, microphones and speakers."[224] In addressing the corporate nature of worship, Graham laments that "today's music style tends to put all the focus on the guys on the platform so that we feel impressed by their skills and talent. This is not the way things were meant to be. Church worship must be corporate, not individualistic. Everyone's voice should be heard in the Kingdom of God, not just a select bunch of singers."[225] As mentioned previously, Jen Wilkin advocates a restoration of corporate worship's communal nature. One factor in accomplishing this goal of "moving from *me* to *us* . . . impacts how we use sound systems and choose music. When the sound is too loud, individuals in the congregation feel isolated and anonymous. Lower levels let us hear one another, encouraging participation."[226]

Many of these authors are quick to point out that the style of music is not at issue, rather the method in which the music is being presented is the concern. Graham notes that "I, for one, am glad for music and instruments in the assembly of Christ. And no, I'm not opposed to praise leaders (as I myself have been one for quite a few years)."[227] James K. A. Smith focuses upon the implications of the manner in which music is being presented in corporate worship when he explains that "my concern isn't with style, but with form: What are we trying to do when we 'lead worship?' If we are intentional about worship as a communal, congregational practice that

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[224] Will Graham, "Why Has Church Become a Concert?," *Evangelical Focus Magazine*, September 27, 2015, accessed June 21, 2020, https://evangelicalfocus.com/fresh-breeze/1007/why-has-church-become-a-concert.

[225] Ibid.

[226] Wilkin, "Sunday Gathering Is Not about You," 22.

[227] Graham, "Why Has Church Become a Concert?"

brings us into a dialogical encounter with the living God—that worship is not merely expressive but also formative—then we can do that with cellos or steel guitars, pipe organs or African drums."[228]

There are, however, some scholarly rebuttals to the argument that overamplification leads to passive and individualistic worship. In his study of Hillsong Music published in 2017 by *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Nelson Cowan contends:

> Hymnologists and liturgical scholars are quick to cite contemporary worship music as "too loud" or too "performative" to allow for congregational singing. Often, criticisms are levelled against the "Hillsong experience" and churches with "contemporary" sounds for being anti-communalist, often rooted in the notion that all voices must be heard aloud in congregational singing. The communalism of Hillsong worship, however, is of a different sort. In the age of megachurches and the consumerization of worship, communalism is evinced by the worship's sonic resplendence, not minimized by it.[229]

Karl Inge Tangen in his book, *Ecclesial Identification beyond Late Modern Individualism?: A Case Study of Life Strategies in Growing Late Modern Churches,* agrees with Cowan's conclusion. In reference to Hillsong Church in London, one of his case studies of European Pentecostal churches, Tangen observes that in their rock-concert-style worship services, "the total impression of light, sound, and strong involvement easily creates the notion of being in a room where people have a sense of experiencing 'collective effervescence.'"[230] He later characterizes these worship services as possessing a "more passionate and lively, corporate spirituality."[231]

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[228] Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands."

[229] Cowan, "Heaven and Earth Collide," 95.

[230] Karl Inge Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification beyond Late Modern Individualism?: A Case Study of Life Strategies in Growing Late Modern Churches* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 56, accessed June 26, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[231] Ibid., 151.

In conjunction with sound amplification, the manner in which lighting is used in the

worship space contributes to corporate individualism and has garnered some attention in the

literature. Recognizing the parallelism of sound and lighting, Crouch, although somewhat

cynically, maintains that "especially among self-styled 'postmodern' churches, which like to turn

down the lights and turn up the sound, two-thirds of the people could keel over and the band

would play on."[232] But, in this comparison, Crouch confirms the common practice in concert-

style worship of darkening the room for the congregation and illuminating the stage with

theatrical lighting. The intended purpose is to create an intimate atmosphere conducive to private

worship by blocking out the other congregants in the room and take away distractions.[233]

However, Bob Kauflin cautions the use of lighting to set a mood in corporate worship when he

stresses that "worship is not simply a mood. Aesthetic elements should support and complement

our response to God's Word and the gospel, not overpower it, distract from it, or be the

foundation for it."[234] He further contends that lights should be turned up during congregational

singing because the body of Christ should be interacting with one another. Kauflin explains that

through singing in corporate worship,

> we're speaking to one another. When I go to a movie with Julie, I don't mind that the theater is completely dark. I have zero interest in what the people around me are doing. I just want to see what's on the screen. But a movie theater is not the church. The church is Christians meeting with God and each other around the gospel. We're commanded twice in the New Testament to speak to or teach and admonish one another as we sing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). That involves not only hearing others, but seeing them. When I'm not leading I'll look around a few times just to take in the fact that I'm singing God's praise with other saints Christ has redeemed. I'm encouraged by their participation and the reality that I'm not alone! Focusing all the light up front can subtly communicate that the

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[232] Crouch, "Amplified Versions," 129.

[233] Don Chapman, "The 'Brightest' Debate in Worship," *ChurchLeaders*, July 20, 2014, accessed June 26, 2020, https://churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/175373-don-chapman-brightest-debate-in-worship.html.

[234] Bob Kauflin, "Who Turned the Lights Out?," *Worship Matters* (blog), February 27, 2015, accessed June 24, 2020, https://worshipmatters.com/2015/02/26/who-turned-the-lights-out/.

most significant activity of the meeting is taking place there. But we're gathering as the church not going to a concert. We're a body, a temple, a house. The most important sound of the gathering is the congregation, not the musicians. A lit auditorium can help reinforce that theological principle.[235]

As Kauflin noted, lighting can have a dramatic effect upon atmosphere in the worship space, and it has the power to enhance the communal nature of corporate worship or reinforce individualism. In his article, "Why We Sing with the Lights On," Pastor Ronni Kurtz recognizes that "singing in a fully lit room can act as another dagger to our hearts prone to self-centered faith. One of the arguments for a dimly lit room during service is to eliminate distractions so that the attendee can focus on what they sing to Jesus. Yet I fear that in our attempt to eliminate distractions we've also eliminated the corporate reality of worship."[236] As mentioned earlier, Jen Wilkin advocates for a return to this corporate reality and an abandonment of individualism by "moving from *me* to *us*."[237] She contends that this realignment "requires re-evaluating worship environments. The use of stage lighting leaves the congregation in darkness for much of the service, and anonymity invades our worship. Leaving the lights undimmed for most, if not all, of that time allows us to actually see each other joining together in worship, to recognize that we approach the altar as a family versus as individuals."[238]

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[235] Kauflin, "Who Turned the Lights Out?"

[236] Ronni Kurtz, "Why We Sing with the Lights On," *ChurchLeaders*, last modified August 23, 2017, accessed June 25, 2020, https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/308613-how-to-sing-why-we-sing-with-the-lights-on-ronni-kurtz.html.

[237] Wilkin, "Sunday Gathering Is Not about You," 22.

[238] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The evangelical church in the twenty-first century has experienced a rise in corporate individualism in worship, and an examination of this development should address the indications of its presence and its impact upon corporate worship. The purpose of this qualitative historical study is to determine what indicators reveal that corporate individualism is present in the worship of a congregation, examine how corporate individualism affects worship practices, and offer solutions for churches that struggle with this issue. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology used in this study to accomplish these goals. This chapter outlines the research design undertaken in this study, the research questions and hypotheses, the process of gathering pertinent literature, the types of sources used for this research, the process for analyzing the literature, and how the research will be synthesized to answer the research questions and propose solutions for corporate individualism in worship.

Research Design

Extensive research revealed a gap in the literature pertaining to corporate individualism. While there has been much discussion about each individual component of corporate individualism, there is not an understanding of how these components converge into one interrelated phenomenon. Additionally, there is no literature that examines the root cause of corporate individualism, recognizes the golden thread that weaves all these disparate elements together, and synthesizes the information to present solutions to the problem. This qualitative historical study assembles scholarly sources—books, dissertations, journal articles, and research studies—to gain an understanding of the breadth and depth of corporate individualism in worship and offer solutions to churches who struggle with this issue.

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A qualitative research design was chosen for this thesis because the researcher examines existing literature on corporate worship, individualism, postmodernism, congregational song, and worship environment; identifies themes from the literature; and synthesizes and interprets the data. According to John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, in a qualitative study, the researcher inductively identifies themes from examining existing literature and makes "interpretations of the meaning of the data."[239] Additionally, this study utilizes a historical approach with the literature to trace the development of corporate individualism from the middle of the twentieth-century to the present, interprets those events, and offers solutions to current issues within churches today. Edward Carr describes historical research as "a continuing dialogue, an endless exploration between . . . different interpretations of the significance of historical events."[240] Therefore, this qualitative historical study answers the research questions by examining existing literature to better understand the problem of corporate individualism in worship and offer solutions that address the challenges surrounding the issue.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

To examine the issue of corporate individualism in the worship of twenty-first century evangelical churches, the following research questions were developed:

Research Question 1: What are the indications of corporate individualism in worship in evangelical churches?

Research Question 2: How has the rise in corporate individualism in worship affected worship practice in evangelical churches?

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[239] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 4.

[240] Carr, *What Is History?*, 35.

After identifying the indications that corporate individualism is present in a congregation, this study examines the ways in which this phenomenon has affected their worship practices. The hypotheses for these research questions are:

Hypothesis 1. The indications of corporate individualism in worship in evangelical churches include self-focused worship songs, overvaluation of personal experience, and ambiguous worship songs.

Hypothesis 2. Corporate individualism has affected worship practices in evangelical churches in terms of song selection, congregational participation, and platform presence.

Process of Gathering Literature

The process of gathering literature began with general research concerning the broad topics of individualism and corporate worship. Utilizing Liberty University's library; online databases, such as ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and JSTOR; and Google Scholar led to the discovery of books, journal articles, and doctoral dissertations that dealt with these general topics. The footnotes and bibliographies from the literature provided a wealth of new resources while providing authority and validity to the sources. As this researcher delved into these scholarly sources, themes began emerging that prompted further inquiry into more specific areas concerning the indications of corporate individualism and its impact upon corporate worship.

One of the first themes that began to emerge was postmodernism's emphasis on relativism and personal experience. As more research was undertaken, this theme shaped an understanding of how corporate individualism developed over time. However, other sources were discovered that offered alternative views, such as modernism's emphasis on individualism that needed to be examined and incorporated into a more thorough understanding of the development of corporate individualism. A second theme that quickly emerged during the

research concerned the use of reflexive and ambiguous lyrics in congregational songs. This research uncovered several published textual studies on congregational song, both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. A third theme that emerged in the literature was the influence of design, sound, and lighting upon the worship space. Research on this theme revealed how the worship environment impacts both the congregation's understanding of worship and their experience in worship.

Throughout the process of gathering literature, the reliability of the sources and the validity of their conclusions was a major consideration. In the research process, names of respected and renowned scholars and practitioners reoccurred in the texts and citations of books, journals, and dissertations, adding weight and authority to those sources.

Types of Sources

The primary sources that this researcher consulted were books, journal articles, and dissertations. Sparingly, but when appropriate, magazine articles and websites were included, depending upon the reliability of the author and website. While the majority of sources were published in the last five to ten years (the largest grouping being published in the last five years), several sources from the early 2000s were consulted. Due to the historical nature of this study, tracing the development of corporate individualism (over the last several decades) and postmodernism (over the past seventy years), a few select sources were included from before the year 2000 based on their importance to and recognized authority in their field of study. For the purposes of this thesis, the researcher divided the literature into two categories: Related Literature and Research Studies. The Related Literature is examined in chapter two, establishing the breadth and depth of corporate individualism in twenty-first century worship. The results of

the Research Studies are examined in chapter four, offering quantifiable verification of the Related Literature.

Rather than being limited to a single, original case study produced by the researcher, which would examine only a narrow swath of experience in a singular location, or a very limited number of locations, this study benefits from recent research studies by scholars and research organizations to better understand the extent to which corporate individualism has effected evangelical worship. Ten research studies were selected for examination in chapter four. The following is a summary of the methodology used in each of these studies, grouped by topic.

<div align="center">Studies of Postmodernism and Worldviews</div>

Barna Group has done extensive research over several decades tracking the beliefs and practices of Christians in America. In chapter four, this researcher utilizes individual elements from four of their reports that contain statistical analyses and information pertaining to worldviews, postmodernism, and relativism. Additionally, Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research partnered to conduct a series of studies concerning American belief systems. These five studies reveal the extent to which Christians have been influenced by the postmodern worldview. The following is a description of the methodology utilized in each of these studies.

"Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians" by Barna Group

For this study, Barna surveyed 1,456 practicing Christians in March 2017 to determine the extent to which secular worldviews have influenced them. Barna defined "practicing Christians" as Christians "who go to church at least monthly and consider their faith very

important in their life."[241] Participants in the survey were "a representative sample of adults"[242] from all fifty states in America and were over the age of eighteen. Barna specifies that the "sampling error for this study is plus or minus 2.4%, at the 95% confidence level. Minimal statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables."[243]

"Signs of Decline & Hope among Key Metrics of Faith" by Barna Group

This research is a compilation of surveys conducted over twenty years, beginning in 2000 and ending in February 2020, tracing the shift in attitudes toward Christianity and religious practices in American culture. Barna randomly sampled 96,171 adults throughout the nation and utilized surveys conducted through telephone interviews and online surveys. One statistic, quoted by this researcher in chapter four, contains data "based on 9,445 additional interviews with a random sample of U.S. adults who were surveyed by telephone from 1991 to 1999."[244]

"The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code" by Barna Group

This study combines two sets of surveys conducted during the summer of 2015 to discover the pervasiveness of relativism in American society. In the August survey, online interviews were conducted with 1,000 adults in the United States with a "sample error [of] plus or minus 3.0 percentage points at the 95-percent confidence level."[245] The July survey was also

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[241] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews."

[242] Ibid.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Barna Group, "Signs of Decline and Hope among Key Metrics of Faith," Barna, March 4, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/.

[245] Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code," Barna, May 25, 2016, https://www.barna.com/ research/the-end-of-absolutes-americas-new-moral-code/.

conducted online with 1,237 American adults participating. This survey has a "sample error [of] plus or minus 2.6 percentage points at the 95-percent confidence level."[246]

"Do Americans Replace Traditional Church with Digital Faith Expressions?" by Barna Group

For this study, Barna surveyed 1,606 adults in the United States during December 2020 to determine the influence of technology upon the religious practices of Americans. Of those 1,606 adults, 794 were identified as practicing Christians. This online survey utilized a "nationally representative panel. The rate of error for this data is +/- 2.2% at the 95% confidence level."[247]

"The State of Theology" by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research

Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research conducted research in 2018, 2016, and 2014 with 3002 adults (2018) and 3000 adults (2016 and 2014) throughout the United States to gauge current theological beliefs and religious practices of Americans. They report that "a demographically balanced online panel"[248] conducted interviews with a sampling error not exceeding +/- 1.9% with a 95% confidence level. The research team discloses that "results are weighted to balance gender, age, ethnicity, income, region, and religion."[249]

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[246] Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes."

[247] Barna Group, "Do Americans Replace Traditional Church with Digital Faith Expressions?," Barna, March 12, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/worship-shifting/.

[248] Ligonier, "The State of Theology."

[249] Ibid.

Studies of Personal Experience in Corporate Worship

"The Experience of Congregational Singing: An Ethno-Phenomenological Approach" by

Gordon Adnams

In his dissertation, Gordon Adnams utilizes phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to explore the "experience of singing together in worship."[250] This qualitative study was based on fieldwork conducted in 2003 and 2004, during which Adnams became a participant/observer at Eldridge Baptist Church in an undisclosed city in western Canada. He conducted "informal, semi-structured interview[s]" (or received written reports) in which he asked the participants to describe a specific moment during congregational singing that was memorable.[251] The interview questions most applicable to this thesis are: "How were you aware of yourself? Of others?" and "How did you experience the words? The Music?"[252] After conducting the interviews, Adnams gave the participants a transcription of the conversation, allowing for amendments or adjustments to be made.

Adnams analyzed the responses from these surveys in two ways: (1) phenomenologically, to understand the meaning of the shared experience through congregational singing, and (2) ethnomusicologically, to examine the ways in which this musical experience was created. Phenomenological research, according to Creswell and Creswell, arose from philosophical and psychological modes of inquiry in which "the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. This description culminates in the

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[250] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 16.

[251] Ibid., 20–21.

[252] Ibid., 21.

essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon."[253]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty underscores that important to the phenomenological approach is "the

attempt to provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any

consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations."[254] From this

description, or "essence" of the lived experience, the researcher is "now able to grasp the nature

and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way."[255] Adnams describes

ethnomusicological research as being "primarily concerned with writing about the ways people

make music, and what happens when people make music."[256] The field of ethnomusicology is

diverse and, according to Jennifer Post, "ethnomusicologists embrace the contemporary musical

landscape and are concerned with the broad range of cultural expression."[257] In Adnams' study,

the ethnomusicological approach is intertwined with the phenomenological "treatment of the

individual lived experience of singing and derived from interviews of the Eldridge worshippers

and music leaders."[258]

　　　After collecting the data from the interviews, Adnams studied the transcripts for general

similarities in the participant's experience of singing. Within those broad topics, he noted

specific emerging themes, which became the basis for his interpretative analysis. Adnams

explains that he "used the essential themes that emerge from the lived experience descriptions of

[253] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 13.

[254] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), lxx, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[255] Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 39, https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/9781315421056.

[256] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 22.

[257] Jennifer C. Post, "Introduction," in *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jennifer C. Post (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3, https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/e/9780203036037.

[258] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 22.

the congregational singers to guide the analysis of the ethnographic descriptions, thus allowing the phenomenological thinking to influence the ethnography and any resulting theoretical discussion."[259]

"Relational Power, Music, and Identity: The Emotional Efficacy of Congregational Song" by Nathan Myrick

Published in the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* in 2017, this ethnographic study "examines the complex social and religious factors that facilitate the emotional efficacy of congregational song to generate relational strength, as well as communal and individual religious identity, in participants."[260] Myrick chose the 2015 National Worship Leader Conference (NWLC) in Dallas, Texas, to do his fieldwork. This conference is held in four (or more) cities at various locations throughout the country each year. Attendees of the NWLC are almost entirely practitioners of congregational worship music in the local church, either as a worship leader, a member of a worship team, or a member of a technology team. Additionally, attendees tend to be affiliated with churches which employ contemporary worship music on a regular basis.

Myrick attended the general sessions, which included times of congregational worship through song, and recorded his observations. He also conducted interviews with attendees of the conference, eliciting responses regarding their personal experience within the congregational singing that occurred during the general sessions. Myrick utilized the framework of convergence theory for his analysis and evaluation, which "suggest[s] that in participatory cultures (such as those most affected by the genre of modern worship music), the collective intelligence of those

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[259] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 31.

[260] Nathan Myrick, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity: The Emotional Efficacy of Congregational Song," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 3, no. 1 (2017): 78, https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1060.

participating in the culture is informed by the consumption of common information through highly mediated ecologies."[261] Myrick notes that the NWLC serves in this function.

Textual Studies of Congregational Song Lyrics

"The Changing Theological Functions of Corporate Worship among Southern Baptists: What They Were and What They Became (1638-2008)" by Stuart L. Sheehan

This dissertation contains the most extensive study of congregational song lyrics used in Southern Baptist churches. Analyzing the texts to more than 17,000 songs, Stuart Sheehan traces the changing theological function of corporate worship throughout the 370 years of Baptist (later Southern Baptist) history in the United States.

Sheehan created an original research design based upon a thematic analysis methodology situated in a framework of content analysis. Modeled upon the work of Sandra Sizer, who pioneered thematic analysis on hymn texts by studying the rhetorical devices—identified themes—employed in the texts of gospel hymnody.[262] Thematic analysis enabled Sheehan "to examine hymn texts by taking special note of the mode of address (who is speaking and who is being addressed)"[263] with the objective to "identify theological function at work in the corporate gatherings of Baptists."[264] Content analysis provided the necessary framework to structure his analysis. Klaus Krippendorff explains that "content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their

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[261] Myrick, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity," 80.

[262] Stuart L. Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions of Corporate Worship among Southern Baptists: What They Were and What They Became (1638-2008)" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 2017), 28, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

[263] Ibid., 46.

[264] Ibid.

use."[265] Sheehan used the structure of content analysis to provide a means for "understanding 'who said what to whom, how and with what effect,' and making 'replicable and valid inferences from texts.'"[266]

To identify changes in the theological function of Baptist congregational song over time, it was necessary for Sheehan to divide the timeframe into five segments, based upon significant historical events within the denomination. Period I (1638-1789) begins with the establishment of the first Baptist church in America. The next landmark in Baptist history in the United States was the publication of the first hymnal for Baptists in America, which occurred in 1790, the start of Period II (1790-1839). At the beginning of Period III (1840-1891), "the conflict between northern and southern Baptists reached a tipping point."[267] Soon after, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was formed. Another landmark of Southern Baptist history was the creation of the Sunday School Board; thus, its first full year of operation marks the beginning of Period IV (1892-1955). Lastly, Period V (1956-2008) begins with the publication of the SBC's first hymnal after World War II and ends in 2008 when the SBC published its most recent hymnal.[268] For the purposes of this thesis, the researcher discusses Sheehan's results concerning Periods IV and V in chapter four.

Sheehan's next task was establishing a body of texts to analyze. Sheehan began with a list of most frequently published hymns compiled by Stephen Marini for the *Hymnody in American Protestantism Project*. He narrowed that list by selecting hymnals utilized by Baptists in the

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[265] Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2013), 24.

[266] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 48.

[267] Ibid., 50.

[268] Ibid., 49–52.

Southeast and were "part of the stream that influenced Southern Baptists."[269] However, this list

did not include sources published prior to 1790, therefore Sheehan added four songbooks in

popular use by Baptists extending back to 1638, the beginning of Period I that he had previously

established. At the conclusion of his data gathering, Sheehan had collected a total of 17,427 texts

for his data sample.[270]

Before this staggering number of songs could be analyzed, Sheehan developed a method

of coding the texts. He approached each text with the following questions:

1. Who is speaking?
2. What is the spiritual condition of the speaker(s), if not God?
3. To whom (or what) is the text addressed and, if to the unconverted, with what effect?
4. About whom (or what) is the text speaking?[271]

Sheehan then created multiple-choice answers for each question, assigning each choice a number

for sorting purposes during the analysis process. The possible answers for the four questions

were: (1) an individual, a group, or the Godhead, (2) converted or unconverted, (3 and 4)

converted, unconverted with concern for their conversion, unconverted without concern for their

conversion, the self/one speaking, the Godhead, or other.[272] Sheehan designed this instrument "to

code manifest data rather than latent data. Manifest data is that which is visible and can be

observed in concrete terms, while latent data requires the researcher or the subject to make

interpretive decisions before coding can be completed."[273] When a text had two answers to a

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[269] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 52.

[270] Ibid., 52-59.

[271] Ibid., 62.

[272] Ibid., 62–63.

[273] Ibid., 64.

question, both answers were recorded. His goal was to produce quantitative results that could be objectively measured and analyzed.[274]

Sheehan identified two limitations to his study. First, it is unknown whether or not a particular hymn was used in any given congregation, or how often. This limitation was mitigated, in part, by the knowledge that hymnals were created to be sold, thus publishers and editors sought to include the most widely used hymns. Second, by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century (Period V), hymnals were used less often in Southern Baptist churches. While the results (discussed in chapter four) reveal a great deal of change in Period V, Sheehan believes that this second limitation only serves to expose "*less change than was actually present among Southern Baptist churches.*"[275]

"The Songs We Sing: A Textual Analysis of Popular Congregational Songs of the 20th and 21st Century" (2019) by Ian Hussey and
"Some Similarities and Differences between Historic Evangelical Hymns and Contemporary Worship Songs" (2015) by Lester Ruth

For the purpose of this thesis, these two studies are examined in tandem because, according to Hussey, his research (2019) builds upon and extends Ruth's earlier study (2015). Both textual analyses compared the most popular evangelical hymns and contemporary worship songs, although they utilized different bodies of songs for their research data. Ruth based his list of seventy evangelical hymns from the work of Stephen Marini, who examined "eighty-six historically significant evangelical hymnals from 1737 to 1860."[276] From the 33,000 hymns

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[274] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 64.

[275] Ibid., 71.

[276] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 69.

published in these volumes, Marini identified 70 hymns that had appeared in at least one-third of the hymnals. Hussey's list of hymns was based off the work of Robert T. Coote, who examined "28 hymnals published since the late 1800s by the six largest U.S. mainline denominations."[277] From these volumes, Coote identified twenty-seven hymns that were published in at least twenty-six of the twenty-eight hymnals. Hussey used this list of twenty-seven hymns for his research. Since hymns often contain alterations to the text from one hymnal to another, both Ruth and Hussey referred to www.hymnary.org to obtain the texts for analysis.

To establish a corpus of contemporary worship songs for analysis, Ruth compiled a list of 112 songs—every song that has appeared on Christian Copyright Licensing International's (CCLI) "Top 25" lists from 1989 through February 2015. Hussey, however, wanted to use a more current (at the time of his study) body of contemporary songs for his analysis, thus he selected the top twenty-seven worship songs from CCLI's reporting on November 9, 2018.[278]

In his analysis of the selected body of hymnody and contemporary worship songs, Ruth examined their frequency of addressing the Trinity, references to divine and human activity, and differing eschatologies.[279] Hussey addressed these issues as well, but extended his analysis to include word count, lexical density, and readability of the texts. Most importantly for this thesis, he conducted a more thorough examination of the usage of personal pronouns.

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[277] Ian Hussey, "The Songs We Sing: A Textual Analysis of Popular Congregational Songs of the 20th and 21st Century," *Ecclesial Practices* 6, no. 2 (November 26, 2019): sec. 3, accessed July 3, 2020, https://brill.com/view/journals/ep/6/2/article-p217_217.xml.

[278] Ibid.

[279] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 69–76.

Studies of Worship Environment

"Making Space for Millennials" by Barna Group

This study, published in 2014, required a multiphase process. In the first phase, Barna

recruited two focus groups, comprised of 10 adults between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine,

one in Atlanta, Georgia, and the other in Chicago, Illinois. Participants were screened to ensure

representation "from a variety or religious backgrounds, including practicing Christians, non-

practicing Christians and non-Christians, and came from a range of racial and ethnic

backgrounds, including black, white, Hispanic and Arab. Each group had at least three male

participants."[280] Each focus group toured selected churches in their city, large and small, urban

and suburban, as well as outdoor spaces and coffee shops. As the participants toured each space,

they were asked questions to determine their perception of the space. From these responses,

Barna "better understood the scope of issues confronting churches as they work to optimize their

buildings for the next generation."[281]

In phase two, Barna conducted an online survey, which was developed after collating the

observations from the participants of phase one. This survey was utilized to determine how

worship spaces communicate meaning and functionality to Millennials, thereby providing insight

regarding design and aesthetics of worship spaces for future generations. The survey was

conducted in October 2013 with 843 adults in the United States, ages eighteen to twenty-nine.

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[280] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials: A Blueprint for Your Culture, Ministry, Leadership and Facilities* (Barna Group, 2014), 121, https://theckn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Millennial_Research_Chap4.pdf.

[281] Ibid., 75.

Barna reports that the "margin of error for a sample of this size is plus or minus 5.2 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level."[282]

Synthesis of Research

As literature was selected for this study, careful attention was paid to ensure the reliability of the sources. As mentioned above, the general topics of individualism and corporate worship was researched, and as specific themes emerged, further research was conducted on those themes. The literature was organized into two broad categories, then subdivided into several specific themes. The first category, Postmodernism, was researched to identify causative factors of corporate individualism in worship and to better understand its development within a historical context. Postmodernism was subdivided into five themes: (1) Reaction against Modernism, (2) Individualism versus Community, (3) Relativism versus Absolute Truth, (4) Acceptance of Multiple Worldviews, and (5) Exaltation of Personal Experience.

The second category, Individualism in Worship, was researched to identify the indicators of the presence of corporate individualism in worship and to discover the impact of corporate individualism upon worship practices. Individualism in Worship was subdivided into seven themes: (1) Self-Focused/Reflexive Song Texts, (2) Ambiguous Worship Songs, (3) Overvaluation of Personal Experience, (4) Corporate versus Individual Congregational Participation, (5) Platform Presence-Leadership, and (6) Platform Presence-Worship environment. In addition, the literature was categorized as either Research Studies or Relevant Literature on the aforementioned themes.

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[282] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 121.

As resources were gathered, quotes from the Relevant Literature and results of the Research Studies were coded into one of these general categories and into a specific theme. The interrelation of the various themes quickly became apparent as it was necessary to code a large portion of the quotes into more than one theme. However, because the themes were interwoven, the process of synthesizing the information became a natural development of the interpretation process. As these distinct themes from the literature were emerging, the researcher evaluated their relevance to the research questions and interpreted them through that lens.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents research findings from eleven studies that examine various individual aspects of corporate individualism in worship. Collectively, these studies offer insight into the overall picture of the influence of corporate individualism, revealing what indications of the phenomenon could be present in a congregation and its impact upon worship practices in many evangelical churches in the twenty-first century. The following presents findings of recent research studies on postmodernism and worldviews, personal experience in corporate worship, song lyrics, and worship environment. While these research studies examine more than what is detailed below, the portion of their findings presented here specifically pertain to the subject matter of this thesis.

Studies of Postmodernism and Worldviews

Findings of Five Research Studies

Barna Group, Ligonier Ministries, and LifeWay Research have conducted several studies that seek to understand the influence of the culture upon the Christian church in America. This section presents findings from five such studies—four from Barna Group and one from the partnership of Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research—that examined the influence of postmodernism and relativism upon church practices. These studies were conducted and published between 2015 and 2020, with the exception of one ("Signs of Decline and Hope among Key Metrics of Faith"), which examined a series of studies from 1993-2020. These five studies are discussed in conjunction with one another; thus, each study is identified by a shortened name as indicated below:

- "Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians" is referred to as "Competing Worldviews;"

- "Signs of Decline and Hope among Key Metrics of Faith" as "Signs of Decline;"

- "The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code" as "End of Absolutes;"

- "Do Americans Replace Traditional Church with Digital Faith Expressions?" as "Digital Faith;"

- "The State of Theology" as "State of Theology."

As discussed in chapter two, inherent in postmodernism is the acceptance of many worldviews, which has begun to make inroads into the evangelical church. Barna affirms that "we live in a world of competing ideas and worldviews. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, Christians are more aware of (and influenced by) disparate views than ever."[283] In their 2017 study, "Competing Worldviews," Barna surveyed 1,456 practicing Christians to gauge the influence of other worldviews upon the church. They defined "practicing Christians" as those "who go to church at least monthly and consider their faith very important in their life."[284] Barna discovered that 61% of practicing Christians believe concepts within New Spirituality, 54% agree with tenets of postmodernism, 36% approve of aspects of Marxism, and 29% endorse ideas rooted in secularism.[285]

Regarding postmodernism specifically, Barna found that "as a whole, more than half (54%) of practicing Christians embrace at least one of the postmodern statements assessed in the research."[286] When asked whether or not they agreed with the statement, "what is morally right

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[283] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews."

[284] Ibid.

[285] Ibid.

[286] Ibid.

or wrong depends on what an individual believes," nearly one-quarter (23%) of respondents

strongly agreed with moral relativism (see figure 1). Counterintuitively, those who were more

educated (college level) are *less* likely to agree with moral relativism (21%) compared to

respondents with a high school or less education (31%).[287]
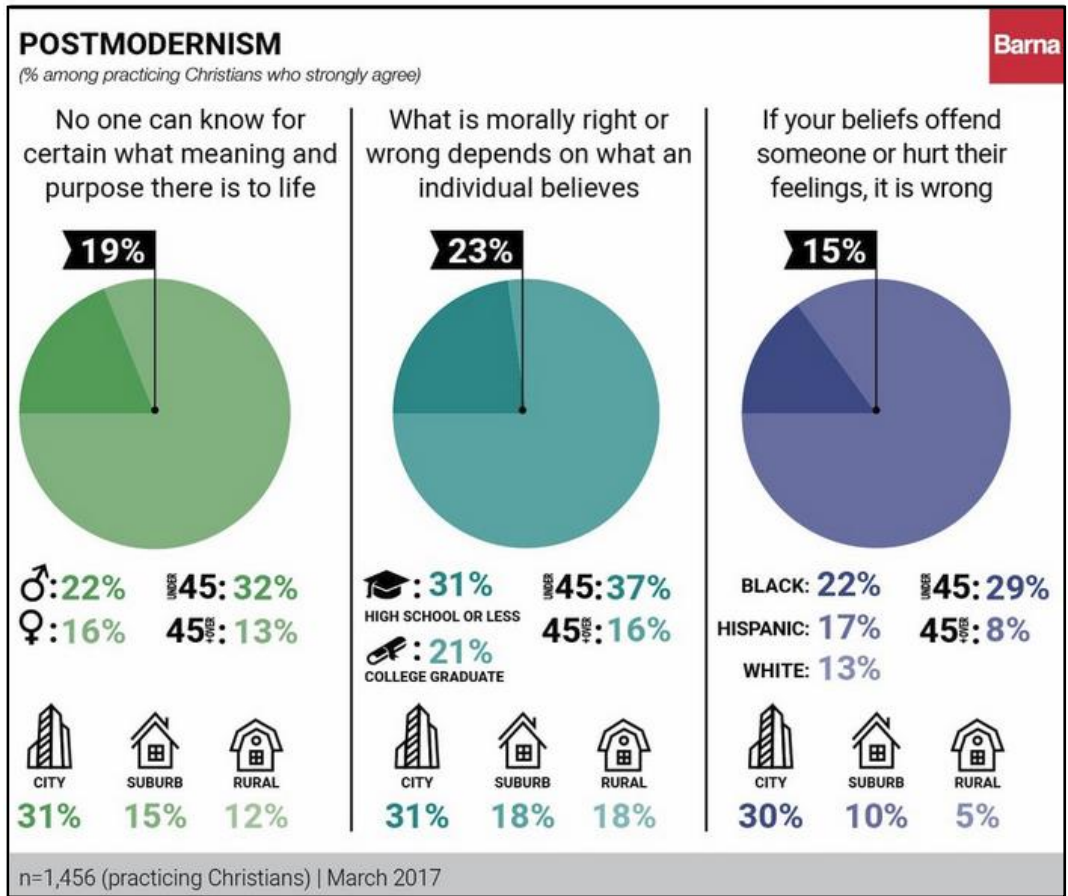
Figure 1. Postmodernism
Source: Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians," Barna.com, May 9, 2017. Used by permission.

Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay ask a related question in their "State of Theology"

survey, but with a higher percentage of agreement among evangelicals. When asked whether or

not they agreed with the statement "religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about

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[287] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews."

objective truth," nearly one in three evangelicals (32%) agreed with the statement (which includes both *somewhat agree* and *strongly agree*, see figure 2). In comparison, 60% of all Americans, Christian and non-Christian, agreed with the statement.[288]

Figure 2: Objective Truth - Evangelicals
Source: Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research, "The State of Theology," Thestateoftheology.com. © 2018 LifeWay Research. Used by permission.

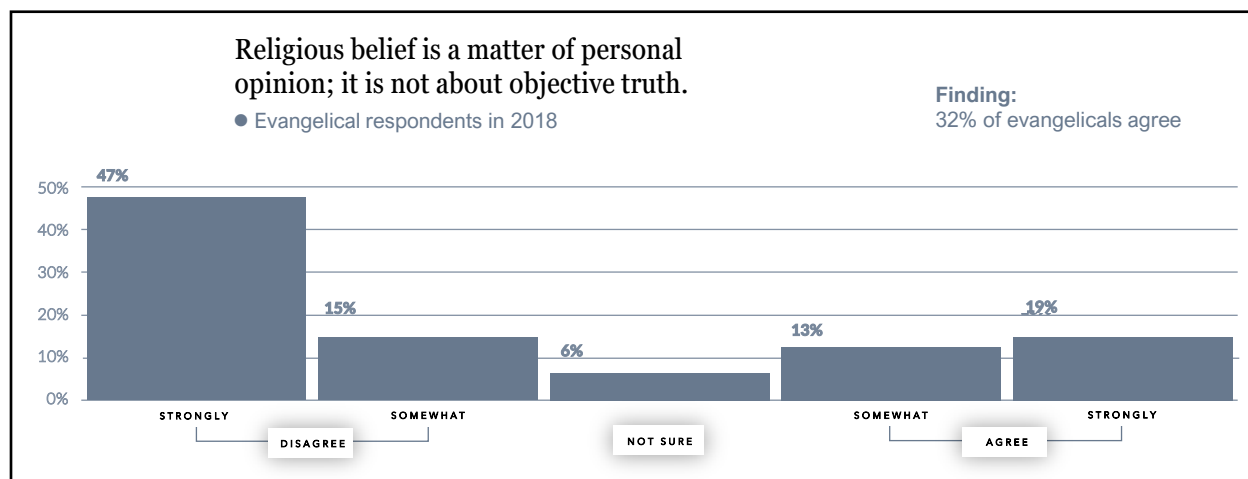Additionally, Barna observes that while Christians are more likely to believe in objective truth, they are, however, "somewhat sympathetic to the postmodern insistence that capital 'T' truth claims lead to oppression. Just 15 percent of practicing Christians strongly agree that 'if your beliefs offend someone or hurt their feelings, they are wrong.'"[289] Dissecting this statistic further, Barna discovers that "black practicing Christians, historically on the receiving end of

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[288] Ligonier, "The State of Theology." This researcher believes that there is a misprint in the Ligonier Ministries' and LifeWay's findings. In the written discussion of their findings, Ligonier states that 32% of evangelicals think that religious beliefs are opinion rather than objective truth. That is the statistic used in Figure 2. However, in their interactive Data Explorer, the percentage of evangelicals who do not believe in objective truth is higher and recorded as 37%. Interestingly, this research divides "evangelicals" from "black protestants" without an explanation that this researcher can find. Combining these groups results in 40% who do not believe in objective truth. As a point of comparison, their research also reveals that 59% of mainline Christians think that religious beliefs are a matter of opinion rather than objective truth.

[289] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews."

hurtful ideologies, are more likely to agree than white practicing Christians (22% compared to 13%)"[290] (see figure 1).

In a related study, "End of Absolutes," Barna examines the issue of moral and objective truth, but with the addition of delineation between generations. Barna discovers that 44% of all American adults believe that moral truth is relative while 35% believe in absolute moral truth. The remaining 21% profess that they have not thought about the issue. Correspondingly, this study finds that 28% of practicing Christians believe in relativism while 59% believe in absolute moral truth. 14% have never considered it. Not surprisingly, the younger generations are more likely to believe in relativism, and the number goes down in each preceding generation: 51% of Millennials, 44% of Gen-Xers, 41% of Boomers, and 39% of Elders (see figure 3).[291]

Figure 3. Moral Truth: Absolute or Relative?
Source: Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code," Barna.com, May 25, 2016. Used by permission.

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[290] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews."

[291] Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes."

This study also reveals that as Americans are rejecting objective truth, they are determining what is morally right or wrong based on personal experience. Barna reports that "according to a majority of American adults (57%), knowing what is right or wrong is a matter of personal experience. This view is much more prevalent among younger generations than among older adults. Three-quarters of Millennials (74%) agree strongly or somewhat with the statement, 'Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know.'"[292] Figure 4 also reveals that 41% of Christians agree with this statement, exposing how pervasive the postmodern exaltation of personal experience is within the church.[293]
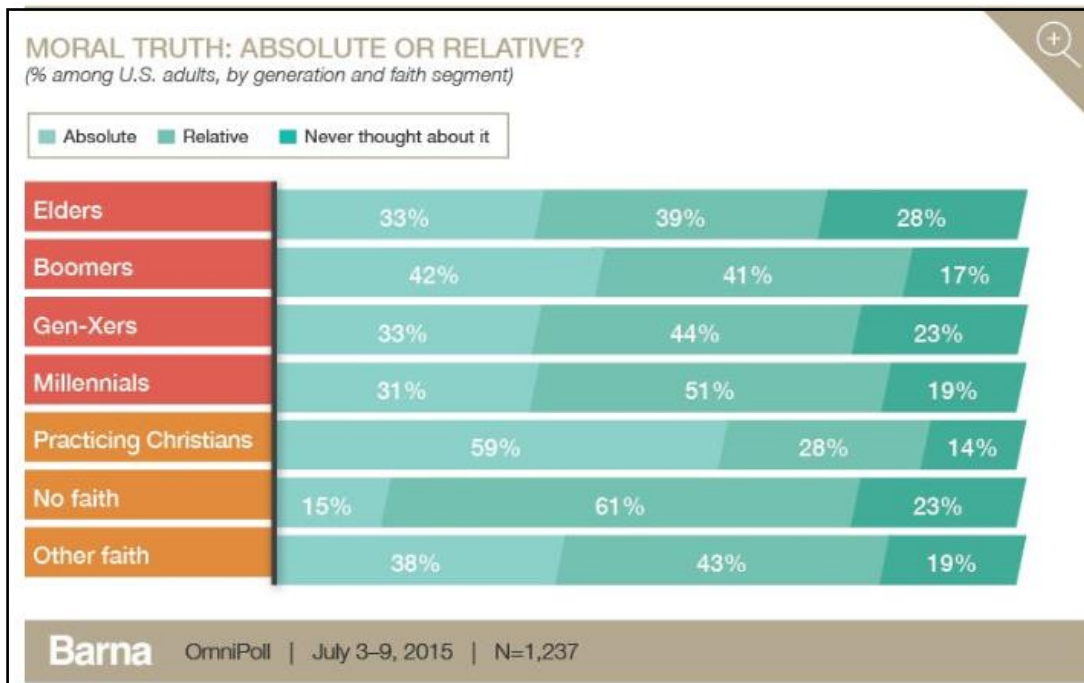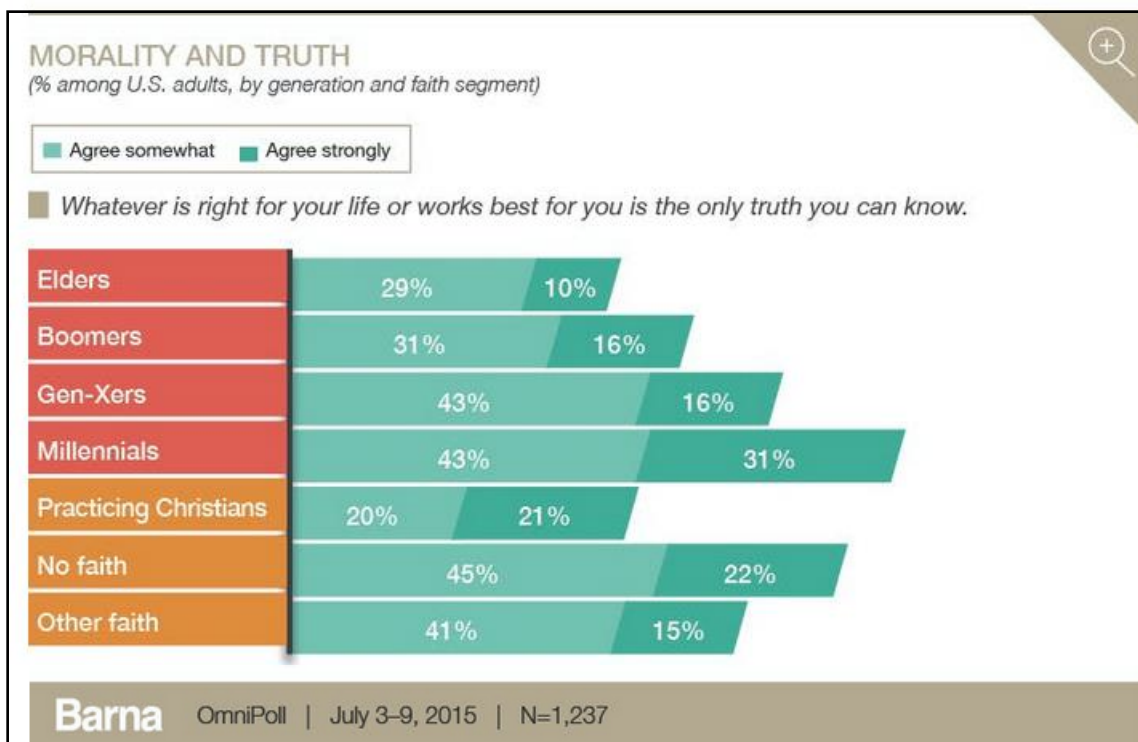

Figure 4. Morality and Truth
Source: Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code," Barna.com, May 25, 2016. Used by permission.

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[292] Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes."

[293] Ibid.

In the Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research study, "The State of Theology," the research also revealed that another effect of relativism and individualism is evidenced in the decline in church attendance. When asked if they agreed or not with the statement, "worshiping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church," 58% of all Americans agreed, including 46% of evangelicals. Ligonier and LifeWay attribute this outcome to relativism and the "characteristic American emphasis on individualism."[294] In their report, "Signs of Decline," Barna traces this trend in church attendance over the past twenty-seven years (1993-2020). Figure 5 illustrates the continuing decrease in church attendance, from the high of 48% of all Americans attending weekly church services in 2009 to the current rate of 29% in 2020 (pre-COVID-19).[295]
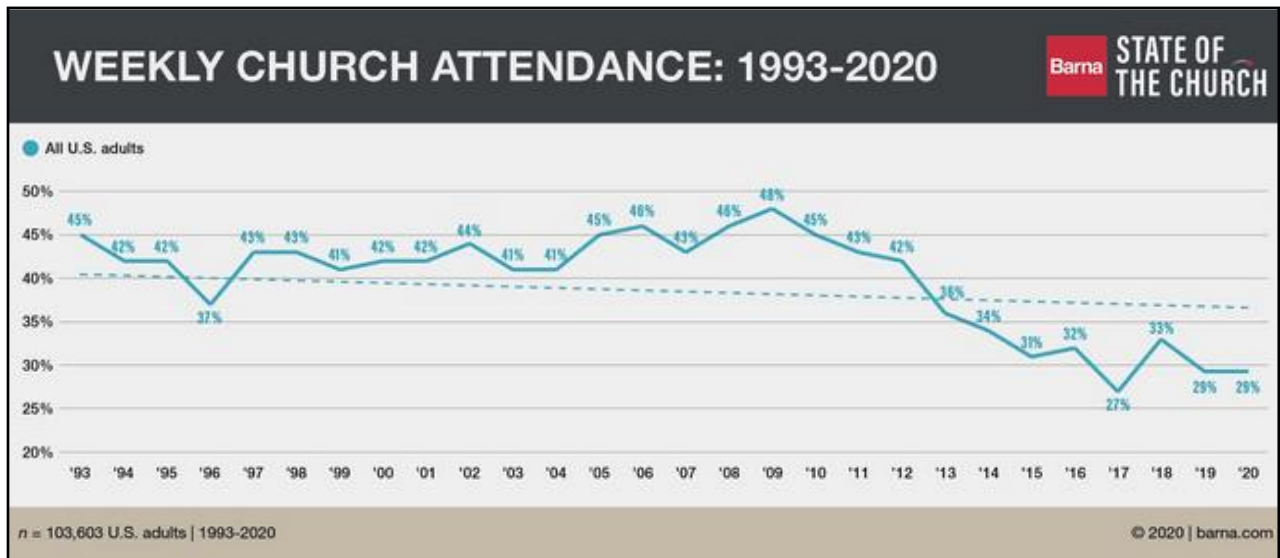
Figure 5. Weekly Church Attendance: 1993-2020
Source: Barna Group, "Signs of Decline and Hope among Key Metrics of Faith," Barna.com, March 4, 2020. Used by permission.

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[294] Ligonier, "The State of Theology."

[295] Barna Group, "Signs of Decline and Hope."

Figure 6 shows this decline in weekly church attendance by generation. Only 25% of

Millennials, the youngest generation polled, currently attend church weekly; more surprisingly,

only 37% of Elders, the oldest generation polled, report weekly attendance. Barna highlights the

sharp decline in attendance since 2012, identifying a 14% drop among Elders and a 13% drop

among Boomers. They declare that this is "remarkable considering it's a common assumption

that people become more religiously active as they age. While health ailments could impair the

ability of some Elders to make it to weekly services that is less likely to be the case with

Boomers."[296]
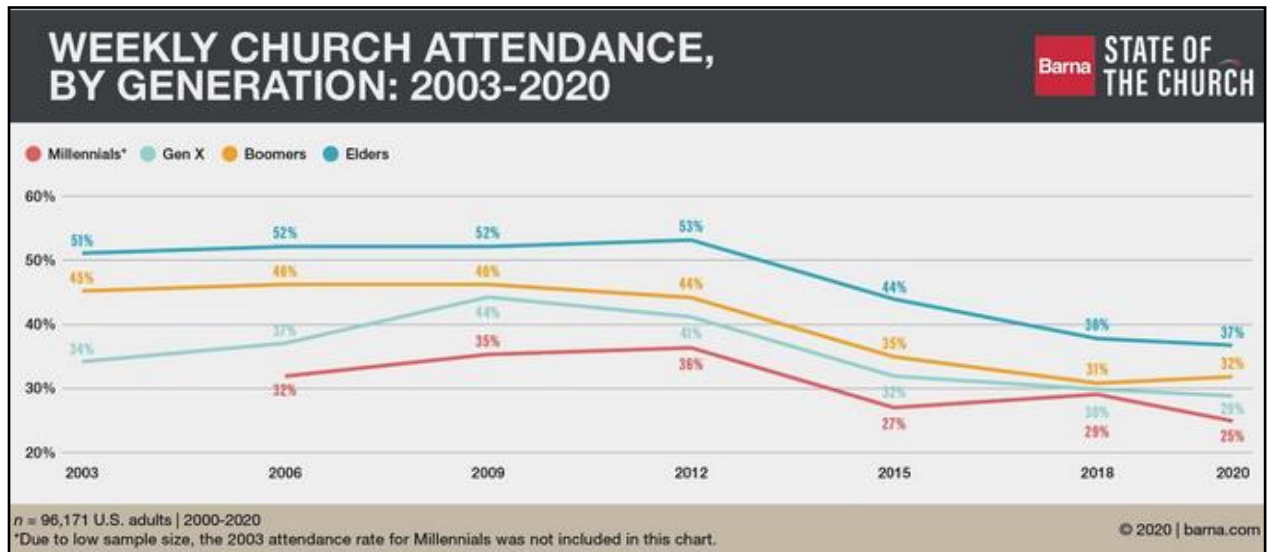
Figure 6. Weekly Church Attendance, By Generation: 2003-2020
Source: Barna Group, "Signs of Decline and Hope among Key Metrics of Faith," Barna.com, March 4, 2020. Used
by permission.

Barna's research has revealed a surprising trend: the older generations are falling away

from "conventional church attendance" at the same rate as the younger generations. Which raises

the question, "What are Christians replacing church attendance with?"[297] In a 2019 survey

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[296] Barna Group, "Signs of Decline and Hope."

[297] Barna Group, "Do Americans Replace Traditional Church?"

reported in "Digital Faith," Barna discovers that 50% of practicing Christians replace church attendance with electronic resources (e.g., online streaming of worship services, sermon podcasts, Christian television programming, etc.) at least occasionally: 13% replied often, 9% half of the time, and 27% occasionally (see figure 7). They report that "among Millennials, these percentages climb; one in three (34%) tells Barna they 'often' replace church attendance with other forms of Christian content."[298]
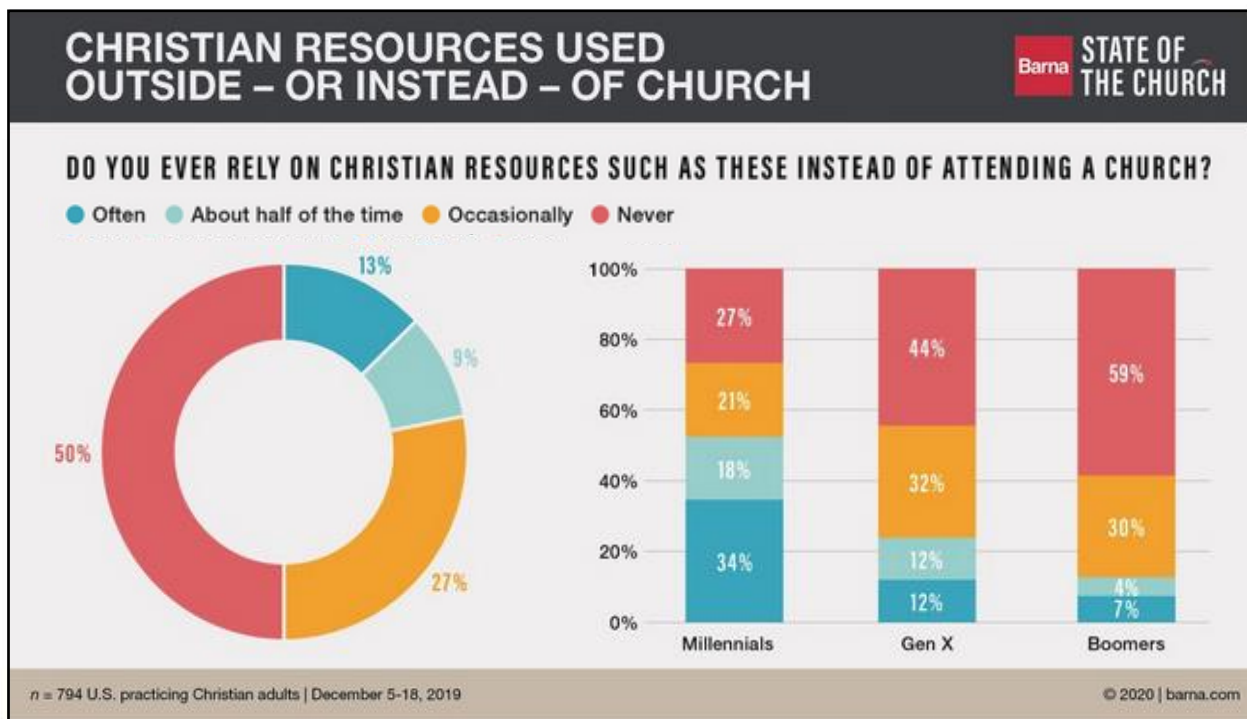
Figure 7. Christian Resources Used Outside—Or instead—Of Church
Source: Barna Group, "Do Americans Replace Traditional Church with Digital Faith Expressions?" Barna.com, March 12, 2020. Used by permission.

"What the Research Means"[299]

All of the above studies can be summarized in Barna's statistic that "only 17% of Christians who consider their faith important and attend church regularly actually have a biblical

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[298] Barna Group, "Do Americans Replace Traditional Church?"

[299] Barna Group concludes each report with a section titled, "What the Research Means," where they draw conclusions from the data in that report.

worldview."[300] In "Competing Worldviews," Brooke Hemphill, Barna's Senior Vice President of

Research, proclaims that "this research really crystalizes what Barna has been tracking in our

country as an ongoing shift away from Christianity as the basis for a shared worldview."[301] Over

several decades, Barna has "observed and reported on increasing pluralism, relativism and moral

decline among Americans and even in the Church. Nevertheless, it is striking how pervasive

some of these beliefs are among people who are actively engaged in the Christian faith."[302]

David Kinnaman, President of Barna Group, echoes Hemphill's concern when he submits in

"End of Absolutes" that

> the highest good, according to our society, is "finding yourself" and then living by
> "what's right for you." . . . There is a tremendous amount of individualism in today's
> society, and that's reflected in the church, too. Millions of Christians have grafted New
> Age dogma onto their spiritual person. When we peel back the layers, we find that many
> Christians are using the way of Jesus to pursue the way of self. . . . While we wring our
> hands about secularism spreading through culture, a majority of churchgoing Christians
> have embraced corrupt, me-centered theology.[303]

Studies of Personal Experience in Corporate Worship

This section presents findings from two studies that have examined the individual's

personal experience in corporate worship. Gordon Adnams' study for his doctoral dissertation,

"The Experience of Congregational Singing: An Ethno-Phenomenological Approach," examines

many aspects of the personal experience of congregational singing in a Baptist church in Canada,

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[300] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews." This statistic is derived from a 2015 OmniPoll. For the purposes of their research, "Barna Group defines 'biblical worldview' as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today" (Ibid.).

[301] Ibid.

[302] Ibid.

[303] Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes."

including the dichotomy of the individual worshiping privately within the communal context.

Nathan Myrick's study, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity: The Emotional Efficacy of Congregational Song," published in the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*, examines the ability of congregational singing to "generate relational strength, as well as communal and individual religious identity, in participants."[304]

"The Experience of Congregational Singing" by Gordon Adnams

Much of Adnams' analysis of his fieldwork focused on the individual worshiper's personal sense of authenticity—that they are "really worshiping" in a way that is true to them, expressing themselves with originality and individuality. He observes that "for each singer, one challenge appears as a need to know, in some manner, that in the moment of singing, what is inside is the same as what is outside; that what is sung is what is felt to be real and expressed authentically in and as worship."[305] In many of his interviews, Adnams recognizes the perceived need for the worshiper to feel isolated from those around him or her, "alone with God in the crowd" to achieve this authenticity of worship.[306]

Ruth, one participant in Adnams' study, recounts that "when I'm worshipping . . . I usually close my eyes; it's a way for me to kind of tune out the people and the distractions that are going on around me. . . . [With choruses] there's a lot of repetition and the first couple of times through . . . I'm listening to people around me and listening to myself sing, then after I've had the repetition, I can tune that out and focus on actual worship."[307] Similarly, Kate discloses

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[304] Myrick, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity," 78.

[305] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 149.

[306] Ibid., 147.

[307] Ibid., 139–140.

that "I quite often close my eyes, presuming I know the words and the music, because I can block out what's around me. I really don't care who's there. And I sing as if I don't care who's there, because I'm not singing for you or them; I'm really singing for the Lord."[308] Adnams recognizes an irony that is occurring: "Eyes are closed to shut out all of the other singers who are necessary for the occasion of singing in a worship service. But at some point in time, they apparently become a distraction for a really worshipping member whose goal appears to be a private, inner awareness of communicating to God the personalized feelings named in the communally sung words."[309] Adnams emphasizes that these moments of private worship in the context of congregational singing could not occur without the other congregants present. He acknowledges their symbiotic relationship when he observes that "each congregational singer is in his or her own reality, alone in the crowd but nonetheless necessary to the union that is the communal voice."[310]

Stories such as Ruth's and Kate's cause Adnams to wonder how these experiences of solitude within a community should be understood and interpreted. He perceives that

> part of the feelingful response to a song is a product of singing in a group. . . . Somehow, a group can supply additional inspiration upon which we draw for richer participation in an event. . . . [E]ven though singers seem to want to ignore other singers, the context of this activity remains communal and thus influential.
>
> But the intentional awareness of the worshipper has been shifted. . . . The wonder of us before God, the multi-voiced local community that has been called into being seems to be merely a setting that allows the individual to begin the journey towards communing with God privately. Many singers achieve a state of feeling something that is interpreted as an individual connection with God, a sense of personally communicating, of singing alone to Deity.[311]

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[308] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 147.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Ibid., 149.

[311] Ibid., 147–148.

In this sense, the community of worshipers contributes to and enhances the individual's private worship within the corporate environment.

Additionally, Adnams finds that balancing individual expressions of worship with corporate ones is further complicated by an intergenerational context, such as the congregation participating in his case study. The younger generations "seem to be in the quandary of a deep desire to express the real 'me' and the pressure of conformity exerted by a restrictive 'us' in worship."[312] Adnams observes a noticeable tension between the generations as the younger people seek a "personally expressive worship" within an intergenerational congregation. He concludes that "in our quest for authenticity, there is the necessity of defining ourselves in opposition to others but at the same time in dialogue with them. Many of the younger people want the personal freedom to express themselves in an individual way without any real or imagined judgment from others present, especially parents or other elders."[313] Shelly, one of the youth Adnams interviews, admits that

> there's a whole level of intimidation when you're worshipping with people of all different ages than when you're with just your peers. . . . And I've noticed in things like youth group, people will be more comfortable; they'll start crying and they'll be lifting their hands and people will feel comfortable kneeling, falling on their faces if they need to. But on a Sunday morning you won't see that because there's a difference when your parents can see you and when other adults in the church can see you. It's just different.[314]

Adnams believes that physical gestures in worship (e.g., raising hands, kneeling, clapping, dancing, closing eyes, etc.) are considered by the younger generations as "personal expressions of worship, not corporate. This 'do your own thing' is an individual, private, yet public response

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[312] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 175.

[313] Ibid., 176.

[314] Ibid., 174.

to God—the interior freely brought to the exterior—and as such is valued as personally authentic."[315]

While the younger generations consider this "expressive individualism" within corporate worship to be personal and authentic, Adnams maintains his research affirms that "really worshiping with all of its dimensions is best achieved in and because of the large group meeting; the effect of everyone singing, the leadership of a band in a room are all necessary and contribute to the achievement of personally expressive worship."[316] However, this individualism in corporate worship causes Adnams to wonder if the congregation, when it becomes merely a backdrop to personal worship, can be considered a "'community' of believers? If so, what kind of community is being celebrated, encouraged and taught if the worship activity and actual goal of the singing is a privatized experience, achieved by common consent. Even if all the singers are comfortable with each other, for real worship to occur, the activity of the other needs to be 'tuned out' as it is often deemed to be a distraction."[317]

"Relational Power, Music, and Identity" by Nathan Myrick

While Adnams' study of Eldridge Baptist Church demonstrates how the communal setting of corporate worship can serve as merely a backdrop for private worship, Myrick's study at the 2015 National Worship Leader Conference (NWLC) reveals how a relational bond can be created and strengthened through congregational song. Myrick examines the effects of musical entrainment in "modern worship" upon the congregation's emotional and relational identity. Set in the context of musical entrainment—"the theoretical explanation of how two autonomous

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[315] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 177.

[316] Ibid., 178.

[317] Ibid.

rhythmic oscillators synchronize without direct physical contact"[318]—Myrick's study utilizes this theory as an opportunity "for understanding human experiences of unity and intimacy in music."[319]

On the second day of the conference, Myrick attended the morning general session where he observed the effects of entrainment on the congregation. Of particular interest was the song "Cornerstone," led by the duo Shane and Shane, the worship leaders for that morning. Myrick noted that during the song, "the congregation began to sway in unison, hands outstretched. I tapped out the tempo of the swaying and recorded 62 B.P.M., which precisely matched the 62 B.P.M. Tempo of the music. The synchronization lasted for several seconds, dissipated, then returned. This pattern continued throughout the rest of the song to varying degrees."[320]

Following the general session, Myrick interviewed Juan, who identified the congregational singing of "Cornerstone" as a particularly meaningful moment during worship that morning. In his analysis of the interview, Myrick asserts that during congregational singing, "it is the moments of entrainment within that familiar ritual context that provide the most profoundly meaningful experiences. While Juan first identified the lyrics and 'whole concept of that song' as being the primary source of meaning for him, he quickly noted that this significance was augmented and enhanced by the presence of others engaged in the same activity."[321] Following is a portion of the interview transcript:

> Juan: I was hearing some other people sing, and I could just feel their spirits singing to God, like, just kind of, like their hearts pouring out to God.

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[318] Myrick, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity," 82.

[319] Ibid.

[320] Ibid., 85.

[321] Ibid., 86.

Author: What does that feel like? Can you describe it?

Juan: Yeah, yeah. I didn't feel alone. I definitely felt like someone understood me, like someone was also going through something the same, which didn't make me feel alone. . . . It made me feel like I didn't have to hold back, I could just go at it . . . it felt kind of warm, like, you know when you hug someone? It felt really warm.[322]

Juan also recounts previous similar experiences in worship where he describes his experience of congregational singing "in terms surprisingly similar to those used to describe entrainment in academic literature:"[323]

Juan: It definitely intensifies when I'm around other people. *It's like our energies are syncing together*, um, I feel like we're *all cogs in the same clock*. And you know it's like mine's turning, I feel like everyone else's is turning at the same time, or like vice versa; like theirs is turning, mine turns. . . . It's just like we connect and the feeling just intensifies, um, I feel like God's presence just jumps like a fire that starts right in a little bush and then it catches on to another bush and another bush and the fire just grows and grows and grows.[324]

Juan's description reveals how emotional and relational connection among the worshipers can be strengthened in the process of congregational singing. Myrick concludes that Juan's interview "suggests that there may be some recognition on the part of the congregants that they are meaningfully connecting to others, and that this connection may coincide with musical entrainment."[325]

Textual Studies of Song Lyrics

This section presents the findings from three textual studies of congregational song lyrics. To trace the development of corporate individualism as evidenced by the songs that evangelicals

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[322] Myrick, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity," 86.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Ibid.

[325] Ibid., 86–87.

sing in worship, this researcher selected three studies that have examined the texts of both hymns and contemporary worship songs. Since Southern Baptists are the largest evangelical denomination in the United States with over 14.5 million members,[326] songs sung by this denomination are representational of evangelical churches in America as a whole. In his dissertation, "The Changing Theological Functions of Corporate Worship among Southern Baptists: What They Were and What They Became (1638-2008)," Stuart Sheehan engages in an extensive study examining the texts of psalms, hymns, and contemporary songs published in every hymnal used by Baptists (later to become Southern Baptists) in their 370-plus-year history in America through their most recent hymnal published in 2008.

With the increased use of contemporary worship music by evangelical churches in the late twentieth century and throughout the twenty-first century, this researcher also selected two studies that examined the most popular contemporary worship songs used in the twenty-first century: "Some Similarities and Differences between Historic Evangelical Hymns and Contemporary Worship Songs" (2015) by Lester Ruth and "The Songs We Sing: A Textual Analysis of Popular Congregational Songs of the 20th and 21st Century" (2019) by Ian Hussey. These two studies are examined together since Hussey's research was built upon and expanded Ruth's study. Details of the methodology and song selection process for all three studies are discussed in chapter three of this thesis.

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[326] "Southern Baptist Convention Continues Statistical Decline, Floyd Calls for Rethinking ACP Process," Baptist Press, June 4, 2020, accessed July 16, 2020, http://www.bpnews.net/54903/southern-baptist-convention-continues-statistical-decline-floyd-calls-for-rethinking-acp-process.

"The Changing Theological Functions of Corporate Worship among Southern Baptists:

What They Were and What They Became (1638-2008)" by Stuart Sheehan

Sheehan begins his study with the founding of the first Baptist church in the United States in 1638 and ends in 2008 with the publishing of the most recent Southern Baptist hymnal. In examining the 17,427 texts from every hymnal that Baptists in America have used, Sheehan traces the changing theological functions—"the various purposes of activities performed to or on behalf of God"[327]—of corporate worship in Baptist churches through the texts that were sung. His research reveals that "Baptists in America (later Southern Baptists) practiced corporate worship in harmony with their stated beliefs from 1638 until the opening decades of the twentieth century."[328] However, Sheehan discovers that "in the first half of the twentieth century, God was no longer a primary object of the people's worship. By 2008, the individual became the focus of corporate worship. Southern Baptists arrived at a place of significant discontinuity between what they declared the functions of worship to be and what they did in practice."[329]

To establish a baseline from which to compare future developments, Sheehan begins his study by explaining that Baptists in America adopted the Second London Confession in 1742 (which became known as the Philadelphia Confession thereafter) that outlined three foundational elements of corporate worship: "preaching, singing to one another, and singing to God. . . . Congregations were instructed to listen to the sermon, while singing was to be a vehicle for their active participation in worship. Through song, they could express corporate praise to God and

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[327] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 2.

[328] Ibid., 4.

[329] Ibid.

speak to one another."[330] Sheehan emphasizes that through the adoption of the Philadelphia

Confession, Baptists understood congregational singing as having two theological functions:

"doxological and communal. These represent two axes, one vertical and one horizontal."[331] The

vertical axis is where believers speak "directly to God . . . the object of their praise. Thus, direct

addresses to God were a significant part of the construct of early Baptist worship."[332] The

horizontal, or communal, axis was described in the Philadelphia Confession (in reference to

Colossians 3:16) as "'teaching and admonishing one another.'. . . Horizontal singing was for

mutual edification among the converted . . . the gathered church."[333] Therefore, congregational

singing was "centered on the doxological and the communal. This set a foundation on which

Baptists in America built their own understanding of corporate worship."[334]

      With this understanding of the Baptist's position on congregational singing, Sheehan sets

forth to determine if the practice of Baptists in America (later Southern Baptists) have been

congruent with their stated beliefs by analyzing the texts that Baptists have sung during corporate

worship. While the focus of this thesis is upon the later developments in Baptist history, it is

important to note that Sheehan finds that, originally, Baptists' beliefs and praxes were in

harmony. His textual analysis of Period I (1638-1789) reveals that congregational songs

> were strongly set around two axes, the doxological and communal. More than 60% of all
> texts addressed God. . . . Horizontal communication was equally prominent. Over 60% of
> the texts included language in which the converted addressed one another. . . .
> Congregants encouraged and testified to one another. They were characteristically

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[330] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 9.

[331] Ibid.

[332] Ibid., 10.

[333] Ibid., 9–10.

[334] Ibid., 10.

corporate, rather than individualistic. . . . Worship among early Baptists in America was doxological, communal, and overwhelmingly corporate (see figure 8).[335]
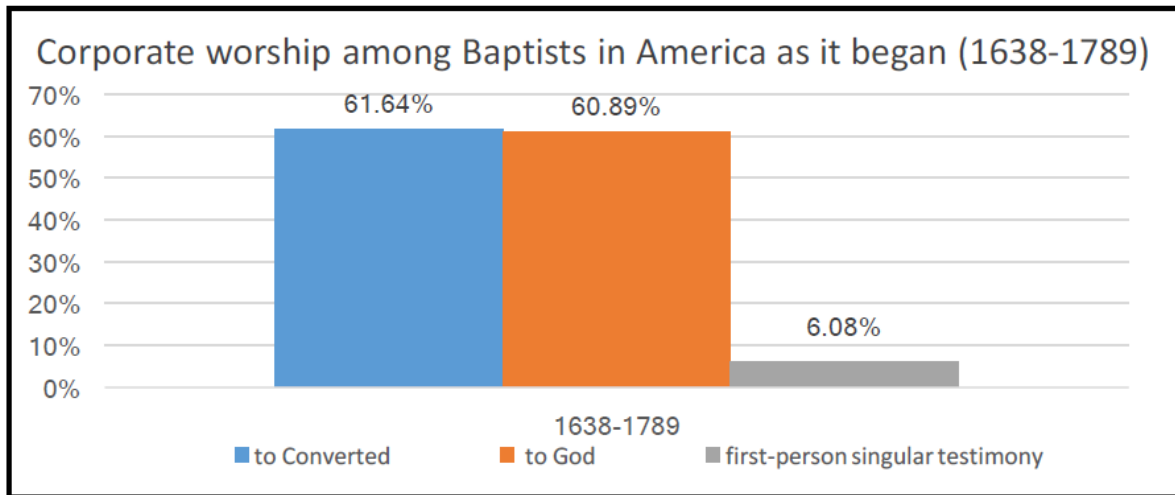

Figure 8. Corporate Worship among Baptists in America, 1638-1789
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions of corporate Worship among Southern Baptists: What They Were and What They Became (1638-2008)" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 2017), 250, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Used by permission.

While there are notable and interesting developments in the texts that Baptists sang during the one hundred years spanning Sheehan's Period II (1790-1839) and Period III (1840-1891), the most pertinent developments to this thesis occurred in Period IV (1892-1955) and Period V (1956-2008)—encapsulating the culmination of modernist ideals and the subsequent rise of postmodernism. Sheehan asserts that, in Period IV,

> Southern Baptist worship in the first half of the twentieth century evidenced an extraordinary transition. The priorities that animated their Sunday gatherings for almost three centuries were upended. This occurred during a period of significant growth, both numerically and in the size and scope of the denomination's structure. . . . Between 1900 and 1950, their numbers swelled from 1.6 million in 19,558 churches to more than 7 million in 27,788 churches. In the midst of this statistical heyday, Southern Baptists lost their focus on God as a primary object of their worship. They abandoned the structure of corporate gatherings, which was so important to their fathers. The communal axis overwhelmed the doxological. . . . By mid-century, congregations who gathered to worship God spoke predominately to one another and mostly about themselves.[336]

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[335] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 105.

[336] Ibid., 174.

To arrive at these conclusions, Sheehan outlines his textual analysis. Included in his analysis of Period IV were six hymnals: *Manly's Choice* (1892), *Baptist Hymn and Praise Book* (1904), *The Popular Hymnal* (1918), *The Modern Hymnal* (1926), *The American Hymnal* (1933), and *The Broadman Hymnal* (1940). The first two hymnals during this period maintained a majority of texts that were addressed to God; however, the remaining four hymnals contained dramatic decreases to the vertical axis of worship. Basil Manly, Jr., the compiler of the first hymnal, *Manly's Choice*, intentionally sought to preserve the vertical axis in Baptist corporate worship. Sheehan recognizes that one of Manly's primary aims "was to 'promote universal congregational singing: "Let all the people praise God."'[337] For Manly, praising God meant speaking to Him. Of the 254 titles in his collection, 146 addressed God directly (57.48%). Manly was working to safeguard the doxological axis from being eclipsed by the growing importance of the horizontal aspect of congregational worship."[338] While the second hymnal during Period IV, *Baptist Hymn and Praise Book*, followed Manly's lead with 55.57% of texts addressing God, "thereafter, numbers of texts that addressed God fell significantly as a portion of the whole. On average, only 31.65% of texts in the remaining [four] volumes allowed for the congregation to speak directly to God"[339] (see figure 9).

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[337] Basil Manly, "Preface," in *Manly's Choice: A New Selection of Approved Hymns for Baptist Churches, with Music* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Book Concern, 1892), iii, accessed July 16, 2020, Google Books.

[338] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 186.

[339] Ibid.
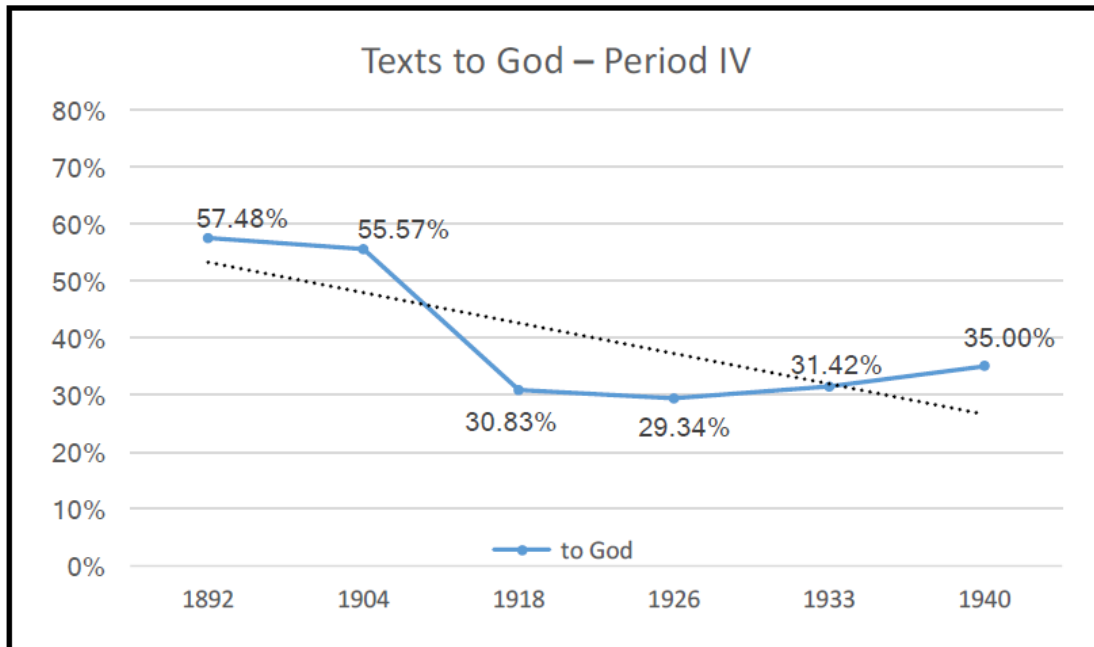
Figure 9. Texts to God—Period IV
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 187. Used by permission.

Sheehan emphasizes that the "reorientation of the axis of worship (from vertical to horizontal) was a major development" during this period.[340] Consequently, the percentage of texts addressing the congregation rose dramatically, in inverse proportion to the decline of texts addressing God. While the first two hymnals maintained a balance between the vertical and horizontal axis (with the percentage of texts addressing the congregation being 56.30% and 55.74%, respectively), the final four volumes in this period contained an average of 70.72% of texts addressed to the gathered body of believers (see figure 10).[341] Interestingly for this thesis, Sheehan acknowledges that the "texts in which the converted spoke to one another were used for

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[340] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 189.

[341] Ibid., 190.

mutual encouragement, the congregation speaking about their common hope. They were often

set in first-person plural voicing."[342]
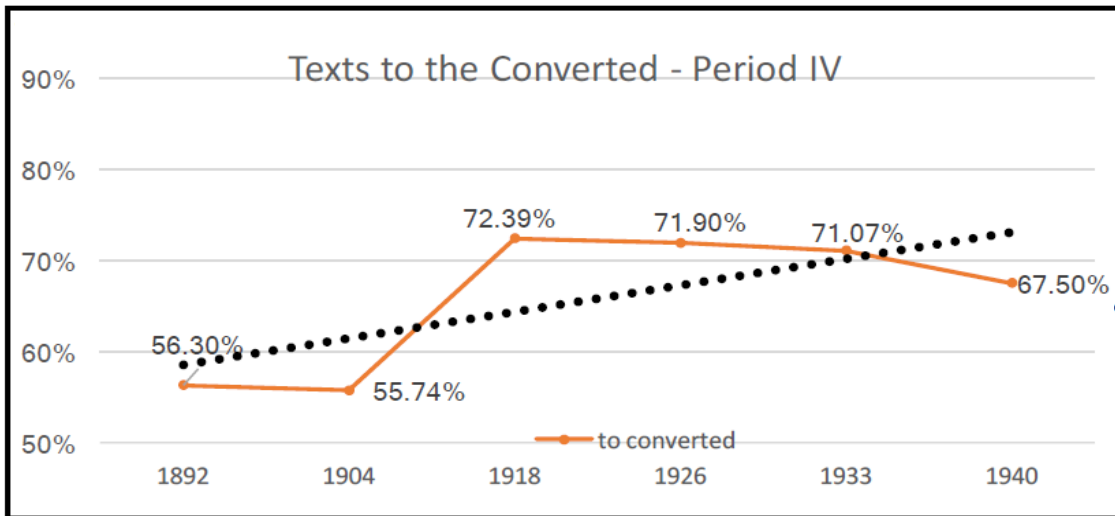
Figure 10. Texts to the Converted—Period IV
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 190. Used by permission.

Another major development in Period IV was the rise in the use of reflexive texts, with

an average of 54.75% throughout that timeframe. Additionally, the final volume in this period,

The Broadman Hymnal, contained 72.08% of reflexive texts (see figure 11). Sheehan observes

that "the use of reflexive texts was becoming an important means of communication in worship.

In the previous period, congregants spoke about themselves only 39.16% of the time. . . . In the

1940 volume [*The Broadman Hymnal*], the focus on themselves was overwhelmingly

dominant."[343] Sheehan attributes this change to the influence of Baptist theologian E. Y. Mullins

and, to a lesser extent, his protégé, W. T. Conner. He describes their theology in strikingly

similar terms to postmodernism, which developed decades later. Sheehan maintains that Mullins,

President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and "the chief architect of *The Baptist*

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[342] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 191.

[343] Ibid., 198.

Faith and Message (1925),"[344] elevated the experience of the individual by arguing "that

personal experience was the foundation of spiritual truth."[345] He claims that Mullins "taught an

approach to theology that changed the way the denomination understood God . . . [and] placed

individualism and personalism at the core of the Southern Baptist understanding of faith."[346]
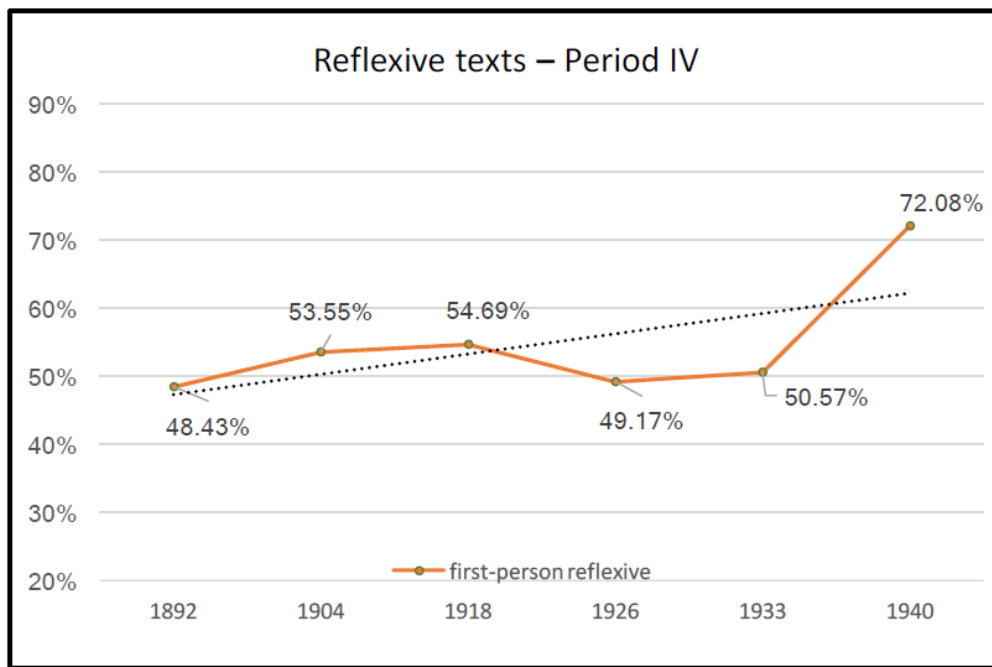
Figure 11. Reflexive Texts—Period IV
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 198. Used by permission.

Sheehan summarizes Period IV by declaring that

> The data in this chapter proves that God became a minority object of their addresses
> within their worship gatherings. As they adjusted their theological perspectives, their
> concept of the faith began to orbit around human experience. Despite their reassertion in
> 1925 that worship was both doxological and communal, the vertical axis faded. The
> horizontal, communal axis became the single, dominant focus of their worship
> gatherings. The congregation became both the primary object and subject of corporate
> worship.[347]

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[344] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 178.

[345] Ibid., 211.

[346] Ibid., 179.

[347] Ibid., 184.

Period V (1956-2008) brought more significant changes to Southern Baptist corporate worship, both functionally and stylistically. Sheehan proclaims that this period "was one of profound cultural change and denominational development."[348] While Southern Baptists became the largest Protestant denomination in America during this period,[349] they also became acutely aware of the surrounding culture's "hostil[ity] to the idea of absolute truth."[350] The cultural upheavals in America and the growing theological tensions within the denomination caused the Southern Baptist Convention to adopt two new statements of faith during this period—in 1963 and 2000.[351] Nevertheless, the denomination's stance on the functions of corporate worship remained the same: "The intent of gathering for public exercises of worship was still doxological and communal."[352] However, in practice, Sheehan discovers that "the data analyses in this period showed that God remained a minority object of the people's worship and the reflexive voice, so prominent in the previous period, evidenced a disturbing trajectory. The individual, speaking about self, was becoming the hallmark of Southern Baptist worship."[353]

One important development in corporate worship experienced by Southern Baptists (and in most evangelical churches) during Period V was the rise in contemporary worship music. At the beginning of this period, Southern Baptist worship was homogeneous; however, by 2008 "the

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[348] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 212.

[349] Ibid.

[350] Susie Hawkins, "Forward," in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 6, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[351] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 215.

[352] Ibid., 216.

[353] Ibid., 212.

era of a unique denominational worship style was over."[354] Originally known as the Praise and

Worship movement, the influence of contemporary music was and is profound in Southern

Baptist worship. Sheehan explains that

> many of the texts used in this movement characteristically emphasized God's immanence. The Southern Baptist affinity for this style was an understandable phenomenon. Worshipping God in more familiar terms had been the trend since Dwight L. Moody, who had laboured to present God in close, familial terms. The theologies of Mullins and Conner held up personal experience as the key component of verifying spiritual truth. The notion of an immanent God, who confirmed truth through personal experience, was deeply imbedded in the corporate worship of Southern Baptists before the Praise and Worship movement began. The newer contemporary forms simply echoed these themes, providing an emotional intensity that validated the experience of the worshipper.[355]

Four Baptist hymnals were published during Period V: *Baptist Hymnal* (1956), *Baptist*

Hymnal (1975), *The Baptist Hymnal* (1991), and *Baptist Hymnal* (2008). The percentage of texts

directly addressing God continued to decline during this period, although, the 1956 *Baptist*

Hymnal was an intentional course correction from the previous volume, the 1940 *Broadman*

Hymnal. The 1956 edition increased the vertical axis from its 1940 predecessor, jumping from

35% of texts addressing God in *The Broadman Hymnal* to 45.91% in the 1956 *Baptist Hymnal*.

The 1975 edition, however, returned to the previous pattern and reduced its vertical texts to

42.77%, and the 1991 hymnal further decreased the number of texts addressing God to 39.83%

(see figure 12).[356] With the most recent hymnal published by Southern Baptists in 2008, Sheehan

notes an increase in vertical texts and attributes this change to the inclusion of contemporary

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[354] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 221.

[355] Ibid., 219.

[356] Ibid., 224.

songs, positing that "the small uptick in the number of texts addressing God in the 2008 hymnal . . . indicated the use of newer worship forms."[357]
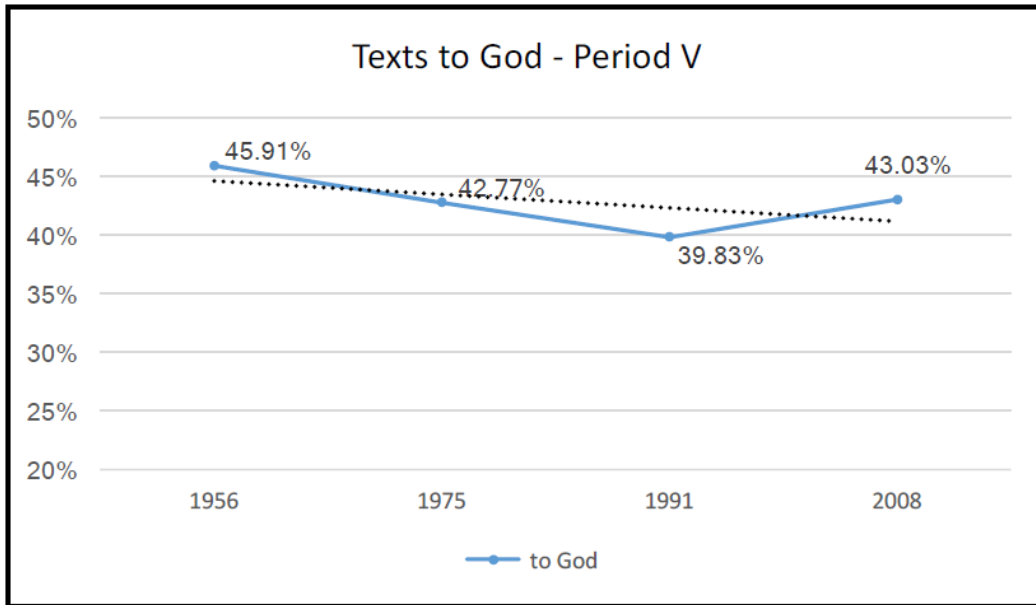
Figure 12. Texts to God—Period V
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 224. Used by permission.

Another consequence of incorporating songs from the contemporary music genre is a decrease in the number of texts that utilize plural forms of address to God. Sheehan asserts that a common characteristic of contemporary songs is the use of "first-person singular [pronouns]. The result is an expression of a personal connection between the worshipper and God."[358] Sheehan discovers that

> these choruses caused direct addresses to God to become more individualized. Comparing the 1956 volume and the 2008 volume, first-person singular addresses to God rose from 22.37% in 1956 to 26.56% in 2008 [see figure 13]. This occurred while the overall number of texts to God dropped from 45.91% in 1956 to 43.03% in 2008. The net effect was that congregations spoke to God less by 2008, but a greater portion of those were spoken by individuals. . . . The axis of worship remained predominately horizontal.

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[357] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 228.

[358] Ibid., 227.

It transitioned, furthermore, away from corporate, plural addresses to God, giving over to the individual worshipper.[359]
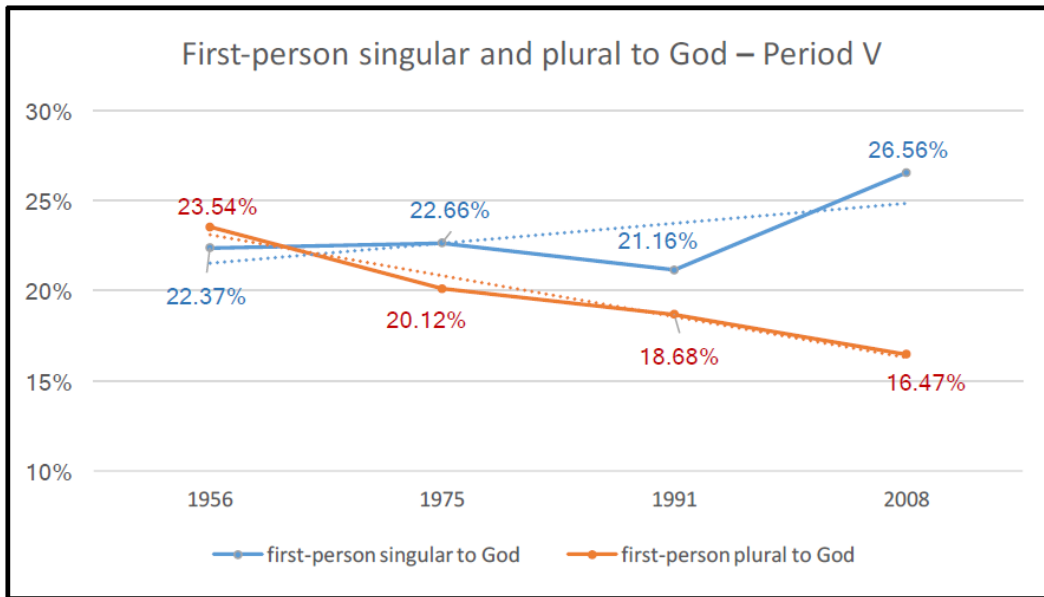
Figure 13. First-Person Singular and Plural to God—Period V
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 239. Used by permission.

Period V also witnessed an increase in the use of reflexive texts in corporate worship. Sheehan informs that "at the beginning of Period V, the reflexive voice was prominent within Southern Baptist worship. Through the duration of this period, the instances in which worshippers spoke about themselves continued to increase"[360] It is important to note, however, that the last hymnal in Period IV, *The Broadman Hymnal* (1940), contained 72.08% of reflexive texts. Thus, the *Baptist Hymnal* of 1956 sought to moderate the use of reflexive texts by decreasing its use significantly to 44.55%. Even so, the reflexive voice during this period increased to 51.93% by 2008 (see figure 14).[361]

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[359] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 228–229.

[360] Ibid., 237.

[361] Ibid.
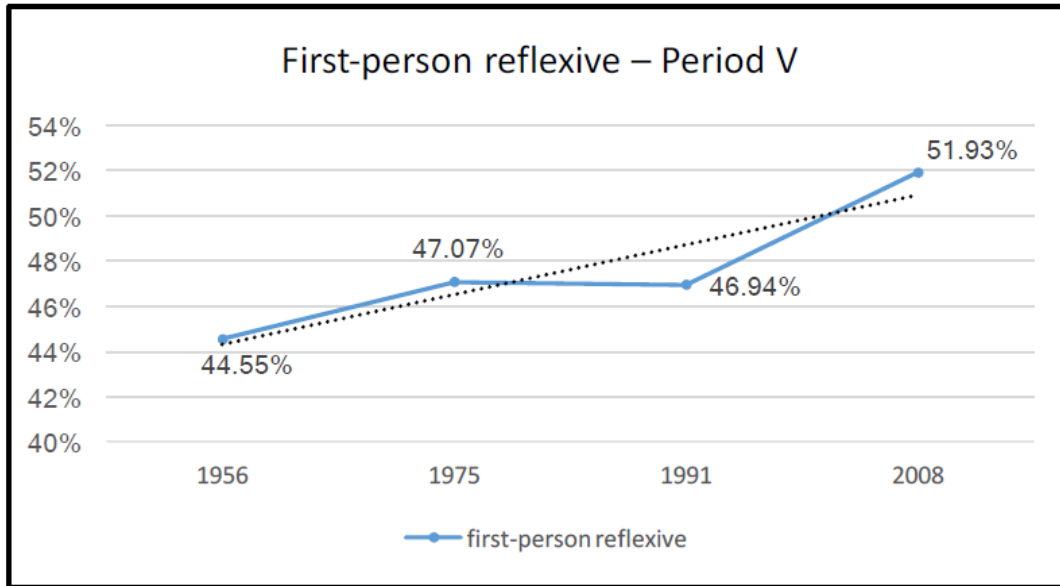
Figure 14. First-Person Reflexive—Period V
Source: Stuart Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 237. Used by permission.

Sheehan points out that the use of reflexive texts underwent a change in this period with "an increase of direct addresses to God by individual worshippers. This occurred in an inverse proportional relationship to the number of plural addresses."[362] While the number of first-person singular pronouns used in addressing God increased in this period, the "allocation of plural voicing was in a free fall (see figure 13). The result was a complete upending. As newer forms of worship proliferated, the individual voice became more prominent. . . . For Southern Baptists, reflexive texts that addressed God became an avenue for individualized expressions, rather than corporate ones."[363] Additionally, the reflexive voice increased in the texts that the congregation utilized to speak to one another during this period. The 1956 hymnal contained 25.49% of these "testimonial texts." Sheehan's analysis reveals that "it rose thereafter to 29.69% in 1975, 30.74%

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[362] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 238.

[363] Ibid., 239.

in 1991, and 31.45% in 2008. The move toward individualizations was clearly visible. Individual

congregants were increasingly led to speak about themselves."[364]

The changes in the way reflexive texts were used marked a shift in focus for Southern

Baptists. The move away from gospel songs to more contemporary forms of music indicated that

"evangelism as a component of Southern Baptist Sunday gatherings was ending. . . . The old-

time gospel style of Southern Baptist worship has passed. What rose in its place was

experimentation with more contemporary worship forms."[365] Sheehan explains that this shift

"was evident in the increase of reflexive texts spoken to the congregation and the increase of

texts in which individual congregants spoke directly to God about themselves. Evangelistic zeal

gave way to a focus on a personal experience of worship."[366]

The totality of Sheehan's research reveals that for Baptists in America (later to become

Southern Baptists), "the axis of worship changed, from an orientation that included both vertical

and horizontal axes to one that was uniquely horizontal. Corporate worship then turned inward,

as the individual became the rising concern."[367] The second half of the twentieth century and the

beginning of the twenty-first century encapsulated most of this change. Sheehan concludes that

Period V (1955-2008)

> confirmed that the structure of corporate worship endured its third major transition,
> namely the fascination with self. In the first half of the twentieth century worship moved
> away from its vertical axis (directed toward God), as congregational worship became
> overwhelmingly communal. This period continued in the same trajectory but with a twist.
> Horizontally-oriented worship reached its logical end; reflexive texts moved from being
> more corporate and plural to being personalized. Theological individualism, which
> flourished in the early part of the twentieth century, eventually overpowered the historic

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[364] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 240.

[365] Ibid.

[366] Ibid.

[367] Ibid., 19.

construct of Southern Baptist worship, undoing their long commitment to the gathered congregation . . . [and] became less focused on the communion of believers. When God was no longer a primary object of their corporate addresses, centripetal forces, visible in the increased fascination with self, pulled the attention of Southern Baptist worship inward. The confluence of a theology built on personal experience and the loss of the primacy of God in corporate worship, both prevalent in the early part of the century, eventually produced gatherings that focused on the individual. Corporate worship was no longer about the congregation of the converted, nor was it addressed primarily to God; the chief concern was the individual worshipper.[368]

Sheehan's research provides a solid foundation and historical context for understanding the development of individualism throughout the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries in the hymn texts that evangelicals have sung in corporate worship, including a small number of contemporary songs which are published in hymnals. Furthermore, an analysis of the most frequently used contemporary worship song texts in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is crucial to the understanding of the rise of corporate individualism as evidenced in the lyrics of congregational song. The following two studies provide insight into theological functions of contemporary worship songs in comparison to evangelical hymns.

"Some Similarities and Differences between Historic Evangelical Hymns and

Contemporary Worship Songs" (2015) by Lester Ruth and

"The Songs We Sing: A Textual Analysis of Popular Congregational Songs

of the 20th and 21st Century" (2019) by Ian Hussey

Lester Ruth's initial study, published in 2015, focuses on a textual analysis of evangelical hymns and contemporary worship songs, determining distinctions and similarities between the two. Ian Hussey continues this research and expounds upon the themes of Ruth's initial study while utilizing more recent contemporary songs (those in popular usage at the end of 2018). Ruth

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[368] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 245–246.

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also seeks to affirm or refute the popular notion that evangelical hymns are *about* God while contemporary worship songs are directed *to* Him. He asks, "[I]s such a dichotomy accurate? Are those bodies of song all that different?"[369] Ultimately, he discovers that

> from a certain angle, especially one that only asks theological questions about the lyrics, hymns and choruses are often quite similar. . . . Specifically, a theological analysis of the lyrics of the most popular evangelical hymns and choruses in the United States demonstrates important similarities in their Trinitarian perspective—or lack thereof— over the last 200 years. In addition, a close lyrical examination reveals significant points of divergence, especially in a shift to more direct forms of adoration in worship as well as in different eschatologies.[370]

Ruth approaches his study by comparing the use of nouns and verbs in both sets of congregational song. While much of his research does not directly pertain to the subject of this thesis, his analysis of the manner in which song texts address God illuminates the prevalence and strength of the vertical axis of worship and the general lack of corporate awareness in contemporary worship songs.

Ruth finds that one significant distinction between evangelical hymns (which he abbreviates as EH) and contemporary worship songs (CWS) "deals with the frequency and manner in which a divine Person is addressed directly in worship through song. Not only is there a clear tendency toward prayer to the divine in contemporary worship songs but there is an overwhelmingly strong propensity toward immediate worship of divinity, whether in sheer numbers of CWS or in relative percentage as compared to EH."[371] Ruth suggests that "CWS tend to use such phrases as 'I worship you, I honor you, I praise you' in a direct approach to worship. CWS come before divinity in worship in terms of bold address to God, eagerly, and repeatedly,

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[369] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 68.

[370] Ibid.

[371] Ibid., 74.

whereas EH tend to praise in indirect ways. . . . CWS tend to spend quite a bit more time directly adoring the divine."[372] Sheehan's research confirms Ruth's assertions. As previously discussed, Sheehan discovered in the analysis of hymnals in Period V of his study, there was a small increase in texts addressed to God in the most recent *Baptist Hymnal* (2008) due to the inclusion of contemporary worship songs in that volume.[373] Both researchers concluded that an intentional effort is being made in contemporary worship songs to strengthen the vertical axis of worship.[374]

However, a noticeable transition from a "corporate consciousness" to an individual one also began occurring in contemporary worship songs. Ruth recognizes that

> on the whole, a corporate consciousness permeates Evangelical hymnody but is lacking in contemporary songs. That quality is easily seen in the numerous constructions in EH using the archaic [second-person] vocative pronoun "ye" as in "ye saints," "ye ransomed sinners," or "ye that love the Lord." In these cases this acknowledgement of other people is linked with some sort of charge or instruction, often to come to God to worship him or accept grace. While this sort of corporate awareness can be found in CWS . . . , it is generally less prevalent in the newer songs.[375]

Ian Hussey expands this discussion of personal pronoun usage in his study and discovers that hymns utilize first-person singular pronouns 3.0250% of the time (of total word count) while their percentage of use in contemporary worship songs is 5.5132%. The total of first-person plural pronoun usage in hymns is 3.0911% compared to 1.8377% in contemporary songs. Hussey concludes that "contemporary Christian songs are almost twice as likely to use first person singular pronouns (I, me, my) than the hymns. In contrast, the hymns are more likely to use first person plural pronouns (we, us) than contemporary Christian songs. In other words,

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[372] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 74.

[373] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 228.

[374] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 74; Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 224-228.

[375] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 74.

contemporary Christian songs tend to be more personal and individualistic than their traditional counterparts."[376]

Hussey acknowledges the concern of individualism in contemporary churches and affirms that "congregational song is meant to be corporate. Singing together, brings people together. As they sing together they agree not to be soloists or competitors but to compromise with each other and joining voices as if joining hands. . . . Congregational singing makes the theological statement 'we are the body of Christ.'"[377] However, Hussey believes that the issue of personal pronouns is more complex that it might appear. He argues that "a statement of deep devotion will necessarily use the first-person pronoun even in the midst of community. . . . Hence the prevalence of 1st person pronouns in contemporary songs should not be used to criticize them as 'individualistic.'"[378]

Study of Worship Environment

Making Space for Millennials by Barna Group

This four-part study concerning Millennials and the church contains one section that focuses upon church facilities, including worship space. Barna Group's stated purpose in this portion of their study is "to understand the principles of design that best resonate with Millennials,"[379] a postmodern generation. Barna begins their report differentiating contemporary church architecture from traditional church structures, identifying the postmodern influence of ambiguity:

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[376] Hussey, "The Songs We Sing," sec. 4.4.

[377] Ibid., sec. 5.3.

[378] Ibid.

[379] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 74.

> Cathedrals were built not only to house teaching and worship, but to proclaim the gospel and convey doctrine, theology and Scripture. . . .
>
> The old churches were built to connect people to God. The altar, the stained-glass windows, the soaring ceiling that pointed to the heavens—every element was designed to create a link between human and divine.
>
> Generally speaking, modern churches are not designed with this goal in mind. In fact, many modern churches are explicitly constructed not to look and feel too much like a religious place. A modern church is designed to host activities, and these activities point the people to God. But strip away those activities and you might as well be at a community college or a performing arts center.[380]

While contemporary churches have been designed to reach younger generations and the unchurched, Barna's research reveals that Millennials—the primary group many contemporary churches are targeting—resonate more with traditional church structures. However, as with much of postmodern thought, this issue is complex.

Barna asked their focus group to select one word from a pair of words that describes their "ideal" church, the results reveal interesting contradictions. In the area of aesthetics, 67% chose "classic" over "trendy" (33%). 77% preferred "sanctuary" while only 23% chose "auditorium." 67% selected "quiet" while 33% chose "loud." However, 60% preferred "modern" over "traditional" (40%), and 64% chose "casual" while 36% selected "dignified."[381] Barna perceives that

> you may associate the words "sanctuary," "classic" and "quiet" with more traditional church buildings—yet less than half of survey respondents preferred the word "traditional" over "modern." And herein lies a cognitive dissonance common to survey participants. Many of them seem to aspire to a more traditional church experience, in a beautiful building steeped in history and religious symbolism, but they are more at ease in a modern space that feels more familiar than mysterious.[382]

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[380] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 74.

[381] Ibid., 76–77.

[382] Ibid., 78.

These contradictions leads Barna to conclude that Millennials are drawn to "the rich religious atmosphere and deep-rooted spirituality of Redeemer or St. James [cathedral-style buildings], but most would probably find themselves at Buckhead or Willow Creek [contemporary structures] on any given Sunday."[383]

The "cognitive dissonance" Barna observes is also reflected in the words Millennials selected from pairings that referred to the worship environment and musical characteristics. While 78% chose "upbeat" over "low-key" (22%) and 78% selected "community" over "privacy" (22%), at the same time, 67% preferred "quiet" over "loud" (33%), and 60% selected "relaxed" while 40% chose "exciting." Additionally, 56% selected "performance" over "ritual" (44%), which correlates with 77% who chose "variety" over "consistency" (23%).[384] These results, and the ones reported above, correspond with the literature in chapter two describing the difficulty in defining the postmodern philosophy due to the diversity of thought and acceptance of multiple worldviews. The quip by Anthony Randall quoted in chapter two applies here as well: "[It's] like trying to nail a piece of Jell-O to the wall."[385]

A unique aspect of Barna's research is a portion of the survey where they presented visual images of various elements of church architecture to the participants and asked them to select the one that was most appealing. The first set of images are photographs of worship spaces (see figure 15). Sanctuary 1 is a picture of a contemporary megachurch, Sanctuary 2 is a medium-sized auditorium, Sanctuary 3 is a small modern, minimalist space, and Sanctuary 4 is a small auditorium.

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[383] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 79.

[384] Ibid., 76–77.

[385] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 18.
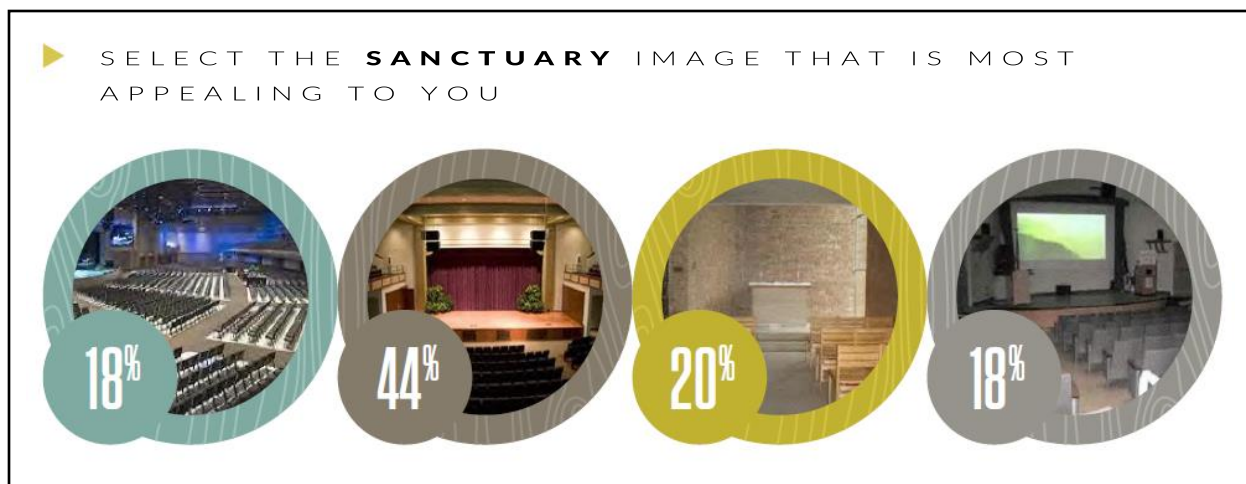
Figure 15. Sanctuary
Source: Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials: A Blueprint for Your Culture, Ministry, Leadership and Facilities* (Barna Group, 2014), 81. Used by permission.

Barna reports that "Sanctuary 2 was the 'Goldilocks' space for many respondents—not too big, not too small. Just right. It's big enough to retain some anonymity as a visitor . . . but small enough to feel part of a community."[386] The emphasis on community is also revealed in the word pairing mentioned above where 78% of Millennials selected "community" while only 22% chose "privacy." The responses from the participants also indicates that "size is a necessary evil rather than a selling point. Participants acknowledged that a successful church would grow and therefore need to increase the size of its services and facilities. But they also expressed a bit of tacit distrust for very large churches. One young man put it starkly: 'It seems like a really big business.'"[387]

Similarly, the utilitarian and ambiguous style of contemporary churches caused one participant to respond that "it kinda feels like a bait-and-switch."[388] Visual clarity of the space

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[386] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 80.

[387] Ibid.

[388] Ibid.

was important for both those in the field group and the participants in the survey. While the field

groups were impressed with the quality and attention to detail in the modern churches, after

visiting the cathedral-style churches, they were no longer enamored with the modern churches.

As the participant in the field group that spoke of the bait-and-switch reflected on the differences

between the modern and traditional churches, "the more frustrated she became. She felt the

cathedral presented itself honestly, while the modern church was trying to pass itself off as

something else."[389] This feeling was shared by many in the focus groups: "Once they viewed the

rich religious décor of the cathedrals, they wished there were more of it in the modern

facilities."[390] Barna summarizes that

> On the whole, Millennials have a strong preference for unambiguous visual clarity.
> Practically speaking, field group participants expressed appreciation for clear signage and
> directions for how and where to find information. More philosophically, Millennials want
> to be able to answer the questions "Where am I?" and "What's expected of me?" by
> looking for cues in their surroundings. Cathedrals and traditional churches have such cues
> in spades, yet modern churches are often designed expressly to be ambiguous. . . .
>
> They want a church to be open and honest about what it is and about what it is
> trying to accomplish. Most expect a Christian church to look . . . like a Christian church.
> When it doesn't, some feel off-balance and perplexed.[391]

This sentiment was also discovered in the results of the survey. The second set of images

presented to the participants of the survey depicts four altar areas "with varying levels of

ornamentation and iconography"[392] (see figure 16). Altar 1 is a modern space devoid of any

religious symbolism, Altar 2 is a traditional Protestant space with an empty cross, Altar 3 is an

ornamented Catholic church with a large crucifix, and Altar 4 is a simpler Catholic space with a

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[389] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 82.

[390] Ibid.

[391] Ibid.

[392] Ibid., 84.

smaller crucifix. Altar 3, the most ornamented space, was selected most frequently with 37% of participant's responses, while Altar 2 was nearly as favored with 33% (Evangelicals selected Altar 2 at a rate of 55%). Barna notes that "both are unambiguously Christian and are more traditional in appearance than 4."[393] This is an interesting result in comparison to the trend discussed in chapter two regarding the increasing use of ambiguous song lyrics in contemporary worship music.
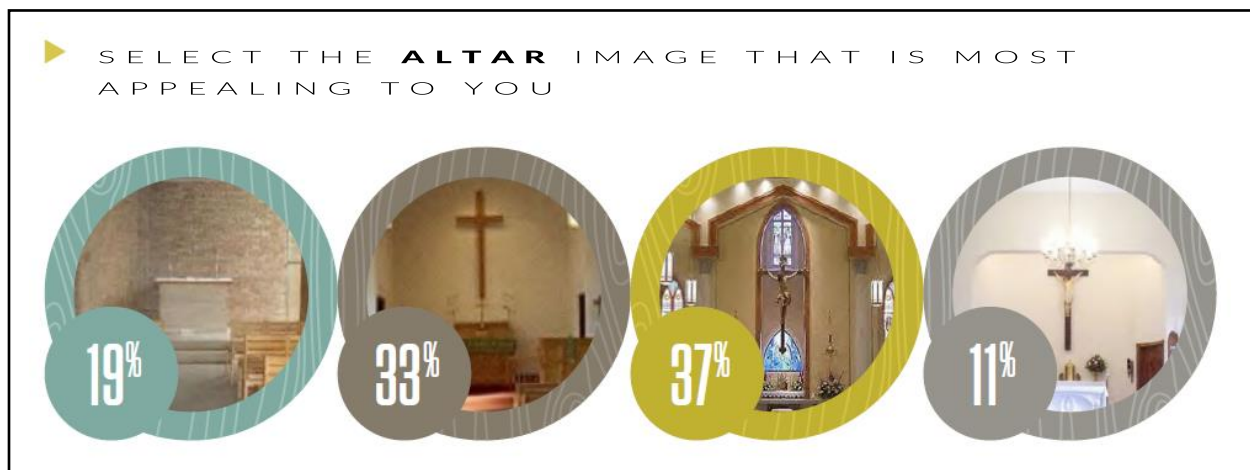
Figure 16. Altar
Source: Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 85. Used by permission.

The survey results from the final set of images strengthen the overall picture of the dichotomy in the Millennials' perspective. They were shown four types of church windows from simple and clear to very ornate stained-glass (see figure 17). Window 1 has simple, clear panes of glass, Window 2 has a mixture of clear glass and simple stained glass, Window 3 is completely stained glass in a contemporary/modern style, and Window 4 is a traditional, ornate stained-glass window.

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[393] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 86.
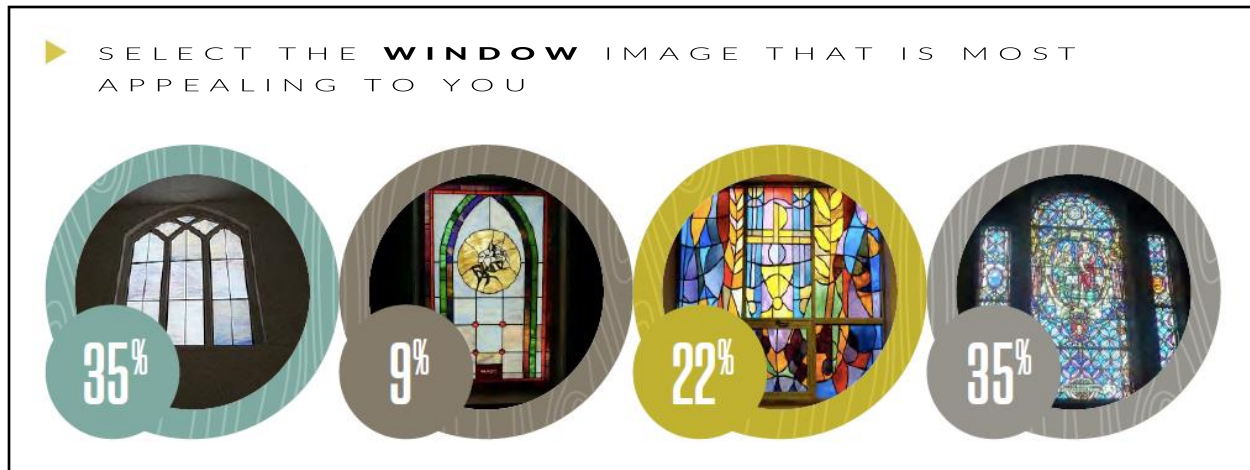
Figure 17. Window
Source: Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 93. Used by permission.

Barna was "particularly interested in this topic because we had identified two contradictory findings from our filed groups: they loved big, open windows (nature), but they also loved stained glass (visual clarity). What would happen when we pitted the two against each other?"[394] The results are interesting. The two windows on the opposite ends of the spectrum tied with 35% of participants' responses. Barna recognizes that "this is a drastic split; 1 is the most modern, least 'churchy' of the images, while 4 is the most ornate and traditional. These results are consistent with our field group findings: Millennials like both! So why not embrace both types of windows?"[395]

When asked why she believes "Millennials gravitate toward more traditional worship spaces,"[396] Sara Joy Proppe, a real estate developer who educates churches on stewardship of "the built environment for the common good,"[397] insightfully asserts that

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[394] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 92.

[395] Ibid.

[396] Ibid., 96.

[397] Ibid.

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the built environment orients us in a particular place. This is why Millennials gravitate toward more traditional worship spaces. They are hungry for rootedness and community. Having grown up in an era of ubiquitous McDonalds, Wal-Marts and housing tracts, placelessness dominates much of their human experience. Modern development patterns, driven by chain stores and highway systems, have made one place indistinguishable from another. In contrast, places imbued with particularity root us in memory, connecting us to the places we inhabit and to one another. Corporate memory is fundamental to community formation. In traditional worship spaces, Millennials are connected to the shared story with generations who have gone before them. As beings created for community, we thrive most when we are rooted together in a larger narrative. Despite all the virtual connections Millennials have through social media, I believe they are eager for tangible, physical community. A traditional church building that echoes a history of community resonates with that desire.

The Barna study reveals the contradiction many Millennials feel: a desire for comfortable anonymity yet an affinity for traditional communal religious spaces. The common approach of many modern churches is to err on the side of comfort and anonymity, stripping away religious elements and designing spaces for activities—but we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The Barna study notes, "Millennials want to be able to answer the question 'Where am I?'" Answering that question requires being oriented by and rooted in a communal history.[398]

The postmodern dichotomy of individual-in-community presents many challenges for architects and churches to navigate. Barna recognizes this complexity and concludes their report by cautioning that

it's tempting to oversimplify the relationship between Millennials and sacred space. For instance, it might be easy to believe such a place needs to look ultra modern or chic to appeal to teens and young adults. But the truth, like so much about this generation, is more complicated—refreshingly so. Most Millennials don't look for a church facility that caters to the whims of pop culture. They want a community that calls them to deeper meaning.[399]

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[398] Sara Joy Proppe, quoted in Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials,* 97.

[399] Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 94.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of this study, its purpose and procedures, research findings, and limitations. The findings are applied to the research questions, explaining how the research affirms or refutes the initial hypotheses, and suggestions for further research are offered. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the examination in the previous chapters of existing literature and data from research studies regarding the rise of corporate individualism in the worship of twenty-first-century evangelical churches.

Summary of Study, Purpose, and Procedure

Many evangelical churches in the twentieth century are experiencing a rise in individualism within their corporate worship services. An emphasis upon personal experience has reduced the importance of the horizontal axis of worship as described in the New Testament (e.g., Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16). The purpose of this qualitative, historical study is to examine the factors that led to the rise of corporate individualism in worship, identify hallmarks that indicate the presences of corporate individualism in worship, and determine ways in which corporate individualism affects worship practice in twenty-first century evangelical churches.

Chapter one introduces the concept of corporate individualism and explains how Rory Noland first applied this term to the context of corporate worship. An introduction to the historical factors that led to the development of corporate individualism is given, specifically pertaining to the influence of postmodernism. The researcher outlines the problems associated with an increasingly self-focused individualism in corporate worship that overvalues personal

experience and undervalues the communal aspect of corporate worship. The following research

questions and hypotheses are presented, which guides the trajectory of this study:

Research Question 1: What are the indications of corporate individualism in worship in evangelical churches?

Research Question 2: How has the rise in corporate individualism in worship affected worship practice in evangelical churches?

Hypothesis 1. The indications of corporate individualism in worship in evangelical churches include self-focused worship songs, overvaluation of personal experience, and ambiguous worship songs.

Hypothesis 2. Corporate individualism has affected worship practices in evangelical churches in terms of song selection, congregational participation, and platform presence.

Chapter two presents literature pertinent to the rise of corporate individualism in

corporate worship. The literature review is divided into two main sections: (1) literature

discussing the development and tenets of postmodernism and (2) literature pertaining to the

indications of individualism in corporate worship and its effects upon worship practices. While it

is difficult to encapsulate the entirety and complexity of the postmodernist worldview, chapter

two identifies this philosophy as inherently and fundamentally a rejection of modernism.

Postmodernists' objection to a universal and objective truth inevitably leads to relativism and an

acceptance of multiple worldviews; therefore, personal experience becomes the sole arbiter of

truth. The intertwining of worldviews creates a tension between individualism and community,

which is exacerbated by and reflective of the new paradigm of social connection that originated

with the advent of the internet and social media. These factors inevitably affect congregational

participation during worship—both their active participation and their interactions with other

congregants. The overvaluation of personal experience has resulted in an undervaluation of the

worshiper's connection with the community that has gathered as a corporate body to worship the

Lord. This lessening of the horizontal axis of worship is exhibited in the use of self-focused

worship songs with reflexive texts while the increase of ambiguous song lyrics is reflective of

the postmodern ethos of relativism, the acceptance of multiple worldviews, and the exaltation of

personal experience. The tension of individual-in-community is expressed in the word choices of

the worship leader and pastor. Lastly, corporate individualism can manifest itself in the worship

environment, from the architectural design to the manner in which audio and lighting is utilized

in the worship space.

Chapter three describes the methodology and research design utilized for this qualitative,

historical study. This researcher examines existing literature to establish the historical context for

the rise in corporate individualism and to identify the indications of its presence in worship.

Additionally, several research and textual studies are surveyed to discover how corporate

individualism has influenced worship practices in many evangelical churches. The literature

consists of books, journal articles, dissertations, and published textual studies and results of

surveys that were discovered through research within Liberty University's library, online

databases, and Google Scholar. Chapter three also contains descriptions of the methodology used

by other researchers in each of the surveys and textual studies discussed in chapter four.

Chapter four presents the research findings from eleven studies that explored various

aspects of postmodernism and corporate individualism in worship, revealing an overall picture of

their influence and effect upon worship in many evangelical churches in the twenty-first century.

The results of five research studies are discussed (four from Barna Group and one from the

partnership of Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research) that reveals the extent to which

postmodernism has influenced practicing Christians and, consequentially, the church. Two

studies, a doctoral dissertation and a case study published in an academic journal, delve into the

understanding of personal experience within the process of congregational singing. Three studies

of song texts are analyzed that examined the use of reflexive lyrics, singular and plural personal pronouns, and the vertical and horizontal axes of worship as evidenced in the song texts. Finally, one study is discussed regarding the perspective of the Millennial generation concerning worship space.

Summary of Research Findings

Historical Development of Corporate Individualism

This thesis examines existing literature and published results of research studies to trace the historical development of corporate individualism and to answer the research questions regarding the indications of corporate individualism and how it has affected worship practices. The result of the literature review regarding the development of this phenomenon proved to be more complicated than this researcher initially perceived. The literature reveals that the exaltation of personal experience—a hallmark of corporate individualism—is rooted in the philosophy of postmodernism, whereby truth can only be known through the personal experience of the individual. However, individualism and the autonomous self is a distinctive feature of modernism, although Soong-Chan Rah finds individualism central to the philosophies of the paragons of Western thought from Plato to Derrida, one of the founders of postmodernism. For the evangelical church in the United States, the rugged individualism engrained in the American ethos exacerbates the issue.

The literature also reveals that the postmodern worldview is complex and, at times, contradictory. Personal experience, relativism, and the acceptance of multiple worldviews undergird the dichotomy of "individual-in-community" or the "me/we," as referred to by Leonard Sweet. Both Sweet and Andrew Fabich recognize the intertwining of modernism and postmodernism and acknowledge the simultaneous presence of both philosophical worldviews in

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society today. Adding to this intricacy is the new paradigm of how to live in community introduced by the internet and social media. Randall recognizes the inherent superficiality of these relationships where one can have infinite number of "friends." Moreover, he underscores that while the postmodernists' understanding of truth is determined by an individual's personal experience, that truth must be lived out in community, in whatever way community is defined by each individual.

The four studies by Barna Group and the one study by the partnership of Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research reveal the extent to which postmodern worldviews have influenced the church. Barna reports that 54% of practicing Christians support at least one tenet of postmodernism, with nearly one in four practicing Christians (23%) agreeing with moral relativism.[400] In another study, Barna discloses that 41% of Christians believe that personal experience determines what is right or wrong.[401] Ligonier and LifeWay discovered that essentially one in three evangelicals (32%) do not believe in objective truth. They also report that relativism and individualism have resulted in 46% of evangelicals agreeing that "worshiping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for attending church."[402]

The results of Stuart Sheehan's extensive analysis of texts sung by Baptists throughout their 370-plus years in America was very enlightening. His study details how individualism, as expressed through the songs used in corporate worship, began appearing in the early 1900s and increased through the beginning of the twenty-first century. Sheehan's research determined that the individualism found in the early Southern Baptist hymnals was a reflection of the influence

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[400] Barna Group, "Competing Worldviews."

[401] Barna Group, "The End of Absolutes."

[402] Ligonier, "The State of Theology."

of Baptist theologian E. Y. Mullins. Interestingly, Mullins' theology was decidedly postmodern in its essence, even though he lived before the era of postmodernism. Thus, the individualism evidenced in the hymnals of the early twentieth century was influenced by Mullins' postmodernist theology emphasizing personal experience.

This brief history demonstrates that the development of corporate individualism is multifaceted. In America, the roots of individualism extend to the beginning of the nation, however its influence in the church heightened with the influx of postmodernism in the last half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. As American culture shifted decidedly toward postmodernism, this new worldview and its exaltation of personal experience slowly began entering into evangelical churches, resulting in the rise of corporate individualism in worship.

<p style="text-align:center">Indications of Corporate Individualism</p>

This researcher hypothesized that the indications of corporate individualism include self-focused worship songs, overvaluation of personal experience, and ambiguous worship songs. The results of the literature review presented in chapter two and the findings of the research studies outlined in chapter four support this hypothesis.

Overvaluation of Personal Experience

The literature review and the case studies affirmed the emphasis on and overvaluation of personal experience in the corporate worship of many evangelical churches. The literature described the exaltation of personal experience as the epitome of the postmodern ideals of relativism, acceptance of multiple worldviews, individual-in-community, and rejection of modernism. Robb Redman and Leonard Sweet assert that the postmodernists' approach to

knowing truth solely through personal experience rejects the modernists' view of an objective and absolute truth.[403] This elevation of personal experience lays the foundation for the philosophical doctrine of relativism. Sweet contrasts the modernist desire to have *knowledge of* the truth with the postmodernist desire to *experience* truth.[404] Redman underscores the importance of personal experience for postmodernists when explaining that they believe nothing can be known apart from the subjective experience of the observer.[405] Randall asserts that the logical conclusion of relativism is the acceptance of multiple worldviews because one cannot discount another's truth that is based upon their personal experience.[406]

Both Redman and Michael Walters recognize that every person, churched and unchurched, is immersed in the culture of postmodernism in daily life. Thus, when entering into corporate worship, they inevitably bring their "postmodern experience orientation"[407] into the worship environment.[408] This collective subconsciousness is illustrated in the story Andrea Lucado recounts when she realized that her tendency to overemphasize her personal experience in worship can cause her to worship the experience rather than God.[409] Walters describes this phenomenon of worshiping the worship experience as romanticism, where the love of the feeling derived from the experience drives their approach to worship.[410]

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[403] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 133, 138–139; Sweet, "A New Reformation," 186–187.

[404] Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*, 380.

[405] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 133.

[406] Randall, "Practical Guide for Postmodern World," 32–33.

[407] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 144.

[408] Ibid.; Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 51.

[409] Lucado, "Do You Worship Experience?"

[410] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 58.

Anna Nekola documents how the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry began to capitalize on the cultural experience orientation by advertising the "worship experience" in many of their promotion of events and products. This terminology eventually entered the nomenclature of many local churches, replacing the name "worship service." Nekola describes how this focus upon personal experience in the culture, combined with the rising popularity of the CCM industry and its products, has promoted a personalized and individualized understanding of worship over a corporate one.[411] Monique Ingalls contends that with the commercialization of worship music and the CCM industry, authenticity became the primary means by which this music is measured.[412] Michelle Baker-Wright argues that the pursuit of authenticity has led songwriters to primarily address how God can meet personal needs, resulting in an overemphasis of individualism within worship.[413]

Ingalls also acknowledges the positive emphasis upon active participation within contemporary worship music, which powerfully contributes to community building within the congregation.[414] Redman describes how the desire for personal experience, coupled with contemporary worship music's participatory nature, has drawn postmodern generations to the experiential worship intrinsic to Pentecostalism.[415] Sweet agrees that charismatic worship is a natural fit for postmodernists who are seeking "interactive, immersive, in-your-face participation in the mystery of God."[416] However, Redman does caution that the prominence of personal

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[411] Nekola, "I'll Take You There," 125, 129–133.

[412] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 47.

[413] Baker-Wright, "Intimacy and Orthodoxy," 172.

[414] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 17, 107.

[415] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 32, 149.

[416] Sweet, "A New Reformation," 179.

experience in Pentecostal worship can lead to an overemphasis on emotionalism and an underemphasis on doctrine.[417] Emotionalism is not exclusive to charismatic churches, and when combined with the postmodern exaltation of personal experience, the self is easily placed above all else. Walters recognizes this proclivity as idolatry. He warns that the overvaluation of personal experience can become the worship of self, where "self curve[s] back on itself."[418]

Gordan Adnams' and Nathan Myrick's case studies reveal the extent to which the exaltation of personal experience has manifested itself in the corporate worship of many evangelical churches. Adnams demonstrates that the twenty-first-century quest for authenticity in worship has contributed to the perceived need for the worshiper to disconnect and isolate from those around him or her. Adnams recognizes the irony that the personalized worship of an individual in a corporate worship service is dependent upon the symbiotic relationship with those around him or her in congregational song, although, the individual worshiper perceives that surrounding congregants are a distraction to his or her private worship. Although individual worship is occurring, Adnams acknowledges that corporate worship is inherently communal.[419] Myrick's fieldwork reveals how congregational singing can build relationships and enhance the individual's worship. The power of the collective voices imbues meaning to the experience while building connection within the community.[420]

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[417] Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 149–150.

[418] Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 60.

[419] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 147–149.

[420] Myrick, "Relational Power, Music, and Identity," 86–87.

Self-Focused Worship Songs

Sheehan's textual study reveals the influence that self-focused worship songs employing reflexive texts has had upon worship practice in the largest evangelical denomination in the United States. He presents a surprising development in the axes of worship. While Baptists in America (later to become Southern Baptists) originally viewed the vertical and horizontal axes equal in importance, Sheehan traces the decrease in the vertical axis of worship while the horizontal axis increased in importance. Eventually, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the horizontal axis turned inward to focus primarily on the self. The most recent hymnal published by Southern Baptists includes contemporary songs, which began to restore the vertical axis of worship. However, these songs directly addressing God increased the usage of reflexive texts, thus enhancing individualism in corporate worship.[421]

Both the literature review and the textual studies recognize the negative emphasis caused by the extensive use of first-person singular pronouns in contemporary worship music and the spoken word. Debra Rienstra, Ron Rienstra, and Constance Cherry advocate for the increased usage of plural pronouns ("we," "us," and "our") and a decreased usage of singular pronouns ("I," "me," and "my") in the words spoken by the worship leader and pastor, the prayers that are prayed, and the songs that are sung.[422] Plural pronouns help reinforce the cohesion between the congregants as the Family of God worships the Father together.

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[421] Sheehan, "The Changing Theological Functions," 237–240, 245–246.

[422] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 51; Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 61–62.

Ambiguous Worship Songs

Another consequence of postmodernism within the church is an increased usage of ambiguous song lyrics in corporate worship. The literature affirms that relativism, the emphasis of personal experience, and the acceptance of multiple worldviews has led to lyrics that are ambiguous or vague. When multiple worldviews are accepted as true, then the lyrics of congregational songs become less theologically or doctrinally specific. This ambiguity allows the individual to derive his or her own meaning from the text, resulting in the song meaning different things to different people. Kauflin warns that songs that do not give an accurate portrayal of God or obscure His identity will be detrimental to the spiritual health of the congregation.[423] Additionally, Nelson Cowan's and Mark Evans' studies of Hillsong Music indicates that the globalization of contemporary worship music has increased the use of ambiguous lyrics. As the influence of megachurch worship teams has grown internationally, many of their lyrics have intentionally become theologically and doctrinally vague so that they can be sung across denominational lines.[424]

<div align="center">Impact upon Worship Practices</div>

This researcher hypothesized that corporate individualism has affected worship practices in terms of song selection, congregational participation, and platform presence. The existing literature and research studies affirm this hypothesis.

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[423] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 62.

[424] Cowan, "Heaven and Earth Collide," 93; Evans, "Hillsong Abroad," 183.

Song Selection

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the literature demonstrates that contemporary worship songs have helped facilitate the reinstatement of the vertical axis of worship. In reaction to the large body of hymnody that speaks about God, contemporary songwriters have intentionally addressed their songs to God directly—talking *to* Him rather than *about* Him. However, the increased usage of reflexive texts while addressing God has also amplified the focus upon the individual in worship. As noted above, Stuart Sheehan's extensive examination of texts sung by Baptists (later Southern Baptists) in America traced this development of individualism in the largest evangelical denomination in the United States. While Sheehan's analysis ended in 2008 with the most recent hymnal published by Southern Baptists, Lester Ruth's and Ian Hussey's studies extended this examination to the most popular contemporary worship songs (used across denominations) through 2015 and 2018, respectively. Ruth's textual analysis found that contemporary worship songs have continued the shift away from a corporate consciousness to an awareness of the individual. Ian Hussey's subsequent analysis confirms the perpetuation of this trend in more recent contemporary worship songs.[425]

Congregational Participation

The literature discussed congregational participation along two lines: the overvaluation of personal experience and the worshiper's interaction with other congregants. Earlier in this chapter, the literature regarding the overvaluation of personal experience was summarized. The literature concerning the worshiper's interaction with other congregants indicates that the horizontal axis of worship is being undervalued as corporate individualism has increased. Cherry

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[425] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 74; Hussey, "The Songs We Sing," 4.4.

underscores the importance of communal relationships inherent in corporate worship. While she

emphasizes the two axes of worship (vertical and horizontal), she describes corporate worship as

tridirectional—from God to the people (vertical), from the people to God (vertical), and the

interaction between the community of worshipers (horizontal). Cherry maintains that biblical

worship is tridirectional where the members of the worshiping community are interdependent

upon one another as the body of Christ (corpus). Without the horizontal axis, worship is

individualistic.

Cherry warns that many argue that corporate worship should only be vertical, but she

references 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:19-20, and Colossians 3:16 as evidence that New

Testament worship is also horizontal.[426] New Testament worship includes the edification of the

body of believers, which only occurs through interaction and communication. A host of authors

highlight the biblical paradigm of the body of Christ living in community rather than in isolation.

Bob Kauflin, Donald Whitney, Tim Stafford, Ross Parsley, and Rory Noland all agree that living

in community is intrinsic to belonging to the Family of God.[427]

Corporate individualism, however, fosters isolation rather than strengthens community

bonds. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Adnams' case study demonstrates that much of the

contemporary approach to worship diminishes the importance of the surrounding congregation

and encourages the individual worshiper to block out the "distraction" of those around them.[428]

Baker-Wright maintains that this individualistic perspective is rooted in the assumption that

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[426] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 55–57.

[427] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 178; Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 77; Stafford, "The Church," 47; Parsley, *Messy Church*, 63; Noland, *The Worshiping Artist*, 162.

[428] Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing," 178, 180.

worship is "solely an expression of an individual relationship with God."[429] Therefore, in a

corporate setting, the worshiper expects that he or she will participate in a "personal, isolated

dialogue."[430] Ingalls and Nekola contend that this expectation is bolstered by the CCM industry,

which has removed the distinction between public and private worship.[431] Worship music, which

was historically understood as corporate in nature, is now produced and sold for individual

"consumption outside the church."[432]

Platform Presence

      For the purposes of this thesis, platform presence refers to the leadership on the platform

as well as the physical presence of the worship environment (specifically, architectural design of

the space, use of sound reinforcement, and lighting systems). The literature stresses that the

choice of words spoken by the worship leader and the pastor can either foster unity within the

body of Christ or nurture a sense of individualism during corporate worship. Rienstra and

Rienstra posit that worship is formative, thus the choice of words will instruct and shape the

body of Christ. Similar to the choice of words in congregational songs, the words used in spoken

prayers, introductions to songs, and other spoken elements of worship will foster unity or

individualism in the congregation. This is primarily accomplished through the use of first-person

plural pronouns (we/us/our) or first-person singular pronouns (I/me/my). While Rienstra and

Rienstra maintain that both singular and plural pronouns should be used in worship, they believe

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[429] Baker-Wright, "Intimacy and Orthodoxy," 173.

[430] Ibid.

[431] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 8; Nekola, "I'll Take You There," 134.

[432] Nekola, "I'll Take You There," 134.

that the use of plural pronouns should increase because the gathered assembly in worship is being formed into the body of Christ.[433]

The literature also affirms that the worship environment can foster a sense of community or promote individualism. Ron Rienstra's concept of "theophonic expectation" asserts that the worship space's configuration will influence the congregation's perception of the vertical and horizontal axes of worship.[434] Additionally, Richard Kieckhefer demonstrates that the development of contemporary church architecture reveals the congregation's theological and philosophical approach to evangelism. This methodology led contemporary churches to design new buildings to resemble secular spaces or adapt movie theaters, schools, warehouses, and office buildings for sacred use.[435] Lim and Ruth recognize that in the 1990s, churches were beginning to envision how best to configure worship space for the new contemporary style of worship, and megachurches became the leading prototype.[436] Louis Nelson illustrates how the megachurch is a "clear byproduct of late-twentieth-century post-modern culture," blurring the lines between "sacred and quotidian space."[437] Without identifiable sacred references, the megachurch allows the individual to assign their own meaning to the space.[438]

The rapid expansion and innovation in technology has had a dramatic impact upon worship in churches of all sizes. Sophisticated sound, lighting, and projection systems are now

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[433] Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 51–54.

[434] Rienstra, "Sanctuary Architecture."

[435] Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, 271; Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 45.

[436] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 45.

[437] Nelson, "Placing the Sacred," 75.

[438] Ibid.

commonplace. However, the extent to which churches have embraced these technologies has led

many to compare contemporary worship to rock concerts. James K. A. Smith, Michael Walters,

and Andy Crouch warn that overamplification and sensory overload in worship will inevitably

produce passivity in worshipers. Rather than actively participate in the "liturgy" of worship, the

congregation will become spectators watching a performance by those on the stage.

Overamplification causes the congregation to not be able to hear themselves, and therefore, they

stop participating. "Congregational" singing ceases to include the congregation. Rather than

commenting on the style of music, these authors maintain that the improper use of technology

inhibits communal participation and encourages passive and individualistic worship.[439] This

commentary, likewise, applies to lighting in worship. Crouch and Kauflin, along with Ronni

Kurtz and Jen Wilkin, caution that darkening the worship space for the congregation and

illuminating the stage with theatrical lighting prevents the worshipers from interacting with one

another. While trying to remove distractions from worship, darkening the worship space removes

a corporate awareness as well. As with the design of the worship space and sound amplification,

lighting has the ability to foster community or promote individualism.[440]

Limitations

As with any study, this researcher acknowledges that this thesis contains certain

limitations. Choices regarding scope of inquiry, selection of data sets, and participants in a

survey or case study places necessary limitations on what can or should be included in the

research process. While there is sufficient literature on postmodernism and the horizontal and

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[439] Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands"; Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 135; Crouch, "Amplified Versions," 129–130.

[440] Kauflin, "Who Turned the Lights Out?"; Crouch, "Amplified Versions," 129; Kurtz, "Why Sing with Lights On"; Wilkin, "Sunday Gathering Is Not about You," 22.

vertical axes of worship, there is little scholarly literature on the influences of the worship environment upon the personal experience of the worshiper. The field of textual analysis of song lyrics is burgeoning and a few studies have been conducted, however, there are a relatively small number of these analyses to date. As a plethora of songs are composed and introduced to the church continuously, there is always a new corpus of texts that can be examined. This presented a limitation for this thesis since the most popular contemporary worship songs sung in evangelical churches changes at a rapid rate. Thus, the most recent textual analyses of "current" and "popular" songs quickly become out of date, although they remain extremely relevant in the discussion of mapping trends through the years.

Additionally, in the three textual studies of congregational songs chosen for this thesis, each researcher, by necessity, made choices to limit their data sets for inquiry since it is not possible to identify every text sung in all evangelical churches. Selecting the most widely used contemporary worship songs is particularly problematic since each church independently chooses from an endless body of songs composed from around the world. When churches used published hymnals for their congregational songs, there was more uniformity within each denomination regarding song selection, making it feasible to make generalized conclusions regarding their song use. Currently, the diversity and discontinuity in song selection between churches and evangelical denominations makes it difficult to provide a general characterization of their song choices.

The case studies and surveys are inherently limited by their selection of participants for each study. The surveys discussed in chapter four were conducted by professional research companies that provided the margin of error and confidence level for their studies. Hypothetically, the larger the sample size, the more reliable and representative the results will

be. The case studies were restricted to the immediate location and group of people chosen for participation, producing an insightful snapshot of that particular group at that location and time. Their results may or may not be replicated when observing a different group in another location.

Recommendations for Future Study

The purpose of this study was to establish the historical context for corporate individualism, identify indications of its presence, and determine how it has affected worship practices. The evangelical church could benefit from future research through case studies within churches that exhibit characteristics of corporate individualism. Fieldwork at such a church could include interviews with congregants to discover their perceptions about their interactions with other worshipers, their level of active participation in worship, and the effects of the worship environment upon their personal experience of worship. Additionally, participant interviews could be useful to determine how the rise in corporate individualism has influenced the participants' theological understanding of worship.

Another recommendation for further research is a continuation of textual studies on song lyrics. As new songs are written and introduced into the church weekly, the repertoire of songs that the evangelical church sings remains in a constant state of flux. It is important to continue textual studies on new worship songs to trace trends over time. The foundational work of researchers such as Lester Ruth, Ian Hussey, and Stuart Sheehan should be built upon and enhanced. Additionally, as mentioned in the literature review in chapter two, authors Debra Rienstra, Ron Rienstra, and Michelle Baker-Wright have all noted that many composers of contemporary worship songs utilize an individual, singer-songwriter approach to creating new songs. However, it is increasingly common for worship bands based within a church community (such as Hillsong, Elevation Worship, Passion Band, and Bethel Music) to write worship songs

as a team. One recommended study is to analyze the texts of songs written by these worship bands (and others) to determine whether or not their church context has influenced the use of plural versus singular first-person pronouns. Has the group approach to songwriting and the group's position within their church increased the communal perspective of these worship songs?

During the course of this study, the researcher discovered the polarization that exists between modernists and postmodernists. Thus, the question arose whether or not modern generations and postmodern generations can indeed worship in the same worship environment. With diametrically opposed philosophies and understandings of truth, can a church effectively minister to a congregation comprised of both modern and postmodern mindsets? While this researcher believes that an intergenerational approach to worship is prescribed in the Scriptures, the researcher also acknowledges that, given the divergent worldviews between the generations, each generation must be willing to demonstrate flexibility and reach compromises in order to worship together. As the focus has increased on intergenerational worship in recent years, future research is recommended to determine ways in which churches can effectively navigate the differences between modernists and postmodernists, enabling believers to worship as the unified body of Christ.

Conclusions

The twenty-first century has witnessed a marked rise of individualism in corporate worship in many evangelical churches. While the development of this phenomenon is complex, the exaltation of personal experience intrinsic to postmodernism coupled with the individualism underlying the American ethos (and Western society in general) has produced an undeniable emphasis upon self in corporate worship. The overvaluation of personal experience, self-focused worship songs, ambiguous lyrics, lack of interaction among the congregants, and elements of the

worship environment all expose the influence of corporate individualism in worship today. But how should the church address this issue? To reach any conclusions and to proffer solutions regarding corporate individualism in worship, corporate worship must be understood from a biblical perspective.

God created mankind to worship Him; He also made man to live in relationships. Throughout the Scriptures, God's people have gathered to worship Him as a community, offering praise and thanksgiving for what God has done, seeking forgiveness for sin, and proclaiming God's salvation. While many details are not specified, the New Testament does provide guidance regarding the fundamental principles of Christian corporate worship. In Hebrews 10:25, the author instructs believers to gather for worship, which some had abandoned. Thus, God expects His children to meet together for corporate worship. Paul declares in Ephesians 5:18-21 that when the body of Christ congregates, they are to "be filled with the Spirit, *addressing one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody *to the Lord* with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything *to God the Father* in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *submitting to one another* out of reverence for Christ" (italics mine). It is evident that God has designed corporate worship to be mediated through two axes: vertical and horizontal. If there are doubts concerning God's intention, Paul reiterates this pattern in Colossians 3:16 when he instructs the church to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing *one another* in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts *to God*" (italics mine). The horizontal axis is further emphasized when this verse is considered in its context. The preceding verses exhort the faithful to be united, forgiving one another and living in harmony with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Verse 15 declares that "indeed you were called in one body." It is clear through these

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Scriptures that God desires for His people to gather as a corporate body, in community with one another, to worship Him with one voice.

Given the biblical paradigm, how can corporate individualism be rectified in the church? Ultimately, it is a matter of balance. The vertical axis must be present for worship to occur. The individual worshiper must enter into a dialogue with God, a two-way conversation, where he or she speaks to God and listens to Him. Concurrently, the horizontal axis must not be overlooked or undervalued. The corporate gathering was not intended to be merely a backdrop for the individual's personal worship to the exclusion of those around him or her, elevating personal experience and bolstering the primacy of self. There is a uniqueness to corporate worship that differentiates it from private worship. In private worship, the vertical axis is the only axis. However, there is a uniqueness to and power in corporate worship that simply cannot be duplicated in private worship. Therefore, if the horizontal axis is missing in corporate worship, then why gather with other people for worship? If corporate worship is not different from private worship, why would God command for His people to engage in it?

Both axes are critical to corporate worship, and the proper balance between the two must be achieved. It is important to recognize that, biblically, the horizontal axis of corporate worship is not about focusing on people versus centering on God. Rather it is about proclaiming God's truth to others for their edification, encouraging and strengthening one another in their faith, and expressing love for God by praising Him *in front of*, *to*, and *with* others. The focus is centered upon God as the congregation proclaims to each other: "Look at what He has done for me. See how great He is!" God remains the focus as the body of Christ unites to glorify the Savior with one voice.

How, then, can this balanced be achieved? How can the cultural exaltation of personal experience and focus upon self be overcome and equilibrium restored? A complex issue such as corporate individualism will necessitate a multifaceted solution. Regarding self-focused worship songs and word choice by worship leaders and pastors, a concerted effort should be made to shift the language to reflect the communal setting of corporate worship, utilizing the pronouns we/us/our more than I/me/my. While plural pronouns should not be used to the exclusion of the singular, the setting of corporate worship lends itself to language that emphasizes the plural. Songwriters should approach their craft with more of a corporate awareness as they write lyrics to be sung by congregations. A positive development occurring in songwriting is increased collaboration among multiple writers rather than the isolated singer-songwriter approach, however, research has not been conducted to determine whether or not this trend has impacted the corporate consciousness of the songs they have written. Therefore, worship leaders should approach song selection with an awareness of the corporate voice in the lyrics that their congregations will sing.

Additionally, worship leaders should avoid selecting congregational songs with ambiguous lyrics. Texts that are not theologically or doctrinally specific not only reinforce the postmodern relativistic mindset, they also hinder the congregation from growing in their understanding of who God is. Worse yet, ambiguous lyrics can promote an inaccurate view of God. While every song sung by the congregation need not be a theological treatise, they should be doctrinally and theologically sound and specific to whom they are addressing.

Corporate individualism can also be mitigated through careful attention to the worship environment. As this study discovered, the worship environment can promote or impede congregational participation and interaction between the worshipers. Architects, church leaders,

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and congregations need to reevaluate the appropriateness of adopting the concert stage as a conducive setting for having a divine encounter as the body of Christ. From the physical arrangement of the space to the audio-visual aspects of the environment, the concert setting inhibits congregational interaction, reinforces individualism, and promotes passivity among the worshipers. Creative placement of the band and worship leaders in the space is one consideration that James K. A. Smith addresses in his open letter to worship bands. He suggests: "Because we've adopted habits of relating to music from the Grammys and the concert venue, we unwittingly make you the center of attention. I wonder if there might be some intentional reflection on placement (to the side? leading from behind?) and performance that might help us counter these habits we bring with us to worship."[441] Throughout history, the placement of the congregants, choirs, musicians, altars, and proclaimers has been reconfigured to best suit the needs and philosophies of worship at that time. These important deliberations in the twenty-first century should include ways to allow for interaction to occur between the worshipers and reconsideration of the primacy of the musicians. And, according to the results of the Barna research regarding worship space and the Millennial generation, the church should also rethink the contemporary movement's philosophy that removes all religious imagery from the space.

Another prominent aspect of the concert setting that the church must reexamine is the overstimulation of the senses that occurs from overamplification and the excessive use of theatrical lighting and projection. The rapid advancements in technology have provided the church new opportunities to engage our senses in worship and to proclaim the gospel. However, careful attention should be given to the manner in which technology is used in order to prevent sensory overload, which distracts from worship rather than enhances it. While this suggestion

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[441] Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands."

might seem simplistic, turning down the sound amplification and raising the lighting on the worshipers can have a dramatic effect on reducing corporate individualism facilitated by the worship environment. Ronni Kurtz agrees that "while it might seem counter-intuitive, let's lower the music and raise the lights."[442] These actions will allow the congregation to hear one another sing, encourage participation in singing, and enable visual interaction between the worshipers.

For some, these changes could be initially distracting, but it is possible to ease the transition. Many charismatic churches utilize a tabernacle or temple model of worship that begins in the "outer courts" with exuberant praise and thanksgiving, and progresses toward the "Holy of Holies," which is very intimate and personal. One possibility for creative use of lighting that accomplishes the purposes of the worship pattern they follow and allows for more visual interaction with the congregation is to begin the services with the lights up, enabling the worshipers to see one another. During this section of the service, an intentional emphasis upon plural pronouns (we, us, and our) will also reinforce the communal nature of corporate worship. As the service progresses to a more intimate and personal time of worship, the lighting can be incrementally lowered as they approach the "Holy of Holies." During this progression, the use of singular pronouns (I, me, and my) could begin to predominate the language. Additionally, adjusting the sound levels to match these changes in lighting and language use can enhance the effectiveness of this approach. However a congregation decides to address their worship environment, reimagining the arrangement and aesthetics of the worship space is critical in the twenty-first century to counter the influx of individualism within corporate worship.

The worship renewal that has occurred over the past several decades has energized the church and refocused God's people on encountering Him in corporate worship. The proliferation

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[442] Kurtz, "Why We Sing with the Lights On."

of contemporary worship music, combined with the Pentecostal renewal movement, has brought a freshness and expressiveness that was not present in the mainstream of evangelicalism through much of the twentieth century. However, new practices should not be embraced uncritically. As Western society has experienced a monumental paradigm shift to postmodernism, worship practices in many evangelical churches have been influenced by the culture's exaltation of personal experience, embrace of relativism, and acceptance of multiple worldviews.

Corporate individualism has altered many worshiper's understanding of the nature of corporate worship, resulting in the pervasive expectation that the gathered church in worship is merely the backdrop for an individual to experience personal worship. While corporate individualism overvalues the individual's personal experience and undervalues the communal nature of corporate worship, the church must begin to restore the balance between the vertical and horizontal axes of worship. The vertical axis of worship is necessary, or it is not worship at all. However, the New Testament reveals that the horizontal axis of corporate worship was designed by God for the edification of the church and strengthening of the worshipers' faith. Both axes are important, and balance must be achieved. Worship leaders and pastors in the twenty-first century need to examine their worship practices to ensure that God is the focus of worship while fostering a sense of community within the body of Christ.

Permission to Use Infographics from Barna Group

Below is the email correspondence between this researcher and Barna Group.

Hello Russ,

On this date August 18th 2020, Russell Robbins is given permission to quote the following Barna articles: Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians, The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code, Signs of Decline and Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith, Do Americans Replace Traditional Church with Digital Faith Expressions and the monograph: *Making Space for Millennials,* in his doctoral thesis "The Rise of Corporate Individualism in Twenty-First Century Worship".

I think I got all the resources you used, but if one is missing just let me know

Blessings,
Jeni

Knowledge to navigate a changing world

Los Angeles | Atlanta | Nashville | London

| barna.com | 805-639-0000

On Mon, Jul 6, 2020 at 11:24 AM Russ <russ@fbcsalisbury.org> wrote:

Barna Group,
I am working on my doctoral dissertation and would like to obtain permission to use the following graphs/charts that are published online:

1. "Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians" (May 9, 2017) Infographic on Postmodernism

2. "Signs of Decline & Hope among Key Metrics of Faith" (March 4, 2020)
   a. Infographic on Weekly Church Attendance: 1993-2020
   b. Infographic on Weekly Church Attendance, By Generation: 2003-2020

3. "The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code" (May 25, 2016)
   a. Infographic on Morality and Truth (most likely will only need the first chart in that graphic)
   b. Infographic on Moral Truth: Absolute or Relative?
   c. Infographic on The Morality of Self-Fulfillment (might not need this one

4. ”Do Americans Replace Traditional Church with Digital Faith Expressions?” Infographic on Christian Resources Used Outside – or Instead – of Church (most likely will only need the bottom portion of the graphic)

This is the information you requested:

Russell Robbins
Doctoral student at Liberty University and
Minister of Music at First Baptist Church, Salisbury, NC

I would like to use the above infographics in my doctoral thesis, "The Rise of Corporate Individualism in Twenty-First Century Worship."
This thesis will be submitted to Liberty University Digital Commons and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

The chapter these graphics would be used in is not complete, yet. I can submit the chapter once it is completed.

Please let me know if you require any additional information.

Thank you for your consideration,
Russell Robbins

APPENDIX B

Permission to Use Infographics from LifeWay Research

Below is the email correspondence between this researcher and LifeWay Research

Kevin Walker
Mon 7/6/2020 4:06 PM
To: Russ;

You're welcome, Russ. For any of the charts online, we ask that you cite it as you would an online resource and make sure the LifeWay Research copyright is visible.

Thank you,
Kevin Walker
LifeWay Research

Russ
Mon 7/6/2020 2:39 PM
To: Kevin Walker

Thank you, Kevin, for your response. I will look forward to seeing the report when it comes out.

One other question, how do I obtain permission to use a couple of your graphs/charts that are online to include in my dissertation?

Thank you,
Russell Robbins

Kevin Walker
Thu 7/2/2020 1:28 PM
To: Russ;

Thank you for your email, Russell. There will be a State of Theology report for 2020. We do not have the release date for the data, yet.

Thank you,
Kevin Walker
LifeWay Research

On Thu, Jul 2, 2020 at 12:01 PM Russell Robbins <wordpress@lifewayresearch.com> wrote:
Name: Russell Robbins
Email: russ@fbcsalisbury.org

Comment: In 2014, 2016, and 2018, LifeWay Research partnered with Ligonier Ministries to study "The State of Theology." Are you going to do that in 2020? If so, when will the results be released. I'm working on my doctoral dissertation, and I'm using these studies as part of my research. Thank you!

APPENDIX C

Permission to Use Graphs and Charts from Stuart Sheehan

Below is the email correspondence between this researcher and Stuart Sheehan.

Stuart Sheehan
Wed 7/22/2020 8:12 AM

Russ,

I was glad to hear about your work. I am happy that my research has been helpful to you and welcome you to use the aforementioned charts. Each should be properly footnoted in whichever format you are using.

I look forward to seeing the fruit of your research as well.

Blessings!
SLS

Stuart Sheehan, PhD
President and CEO

WorldHope
Ministries International

From: Russ <russ@fbcsalisbury.org>
Date: Tuesday, July 21, 2020 at 4:09 PM
To: Stuart Sheehan
Subject: Requesting permission for use of graphs

Dr. Sheehan,

It was good to talk with you this afternoon. Your dissertation has been extremely beneficial in my research and writing. I would like to request permission to use some graphs from your dissertation, "The Changing Theological Functions of Corporate Worship among Southern Baptist: What They Were and What They Became (1638-2008)."

Specifically, I would like to use the following 7 charts:
- "Corporate Worship among Baptist As It Began (1638-1789)"
- "Texts to God - Period IV"
- "Texts to the Converted - Period IV"
- "Reflexive Texts - Period IV"
- "Texts to God - Period V"
- "First-Person Singular and Plural to God - Period V"
- "First-Person Reflexive Period V"

Each chart will be properly cited with your information as the source.
Thank you,
Russell Robbins

THESIS COMPLETION FORM

Russell Allen Robbins

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Worship Studies

Thesis: THE RISE OF CORPORATE INDIVIDUALISM IN TWENTY-FIRST

CENTURY WORSHIP

Major Field: Worship Studies

Biographical: Russell Robbins serves as Minister of Music at First Baptist Church in

Salisbury, North Carolina.

Personal Data: Russell Robbins has served full-time in worship ministry for 23 years. He

specializes in choral conducting, leading worship teams, and planning/leading worship.

Education: Russell Robbins earned a Master of Music in Church Music from

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, in 1996; a Bachelor of Music in

Church Music from Mississippi College in 1993; and a Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design from

Mississippi College in 1993.

Russell Allen Robbins Completed the Thesis Project for the

Doctor of Worship Studies at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

on *August 17, 2020*

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ADVISOR'S APPROVAL/DATE

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