

THE CULTURAL RELEVANCE MODEL OF WORSHIP

By

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Liberty University

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF WORSHIP STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

In the early decades of the twenty-first century a new model of worship has begun to emerge in some North American evangelical churches. Significant events in North American church history combined with cultural ideologies inherent to the North American context have influenced particular churches resulting in new worship practices. Churches that are affected are often marked by the development of highly affective worship experiences, the production and consumption of goods, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of technology. In examining the cultural values at work in this development, this study found a historical thread that has worked to redefine the worship service as an evangelistic meeting and the cultural values of pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism to be the primary drivers of change. This qualitative study sought to identify the cultural values at work in some North American evangelical churches and some of the definitive characteristics found in churches within the new model of worship. It then sought to examine the intersection of these two inquiries in order to ascertain the level of influence of cultural values over worship practice in the emerging model of worship.

Keywords: worship, North America, culture, contextualization, syncretism, cultural relevance, seeker-sensitive, consumerism, progressivism, pragmatism, attractional, idolatry

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

North American Evangelical Church – NAEC

Church Growth Movement – CGM

Contemporary Worship Music – CWM

Homogenous Unit Principle – HUP

Cultural Relevance – CR

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background of Topic

In the late decades of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century, evangelical churches in North America have experienced major shifts in worship practices. During those decades, historical, cultural, and religious developments culminated in the emergence of "contemporary" worship practices that challenged more traditional expressions of worship found in North America.¹ Models of worship that developed during this time "arose out of the desire to adapt Christian worship to contemporary American culture."² The ensuing disagreements that arose in many evangelical churches—often dubbed the "worship wars"—resulted in a great deal of conflict throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

Throughout subsequent years, North Americans have continued to be affected by changing culture and rapidly advancing technology. Since contemporary models of worship seek to make church accessible to local culture, new and previously existing contemporary evangelical churches of various sizes and backgrounds have continued to change their methods in order to keep up with these cultural and technological changes. As a result, a type of church has emerged that demonstrates somewhat different characteristics from contemporary churches of previous decades.

Because these changes have developed over the course of several years and they continue to be viewed as a part of the contemporary model of worship, only a few authors and researchers have identified the resulting worship practices as evidence of a new emerging model of

¹ Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002). This book provides an excellent overview of the many factors that contributed to the emergence of contemporary worship.

² J. Matthew Pinson, *Perspectives on Christian Worship: 5 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 1.

evangelical Christian worship. There is, however, a small but growing body of evidence that suggests the emergence of a new model of worship that will require further examination and evaluation according to biblical and theological principles. In this study, the new model is referred to as the Cultural Relevance (CR) model of worship, and churches employing it are referred to as Cultural Relevance churches. These are broad terms describing churches and worship models that place an elevated emphasis on the value of cultural relevance in the worship service with the goal of attracting those in the local context to church.

Just as previous models of contemporary church sought to adapt Christian worship to contemporary American culture, this new model sustains the pursuit of cultural relevance as a core value. This emphasis stems from a desire to reach local culture with the Gospel message. Jesus made it clear in the Great Commission that Christians are tasked with taking the Gospel message into the world. He said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).³ The mandate for evangelism is clear in Scripture, yet the relationship between church and culture is complex.

Throughout Christian history, a tension has existed between Christian worship and the culture in which it exists. The primary source of that tension is found between the contextual nature of Christian worship—which seeks to make the message of the gospel accessible to those in a given context, and the counter-cultural aspect of Christian worship—which asserts that Christianity must act as a subversive and prophetic force against the particular sins and idolatries found in that same context.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

The Lutheran World Federation's Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture—a foundational document in the conversation concerning the relationship between worship and culture—suggests that Christian worship should consist of four foundational characteristics. First, Christian worship should be transcultural, meaning that there are elements of the Christian faith that transcend all cultures and should be practiced universally.⁴ Second, Christian worship should be contextual, meaning that worship should be formed to a culture's values and patterns so far as they are consonant with biblical values, teachings, and practices.⁵ Third, Christian worship should be counter-cultural, meaning that Christianity should act as a subversive influence against the various sins and idolatries of a given culture.⁶ Finally, Christian worship should be cross-cultural, meaning that all Christians join a global community of believers and their worship should cross cultural boundaries.⁷

As earlier noted, when the relationship between worship and culture is examined in light of these four principles, a tension seems to emerge between the contextual and counter-cultural elements. While the former seeks to align worship practice with certain aspects of the culture, the latter seeks to subvert cultural elements that are in opposition to biblical principles. The solution to this tension is found in the premise that biblical constants must remain firm but worship forms are permitted to be flexible. Worship theologian, Ron Man, demonstrates this principle with an illustration of a suspension bridge wherein biblical constants and principles serve as the immovable support towers and flexibility of form is represented by the less rigid suspension

⁴ Lutheran World Federation, "Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities," *Studia Liturgica* 27, no. 1 (1997): 89–90, <https://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001005463&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

cables.⁸ Anne Zaki, professor of worship at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and resource development specialist for global and multi-cultural resources at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, agrees that while Christianity "has its solid, unshakable foundation, the form of a religion is flexible, based on the cultural mold in which it finds itself."⁹

Problems arise when this relationship becomes confused. When biblical constants and principles are surrendered to cultural values, beliefs, and practices, Christianity loses its counter-cultural distinctiveness and becomes compromised. Conversely, when worship forms are made too rigid, the church can become isolated from the culture, losing its ability to communicate the life-giving message of the Gospel to those it hopes to reach.

Thus, when attempting to contextualize worship practice in a local culture, it is vital to clearly establish which cultural practices and values are congruous with Biblical principles of Christianity and which ones are not. In every context, it falls to worship planners to examine the cultural values, beliefs, and practices in their own culture and in their own churches in order to determine biblical alignment. The North American context is no exception. The CR model of worship practice emerging in some North American Evangelical churches (NAECs) needs to be examined for potential issues regarding adopted cultural values that may be out of alignment with biblical teaching.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, a number of factors have converged that have influenced the worship practices of some evangelical churches in North America. Many of these practices and values

⁸ Ron Man, "'The Bridge': Worship Between Bible and Culture," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, ed. James R. Krabill, Frank Fortunato, Robin P. Harris, and Brian Schrag (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 17–25.

⁹ Anne Zaki, "Shall We Dance? Reflections on the Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, ed. James R. Krabill, Frank Fortunato, Robin P. Harris, and Brian Schrag (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 65.

have simply been accepted on the basis that they are valuable tools that can be used to reach the local culture with the good news of the Gospel. However, many churches have become so passionate about relating to the local culture, that they have failed to biblically examine the practices and values they seek to employ. In many cases, these practices are considered "contemporary," and new methods are accepted merely because they reflect what is current or effective. Author and former chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Houghton College, J. Michael Walters writes, "Pastors must constantly ask what is essential to Christian worship and what is mere cultural packaging. The failure to know the difference is potentially devastating to the health of the church."¹⁰

Additionally, the CR model of worship remains fairly unidentified in evangelical circles and in much of the literature. There is a tendency to categorize it simply as "contemporary worship" and place it into the same grouping as the contemporary expressions of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. As a result, the new model has thus far largely been excused from theological and biblical evaluation. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that a new expression of worship has emerged with characteristics that are significantly different from those of its predecessors. An entirely new evaluation needs to be applied to evaluate the CR model for biblical alignment.

Further, it is often the case that those who reside within a given culture are unaware of that culture's idols and its sinful tendencies. In order to evaluate the CR model, an effort must also be made to identify the idols that may exist in North American culture. Only then can the model be evaluated for such idols in the form of cultural values.

¹⁰ Michael Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday: Leading Your Congregation in Authentic Worship* (Indianapolis, IA: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 19.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify North American cultural values that exist within particular NAECs and attempt to understand their influence on worship practice as demonstrated by the characteristics of CR churches.

In every context, it is up to worship planners to examine local values, beliefs, and practices to determine what should be contextualized and what should be excluded from worship. Worship professor, theologian, and Director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, John D. Witvliet, writes:

Christian worship should be "in but not of the world." Christian worship always reflects the culture out of which it is offered. Patterns of speech, styles of dress, senses of time, rhythms and harmonies of music, and styles of visual symbols vary widely depending on cultural contexts. At the same time, worship must not be enslaved to culture. It must remain prophetic, challenging any dimension of local culture that is at odds with the gospel of Christ.¹¹

Additionally, Lutheran author and researcher, S. Anita Stauffer writes, "Sometimes the values, patterns, or root paradigms of a culture contradict the gospel to the extent that they cannot be reoriented and adapted for worship."¹² Zaki adds, "Christian worship must resist the idolatries of a given culture. This doesn't mean that we become anticultural; rather, it challenges us to become careful readers of our culture in light of biblical truths."¹³ Although adopting cultural elements into Christian worship can be useful for making church more relatable in a given context, a great deal of caution and evaluation should be employed.

¹¹ John D. Witvliet, *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 17.

¹² S. Anita Stauffer, "Culture and Christian Worship in Intersection," *International Review of Mission* 84, nos. 332-333 (January, 1995): 65, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/233180989?accountid=12085>.

¹³ Zaki, 69.

Just like those of any other culture, North American practices, beliefs, and cultural values should be examined for biblical and theological alignment. This evaluation is the responsibility of worship planners in the local context. This study seeks to ask crucial questions concerning the relationship between worship and culture in the North American context as they apply to the CR worship model. A historical inquiry must be made to help explain the emergence of the CR model. Biblical principles regarding the relationship between church and culture must be explored. The idolatries of the North American culture—which may be covertly present within specific value systems—must be made visible. The prominent characteristics of the CR model must be identified. Then those characteristics must be made sense of in light of the newfound understanding of North American cultural values. Finally, these North American cultural values and their presence in NAECs must be evaluated according to biblical and theological principles.

Significance of the Study

There are several reasons why this study is essential. First, while other studies have been conducted concerning the tension between the contextual and counter-cultural aspects in the relationship between worship and culture in foreign contexts, few authors have purposefully examined this principle as it is applied to the emerging practices of CR churches in the early decades of the twenty-first century. This reality may have to do with the fact that the questions being posed are missiological and ethnodoxological in nature, and North Americans tend to view their context as a "sending" entity rather than a "receiving" culture¹⁴ that might require examination in order to identify its own idolatries.

¹⁴ Rebecca Y. Kim, "Why Are Missionaries Coming to America? A Case Study of a Korean Mission Movement in the United States," *Missiology* 45, no. 4 (October 2017): 430, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829617701086>.

Second, it is easier to see the idolatries of another culture than it is to identify them in one's own context. Harold Best, author, Emeritus Dean / Professor of Music at Wheaton College Conservatory of Music, and past president of the National Association of Schools of Music, notes that idolatry can be "intellectually obvious," yet "confoundedly subtle and insidiously prevalent."¹⁵

Third, much of the writing regarding the interaction between worship and culture in North America focuses on the North American "worship wars" of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Culture is not static. A new paradigm for North American evangelical worship practices has begun to emerge in subsequent years. It cannot be assumed that one style of music or method of worship will remain indefinitely. Periodically, the contextual/counter-cultural aspects of the worship/culture relationship need to be re-examined.

Fourth, since North American church practices often stand as an example to be emulated both locally and globally, these practices must be studied to determine whether they achieve the goal of being both culturally contextualized and biblically faithful. Suppose some NAECs promote practices that are lacking in biblical faithfulness or include forms of idolatry. In that case, worship planners must institute *ecclesia semper reformanda*— the idea that the church must always be reformed.¹⁶ Pastors, church planters, worship leaders, missiologists, and ethnodoxologists may benefit from this study as it seeks to examine the worship practices of particular NAECs from an ethnodoxological perspective.

¹⁵ Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 163.

¹⁶ Leo J. Koffeman, "'Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda': Church Renewal from a Reformed Perspective," *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (September 2013): 1, <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/2875>.

Statement of Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

Research Question One: What are the characteristics of the worship model that has begun to emerge in the early decades of the twenty-first century in particular North American evangelical churches?

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, what appears to be a new worship model has emerged in the North American context. This model has its roots in the contemporary worship models of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, but appears to be exhibiting several new characteristics. Since it seems to qualify as a new expression of worship, its characteristics need to be identified and evaluated for biblical faithfulness.

Research Question Two: What historical influences and value systems inherent to North American culture drive the emergence of the new model of worship practice in particular North American evangelical churches in the early decades of the twenty-first century?

Since it is often difficult for those within a specific context to identify the idolatries inherent to that culture,¹⁷ it is necessary to uncover cultural idolatries in order to make them apparent. Only after identifying the cultural idolatries, underlying beliefs, and sinful practices within a context can worship practices be adequately evaluated.

Hypotheses

The working hypotheses for this study are:

Hypothesis One: The characteristics of the model that has begun to emerge in the early decades of the twenty-first century in some North American Evangelical churches include the production of highly affective worship experiences, the production and

¹⁷ Best, 163.

consumption of goods as a part of worship, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of modern technology.

The development of highly affective experiences in the worship service is one of the hallmarks of the CR Church. Professor of Sociology and worship researcher, George Sanders writes, "To create the spectacle, many churches have consolidated various elements from retail and entertainment sectors and have begun engaging worshippers in ways that resemble other forms of consumerism. In particular, there is a heightened emphasis on bodily experiences—especially the realm of sight."¹⁸ This inordinate emphasis on the visual sense is a defining feature of the model.

The production and consumption of goods are also a component of the new model.

Nathan Myrick, researcher, ethnomusicologist, and professor of church music at Mercer University, notes:

In addition to the artifacts of music, other industries are understood as contributing equally to the transformation of culture through the production of consumable goods. Coffee, apparel, foodstuffs, as well as visual, performing, and plastic arts, are all encouraged by Celebrity Model churches, as the work of creating gospel-centric culture is understood as a holistic enterprise.¹⁹

Elsewhere Myrick suggests that the model "aspires to be self-sustaining, fulfilling a multifaceted demand for goods while simultaneously marshalling those goods into the service of the gospel."²⁰

Sanders adds, "A variety of culture industries also enable churches to manufacture an abundance

¹⁸ George Sanders, "Panem et Circenses: Worship and the Spectacle," *Culture and Religion* 13, no. 1 (March, 2012): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2012.658419>.

¹⁹ Nathan Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry: Characteristics and Considerations," *The Hymn* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 26, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2289418136/abstract/32B96B13149E4D17PQ/1>.

²⁰ Nathan Myrick, "Double Authenticity: Celebrity, Consumption, and the Christian Worship Music Industry," *The Hymn* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 27, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/2289417509?pq-origsite=summon>.

of spectacular products and services. These spectacular goods contribute to a wider culture of amusement through their normalisation of novel stimuli and they further the expansion of capital."²¹ The goods and services mentioned come in various forms and will be discussed at length later in the study.

CR churches often follow an attractional model. Jared C. Wilson, professor of pastoral ministry at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes, "An attractional church conducts worship and ministry according to the desires and values of potential consumers."²² Part of the goal of attractional models of churches is to attract "seekers" from the local context in order to share the Gospel message with them. One of the ways this is done is through marketing. In the CR Church this has come to include the appearance of those on the platform. Myrick writes, "The Celebrity Model is often characterized by youthful worship leaders who are dressed according to current popular fashions, as churches who embrace the model are often populated by younger congregants, often in their 20s, 30s, and 40s."²³ One way that CR churches develop their brand is by being purposeful about the appearance of those on the platform. Tom Wagner, Lecturer in Ethnomusicology at the University of Manchester, writes, "An effective brand communicates an organization's purpose and values to and among its stakeholders, and does so by demonstrating fidelity to and being literate in the idiosyncratic cultural codes of its target markets."²⁴ Elements such as youth and fashion are recognized as being a part of the cultural codes of the markets that some CR churches are attempting to reach.

²¹ Sanders, 4.

²² Jared Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 25.

²³ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26.

²⁴ Tom Wagner, "Music Branding and the Hegemonic Prosumption of Values of an Evangelical Growth Church," in *Religion in Times of Crisis*, eds. Gladys Ganiel, Heidemarie Winkel, and Christophe Monnet (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2014), 17.

Finally, modern technology plays a significant role in the CR Church. Although many churches make use of modern technology, CR churches do so at an extraordinarily high level. Modern technology is used to create the affective experience through theatrical lighting, stagecraft, smoke machines, presentation technologies, and music production.²⁵ Further, CR churches are expert users of online video platforms such as YouTube and other digital streaming services.²⁶

Hypothesis Two: The historical influences and value systems driving the emergence of the new model in North America include a philosophy that worship is a tool of evangelism and the cultural values of pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism.

CR churches—and many churches that subscribe to an attractional model of ministry—function on the premise that the worship service is a means to an evangelistic end. This goal is a commonly held belief in many modern evangelical churches, but prior to the machinations of early nineteenth century revivalist Charles G. Finney, worship was viewed as primary and evangelism secondary.²⁷ A historical thread exists at least as early as the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening and persisting to the present day that has worked to make the worship service subservient to evangelism. This inversion of worship and evangelism is a driving philosophy in CR churches.

Closely related is the value of pragmatism. Pragmatism is an American value that assigns worth based upon results. Professor of Preaching at Lincoln Christian University and Christianity

²⁵ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁷ Redman, 8.

Today contributor, Chuck Sackett writes, "It's the only philosophy that originated in the United States. It's the idea that something has to be useful. In fact, we measure something's value by its ability to produce something good."²⁸ In NAECs of various kinds, pragmatism has contributed to the elevation of methods designed to attract churchgoers.

Consumerism is another key American cultural value. Walters writes, "At the very forefront of the values that ought to be critically challenged is the idea that the church must embrace consumerism."²⁹ Consumerism insists on meeting the needs and demands of the consumer. The incorporation of consumerism into worship services has been an unfortunate side effect of designing worship to attract churchgoers. Walters suggests that consumerism carries with it "the possibility that we will enthrone the desires of the consumer in the place of a holy God."³⁰

Finally, progressivism, the notion that "scientific technique can provide us the expectation of continuous material and social improvement,"³¹ stands out as an American cultural value. This is especially true in modern times as it applies to modern technology. Media ecologist and professor of communications at The University of Tennessee at Martin, Arthur W. Hunt III writes, "This is the great danger of progressivism—going it alone as if God was not there or did not care. The modern notion of progress abandons moral discourse for technological know-how. It becomes impossible to question technological innovation from a moral or ethical

²⁸ Chuck Sackett, "Pragmatism: It Works, Doesn't It?" Preaching Today, Christianity Today, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2009/december/americanidols6.html>.

²⁹ Walters, 21.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Arthur W. Hunt, III, *Surviving Technopolis: Essays on Finding Balance in Our Man-Made Environments* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 53.

stance when we believe civilization is constantly advancing."³² Technology can be a great help to churches. However, as technology has been given priority, it has also begun to drive worship practices in particular NAECs rather than merely serving a functional purpose. Since technology is seen as progress, it is rarely challenged.

Definition of Terms

Contemporary Worship: worship that seeks to be appropriate and meaningful in the current time period.³³ When used with regard to recent discussions, it is often characterized by popular music expressions, informality, and reduction of liturgical elements.

Traditional Worship: worship practices that continue to adhere to the generally accepted liturgy of a church's stated identity.³⁴

Worship Wars: conflicts that arose in churches in the late decades of the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first century attributed primarily to preferential differences concerning "traditional" and "contemporary" musical styles and worship practices.³⁵

Culture: The set of values broadly shared by some subset of the human population.³⁶

³² Hunt, 54.

³³ "What Does 'Contemporary Worship' Really Mean?" U.M. News, September 30, 2013, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/what-does-contemporary-worship-really-mean>.

³⁴ Mark Wingfield, "What is Traditional? What is Contemporary?" Baptist News Global, July 25, 2013, <https://baptistnews.com/article/what-is-traditional-what-is-contemporary/#.YIawhOYpAnM>.

³⁵ Marva Dawn, "Beyond the Worship Wars," *Christian Century*, June 4, 1997, https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ps/i.do?p=BIC&u=vic_liberty&id=GALE|A19550310&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon.

³⁶ D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 1.

Cultural Relevance: the state of being relatable to local culture in order to contextualize the gospel. In the North American context, this has been attempted by stating theology in the vernacular, emulating popular musical styles, and creating familiar environments.³⁷

Contextualization: the attempt to communicate the gospel in a way that makes sense to people within their local cultural context.³⁸

Syncretism: the mixing of Christianity with something else resulting in a different gospel.³⁹

Idolatry: the worship of other gods besides the true God, reverence of images, or devotion to whatever one's heart clings to or relies on for ultimate security other than God.⁴⁰

Pragmatism: a philosophy that holds that something's value is dependent upon its ability to produce desired results.⁴¹

Consumerism: the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable, a preoccupation with and an inclination toward buying consumer goods, or the promotion of the consumer's interests.⁴²

³⁷ Peter Schuurman, "Relevance is Over-Rated," *Christian Courier*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.christiancourier.ca/relevance-is-over-rated/>.

³⁸ Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 2, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1299987168/citation/945C6671BFE5447CPQ/1>.

³⁹ Ed Stetzer, "Avoiding the Pitfall of Syncretism," *The Exchange with Ed Stetzer*, Christianity Today, July 15, 2014, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/june/avoiding-pitfall-of-syncretism.html>.

⁴⁰ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 17.

⁴¹ Sackett.

⁴² "Definition of Consumerism," Merriam-Webster, accessed August 21, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumerism>.

Progressivism: a philosophy that scientific technique and technological innovation can sustain material and social advancement indefinitely.⁴³

Seeker: a person who is interested in church or Christianity but has not made a commitment to church or faith in Christ. It is often assumed that seekers have dropped out of church or have stayed away because of their distaste for traditional liturgy and music.⁴⁴

Attractional Church: an approach to ministry that relies on a church's ability to attract large numbers of people to its gatherings in order to accomplish its mission.⁴⁵

Chapter Summary

In recent years what appears to be a new model of worship practice has emerged in particular NAECs. The new model, which is referred to in this study as the Cultural Relevance model of worship, is marked by the development of highly affective worship experiences, the production and consumption of goods as a part of worship, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of modern technology. Because this emerging model is relatively unacknowledged as a new development, its practices need to be studied and evaluated according to biblical principles applied to a process of critical contextualization.

Since those within a culture are often unaware of the cultural idolatries that exist in their own context, it is necessary to identify potential North American idolatries that may have made their way into evangelical worship practices. In the North American context, idols and sinful

⁴³ Hunt, 53–54.

⁴⁴ Redman, 3.

⁴⁵ Eddie Cole, "Missional or Attractional? The Value of Embracing a Both/And Mentality," *The Exchange With Ed Stetzer*, Christianity Today, August 30, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/august/missional-or-attractional-value-of-embracing-bothand-mental.html>.

tendencies are potentially present in the more subtle form of cultural value systems. Some of the North American value systems apparent in particular NAECs include pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism. Additionally, there is a historical thread in Evangelicalism that has worked to make worship subservient to evangelism.

Once North American practices, beliefs, and value systems are identified and explored, it becomes possible to examine the emerging practices of CR churches in light of the revealed information. When cultural values, beliefs, and practices have been given precedence over Biblical teaching, this is a strong indication that a form of idolatry is at work.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature that is relevant to the study of the relationship between worship and culture as it pertains to the most recent iterations of some North American evangelical churches that have placed an emphasis on cultural relevance in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The literature review is composed of five sections. First, an examination of key biblical passages having to do with the relationship between worship and culture will be investigated. Second, historical movements contributing to the development of the model are examined. The third section explores concepts of critical contextualization and syncretism. Fourth, literature that describes the common characteristics of CR churches is reviewed in order to codify the CR model. The final section identifies themes that emerge from the works of cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians as they relate to the relationship between church and culture for the purpose of identifying potential North American values that may or may not be in alignment with biblical teaching.

Section I: Biblical Passages Concerning the Relationship Between Church and Culture

Have No Other Gods Besides Me – Exodus 20:3

The first commandment is a prohibition against the worship of any gods other than God Himself. While this is a fairly general statement, its importance cannot be overlooked in this study since part of the goal is the identification of other gods or idols in the North American context. The NIV translation reads, "You shall have no other gods before me (Exod. 20:3)." Yet

C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch note that "before" is not a correct translation.⁴⁶ Rather, they suggest that the proper translation is "beyond me" or "in addition to me."⁴⁷ The distinction is important because it makes clear that we cannot simply hold God to be chief among competing gods; we must eliminate the presence of other gods entirely. This becomes important in this study because it will be shown that North American value systems—that sometimes reside in the worship of particular NAECs—can become idols.

Do Not Worship Me in Their Way – Deuteronomy 12

In Deuteronomy 12, God instructs the Israelites on how they are to worship Him as they enter the land that He has promised them. While they had been in the wilderness, the centralization of worship practices was easier to maintain. As they would enter the land, they would be dispersed and would come face to face with the worship practices of other cultures. God's instruction in this chapter has to do with seeking out a specific place of worship that God, Himself, would choose, rather than worshipping Him anywhere they saw fit like the Canaanites did. But it also has to do with resisting the temptation to take up the worship practices of the local culture. Upon instructing the Israelites to destroy the places of idolatry found in the nations they were to conquer, God says in verse 4, "You must not worship the Lord your God in their way" (Deut. 12:4). This instruction is taken up again in verses 29-31 where it is written:

The Lord your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all

⁴⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch: Three Volumes in One*, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, vol. 2, trans. Rev. James Martin (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 114.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods (Deut. 12:29-31).

In this passage, God is not just forbidding the worship of foreign gods; He is insisting that the Israelites are only to worship Him in the ways that He has specifically instructed them. Most importantly, they are not to take up the sinful practices of the local culture. According to C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, "The Israelites were not to be drawn aside by the Canaanites, to imitate them in their worship (vers. 29-31)."⁴⁸ The tendency of the Israelites to be drawn into the worship practices of the surrounding nations is evident throughout the Old Testament and indicates the powerful pull of cultural and religious forces on God's people.⁴⁹

While the blatantly sinful acts employed in the worship of the surrounding cultures in the Old Testament are far more obvious to us than some of the more subtle value systems we find in modern North American culture, the warning remains valid. The idea that God's people are not to worship God using the idolatrous practices found in local culture becomes especially important in this study as we consider what values and expressions of worship are truly available to Christians.

The Great Commission – Matthew 28:18-20

It is clear in the New Testament that Christians are tasked with the responsibility of carrying out the mission of evangelism throughout the world. In what has come to be known as The Great Commission—Jesus' final words to his disciples prior to His ascension—He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all

⁴⁸ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch: Three Volumes in One*, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, vol. 1, trans. Rev. James Martin (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 352.

⁴⁹ For examples of Israel's struggle with worshipping foreign gods see Exodus 32, Joshua 24, Jeremiah 19, Judges 6, 2 Kings 21, and Jeremiah 11.

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20). In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, R. T. France states, "Jesus' vision of the future heavenly enthronement of the Son of Man in 24:31 led naturally into a mission to gather his chosen people from all over the earth" (24:31).⁵⁰ This mission is to be taken up by all disciples of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus' statement is delivered directly to the eleven, and possibly to a larger gathering of disciples, D. A. Carson contends that the command is for all followers of Christ. He writes:

Disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey Jesus' teaching (12:46-50). The injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their own role as disciples (28:16). Therefore, they are paradigms for *all* disciples. Plausibly, the command is given to a larger gathering of disciples... Either way, it is binding on Jesus' disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Jesus Christ.⁵¹

Thus, there can be no disputing that evangelism represents a paramount relationship between Christians and the culture in every geographical and cultural context. What becomes a matter of inquiry in this study is not whether evangelism is a primary responsibility of Christians—clearly it is—but whether the worship service is meant to bear the responsibility of converting the lost.

Nonconformity – Romans 12:2

That Christians are sent into the world on a disciple-making mission is made clear through The Great Commission. Yet it is also true that Christians are to remain distinct from the sinful practices, values, and thinking of the cultures into which they go and in which they reside. R. C. Sproul writes, "The Bible calls us 'holy ones.' We are holy because we have been

⁵⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 1114.

⁵¹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 733–34, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=6166865>.

consecrated to God. We have been set apart. We have been called to a life that is different. The Christian life is a life of nonconformity."⁵² Nonconformity, then, is an essential quality for the follower of Christ. In Romans 12:2, Paul exhorts, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

In his commentary on Romans, Colin G. Kruse writes, "Stated negatively, then, spiritual worship involves a refusal to be conformed to this age. The verb translated 'conform' means 'to be conformed to' or 'guided by'... In the case of 12:2 conformity to the values of this (evil) age is meant... Those who render spiritual worship to God resist all such pressures to conform."⁵³ Paul gives a clear warning that there will always be pressure to conform to the patterns of the world and that this is countered by the renewing of the mind. As disciples of Christ go into the world with the Gospel message for the purpose of making disciples, they must do so with an awareness that nonconformity is an expectation of Christianity.⁵⁴

Not of the World but Sent Into It – John 17:13-19

As we discuss the relationship between church and culture the idea of being "in the world, but not of the world" comes to the forefront. A balance must be struck for the Christian who not only resides within a culture but is in some ways inseparable from it. Jesus prayer' for

⁵² R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998), 158.

⁵³ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 464, <https://web-b-ebsohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzU4NDc3MV9fQU41?sid=78f927f3-e129-458b-9b01-2a9b88f42295@pdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

⁵⁴ It is not being suggested here that a certain type of church has fallen into sin merely by adopting a style or method that is borrowed from the culture. To do so would require proof that a cultural practice is idolatrous or sinful and would level a potentially unfair accusation against some churches. Rather, this passage is examined merely as a caution against pursuing the culture too zealously to the point that sin is overlooked for the sake of relevance.

His disciples in John 17:13-19 may best demonstrate the "in the world but not of the world" premise. Jesus prays:

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (John 17:13-19).

In reference to these verses, Carson writes, "The followers of Jesus are permitted neither the luxury of compromise with a 'world'... that is intrinsically evil and under the devil's power, nor the safety of disengagement. But if the Christian pilgrimage is inherently perilous, the safety that only God himself can provide is assured, as certainly as the prayers of God's own dear Son will be answered."⁵⁵

The Jerusalem Council – Acts 15

As the early church began to expand outward from Jerusalem and it became clear that Christianity was open to the Gentiles, questions of cultural differences arose. Specifically, some of the Jewish Christians were asserting that circumcision and the following of Jewish law were requirements for membership in the Church. Carl R. Holladay notes, "At first the identity of the critics is vague—"certain people" from Judea (v.1), but once the scene shifts to Jerusalem, they are clearly labeled—not merely Jewish Christians but converted Pharisees (v.5). Their position is clearly stated: circumcision and torah observance are required for gentiles (vv. 1, 5)."⁵⁶ In other words, they expected Gentile converts to Christianity to become culturally Jewish.

⁵⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 565.

⁵⁶ Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2016), 295, <https://web-b-ebsohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/>

The seriousness of the matter is clear since a council is convened and representatives travel for the purpose of the discussion. The concerned Jewish Christians travel from Judea, and a delegation also comes from Antioch. Among the Antioch delegation are Paul and Barnabas. During the meeting Peter and James both give speeches and Paul and Barnabas are called upon to share what God has done through their ministry to the gentiles. Holladay notes the significance of the solidification of church leadership in this assembly. He writes:

It is now possible to speak of "the church, the apostles, and the elders," in Jerusalem in the same breath (v. 4). This combined with the delegation from the church in Antioch led by Paul and Barnabas, and the further inclusion of James (15:13), presumably Jesus' brother, makes the Jerusalem gathering a high-level, broadly representative meeting—precisely what is needed when a controversy with wide-ranging implications is being adjudicated.⁵⁷

James concludes that they "should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God (Acts 15:19)". Ultimately, based on a proposal put forth by James, it is decided that circumcision and adherence to Jewish law are not a requirement for admission to the Church but Gentiles are discouraged from participating in the sinful rituals related to idol worship in Greco-Roman society. James says, "Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood" (Acts 15:20). David E. Garland writes:

The Greek word translated as "food sacrificed to idols" (15:29) is the key, and it is best to interpret all of these prohibitions as connected to the pervasive idolatry in the pagan world. The council's rejection of the requirement of circumcision, which separated Jewish Christians from gentile Christians, does not entail rejection of restrictions involving idolatry, which separated Christians, who are exclusively tied to the one true God, from idolaters, who relate to many gods and lords. The prohibitions are intended to prevent gentile converts from being sucked back into the vortex of idolatrous influences.⁵⁸

bmx1YmtfXzEzOTgzNTdfX0FO0?sid=78a6b569-646e-44ec-b52fb0d9712fadb9@sessionmgr103&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1.

⁵⁷ Holladay, 296.

⁵⁸ David E. Garland, *Acts*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 163–164, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5107475>.

Although this issue may seem foreign to the modern-day North American Christian, there are lessons to be learned. As it pertains to this study, it is important to keep in mind that those we are trying to reach with the Gospel in the culture are not required to give up their cultural identity in order to become Christians. However, they are required to give up the sinful practices and ideologies of the culture they are called out of. Garland sums up this idea, saying, "The prohibitions may seem irrelevant in our culture, but the principle behind them is valid. There are some behaviors that Christians cannot do and still claim to be Christian."⁵⁹

Paul, Servant to All – 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

The question that has not been answered thus far has to do with how Christians are to relate to the world while remaining separate from it. Christians are not permitted to adopt sinful practices, but in what cultural ways are they permitted to interact with those whom they are trying to reach? Further, what cultural patterns and values are Christians permitted to adopt for the purpose of Christian worship?

Paul addresses the issue of Christian freedom in 1 Corinthians 9 and 10. While the cultural setting and the issues addressed vary considerably from modern-day concerns, there are still valuable lessons to be learned. However, it must be noted that these passages speak primarily to personal relationships and not to church worship practices.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

Though I am free of obligation to anyone, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), to win those under the law. To those without the law I became like one without the law (though I am not outside the law of God but am under the law of Christ), to win those without the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

⁵⁹ Garland, 164.

Some have interpreted Paul's description of his chameleon-like interactions as validation for reaching the culture through worship practices that resemble the culture. But does this passage allow for accommodation with the culture? Gordon D. Fee anticipates this question. He writes:

This passage has often been looked to for the idea of "accommodation" in evangelism, that is, of adapting the *message* to the language and perspective of the recipients. Unfortunately, despite the need for that discussion to be carried on, this passage does not speak directly to it. This has to do with how one *lives* or *behaves* among those whom one wishes to evangelize (not, it needs to be added in passing, with social taboos among Christians).⁶⁰

Fee is careful to define accommodation as the adapting of a message to the viewpoint of the recipients. For this study, we are more interested in the adaptation of worship practices than adaptation of message. Unfortunately this passage does not communicate any clear direction on either topic.

Paul's point is that he makes himself a servant to all in order that the Gospel will be served. Fee writes, "'Freedom' is not his goal; the salvation of others is. Thus, since he is financially independent of all people, he is able freely to put himself at the disposal of all for the sake of the gospel."⁶¹ In our evangelistic efforts we should become servants to all.

Christian Freedom – 1 Corinthians 10

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul once again addresses the issue of Christian freedom. The Corinthians specifically had in mind the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to false gods. Paul's reply was, "Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'"(1 Cor. 10:25-26). In Paul's thinking, the meat was nothing but meat before it had been sacrificed and since false gods are nothing to the

⁶⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 432.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 426.

Christian, the meat is still just meat. The Corinthians were free to eat it without raising issues of conscience. On the other hand, Paul had just urged them to "run from idolatry" and to not participate at "the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:14–22). So participating in the religious aspect of sacrificing to idols was a problem, but purchasing the meat in the marketplace was not. However, Paul argued that if, as a dinner guest, one is offered meat, one should eat it unless he finds out that it has been sacrificed to idols. In this case it is for the sake of one's host that one should abstain. In other words, everything God has made is good and permissible, but we may not participate in sin and we should have the good sense not to lead our neighbors into sin by being too casual about something that is a serious issue for them. Fee writes:

Hence "freedom" does not mean that one does whatever one wishes with no regard for others; nor do the limits on freedom suggested here mean that another's conscience dictates conduct. To the contrary, everything is for God's glory and for the sake of the gospel, that is, for the good of all, which from Paul's point of view means that they might be saved (v.33). That raises both concerns above mere "rules of conduct." Eating and drinking are irrelevant; the one who insists on the right to eat and drink is thereby making it significant. On the other hand, because it is irrelevant, one can use such freedom to forbear when necessary for the sake of the gospel.⁶²

It should not be overlooked that there may be a great deal of Christian freedom available even within Christian worship practice. It is possible to draw a parallel between musical styles and other expressions borrowed from the local culture to Paul's treatment of meat sacrificed to idols. God's created things can be used for good or evil. It is how they are used and what meaning they carry that ultimately determine their appropriateness.

The Church is the Assembly of Believers

While the topic of Christian freedom is helpful in considering our interactions with nonbelievers in a personal context, we have yet to examine any Scripture that speaks to the direct

⁶² Fee, 489.

interactions between Christians and nonbelievers in the corporate worship setting. To be more specific, we must establish the roles of the believer and the nonbeliever in the congregation.

The best evidence that the church is composed of believers comes from the perspectives of the apostles and the patterns demonstrated in the early church. First, it seems clear that the apostles understood the church to be the assembly of those who have already placed their faith in Christ. Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is addressed to "the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). The greeting in this epistle, which would have been read publicly in the assembly, is directly addressed to the gathered body of believers. In addition, other passages consistently define the church as the body of Christ—the physical manifestation of Christ on earth (Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23, 5:29-30).

Second, the biblical example of church growth resulting from conversion is consistent with people coming to faith prior to being incorporated into the body of believers. Shortly after the account of Peter delivering an evangelistic open-air sermon in Jerusalem that resulted in the conversion of 3,000 people, Acts 2:42-47 describes the fellowship of believers as a group whose numbers were being enlarged daily by those who were being saved. The resulting pattern suggests that the norm is that of conversion followed by participation in the body—not the reverse. Concerning these verses, Charles R. Swindoll writes:

Churches can also become overly outward focused, so that every function of the church becomes evangelistic. While evangelism is an essential function of the church, it must not come at the expense of other priorities: worship, instruction, and fellowship. If all four priorities are upheld with prayer and maintained in balance, evangelism naturally occurs. People don't have to be cajoled or coerced to tell others about Christ; their spiritual growth will become an easy topic of most conversations. As the first Christians devoted

themselves to worship, instruction, fellowship, and prayer, they became bold witnesses of the gospel to the world outside.⁶³

The evidence provided in the example of the early church in the book of Acts demonstrates that evangelism took place through evangelistic preaching that took place outside of worship gatherings and through the personal witness of believers.

The Unbeliever in the Assembly – 1 Corinthians 14:23-25

There is, however, scriptural evidence that unbelievers might be present during Christian worship. 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 is one possible example. It is sometimes used in support of seeker-sensitive methods that are meant to attract unbelievers to the church worship service. Since the passage does explore the conversion of an unbeliever in the context of a worship service it is worth exploring. Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:23-25)!

Who exactly is intended in the passage is unclear. Fee doubts that Paul can mean "inquirer"— "someone who stands in some kind of halfway position."⁶⁴ However, "unbeliever" and "untutored" in the Christian faith are likely intended.⁶⁵ Fee suggests that one possibility could be an unbelieving spouse "accompanying the believer to his or her place of worship."⁶⁶

⁶³ Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Acts*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 5 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.), 71.

⁶⁴ Fee, 684.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

In any case, these verses do demonstrate the possibility that an unbeliever may be present in the congregation, and Paul is clearly concerned for the unbeliever. Mark Taylor writes, "It is not the case that the church gathers to worship with no regard for the outsider. On the contrary, the church brings glory to God by making God known to unbelievers."⁶⁷ However, the means of conversion demonstrated in these verses are quite different from seeker-sensitive, culturally relevant approaches. Rather than advocating for a culturally contextualized, attractional approach to worship, Paul argues for order, clear communication, conviction, and repentance.

It should also be noted that the purpose of this passage is as an argument for well-ordered and well-communicated worship practices. Apparently the practice of uninterpreted glossolalia had gotten out of hand in the church at Corinth, and Paul sought to address the issue. Other than the fact that the passage has been translated to include the word "inquirer" or "seeker," there is no evidence that Paul had any sort of attractional method in mind. Rather, he was concerned with keeping worship intelligible for the sake of the unbeliever. Although it would be helpful to know more about how worship practices related to the unbeliever in this setting, this passage is simply not intended for that purpose.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a few helpful concepts that can be derived from these passages. First, God does not tolerate the worship of any other gods—even if they are given a subservient position. Second, God has always commanded that the worship of believers should be devoid of any sinful practices that might be found in the local culture. Third, there is a clear mandate for disciples of Jesus Christ to share the good news of the gospel with people in all cultures and in all contexts. Fourth, the Christian must be a nonconformist when it comes to the sinful practices

⁶⁷ Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 336.

and patterns of the world. Fifth, although Christians are not of the world and are to be set apart as God's people, they are sent into the world with the good news of the Gospel. Sixth, those who are being reached with the gospel message are not required to give up their cultural identity but they are required to give up the sinful practices, beliefs, and values found in the local context.

Seventh, although we have a great deal of Christian freedom personally—we may engage with all sorts of people and participate in all sorts of activities so long as we do not sin or cause others to sin—we must consider others before ourselves and be servants to all. Sometimes this will mean sacrificing personal preferences for the sake of others. Eighth, worship is between God and believers. The New Testament pattern for evangelism and worship is that people come to Christ through evangelistic preaching and personal witness prior to joining the worshiping body. Finally, Christians should always have concern for the unbeliever in the assembly. However, it cannot be shown that there is a biblical mandate or even a biblical example of using methods in the worship service that are designed to attract unbelievers. The biblical example appears to be that we are to observe orderly and coherent worship practices for the sake of the unbeliever, but that the primary mode of evangelism takes place outside of the assembly—often through personal interaction.

While the New Testament is relatively silent on what worship practices from the culture are available to practitioners of Christian worship, the greater concern in both testaments seems to suggest caution when it comes to following after the values of the culture—especially when they are in opposition to biblical principles. It is clear that sin and idolatry must be avoided at all costs. The challenge in the North American context is in clearly identifying that which qualifies as an idol. In chapters four and five it will be argued that cultural value systems can cross over into idolatry when they become prioritized above God, His commands, and/or biblical principles.

Section II: Historical Development of the Model

While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine every possible historical event and movement that has contributed to the dominance of certain cultural values in these NAECs, there are a few key historical church movements that may help to illuminate the process by which this has come to be. Primarily in view throughout this section is the premise that, in many churches, the worship service—which was once almost universally understood to be the meeting between God and His people—has been reallocated as a tool of evangelism. Although we have seen this transition reach its fullest manifestation in recent decades, it is a philosophy that has taken hold over time. The development can be observed to some degree through a cursory examination of the historical background.

Revivalist Roots

The camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening that took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may provide an early example of worship meetings designed for the purpose of evangelism. Robb Redman writes, "The beginning of the nineteenth century was a period of religious revival throughout much of the new country, particularly in the hills and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains and out on the frontier of the Ohio and Tennessee River valleys. In this wild and untamed setting, the camp meeting emerged as the vehicle for revival and evangelism."⁶⁸ Hoping to duplicate the extraordinary working of the Holy Spirit that had taken place at several earlier meetings on the Kentucky frontier—such as the Cane Ridge revival—people in the rural areas of the frontier began to organize planned outdoor meetings that came to be known as camp meetings.⁶⁹ James F. White writes, "The procedure was to call

⁶⁸ Redman, 5–6.

together everyone within fifty miles for several days of preaching, prayer, hymn singing, and spiritual counseling. Then new converts would be baptized and the meeting would conclude with the eucharist."⁷⁰ According to Elmer L. Towns and Vernon M. Whaley, "The Baptists and Methodists eventually developed the camp meetings into periodic revivals. These revivals became an important part of social life on the frontier."⁷¹ Redman adds, "By the early nineteenth century, camp meetings had replaced the quarterly meetings in importance among Methodists, but camp meetings adopted many features of the quarterly meetings, including the distinction between public and private service, and worship for believers and seekers."⁷² The concept of worship for seekers is an important topic in this study and this example provides evidence that it was at work at least as early as during the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening.

While camp meetings set the precedent for revivalist seeker-oriented worship meetings, it was evangelist Charles G. Finney in the middle nineteenth century who truly galvanized the idea that worship could be subservient to evangelism and that man-made methods could win souls.

Redman writes:

Finney's approach to worship was purely pragmatic; worship is a means to evangelistic ends. He called his approach to worship the "new methods": songs with a simple and familiar melody and lyrics; a dramatic and engaging style of preaching; and the famous "anxious bench," usually the front row of pews reserved for those who felt God was calling them to repent of their sins and receive Christ.⁷³

⁶⁹ Elmer L. Towns and Vernon M. Whaley, *Worship Through the Ages: How the Great Awakenings Shape Evangelical Worship* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic), 145.

⁷⁰ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 159–60.

⁷¹ Towns and Whaley, 161.

⁷² Redman, 6–7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.

Redman notes that there are three important aspects of Finney's approach to worship that deserve our attention.⁷⁴ "First," writes Redman, "his pragmatic approach emphasized freedom and innovation over tradition."⁷⁵ Second, "Finney developed a new way to relate worship to its surrounding culture. His new measures created an "indigenous" form of worship suited to the emerging American outlook and culture, largely by embracing popular styles and downplaying the importance of clerical authority."⁷⁶ Finally, Redman writes:

Finney reversed the relationship between worship and evangelism. Previously, theologians and pastors believed evangelism was a secondary by-product of worship, even in a camp meeting. Saving souls was a high priority to those early camp meeting and quarterly meeting leaders, but worship was a higher priority. For Finney it was the opposite; evangelism was primary, while worship was a secondary concern. Everything that was said and done, sung and prayed in his evangelistic meeting must happen in a way that maximized the opportunity for conversion.⁷⁷

Finney went so far as to have the physical space of churches remodeled for his revivals and popularized "protracted meetings"—meetings that went on for as many nights as it was felt the Holy Spirit was at work.⁷⁸

Evangelists such as Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham followed Finney's example and carried the practice of evangelistic revival meetings well into the twentieth century. Yet, evangelistic meetings continued to take place apart from regular weekly worship services.

⁷⁴ Redman, 8.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Towns and Whaley, 166.

The Church Growth Movement

The Church Growth Movement (CGM)—which was established in North America in the second half of the twentieth century—was based primarily on the principles of missiologist Donald McGavran.⁷⁹ Redman writes:

Studying growing churches in India, McGavran noted several important sociological factors, which he described in his early works on Church Growth. One of these factors is cultural adaptation of worship and preaching. Another factor is what he called the "homogeneous unit principle," the observation that people are more receptive to the gospel in the company of their peers.⁸⁰

The Church Growth Movement was and remains both influential and controversial. Redman notes that CGM theory makes two important contributions to the seeker church movement. First, "Church Growth advocates emphasize the importance of the visitor's experience of a service. It is easy for a pastor or church member to overlook aspects of the service that are obvious to a newcomer."⁸¹ "Second," Redman writes, "Church Growth theory challenges pastors and church leaders to pay attention to the 'environmental factors,' the details and aspects about a church that are not directly related to worship but that determine how user-friendly a service is."⁸²

The implementation of Church Growth theory has resulted in numerical growth for a great number of churches. However, the use of these principles in North American churches has not been without problems. Pastor, author, church planter, researcher, and missiologist, Ed Stetzer notes three ways in which the misapplication of Church Growth Movement principles resulted in negative outcomes. First, he notes, "An unfortunate by-product of the Church Growth Movement is that growing God's church can be as simple as 1-2-3 with guaranteed results. I call

⁷⁹ Redman, 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 13.

⁸² Ibid.

it *methodological mania*. Some in the Church Growth Movement lost their way when they became more driven by methodological mania than by a central focus on mission."⁸³ Second, he asserts that some churches began to adopt a mission station mentality.⁸⁴ He writes, "Our best hopes focused on making the church so attractive that even a lost person would want to come inside to discover Jesus. What happened however, for the most part, is that we made the church become a great place to be for Christians or a 'warehousing effect.'"⁸⁵ Finally Stetzer notes that sociological tools alleviated the emphasis on personal responsibility for evangelism. He explains:

The focus became (at times) focused on using sociological tools and realities to reach people. As such, evangelism was mistakenly depersonalized by making it the responsibility of the institutional church as it engaged its society rather than individuals who were reaching and serving others. Bricks, mortar, and programs do not take away my responsibility to be a living epistle in my neighborhood through word and deed. The end result was, as I see it, too much sociology and not enough focus on the mission itself.⁸⁶

Seeker Church

If the Church Growth Movement provided the sociological tools, it was the seeker service that attempted to allow them to reach their full potential in the North American context. In the mid-1980s, seeker services—church services that implemented Church Growth theory and which sought to attract people far from God—began to receive increasing attention. According to Redman, "A seeker-targeted or seeker-focused service aims at the unchurched or unbelieving attendee; it avoids as much traditional liturgy and music as possible and adopts a high level of

⁸³ Ed Stetzer, "What's the Deal w/ the Church Growth Movement? Part 2: Some Unfortunate Evolutions," The Exchange with Ed Stetzer, Christianity Today, October 8, 2012, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/october/whats-deal-w-church-growth-movement-part-2-some.html>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

cultural relevance in music and communication."⁸⁷ Some churches—such as Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago—experienced great success through the seeker service model. Many other churches became interested in methods that promised numerical results and began to implement them.

The Baby Boomer Generation

It is worth noting that the height of the seeker-sensitive movement came at a time when the Baby Boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1965)⁸⁸ had reached adulthood and many were interested in returning to church. In 1994 Charles S. Clark wrote:

For the last three decades, church and synagogue membership has been mostly declining or stagnant. Experts trace the decline to the baby-boomers—the 78 million Americans born from 1946-65. But now boomers are raising children themselves, and a surprising number who rejected religion have turned to organized worship. Churches and temples find themselves marketing faith to a population once known for its skepticism toward authority. By emphasizing such attractions as child care and informal dress codes, religious bodies invite charges that they are watering down traditional faith.⁸⁹

An anonymous author at the time wrote, "The rise of the baby-boom generation has spawned a new breed of church relying on modern methods to attract people to age-old beliefs. In recent years, nondenominational churches have emerged around the country with the specific mission of bringing in the unchurched."⁹⁰

While generational research is beyond the scope of this study, the connection between the Baby Boomer generation and the seeker-sensitive megachurch movement must be acknowledged. Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, notes the

⁸⁷ Redman, 3.

⁸⁸ Charles S. Clark, "Religion in America," *CQ Researcher* 4, no. 44 (November 25, 1994): 1033, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre1994112500>.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰ "New Church Uses Marketing to Appeal to Baby Boomers," *Marketing News* 27, no. 8 (April, 1993):11, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/216400303/abstract/D55DB5E4C0AA4FE5PQ/1>.

progression of trends that have occurred as baby boomers have aged.⁹¹ In the 1950s they encouraged their parents to attend church.⁹² In the 1960s they began leaving the church and earned a reputation as the "drop out" generation.⁹³ Later, "some of them flocked to megachurches where they could worship without the stale trappings of their parents' religion."⁹⁴ This phenomenon had a significant impact on the success of the seeker model and the development of megachurches in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, baby boomers continue to exert significant influence in churches. Wuthnow wrote in 2007, "Baby boomers are now moving past their mid-life crises, becoming empty nesters, and retiring. To be sure, their influence on American religion remains strong. With the graying of America, they will be the most numerous group in the typical congregation. They will have more time to serve on committees and more money to put in the collection plate."⁹⁵ Although baby boomers have now reached retirement age, they continue to hold significant influence in churches and this may at least partially account for the persistence of seeker-sensitive methods since the approach once achieved significant numerical results among that generation.

Megachurch Influence

It is difficult to separate the Church Growth Movement and the seeker service from the simultaneous emergence of the North American megachurch in the late twentieth century. The implementation of Church Growth principles and, often, seeker sensitive worship services led to

⁹¹ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 20.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

the existence of churches of astounding size. According to David E. Eagle, "Megachurches are big. While some attach a threshold to the number of attenders a megachurch contains—1,500 regular attenders is a popular threshold—it is sufficient to say that these are the very largest of the large."⁹⁶ Some megachurches host tens of thousands of attendees in a single weekend. In their study of megachurches that promote a prosperity message, Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan write, "From the 1960s onward religious conservatives of all varieties—evangelical, fundamentalist, and pentecostal in particular—had begun to embrace market-driven models of ecclesial identity that focused their attention on large-scale growth and a cast of heroes who had achieved it."⁹⁷

Modern Church Multiplication Models

Megachurches are not the only product of CGM principles. The modern church planting movement and more recently multi-site models also commonly reflect CGM principles. According to the Association of Religious Data Archives, "Closely related to the North American Church Growth Movement, the church planting movement seeks to encourage the expansion, planting, multiplication, and effectiveness of local Christian communities by employing theological principles, biblical modalities, and contemporary sociological factors."⁹⁸ In this definition the sociological factors that are inherent to Church Growth theory are evident and the connection to CGM principles should be noted.

⁹⁶ David E. Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch," *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 591, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/579242>.

⁹⁷ Kate and Wen Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," *Religion and American Culture* 24, no. 2 (Summer, 2014), 192, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rac.2014.24.2.186>.

⁹⁸ "Church Planting Movement," Association of Religion Data Archives, https://www.thearda.com/timeline/movements/movement_9.asp.

In addition to the church planting movement, multisite church models have emerged in recent years. Streaming media technology has made it possible for multiple church campuses to engage in shared experiences through various models of multi-site church. This form of multiplication has become increasingly popular. Adelle M. Banks reported in 2014 that "nearly one in ten U.S. Protestants attends a congregation with multiple campuses."⁹⁹ She describes one model of multisite ministry, writing, "Multisite churches typically operate with a main campus headed by the senior minister and one or more satellite locations. In some settings, attendees at the satellite location watch the same sermon, which is beamed in from the central location, but have their own dedicated on-site pastor, music, or small group meetings."¹⁰⁰

Modern church plants and multisite campuses continue to carry out missional objectives of conversion and multiplication, often using CGM sociological tools and new advances in technology. Although church plants and multisite campuses are not always numerically large, they seek numerical growth through the multiplication of churches and campuses.

Conclusion

Taken together, these historical movements begin to show a historical thread in which worship is made secondary to evangelism, man-made methodology and marketing tools are used as means for numerical growth and conversion, and technology is leveraged to the greatest extent possible.

⁹⁹ Adelle M. Banks, "Multisite Church Model Still Vital, Study Shows," *The Christian Century*, April 16, 2014, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Section III: Critical Contextualization and Syncretism

Since this study seeks to identify North American value systems that may be functioning as idols, some exploration of the concepts of contextualization and syncretism are in order.

Eunhye Chang, J. Rupert Morgan, Timothy Nyasulu, and Robert J. Priest write,

"Contextualization may be defined as the process by which the gospel takes root in a specific socio-cultural context."¹⁰¹ Darrell Whiteman writes:

Contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their culture.¹⁰²

Of particular note to this study is Whiteman's assertion that "as we have become more critical in a postmodern world, we have discovered how urgent the task of contextualization is everywhere in the world, including—or should I say especially—in North America."¹⁰³ Specifically, Whiteman uses the example of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, Illinois as an example of contextualization in North America.¹⁰⁴ As previously noted, Willow Creek Community Church has made use of CGM principles—which are missiological in nature—in the North American suburban subculture.

The idea of contextualization in the mission field was a response to earlier missionary efforts that tended to promote a form of Christianity that was decidedly Western. Missiologist Paul Heibert writes, "Roughly from 1800 to 1950 most Protestant missionaries in India, and later

¹⁰¹ Eunhye Chang, J. Rupert Morgan, Timothy Nyasulu, and Robert J. Priest, "Paul G. Hiebert and Critical Contextualization," *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 199, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/356657099/citation/C4200B074E3F41F1PQ/1>.

¹⁰² Whiteman, 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

in Africa, rejected the beliefs and practices of the people they served as 'pagan.'"¹⁰⁵ Their solution was to replicate a Western version of Christianity in non-Western contexts. As a result many of the people being evangelized felt they had to abandon their cultural identity in order to become Christians. This caused a great many of them to reject Christianity on the basis that it was a Western religion. Hiebert attributed the viewpoint of earlier missionaries to the influence of colonialism and the theory of cultural evolution—both of which elevated Western culture to a position of superiority.¹⁰⁶ Thus, local culture was not something to be upheld or celebrated; it was something to be replaced.

It was not until the 1970s that discussions concerning the need for a contextualized approach came to the forefront. Chang, et. al. cite contributions from the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, the 1974 Luusanne Congress of World Evangelization, a 1978 Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture which met in Willowbank, Bermuda, and missiologist Charles H. Kraft, professor of anthropology at the Fuller School of World Mission.¹⁰⁷ Kraft's approach, however, was not well-received among conservative evangelicals at the time.

It was Paul Heibert's "critical contextualization" that first received wide support in the evangelical community when he published his article outlining the process in 1984.¹⁰⁸ Heibert provided a four-step process for contextualization that is summarized by Chang, et al.:

First, the missionary and church leaders engage in a phenomenological and "uncritical" effort to understand the cultural practices involved. At this stage any judgment is to be suspended. In a second stage the missionary and church leaders work to identify and help

¹⁰⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July, 1987): 104, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1299977119/citation/38FEB90D66A548ACPQ/1>.

¹⁰⁶ Heibert, 104–05.

¹⁰⁷ Chang, et al., 200.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

the church examine all relevant biblical passages and theological principles which appear to be germane to an assessment of the cultural practice at stake. The third step is for the people corporately to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths. Finally, people are led to rethink and reinvent old practices to bring them into line with Scripture while also retaining cultural and contextual dimensions to it. These new contextualized practices allow them to express Christian meaning within their own culture.¹⁰⁹

Whenever discussing the positive attributes of contextualization, one must also address the ever-present danger of syncretism. Stetzer provides a useful definition of syncretism:

Syncretism, in this case, is the mixing of Christianity with something else such that they become a different gospel. Syncretism can take place with a positive-thinking gospel, a nationalist emphasis, or emerging culture. Syncretism happens more than we might know.

When anything is added to the message of the gospel, the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ is compromised and another gospel can be created that is, well, actually not the gospel.¹¹⁰

Joseph B. Bangura notes this danger in his own context of Sierra Leone. In regard to Hiebert's model of critical contextualization, he writes:

This process of contextualisation involves applying the gospel to a specific cultural context so that biblical Christianity can make sense to people. However, in striving to contextualise, the Church must guard against the kind of theologising that merely reinforces the cultural practices of people. When the Church uses African culture in this way without recourse to a serious study of Holy Scripture, contextualisation will certainly spell syncretistic doom for the church.¹¹¹

Bangura's statement reflects the precariousness of contextualization. Applied properly, it can result in Christian worship that reflects the uniqueness of local culture, providing an avenue for engagement with the gospel and a sense of ownership within the church. But when applied without appropriate study and consideration of cultural meaning it can quickly devolve into

¹⁰⁹ Chang, et al., 202.

¹¹⁰ Ed Stetzer, "Avoiding the Pitfall of Syncretism."

¹¹¹ Joseph B. Bangura, "The Gospel in Context: Hiebert's Critical Contextualisation and Charismatic Movements in Sierra Leone," *In Die Skriflig* 50, no. 1 (2016): 6, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1835998098/abstract/B99BBDEFDF7C4E22PQ/1>.

syncretism. The concepts of critical contextualization and syncretism are helpful in this study since it seeks to identify and evaluate North American idols in the form of cultural values.

Section IV: Some Common Characteristics of Cultural Relevance Churches

The thesis of this study is that there are powerful cultural values at work in the worship of many NAECs that when taken to their extremes can result in a form of idolatry. When this happens, it can be theorized that churches engage in practices that are not in alignment with biblical principles because they are instead prioritizing cultural value systems—often with truly good intentions. These good intentions are what make syncretism so difficult to spot in the North American context.

It will be argued later in the study that churches most likely to exhibit this phenomenon embrace an attractional model that seeks to employ the worship service as a tool of evangelism, elevates pragmatism in the form of man-made methodology, engages in market-driven consumeristic practices to attract churchgoers, and embraces a value of technological progressivism. When these values are taken to the limit, a fairly consistent set of characteristics emerge that are not dependent upon a church's background or size.

In this section, the research and case studies of several notable worship scholars are reviewed for the purpose of identifying the defining characteristics of NAECs that seem to fall into the category of CR churches. The characteristics identified should not be viewed as negative or positive as of yet, but should simply be understood to be descriptors of an emerging model that has been identified by a limited number of worship scholars. Later in the study, these characteristics will be reorganized and assessed according to the cultural values being examined but for now they should be considered little more than a summary of the field notes and studies of other researchers.

There are relatively few authors who have identified distinctions between what appears to be a new iteration of evangelical Christianity and its seeker-sensitive, Church Growth Movement-influenced predecessors. There are enough similarities that the distinctions are easily missed. Further, it may be fair to suggest that the CR model of worship simply represents an application of the same CGM principles of the past, but within different contexts, directed at different target markets, and equipped with new tools.

Regardless, the characteristics of most of the NAECs in the research have presented themselves in somewhat different ways in recent years. While they maintain some similarities with earlier contemporary models—making use of the latest technology, modern popular music forms, and an informal environment—there have been some new developments. A few researchers and authors, including Nathan Myrick, George Sanders, Brett McCracken, and Andrew Mall have begun to note some of the shared characteristics among some NAECs that differentiate them from earlier expressions.

Myrick refers to a model he has dubbed as "The Celebrity Model" of music ministry.¹¹² Sanders hints at some aspects of "hipster church," a type of church that seems to be characterized by younger participants who embrace a certain fashion sense, saying, "One might find it surprising that a growing number of Christian churches could be populated by twenty-somethings sporting skinny jeans, large-framed glasses, and sailor tattoos."¹¹³ Andrew Mall also focuses on hipster church, describing it as "a place where young fashionable white people gather

¹¹² Nathan Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25.

¹¹³ George Sanders, "Ironically Religious, Blandly Fashionable," *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 4 (2014): 95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514539873>.

on Sunday mornings."¹¹⁴ Brett McCracken, author of *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*, provides a description:

The common feature of these churches, of course, is that they all attract large numbers of hipsters. Also they all tend to be very media savvy, fashionably designed, and friendly to art and culture. They all emphasize social justice and serving—not just *saving*—the community outside their walls. But they are also all very different from one another, with different thoughts as to how best the church should position itself in relation to cool culture.¹¹⁵

These descriptions are, of course, generalizations, and they cannot be applied unilaterally. But they may begin to reveal some of the surface characteristics found in CR churches.

A church need not fit comfortably into one of these categories, however, in order to fall within the bounds of this study. It is more the characteristics and values represented that are of interest. Although many CR churches seem to fall within the category of recent church plants and multisite campuses, there is no shortage of long-established churches engaging in the same practices and value systems identified by Myrick, Sanders, Mall, and McCracken.

The size of a church does not seem to matter. Jay Y. Kim notes, "This isn't a big-church small-church issue. Churches of all shapes and sizes are falling headlong into the trap of relevance at all costs, digitizing and technologizing anything and everything they can."¹¹⁶ McCracken adds, "Hipster churches come in all shapes and sizes and represent a diverse cross section of contemporary Christianity."¹¹⁷ While certain large churches have been engaging in some of the practices described for decades, smaller churches are now able to participate through

¹¹⁴ Andrew Mall, "Worship Capital: On the Political Economy of Evangelical Worship Music," *American Music* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 303, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/710712>.

¹¹⁵ Brett McCracken, *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 78.

¹¹⁶ Jay Y. Kim. *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 9.

¹¹⁷ McCracken, 78.

advances in technology, more affordable options, and technological applications that are more readily accessible to the layperson. These are considerable factors lending to the emergence of CR churches of various sizes.

Myrick also notes that not all churches engaged in the "celebrity model" of music ministry actually maintain paid celebrity worship leaders on their staffs.¹¹⁸ Rather, some "draw from the repertory of commercially produced Modern Worship music that has been doubly authenticated and perform it faithfully, but do not pursue nor desire celebrity status."¹¹⁹ This description does little to differentiate these churches from other churches employing a contemporary worship style. However, Myrick goes on to describe some distinguishing features of the type of church he has in mind:

The Celebrity Model may be externally characterized by several of the following practices. First, while most liturgists and worship leaders of all types place emphasis on musical excellence, the Celebrity Model emphasizes excellence in production value as well. This is most often observed as rock 'n' roll style concert lighting, black rooms, curtains, and staging which accentuate the attention directed towards the stage; accurate, timely audio mixing by the technicians; digital visualization aids which project the lyrics (as well as visual depictions of the lyrics in some cases) for congregational participation; and IMAG (image magnification software).¹²⁰

Second, Myrick points out, "The Celebrity Model draws its repertory from the CCLI charts and Spotify playlists of Modern Worship music... while also placing great value on any original compositions offered by the staff or congregation."¹²¹ He also notes that through the use of technology and instrumentation, the music is performed in a manner that "helps to more closely align the live performance with the doubly authenticated recorded artifacts it seeks to

¹¹⁸ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid..

¹²¹ Ibid., 26.

emulate."¹²² In other words, the live performance of the music during the worship service is meant to sound as much as possible like the audio recording from the celebrity source.

Third, Myrick notes that the new model regularly makes use of digital streaming technologies. "With obvious commercial appeal and marketing value, videos that can be widely disseminated at little cost to the congregation offer an attractive means of cultural production, as streaming services allow consumers to easily locate and possess the artifacts that nourish and identify them."¹²³

Fourth, Myrick observes that the physical qualities of worship leaders in these NAECs are noteworthy. "The Celebrity Model is often characterized," says Myrick, "by youthful worship leaders who are dressed according to current popular fashions, as churches who embrace the model are often populated by younger congregants, often in their 20s, 30s, and 40s."¹²⁴ Myrick postulates that these worship leaders will age with their congregations.¹²⁵

Fifth, Myrick observes that such churches rarely have any "formal music education program."¹²⁶ Instead they rely on the hiring of trained professional worship leaders.¹²⁷

Finally, he observes that such churches:

May be characterized by an emphasis on supporting local businesses, and congregants are encouraged to start their own, as an act of "culture making." In addition to the artifacts of music, other industries are understood as contributing equally to the transformation of culture through the production of consumable goods. Coffee, apparel, foodstuffs, as well

¹²² Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

as visual, performing, and plastic arts, are all encouraged by Celebrity Model churches, as the work of creating a gospel-centric culture is understood as a holistic enterprise.¹²⁸

Sanders is somewhat more critical in his assessment of what he calls "hipster religion," which is deeply related to—if not the same phenomenon—that Myrick is describing. "Hipster religion," says Sanders, "is merely one element in the imbrication that is aspirational consumerism. For those who are unable to attain the kind of status celebrated in American consumer culture, "cool" can function in lieu of more traditional forms of conspicuous consumption."¹²⁹ "Nevertheless," Sanders continues, "hipsterism, and its putative non-conformist lifestyle, is made possible only through a global consumer market that fetishizes a niche market of commodities (i.e. the 'right' clothes, music, neighborhoods, etc.)."¹³⁰ All of this suggests that hipster churches have found a way to commodify "cool." But this is not to say that they are unique in their embrace of a form of consumerism.

Sanders notes the physical appearance of one pastor of what he deems a hipster church, writing, "The pastor of the church, albeit young, male, fashionable, and attractive, has made community engagement a central theme to his sermons."¹³¹ In addition to his observation of the pastor's appearance, Sanders notes that the congregation does not necessarily reflect the same visual expectations. He says, "Unlike my experience with many other hipster churches, this congregation was relatively racially integrated and members of the surrounding neighborhood (decidedly non-hipster) are also involved."¹³² Although Sanders does not elaborate on the

¹²⁸ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25.

¹²⁹ Sanders, "Ironically Religious, Blandly Fashionable," 496.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

subject, this disparity between the public image being displayed on the platform and the appearance of the average churchgoer may call for further explanation.

Elsewhere, Sanders comments on the spectacle that many modern churches make use of that is made possible by modern technology, theatrical stage design, settings borrowed from retail spaces, and a variety of consumer options, all culminating in a worship experience that is highly focused on the bodily senses. He writes,

The spectacle can be found in an array of worship settings—whether it is in the form of expansive video screens, highly polished musical and theatrical performances, the use of stage props to amplify and punctuate speakers’ messages, the impressively wide variety of consumer options facing the worshipper or the deluge of crowds filling voluminous auditoriums. To create the spectacle, many churches have consolidated various elements from retail and entertainment sectors and have begun engaging worshippers in ways that resemble other forms of consumerism. In particular, there is a heightened emphasis on bodily experiences—especially the realm of sight.¹³³

To summarize, some of the characteristics of the NAECs that have been identified by Myrick, Sanders, Mall, McCracken, and others include but are not limited to: an emphasis on production, a resemblance to a rock 'n' roll concert, a significant use of modern technology, an approach to music that attempts to emulate the recorded artifact, an emphasis on local creativity—especially through songwriting, the use of streaming media technology, attention to the physical attributes of worship musicians in categories such as age, attractiveness, and fashion, and the production of consumable goods.

Section V: Themes in the Writing of Cultural Critics, Media Ecologists, and Worship Theologians

Introduction

Since it is often difficult for those within a culture to see the practices and values that may be at odds with biblical Christianity, it may be helpful to consult some of the more

¹³³ Sanders, "*Panem et Circenses*: Worship and the Spectacle," 2.

outspoken voices of cultural criticism and media ecology. It is important to note that cultural critics do what their name implies: they criticize. Their definitions of terms often carry further implications, and their statements are rarely objective. But at times they speak prophetically—seeing the things that are invisible to the average person and drawing attention to them—and for this study such an approach is necessary and helpful. Thus, their writings will be examined for the purpose of becoming cognizant of the underlying issues and values in the North American culture that the average person may not be aware of. The purpose here is not to confirm or deny the assertions of the authors, but rather to make known some of the themes that emerge in order to decode them. At times other scholarly authors are cited whose research support the claims being made.

Relevance

The term "relevance" as used by churches in recent years requires some definition. As churches have sought to reach the local culture through means that the culture will recognize and respond favorably to, they have taken to calling the characteristic of relating to the culture, "relevance." Os Guinness—holding to a more traditional definition of relevance—writes, "Relevance is not the problem. If relevance is properly understood—the quality of relating to a matter in hand with pertinence and appropriateness—we who define ourselves and our lives by the good news of Jesus Christ should be, of all people, most relevant."¹³⁴ He continues, "In itself the good news of Jesus is utterly relevant or it is not the good news it claims to be."¹³⁵

However, what churches tend to mean when they refer to relevance has more to do with employing certain methods that are current, up-to-date, and likely borrowed from the culture.

¹³⁴ Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 12.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

Kim notes that this approach—though frequently employed—is not without its problems. He writes, "I've heard countless stories of young people who are unimpressed at best, and repulsed at worst, by the modern evangelical church's hyper focus on looking, sounding, and feeling like everything else they see in culture—our red-hot pursuit of relevance."¹³⁶

Guinness suggests that Christians must remain just as committed to faithfulness as they are to relevance. He writes,

By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant.¹³⁷

Elsewhere, Guinness states, "Further compounded by accelerating change, which itself is compounded by the fashion-driven dictates of consumerism, relevance becomes overheated and vaporizes into trendiness."¹³⁸

Novelty / Contemporeneity

Novelty or contemporeneity was an additional concern that emerged from the literature. In the literature consulted, novelty not only refers to that which is new, but implies that what is new must necessarily be superior to that which is not. Professor, media ecologist, pastor, and Reformed Christian theologian, T. David Gordon addresses the value of contemporeneity and the pursuit of novelty. He writes, "Contemporaneity is a value, or a value system, that prefers what is

¹³⁶ Kim, 7.

¹³⁷ Guinness, 15.

¹³⁸ Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 63.

new to what is old. Contemporaneity views the past as passé, and tends to regard it either with benign disinterest or with outright contempt."¹³⁹

In many churches that make use of contemporary worship music (CWM), the pursuit of that which is novel is carried out with the regular implementation of new music and the simultaneous elimination of older music. Gordon observes that in such situations, "The criterion of contemporaneity trumps all the criteria of all the hymnal-revision committees that ever labored."¹⁴⁰

David Lemley has noted that the lifespan of worship songs on the CCLI top 10 list has dropped drastically from 2000 to 2010. He says, "The 2010 top-ten list evidences a shift from the lengthy tenure of congregational favorites to the quick rotation of contemporary hits."¹⁴¹ He notes that in 2000 the list represented a twenty-one-year span of authorship, "a long season of use compared to later numbers."¹⁴² Additionally he comments, "The February 2010 list represents only two songs composed in the previous decade, compared with the 2000 list on which only one song was composed within ten years of the list."¹⁴³

Ken Myers, author of *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, suggests that pop culture has inherited the pursuit of novelty from modernity. He writes, "From its roots in early industrialized society, popular culture inherited two attributes that still characterize it: the quest

¹³⁹ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 103.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴¹ David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation Through Contemporary Worship Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 153–54.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 154.

for novelty, and the desire for instant gratification. The quest for novelty is not simply a search for new distractions; it involves the notion that a new thing will be better than the old one."¹⁴⁴

Novelty is also addressed by Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts in *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls*. They take a somewhat more positive view of the pursuit of novelty in music consumption. They write, "The quest for novelty that at one moment can appear as (and sometimes be) the insatiable thirst of the addict for constant innovation, or for persistent consumption, can at another moment equally be recognized as necessarily refusing to permit the stagnation of values and structures within which one lives."¹⁴⁵ Therefore, while the quest for novelty can be seen in a negative consumeristic light, it can also be seen as a driving force that prevents stagnation.

Individualism

The literature revealed a growing awareness that the American value of Individualism is having an impact on worship practices. Even in communal settings like worship services, some researchers have noted an increasing sentiment that worship is for individual consumption rather than communal participation. In his doctoral thesis, Russell Allen Robbins writes:

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.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ken Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989), 64.

¹⁴⁵ Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts, *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 54.

¹⁴⁶ Russell Allen Robbins, "The Rise of Corporate Individualism in Twenty-First Century Worship," D.W.S. thesis, Liberty University, (2020), 34, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2655>.

Gordon notes that the influence of pop culture has led to the elevation of the individual over the community. He writes, "Pop culture celebrates individual self-expression and experience at the expense of community expression and experience."¹⁴⁷ Marva J. Dawn adds, "The technological society increasingly isolates us from one another, with a resulting focus on individual selves and needs, not the good of the community."¹⁴⁸ Myers has likewise noted an increase in isolation as a possible outcome of the value of individualism. He writes:

The individualism of Liberalism not only *liberates* people from each other, it necessarily *isolates* them. A thoroughgoing individualism, which acknowledges no binding ties to family or community, leads to loneliness as well as autonomy. Popular culture may seem to be something that overcomes isolation; after all, listening to popular music or watching a favorite television program can be a point of shared experience.

But it can as easily work the other way. Many of us have had the experience of meeting TV zombies, people who cannot wrench themselves from the set when someone is in the room.¹⁴⁹

Kim likewise notes that one of the key values of the digital age is "*individualism*, which leads to *isolation* when taken to its extreme."¹⁵⁰ He writes:

The more we present "church" as an easily accessible product to be consumed digitally, when it's preferable and convenient for us individually, the more we ground people in the misunderstanding that the Christian life is a solo venture, customizable according to our personal preferences. But this solo approach to following Jesus invariably moves us away from the call to Christian kinship.¹⁵¹

Entertainment / Amusement / Spectacle

There is no shortage of criticism in the literature when it comes to the employment of attractional methods in Church Growth-influenced churches. Often these methods have taken on

¹⁴⁷ Gordon, 88.

¹⁴⁸ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 107.

¹⁴⁹ Myers, 71.

¹⁵⁰ Kim, 105

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 105–06.

forms that can be interpreted as being for the purpose of entertainment or amusement. The product—often referred to by critics as "spectacle"—can look like a theatrical production or a rock concert made possible through the use of theatrical stagecraft and other visual displays. Such presentations have been made possible in churches of various sizes through technological advances such as LED lighting, projection screens, fog machines, IMAG (image magnification), other visually projected images, and stadium or theater seating. The clear purpose of such efforts is to create culturally relevant or contextualized environments that provide a sense of familiarity to North Americans.

However, critics have not remained silent on the use of such methods. Sanders argues that "spectacle is conducive to consumptive behaviours via bodily affect and emotion."¹⁵² "In other words," he continues, "the engagement of consumers along multiple sensorial dimensions resonates across varied settings to valorise (and thus create an implicit desire for) excitement, amusement or otherwise heightened affective and emotional states."¹⁵³ Myers voices his concern, writing, "The aesthetic of immediate and constant entertainment does not prepare the human consciousness well for recognition of a holy, transcendent, omnipotent, and eternal God, or to responding to His demands of repentance and obedience."¹⁵⁴ In his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman reflects on what he considers to be conflicting messages between entertainment and serious religion. He says, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Sanders, "Panem et Circenses: Worship and the Spectacle," 3.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Myers, 132.

In addition to being motivated by the well-intentioned purpose of contextualization, Myers has suggested that modern institutions have gradually come to the conclusion that in order to survive they must become entertaining. He writes:

The advent of fun morality—and the cultural institutions and artifacts that enabled it—soon meant that not having fun was an occasion for anxiety... As this moral inversion has gathered momentum, cultural institutions previously unconcerned with promoting fun gradually succumbed to the assumption that unless they could be entertaining, they would be left in the dust. By the time of the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, numerous cultural institutions—once committed to being sources of moral meaning, definition, and authority—had surrendered.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, Myers warns that the embrace of methods of entertainment leads to the inevitable outcome of having to generate increasingly stimulating forms of amusement and spectacle in order to hold the attention of those being entertained. According to Myers:

If one is relying on popular culture to stimulate excitement, one will gradually require greater and greater levels of stimulation to achieve the same level of excitement. The makers of popular culture will gladly oblige. Since it is the purpose of most forms of popular culture to provide exciting distraction, we should not be surprised that over time, television programs, popular music, and other forms become more extreme (and more offensive) in their pursuit of titillation. Folk culture has the capacity to limit its extremes, since it is the expression of the values and aspirations of a community. Popular culture, on the other hand, presupposes the absence of a community of belief or conviction.¹⁵⁷

It is evident that there are some troubling implications in this statement when it is applied to the use of entertainment in the worship setting. First, if the entertainment model requires greater and greater forms of amusement for its own sustainment, then the spectacle may eventually become a distraction from worship rather than an invitation to participate in worship. Second, although popular culture may be willing to oblige in the continuous production of entertainment, as Myers suggests, this may become an engine for eventual exhaustion and

¹⁵⁵ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show-Business* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985), 121.

¹⁵⁶ Myers, xiii.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

burnout in church settings—particularly in churches that do not have the financial means or human resources to keep up with the ever-increasing demands of an entertainment model. Finally, while popular culture may presuppose the absence of a community of belief or conviction, this cannot be so in the church. Church communities, due to their moral nature, must be able to set limits on how far a spectacle can be taken for the purpose of engaging the attention of those in attendance.

Along these lines, Kim notes that worshiping communities must be deliberate in their evaluation of the various elements that come together during the musical portions of the worship service. He writes, "In the singing life of the church, worship leaders and musicians must give greater thought to how every part of our musical worship—song choices, volume, lights, even stage layout and posture—draws people into substance, not spectacle. Everything we do must invite people to engage and participate and not let them off the hook, to simply sit back and be entertained."¹⁵⁸

Physical Appearance—Youthfulness, Fashion, Attractiveness

Although few authors have given much attention to the growing trend of recruiting the young, fashionable, and attractive to the worship team, there is growing evidence that some worship leaders and musicians are now a part of a marketing mechanism designed to attract members of specific niche markets.

As previously noted, Nathan Myrick suggests that what he calls the Celebrity Model is "characterized by youthful worship leaders who are dressed according to current popular fashions."¹⁵⁹ It has also been noted that Sanders describes one hipster church pastor as "young,

¹⁵⁸ Kim, 63.

¹⁵⁹ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26.

male, fashionable, and attractive."¹⁶⁰ Additionally, Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan draw attention to the significance of youth and beauty in their study of prosperity megachurches. They write:

The high production quality, attractive singers, talented musicians, charismatic worship leader, and the concert atmosphere pioneered by prosperity megachurches reinforced the message that echoed through the walls—that God had blessed his children with power, talents, youth, and beauty. Once a middle-aged man's game, the worship leader had become the symbol of spiritual maturity combined with perpetual adolescence.¹⁶¹

Essentially, Bowler and Reagan are suggesting that the youthfulness and beauty exhibited on the platform are used to verify God's favor on the church.

Neil Postman, on the other hand presents an intriguing scenario that is more reflective of CGM strategy. He says, "Consider, for example, how you would proceed if you were given the opportunity to produce a television news show for any station concerned to attract the largest possible audience."¹⁶² He goes on to describe how the casting process would take place:

You would, first, choose a cast of players, each of whom has a face that is both "likable" and "credible." Those who apply would, in fact, submit to you their eight-by-ten glossies, from which you would eliminate those whose countenances are not suitable for nightly display. This means you will exclude women who are not beautiful or who are over the age of fifty, men who are bald, all people who are overweight or whose noses are too long or whose eyes are too close together. You will try, in other words, to assemble a cast of talking hair-dos. At the very least, you will want those whose faces would not be unwelcome on a magazine cover.¹⁶³

In light of the marketing practices of CGM-influenced churches, it seems possible that a system of casting the young, fashionable, and attractive in entertainment roles is taking place in many churches. Redman notes that "the kind of people on the platform leading the service, and how they look and lead,"¹⁶⁴ have been a consideration of Church Growth strategy for some time.

¹⁶⁰ Sanders, "Ironically Religious, Blandly Fashionable," 496.

¹⁶¹ Bowler and Reagan, 210.

¹⁶² Postman, 100.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 100–01.

Myrick has suggested that these youthful worship leaders and musicians will likely age with their congregations.¹⁶⁵ Yet if a primary role of the church musician is now that of functioning as part of a marketing apparatus rather than primarily leading the musical worship of the congregation, then one must wonder if the longevity of the church musician is still viable.

Page and Gray have noted the reality of this dilemma. They write:

It is the proverbial elephant in the room: aging worship leaders viewed with disdain in the local church. Granted this attitude is seldom publically expressed, but it is still there. After all, can a worship leader in their 40s or 50s really connect with the modern worship culture? The most common answer is no. The result: experienced worship pastors are being unceremoniously dumped and replaced with newer, trendier models. The implications of this attitude have placed the lifelong calling as worship pastor in peril.¹⁶⁶

Additionally, Gordon has noted that the Baby Boomer generation, who, as previously noted, are now firmly in positions of authority in many churches, have a lasting veneration for youthfulness and youth culture. While previous generations have upheld values of wisdom and experience found with age, the baby boomer generation seems to have gone in a different direction. Myers describes the generational attitude of the baby boomers:

Youth culture...began with my generation. The notion of a separate youth culture is post-1950s. It is we, the middle-aged leadership of the church, who are blinded by our own experience, incapable of imagining that "the young" need not be segregated into their own culture but welcomed into the existing culture. We regard our own abnormality, our own adolescent resistance to joining adult culture and tradition, as a universal reality that we now impose on the next generation, without first consulting them to ask whether they wish to remain ghettoized in an adolescent world.¹⁶⁷

He continues:

Biblical wisdom literature encourages the young to respect and emulate their seniors, not rebel against them. My generation tragically rejected such wisdom, and appears incapable

¹⁶⁴ Redman, 14.

¹⁶⁵ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26.

¹⁶⁶ Frank S. Page and L. Lavon Gray, *Hungry for Worship: Challenges and Solutions for Today's Church* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2014), 141.

¹⁶⁷ Gordon, 160.

of perceiving or repenting of its own unbiblical paedocentrism. We think, perhaps sincerely (though dull-wittedly), that we are "concerned for the youth," when we are actually concerned to preserve the cultural abnormality of youth *culture*.¹⁶⁸

In addition, Zac Hicks writes, "The phrase 'youth culture' would have been unintelligible prior to the 60s, but now it is common speak. The glamorization of youthfulness affects everything from marketing and entertainment to presidential elections and local church ministry. And obsession with youth culture has affected the ministry of worship, as well."¹⁶⁹

While there is a limited amount of literature having to do with the values of youthfulness, fashion, and physical attractiveness of worship musicians, enough observers have noted the phenomenon to safely recognize it as a trend. When we pair these qualities with the concept of niche marketing and the generational values of the baby boomer generation, we can begin to see how the phenomenon may be materializing and functioning.

Forms and Medium

One recurring topic in the literature was the idea that the forms we use to communicate content sometimes communicate much more than what we intend. Often quoted in the literature examined was 1960s media ecologist Marshall McLuhan's claim that "the medium is the message."¹⁷⁰ Myers notes the lack of attention given to forms and medium in our conversations about worship contextualization, saying, "Most of the Christian criticism of popular culture has focused on *content* while ignoring *form*. A generation after Marshall McLuhan, the Church still

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 161.

¹⁶⁹ Zac Hicks, "Worship Leading, Ageism, and the Fear of Getting Old," *Worship Theology and Thought*, Zac Hicks: Worship. Church. Theology. Culture., July 24, 2014, <https://www.zachicks.com/worship-leading-ageism-and-the-fear-of-getting-old-repost/>.

¹⁷⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; repr., London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 7, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/reader.action?docID=4643237>.

behaves as if the forms of culture, especially the forms of mass media and the role they play in our lives, are value-neutral."¹⁷¹

Harold Best, in his book, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, asserts that "music is morally neutral."¹⁷² He makes the case that music without text cannot be inherently good or evil.¹⁷³

However, he acknowledges that people can and do make their own connections between music and meaning. Best notes that while music itself is morally neutral, it is "capable of carrying strong or shifting moral messages."¹⁷⁴

On the other hand, critics like Myers and Gordon insist that musical forms cannot be considered neutral. Gordon writes:

The sensibilities of pop culture and those of Christianity are almost entirely opposed to each other, and when we attempt to force Christianity into the constraints of an individual-affirming, consumerist, monogenerational, immanentistic genre, it simply won't fit. Inevitably, the content is shaped by the form into which it is put, and the message becomes a casual, consumerist 'Hey, what do you think about this?' rather than a call to 'repentance that leads to life' (Acts 11:18).¹⁷⁵

Gordon feels that popular music as a genre communicates something far too casual for the worship of God, but whether or not he is right is not the point of this study. Rather, it is his assertion that form can communicate meaning that should not be too quickly dismissed. For when we consider the way in which popular music has been borrowed for the church setting, we must acknowledge that it is not merely content and musical style—the elements that are most often discussed—that are of concern, but also form and medium.

¹⁷¹ Myers, 22.

¹⁷² Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1993), 53.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷⁵ Gordon, 92.

Myers is likewise concerned with form, though he still seems to be focused on the sound of the music:

The key word in this business is *useful*. How useful is it to borrow a cultural form if that form effectively cancels out the content you're using it to communicate? There are many instances of some very dubious borrowings in the history of the Church. As missionaries have taken the gospel to new cultures, it has always been tempting to recast the message of redemption in familiar forms. But some of those forms have been inappropriate as vehicles of holy truth, either because they introduced fatal distortion or misunderstanding, or because they were so intertwined with ungodly practices that their affiliation with the gospel seemed to sanction the very behavior the gospel should have challenged.

More subtly, achieving popularity by "sounding like" establishes a curious pattern for people striving to avoid being conformed to the pattern of this world. The implicit message of such celebrity is that Christians are successful to the extent that they mimic the models established by the world.¹⁷⁶

Meyers comes very close to recognizing the secular ritual that is at work in the live performance of contemporary worship music when he notes that cultural forms may effectively cancel out the message that is trying to be communicated.

What needs to be clearly stated is that it is not only musical style that has been contextualized, but secular ritual as well. James K. A. Smith has done some of the most recognized work on the subject of "secular liturgies." In "An Open Letter to Praise Bands," he writes:

I sometimes worry that we've unwittingly encouraged you to import certain *forms of performance* that are, in effect, "secular liturgies" and not just neutral "methods." Without us realizing it, the dominant practices of performance train us to relate to music (and musicians) in a certain way: as something for our pleasure, as entertainment, as a largely passive experience. The function and goal of music in these "secular liturgies" is quite different from the function and goal of music in Christian worship.¹⁷⁷

Some evangelical churches that have adopted contemporary worship music as their primary vessel of music-making have also emulated the secular rock concert in doing so. Musical style

¹⁷⁶ Myers, 21.

¹⁷⁷ James K. A. Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands," Fors Clavigera, February 20, 2012, <http://forsclavigera.blogspot.com/2012/02/open-letter-to-praise-bands.html>.

may be neutral, but it is more difficult to argue that the medium of the secular rock concert communicates nothing. When a secular ritual like a rock concert is borrowed for use in the church, it must be determined whether or not that ritual carries meaning that extends beyond just the music.

Celebrity

Occasionally, concern was presented in the literature around the problem of celebrity. Most of the concern has to do with the potential of media (how content is delivered) to place individuals in positions where they might become the object of worship. Often a famous pastor or musician, even with pure intentions can become unintentionally celebrated at an unhealthy level. Researcher, Tom Wagner describes the process by which celebrity is created, writing, "Celebrity is created through repetition of mediated images that over time coalesce into a set of meanings and associations in the hearts and minds of those who consume them."¹⁷⁸ Referencing two artists from the Australian megachurch, Hillsong, he continues, "It is not Zschech or Morgan who speak to those who engage with their songs, but their 'celebritized' mediated images and the values associated with those images."¹⁷⁹ Kim adds, "While the digital age did not create the cult of Christian celebrity, it has certainly enhanced and advanced it exponentially."¹⁸⁰ Dawn has also expresses her concern:

The idolatrous adulation of "famous" Christians corresponds to this concentrated subjectivism and vicarious living. Instead of recognizing the value of their own daily experience of following Jesus, some believers falsely elevate big-name stars or let others do the ministry. As a result, performers of contemporary Christian music and hyped-up speakers and writers are elevated to celebrity status.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Wagner, 21.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Kim, 72.

¹⁸¹ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 50–51.

Wagner has noted the delicate balance that must be taken by large churches that market products created by their own celebrity musicians. He writes, "Hillsong's transnational structure dictates that it uses mass-mediated, 'celebritized' images of its musicians to communicate its values efficiently. However, it must do so in an evangelical Christian context in which only Jesus is the 'Famous One' and celebrity is often viewed with suspicion. The 'celebrity' of its musicians must therefore be carefully managed."¹⁸²

Pragmatism / Methods / Technique

Pragmatism is the reliance upon methods to achieve desired results. In the American church this has most often meant applying sociological CGM methods for the purpose of numerical growth. Kim describes the relationship between the pragmatism of modern NAECs with business models:

The modern evangelical church in America has been heavily influenced in recent decades by business-leadership models. While there have been some benefits to the organizational infrastructures and practices of our churches, this influence also pushed us heavily in the direction of pragmatism and results-based decision making. A pragmatic approach and goal setting to achieve results are vitally important and they should not lose their place in church leadership. However, we must become more aware of the ways in which they've blurred our vision when it comes to thinking critically about our methodologies.¹⁸³

Additionally, Kim writes, "Often, the desire to 'serve and reach as many as we can' in the digital age devolves into methods that essentially equate to, 'what's the fastest, most efficient way for us to get bigger?'"¹⁸⁴ Hunt adds, "Not all evangelicals recognize the societal repercussions of electronic media because many of them operate under a paradigm of pragmatism. Evangelicals attach their efforts to build the Kingdom with the same market values that dominate consumer

¹⁸² Wagner, 13.

¹⁸³ Kim, 59.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 10.

culture, hoping to be as successful."¹⁸⁵ The implication is that although growing churches demonstrate a potentially positive and hoped-for result, the focus in a consumer-driven, results-based, pragmatic model can quickly devolve to choices that are only made on the basis of numbers and results.

It has already been noted that Charles G. Finney was paramount in establishing methods as a means for conversion and that the Church Growth, Seeker-Sensitive, and megachurch movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have influenced a wide variety of churches in recent decades. Likewise, Stetzer's observations on the negative side effects of the Church Growth Movement included what he referred to as "methodological mania."¹⁸⁶ These observations are eloquently summarized by Lori J. Danielson as she states the main problem that occurs when Christian worship is replaced with Church Growth Movement pragmatism:

The Church Growth Movement (CGM) and the subsequent mega-church/market-driven philosophy and methodology have influenced the manner in which many evangelical churches perceive their calling and purpose. Although the goal of this philosophy was to help churches evangelize the lost, the methodology pragmatically implemented ways to boost high attendance at church activities. This priority has made the main corporate worship service the gateway to attract as many people as possible to attend the church. This relegates the worship of God to a secondary position, changing the way music is presented and eliminating other elements altogether.¹⁸⁷

Consumerism / Capitalism / Marketing / Competition / Choice

Another topic that emerged from the literature was the observation that modern evangelical churches have been thrust into a competitive, capitalist system of consumption and exchange. This may have already been somewhat true prior to the CGM, seeker sensitive, and

¹⁸⁵ Hunt, 25.

¹⁸⁶ Stetzer, "What's the Deal w/ the Church Growth Movement? Part 2."

¹⁸⁷ Lori J. Danielson, "An Assessment of the Influence of Church Growth Philosophy on Small Church Worship," (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 1, Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2177304058%3Faccountid%3D12085>.

mega-church movements of the 1980s, and 1990s. But when market-based strategies began to be employed in those decades by an increasing number of churches, a system of capitalistic competition was established. Sanders draws attention to the phenomenon, writing, "Corporate megachurches can be seen merely as the logical outgrowth of churches' efforts to brand and market themselves in order to compete for a dwindling supply of customers"¹⁸⁸

Research supports the validity of this assertion. Darin W. White and Clovis F. Simas note that "a fairly large percentage of modern churches in the U.S. have adopted a market-oriented culture."¹⁸⁹ They draw the connection between churchgoers and consumers, writing, "The resource allocation market represents those individuals that consume the products and/or services that a nonprofit produces. Thus, for churches those individuals would primarily be its members and visitors."¹⁹⁰

Cultural critics have been quick to draw attention to the problematic nature of this shift. Dawn establishes that in a market-driven system, congregants become consumers. She expresses her concern, writing, "The greatest danger of a marketing approach to sharing the gospel with the world around the Church is that it treats people as consumers—perhaps religious consumers, but consumers nonetheless."¹⁹¹ One of her primary concerns is that churches are forced to become competitors in such a system. She writes, "A capitalistic world must necessarily be competitive. Products must outsell all others in order for corporations to survive. Consequently, success is inherently linked in our contemporary mind-set with winning the competition for numbers. The

¹⁸⁸ George Sanders, "Religious Non-Places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 1 (2016): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605>.

¹⁸⁹ Darin W. White and Clovis F. Simas, "An Empirical Investigation of the Link Between Market Orientation and Church Performance," *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 13, no. 2 (May, 2008): 153, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/nvsm.314>.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁹¹ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 64.

danger to the Church is enormous and, strangely, often not obvious. Quality suffers when the main concern is quantity."¹⁹² She adds, "The universal Church is harmed when local churches compete with one another to have the most members."¹⁹³

In addition to her critique of how a capitalist model negatively affects churches with an attitude of competition, Dawn draws attention to consumerism's inability to actually meet people's spiritual needs. She writes, "Since consumption can never keep its promises to fill the aching void in people's lives, to create congregational members who treat religion as another consumer item is to train them not to appreciate the way in which God really does fill our emptiness."¹⁹⁴

Along these lines, Gordon explains how commerce is purposefully designed to only be temporarily satisfying. He writes, "Commerce requires consumers to consume; and commerce manipulates consumption by creating a false sense of dissatisfaction with the old, so that individuals long for something newer."¹⁹⁵

The notion that modern churches are deeply involved in a system of capitalistic commerce is supported by a significant and growing amount of research. The research of Anna E. Nekola, Tom Wagner, Monique M. Ingalls, Andrew Mall, and George Sanders all explore how church and worship music can be viewed through a capitalist economic lens. For instance, Mall writes, "By understanding worship music's modes of production, distribution, mediation, and consumption, as well as the ways in which worship musicians and worshippers circulate and operate in systems of exchange, we can better understand the (human) forces that shape worship

¹⁹² Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 51.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁹⁵ Gordon, 106.

experiences for Christians throughout the United States, around the world, and in our local churches."¹⁹⁶ In the introduction to her chapter, "Negotiating the Tensions of U.S. Worship Music in the Marketplace," Anna E. Nekola writes, "This chapter traces the theological and marketing currents that since the late 1990s have characterized 'worship' as 'lifestyle,' moving 'worship' from the collective and noncommercial domain of church into a set of commodities, including music, that can be purchased and consumed individually in private domains, like one's car or house."¹⁹⁷ In much of the literature, the worship service itself is seen as a commodity. According to the literature, many NAECs are entangled with a system of capitalistic consumerism in ways that did not exist prior to the megachurch movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

Excellence

Recently, the term "excellence" has emerged in conversations about worship. As churches have begun to place greater emphasis on production values, excellence has become a concern. Of course, musical excellence is not without its biblical precedent. In Exodus 23:19 the Israelites are commanded to bring the best of the firstfruits to the Lord and in Numbers 18:29-30 they are commanded, "Present as the LORD's portion the best and holiest part of everything given to you." But in many NAECs the term excellence has come to refer to an acceptable level of performance for production purposes. Bob Kauflin writes, "We become more concerned with making corporate worship bigger, better, and more involved. We balk at the thought of someone without musical training and study leading congregational worship. In the process we lose sight

¹⁹⁶ Mall, 305.

¹⁹⁷ Anna E. Nekola, "Negotiating the Tensions of U.S. Worship Music in the Marketplace," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Ana Reily (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 513, Oxford Handbooks Online, <https://www-oxfordhandbooks-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199859993.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199859993-e-33>.

of what makes our offering acceptable in the first place."¹⁹⁸ In short, "excellence" has come to mean "perfection" in certain arenas and God does not require perfection. Rory Noland suggests that we need to understand excellence differently. He says, "Pursuing excellence means we do our best with what we have, to the glory of God."¹⁹⁹

Emotional Experience / Sentimentality / Therapy

The topic of emotional experience emerged occasionally in the literature. Emotions themselves are not wrong. Certainly God made humans with the capacity to experience the full range of emotions and Christ himself can be shown to engage in a wide range of emotional expressions ranging from joy to anger to grief. Emotional experience comes under criticism in the literature when it is marketed as a product to be consumed in the form of "Christian therapy," where the emotion expressed is not justified by the circumstance, or when one emotion is granted superiority over others. Dawn notes that by constantly communicating only an emotion of happiness, churches distort the church's message into a "'health, wealth, and victory' therapy."²⁰⁰ Gordon is likewise critical of what he calls "sentimentality," or the expression of unwarranted emotions. He writes, "*Sentimentality*... designates the desire to experience that which is moving, even if there is no external occasion to prompt the feeling. In this sense, sentimentality is *unmerited* or *unjustified* emotional stirring or passion."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Bob Kauflin, "Idolatry on Sunday Mornings, Pt. 5," *Worship Matters*, December 14, 2005, <https://worshipmatters.com/2005/12/14/worship-service-idolatry-on-sunday-mornings-part-5/>.

¹⁹⁹ Rory Noland, *The Heart of the Artist: A Character-Building Guide for You and Your Ministry Team* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 137.

²⁰⁰ Dawn, 87.

²⁰¹ Gordon, 134.

While it is difficult to argue against the feeling and expression of emotions in worship, the danger of seeking an emotional experience from the worship service is that experiencing those feelings can become the criteria by which worship is judged on a weekly basis.

Progress

The theme of progress or progressivism as an American value system was also evident in the literature. Hunt writes, "The idea that humans are progressing in a definite and desirable direction was generally unknown until the Enlightenment."²⁰² He posits, "The modern notion of progress began with Bacon, Newton, and Locke, and with the declaration that scientific technique can provide us the expectation of continuous material and social improvement."²⁰³ Gordon, writes, "Americans have tended, therefore, to be forward-looking rather than past-looking." He continues, "In a nontechnical and perhaps only implicit way, then, Americans have tended to be progressivists; as such, they regard the past with contempt, as do Marxists."²⁰⁴ Postman makes a similar assertion, writing, "All that is required to make it stick is a population that devoutly believes in the inevitability of progress. And in this sense, all Americans are Marxists, for we believe nothing if not that history is moving us toward some preordained paradise and that technology is the force behind that movement."²⁰⁵

The trouble from a Christian standpoint with the American value of progressivism, is that it essentially ignores God. Hunt says, "This is the great danger of progressivism—going at it alone as if God was not there or did not care. The modern notion of progress abandons moral discourse for technological know-how. It becomes impossible to question technological

²⁰² Hunt, 52.

²⁰³ Ibid. 53.

²⁰⁴ Gordon, 115.

²⁰⁵ Postman, 158.

innovation from a moral or ethical stance when we believe civilization is constantly advancing."²⁰⁶

Technology / Technopoly

The role of modern technology is a subject of significant interest in the literature. On its own, technology can be seen as a fairly benign or even helpful entity. After all, the ark constructed by Noah according to God's instructions was an impressive piece of technology that served to preserve the human race from total destruction (Gen. 6-8). However, when married to the American ideal of progress—the idea that all advancement is positive—technology can become a cause for concern. For a number of cultural critics and media ecologists, it has. Neil Postman famously dubbed the extreme end of this value system as "Technopoly." He writes:

Technopoly is a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology. This requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs. Those who feel most comfortable in Technopoly are those who are convinced that technical progress is humanity's supreme achievement and the instrument by which our most profound dilemmas may be solved.²⁰⁷

Myers takes up the warning cry concerning technology by asserting that we have allowed technology to take the place of God. He writes:

If not omnipresent, the electronic media are anywhere we want them to be. If not omnipotent, they have substantial social and political power. If not omniscient, they are nonetheless the source of all sorts of knowledge for many people. If not eternal, they do (thanks to oldies stations and reruns on cable) have a certain timelessness.

But more consequential than these superficial analogies is the fact that the media, especially television, serve in our culture a role once reserved for God: the role of defining reality.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Hunt, 54.

²⁰⁷ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), 71.

²⁰⁸ Myers, 161.

It is clear that both of these authors have significant concerns about the way in which technology has asserted itself in people's lives and in our institutions.

Chapter Summary

A large body of literature exists that pertains to the relationship between church and local culture in general. Biblical commentary on passages relating to the subject are plentiful, but while helpful in a general sense, fail to definitively provide clear instruction on the practice of contextualizing worship practice with cultural practice. What can be shown is that Biblical passages dealing with the relationship between worship and culture fail to demonstrate any validation for a seeker-sensitive approach. It seems that a concern for nonconformity may be the more prominent apprehension, but there is no clear prohibition of worship practices other than those that are clearly sinful.

An investigation of the works of worship historians demonstrates that a clear historical arc exists wherein the practice of inverting worship and evangelism and the elevation of methodology extends from the time of the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening, through the revivalism of Charles G. Finney and subsequent revivalists, and took shape in the modern church through the Church Growth Movement, seeker services, mega-churches, and modern multiplication movements of church planting and multi-site models.

Literature dealing with critical contextualization and syncretism demonstrates that both are possible in the North American environment and that one is never far from the other. While some authors laud the success of culturally contextualized churches, others demonstrate concern that such churches may be in danger of syncretism.

A limited amount of literature specifically identifies the characteristics of CR churches. Some of the characteristics identified in the literature include: an emphasis on production values;

the implementation of a visual spectacle—often resembling a rock concert—made possible by modern technology; attractive, youthful, and fashionable musicians; an emphasis on the production of consumable goods; and an elevated use of modern technology.

Finally, by examining the writings of cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians, several themes of concern emerged relating to the practice of contextualization in the North American environment. Such themes included: relevance, novelty, individualism, entertainment, physical appearance, form, celebrity, pragmatism, consumerism, excellence, emotional experience, progress, and technology. Although some of these themes are often touted as idolatry by the critics, idolatry is difficult to prove. On the other hand, it is also easily overlooked. What can safely be asserted is that there are certain American value systems that are at work in particular NAECs that when pushed to their extremes can result in practices within churches that are at odds with Biblical teaching and orthodox Christianity.

The literature review initially revealed that there were several themes identified by cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians that overlap with the definitive characteristics found in the CR model of worship. The overlap demonstrated in this chapter suggests the need for an in-depth investigation that takes into account cultural value systems, the characteristics of the CR churches examined, biblical principles, historical background, and principles of critical contextualization in order to determine if the contextualization of cultural values has led to a form of syncretism in some NAECs. The method of research employed to answer the research questions and hypotheses will be outlined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, what appears to be a new model of worship practice in some North American evangelical churches has begun to emerge. Because it is the duty of worship planners in every context to evaluate worship practice for biblical faithfulness, this qualitative study sought to ask and answer relevant questions regarding the characteristics of the new model, cultural values in the North American context, and principles found in Scripture. While reaching the culture with the good news of the gospel is important for every Christian, it is also important to have a firm grasp on the dangers of syncretism when local cultural practices, beliefs, and value systems are adopted for use in Christian worship through a process deemed as contextualization.

That such a situation might exist in the North American context should not come as a surprise and should not be treated any differently than it would be in any other context. It is imperative that local worship planners identify the practices, ideologies, and value systems that are at work in the North American context, evaluate them for biblical faithfulness, and purge that which is not in alignment with biblical Christianity from local worship practices.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an explanation of the methodology used to conduct this qualitative historical study. The research design, the process of gathering data, source analysis, data analysis, and synthesis and interpretation of data used in order to answer the research questions will be explained.

Research Design

The qualitative historical research design was used to identify and assess the characteristics and background of what appears to be an emerging model of worship practice in some NAECs that place a significant emphasis on the value of cultural relevance. This design is in accordance with John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell's description of qualitative research since the data collected builds from specifics in the form of observed characteristics of the churches found in the literature to more general themes that may explain the phenomenon that is taking place.²⁰⁹

Multiple sources of data were collected, the researcher reviewed the data, made sense of it, and organized it into codes and themes that "cut across all of the data sources."²¹⁰ Since Creswell notes that qualitative researchers "work inductively, building patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information,"²¹¹ this study qualifies as a qualitative work. Additionally, the study is historical because it explores past events in order to better understand the present and anticipate possible effects on the future.²¹²

Research Questions

Research questions and hypotheses were developed in order to clarify the nature of the development being addressed. The following research questions are answered in this study:

²⁰⁹ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 4.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² "Qualitative Study Design," Deakin University Library, last modified October 27, 2020, <https://deakin.libguides.com/qualitative-study-designs/historical>.

RQ1: What are the characteristics of the worship model that have begun to emerge in the early decades of the twenty-first century in some North American Evangelical churches?

RQ2: What historical influences and value systems inherent to North American culture are driving the emergence of the new model of worship practice in some North American Evangelical Churches in the early decades of the twenty-first century?

Hypotheses

The hypotheses for this study are:

H1: The characteristics of the model that have begun to emerge in the early decades of the twenty-first century in some North American Evangelical churches include the production of highly affective worship experiences, the production and consumption of goods as a part of worship, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of modern technology.

H2: The historical influences and value systems that are driving the emergence of the new model in North America are the elevation of evangelism above worship, pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism.

Process of Gathering Data

The process of gathering data began with a general sense on the part of the researcher that a new development had been taking place in some North American evangelical churches over the course of the last several years. As a vocational contemporary worship leader with fifteen years of experience, the researcher qualified as a participant in this local context. Based upon first-hand observations and the observations of other researchers, the researcher deduced that some North American evangelical churches that emphasize the value of cultural relevance were

exerting a high level of influence on evangelical churches across a broad spectrum. While many of these churches can be categorized as megachurches, size and denomination did not appear to be a determining factor.

Having previously studied the missiological concepts of critical contextualization and syncretism, the researcher had a vague suspicion that some unseen historical influences and cultural values might be at work in the emerging model. Yet the characteristics of the model and what forces might be at work in its emergence were initially vague. Therefore, the first step in gathering data was to seek out sources including books, journal articles, dissertations, theses, and magazine articles that dealt with biblical principles concerning the relationship between church and culture, concepts of critical contextualization and syncretism, the identification of characteristics of the new model of worship, the history of North American church movements that may have led to the emergence of the new model, and writings that sought to identify North American cultural values that have the potential to be antithetical to biblical Christianity.

Initially, a very small number of journal articles were discovered that identified the characteristics of the CR worship model. These articles confirmed that other researchers were observing the same phenomenon. The scarcity of these sources also confirmed that there was a gap in the current research having to do with the CR model.

Next, the researcher sought to discover sources that addressed some of the cultural values that he suspected existed in North American culture and even in some evangelical churches. Since these values are likely to have been developed, maintained, and added to over time, sources were not limited to recent publications. As thesis sources were examined they revealed other noteworthy sources to be consulted. Interestingly, a large number of these texts came from the time period when megachurches, seeker sensitive services, and Church Growth Movement

theory were emerging as topics of great interest—roughly from the mid-1980s through about 2010. Authors such as Marva J. Dawn, Os Guinness, Ken Myers, T. David Gordon, and Neil Postman were essential in identifying themes of cultural idolatry (i.e. prominent cultural values, beliefs, or practices that were deemed idolatrous in nature by the authors) in the initial stages of this project. Authors who continued in the same vein of cultural criticism in more recent years, such as Jay Y. Kim and Arthur W. Hunt III tended to focus on the topic of technology—picking up where Neil Postman had left off prior to the advent of much of the modern technology in use today.

The next step was to examine biblical passages having to do with the relationship between church and culture. Several of these passages came to light because they were repeatedly referenced in the literature. These passages were studied with the aid of commentaries written by notable scholars to see if any insights could be gained. Additionally, the topics of contextual criticism and syncretism were reviewed and sources were gathered that expounded upon these concepts.

Analysis of Sources

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, sources were examined according to a number of procedures provided by Creswell and Creswell. Among these, the triangulation of data from multiple sources was used to "build a coherent justification for themes."²¹³ When descriptions or themes were mentioned by multiple sources, those descriptions and themes were seen as having a higher level of credibility. When descriptions or themes arose only in the works of a single author they were identified as needing further verification. Potential bias on the part of the researcher was also addressed in the study. Especially when engaging in

²¹³ Creswell and Creswell, 200.

cultural criticism, personal bias must be honestly evaluated. Doing so creates an open and honest narrative that resonates with readers.²¹⁴

Analysis of Data

The intent of analyzing various forms of qualitative data is to make sense out of text and images.²¹⁵ The process in this study involved taking apart data—in this case in the form of descriptions, themes, and observations—and then putting them back together.²¹⁶ Often various documents were being examined simultaneously since the search for emerging themes began as a very broad endeavor and as themes became more clearly defined, further research was both possible and necessary. As is common in qualitative research, data analysis and the write-up of findings were often taking place in conjunction as the researcher proceeded through the project.²¹⁷ Since not all of the information acquired in a qualitative study can be used, some themes had to be disregarded based on the sheer volume of information that emerged.²¹⁸

The researcher sought to develop a process by which documents could be analyzed for data. The first step was to organize and prepare the documents for analysis.²¹⁹ As documents were collected, they began to fall into various general categories within the study. These documents were separated when possible into these general categories—sometimes physically and at other times digitally. Second, documents were thoroughly read and examined in order to

²¹⁴ Creswell and Creswell, 200.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

observe the emergence of important themes and subcategories.²²⁰ During this process the researcher began to develop ideas based on the data.²²¹ Next, a rough process of coding data was employed that made use of circling key words in the texts, making notes having to do with themes and descriptions in the margins, and underlining and using brackets to identify key sections of texts that pertained to the project.²²² These were later easily revisited for the purpose of more specific note-taking and citation as the paper was written. As themes, descriptions, and other information began to present themselves in clearer terms, it was possible to generate categorizations that were relevant to the study.²²³ Finally, these were represented in the qualitative narrative through a discussion of interconnecting themes and illustrative figures.²²⁴

Synthesis and Interpretation of Data

Once sources were collected, organized into general categories, analyzed for validity and reliability, coded, and data was organized thematically, the findings in each specific area were examined in light of the findings in the other areas of research. Additionally, characteristics of the model that could be identified as belonging to a larger thematic category were reassigned and narrow themes that could be placed into broader categorizations were likewise regrouped. This made it possible to understand some of the identified characteristics of CR churches as outcomes of broader value systems.

²²⁰ Creswell and Creswell, 193.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 194.

²²⁴ Ibid., 195.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Categorizing the Characteristics of Cultural Relevance Churches

Introduction

Research revealed a number of characteristics found in Cultural Relevance churches based on the observations of several well-qualified researchers. Many of the characteristics that emerged were epitomized by certain megachurches, churches that have more recently come to be called "hipster" churches, and what Nathan Myrick has referred to as the "celebrity model" of music ministry.²²⁵ The research revealed that church size did not determine the presence of the identifying characteristics and that churches of various backgrounds are engaging in similar practices. Since a wide spectrum of churches was involved, this study sought to focus on shared characteristics of such churches in an effort to illuminate what processes and values are driving the emergence of the model and propelling its influence. The research examined served to provide examples of emerging practices and characteristics.

As the accounts of researchers such as Nathan Myrick, George Sanders, Brett McCracken, Kate Bowler, Wen Reagan, and Andrew Mall revealed descriptive and thematic information about churches that seem to be exhibiting similar values and practices, it became clear that the individual elements described could be regrouped into broader categories that helped to explain their usage. These broader categories included the development of highly affective worship experiences, the production and consumption of goods and services, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of modern technology. None

²²⁵ Nathan Myrick has coined the phrase "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," while Brett McCracken and George Sanders prefer to use "hipster" in their descriptions. Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan refer to a variety of prosperity-gospel megachurches that follow similar patterns.

of these categorizations are intended to serve as accusations or criticisms, but rather serve as descriptors that are meant to help code and categorize the information that emerged in the study.

Highly Affective Worship Experiences

Research revealed that one of the notable characteristics of the Cultural Relevance model of worship is the generation of highly affective worship experiences that stimulate the visual and aural senses in particular. Often an environment resembling a rock concert is created through the use of concert lighting, darkened rooms, curtains, and staging which all work to draw attention toward the stage.²²⁶ Smoke machines and theatrical stagecraft often contribute to the visual experience as well.²²⁷ Digital lyric projection contributes to the visual presentation as it is frequently accompanied by highly stimulating visual imagery.²²⁸ IMAG, or image magnification, is sometimes used to project the images of worship musicians onto various screens, often with song lyrics layered over the video of the musicians.²²⁹

While visual stimulation is accentuated in order to create the affective experience, the element of sound is amplified as well. Often, in keeping with the rock concert motif, the worship music is played at high volume levels and mixed by skilled and knowledgeable audio engineers.²³⁰ Some Cultural Relevance churches seek to emulate the sound of popular recordings of worship songs since the recordings are authenticated by their association with recognized

²²⁶ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25.

²²⁷ Bowler and Reagan, 197–98.

²²⁸ Kim, 44.

²²⁹ Bowler and Reagan, 200.

²³⁰ Mall, 303.

celebrity worship leaders and bands.²³¹ The resulting sonic product could generally be described as loud, professionally mixed, and as similar as possible to the recorded artifact.

The physical environment in which the affective experience takes place could typically be classified as what Sanders refers to as a religious "non-place"—an environment that is largely devoid of identifying features that help a person to locate a space within a historical, geographic, or narrative framework.²³² Religious non-places are often designed to emulate corporate spaces such as malls, movie theaters, and concert venues.²³³ Such physical spaces give "the sense of being 'nowhere' in particular."²³⁴ Some churches have embraced the "non-place" as a way to avoid being associated with traditional Christian churches.

Production and Consumption of Goods and Services

Research showed that the CR model of worship has a significant relationship with the production and consumption of goods and services. Even the affective worship experience that has just been described can be considered a consumable product in such churches. For that matter, an argument can be made that some system of consumption can take place in nearly any church setting regardless of its identifying characteristics. Yet, in the type of church being examined, the production and consumption of goods is often purposeful and local creativity is highly valued.

Songwriting ministries are regularly found in such churches and the production of live worship albums is commonplace.²³⁵ Songs that are written, produced, and recorded by CR

²³¹ Myrick, "Double Authenticity," 22.

²³² Sanders, "Religious Non-Places," 72.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 73.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

churches' worship ministries are regularly sung in Sunday morning worship services.²³⁶ The number of churches that encourage their worship leaders and musicians to write and record original music has greatly increased since the early 2000s, especially in the case of megachurches like Hillsong and Bethel.²³⁷ However, the increased affordability and accessibility of recording and sound technology combined with the ability to create independent music labels and deliver music affordably through streaming platforms, has allowed churches with more modest financial and human resources to engage in the production of original music as well.²³⁸

The production and consumption of goods is not limited to the worship service or recorded audio products. CR churches also encourage the production of various consumable goods from members of the congregation such as coffee, apparel, foodstuffs, and various arts as a positive way to interact with the local community and to form culture.²³⁹ Additionally, the sale of church-branded merchandise in CR churches has become a growing trend in recent years.²⁴⁰

The Involvement of the Worship Team in Marketing

Some of the churches being examined prefer to place the young, fashionable, and attractive on their platforms during worship services.²⁴¹ These qualities were frequently

²³⁵ Mall, 320.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Myrick, "Double Authenticity," 25.

²³⁸ Christopher Andrew Brown, "The New Digital Media: Opportunities for Church Sound Recording, Songwriting, and Music Publishing" (D.W.S. thesis, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, 2020), 1, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2766>.

²³⁹ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26.

²⁴⁰ Ben Kirby devotes a chapter entitled "Church Merch" to the discussion of this emerging trend in his book, *PreachersNSneakers: Authenticity in an Age of For-Profit Faith and (Wannabe) Celebrities* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2021), 161–72.

²⁴¹ "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26.

mentioned in the literature that examined CR churches. Bowler and Reagan were especially cognizant of the emphasis on beauty, the vibrancy of youth, and the pursuit of youth culture in their study on prosperity-gospel megachurches.²⁴² While this characteristic was viewed in some cases as being merely a reflection of a church's demographic makeup, the phenomenon can perhaps best be understood as a matter of branding in a system that markets worship to a niche group or target market of Christian consumers. An effective brand communicates the values and purpose of an organization among its stakeholders, and does so by demonstrating a clear understanding of the cultural codes of its target market.²⁴³ It can be argued, then, that churches that limit their worship teams to the young, fashionable, and attractive do so—knowingly or unknowingly—in an effort to communicate and market certain values to a specific target group. Simply put, churches that wish to attract a certain demographic are likely to represent the same demographic on the platform.

Elevated Use of Technology

Churches in the studies examined tended to be technologically savvy. That is to say that researchers consistently noted the evident use of modern technologies in both the production of the worship service and the delivery of the recorded event via the Internet, streaming media technology, and digital spaces. The production of highly affective worship services, which have already been discussed, would not be possible without the use of a wide array of modern technologies. Theatrical lighting, video projection, IMAG, smoke machines, and advanced audio sound reinforcement systems can all contribute to the production of the affective experience.

²⁴² Bowler and Reagan, 198–99.

²⁴³ Wagner, 17.

In addition to using technology in the production of the worship service, modern technology has greatly expanded the medium for delivering the worship service as a broadcasted production.²⁴⁴ While some churches and television ministries that had the financial and technical resources were already televising worship services in earlier decades, video and audio content can now be affordably disseminated via YouTube and other digital platforms, providing marketing benefits and easy accessibility to recorded or streamed artifacts.²⁴⁵ This has essentially opened up video production—what was once a very expensive and professionalized arena—to churches of various sizes and levels of financial and human resources.

Driving Forces

Introduction

Research in this project included an in-depth study of the concerns of cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians. As their writings were analyzed for themes relating to the study, a list of topics began to emerge. Many of these topics were described in terms of idolatry—although these claims are difficult to validate. As topics emerged from the study it became clear that there were major categories that represented significant systems and minor categories that fell within the major categories. Organizing the minor categories within the major categories helped to reveal how certain North American value systems are contributing to worship practice in some NAECs in general and in CR churches in particular. Additionally, this process revealed that the concerns of these authors fall overwhelmingly into one particular category—*consumerism*. This may suggest that as we look for potential syncretism and North American idols, *consumerism* has the potential to present the greatest threat. Table 1 illustrates

²⁴⁴ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model," 26.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

how the themes identified in the literature can be categorized according to several dominant groupings.

Table 1: Coding the Themes of Cultural Critics, Media Ecologists, and Theologians

Worship as Evangelism	Pragmatism	Consumerism	Technological Progressivism
1. <i>Relevance</i>	1. <i>Pragmatism</i> <i>Methods</i> <i>Technique</i>	1. <i>Novelty/Contemporaneity</i> 2. <i>Individualism</i> 3. <i>Entertainment</i> <i>Amusement</i> <i>Spectacle</i> 4. <i>Physical Appearance</i> 5. <i>Celebrity</i> 6. <i>Consumerism</i> <i>Marketing</i> <i>Competition</i> <i>Choice</i> 7. <i>Emotional Experience</i> <i>Sentimentality</i> <i>Therapy</i> 8. <i>Excellence</i>	1. <i>Progress</i> 2. <i>Technology/Technopoly</i>

The Elevation of Evangelism Over Worship

It has already been noted in Chapter Two that a series of historical events in the North American Evangelical Church have contributed to a philosophy that reallocates the worship service to a position that is subservient to evangelism. The camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening, the revivalist meetings and methods of Charles Grandison Finney and others, the principles of the Church Growth Movement, the implementation of seeker services, the influence of the megachurch movement, and the emergence of the modern church planting movement along with multisite models have all been a part of the development of this viewpoint. While these historical movements have done a great deal of good in terms of growing churches and

winning lost souls, they have also played a part in confusing the biblical roles of evangelism and worship.

Although evangelism is the responsibility of every Christian, confusing worship and evangelism has placed the burden of evangelism on the ability of the worship service to attract and convert unbelievers. In his 2013 dissertation, Scott M. Aniol wrote, "One of the most potentially difficult ministry relationships to reconcile has been that between worship and evangelism. The church growth movement addressed the issue by insisting that a church's primary service should be an evangelistic meeting designed to attract and meet the needs of 'seekers.'"²⁴⁶

Aniol is not alone in challenging the validity of this philosophy. Marva J. Dawn has suggested that the difference between worship and evangelism is a matter of what conversation is taking place. "Worship is the language of love and growth between believers and God," she writes, while, "evangelism is the language of introduction between those who believe and those who don't."²⁴⁷ "To confuse the two and put on worship the burden of evangelism," she continues, "robs the people of God of their responsibility to care about their neighbors, defrauds believers of transforming depth and steals from God the profound praise of which God is worthy."²⁴⁸

When the philosophy that worship is in the service of evangelism takes hold, it can become the basis and validation for many of the decisions made in churches. When evangelism

²⁴⁶ Scott M. Aniol, "The Mission of Worship: A Critique and Response to the Philosophy of Culture, Contextualization, and Worship of the North American Missional Church Movement" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, 2013), 1, <http://www.proquest.com/central/docview/1398906506/abstract/ED90CA752B7D4132PQ/3>.

²⁴⁷ Marva J. Dawn, "True Worship, Real Evangelism," *The Christian Century*, April 21, 1999, 455, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/217233002/abstract/6441A1E124E14A4DPQ/1>.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

becomes the almost exclusive purpose of a church, and attracting people to church takes the place of personal evangelism, things like methods, marketing, worship product, and means of delivery—all taken up under the umbrella of *cultural relevance*—can begin to take on elevated levels of importance in the life of a church. At that point, Christianity can begin to merge with local cultural values like pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism. Table 2 demonstrates how making these particular value systems ultimate can result in things other than God becoming the objects of worship.

Table 2: Potential North American Cultural Values at Work in Some NAECs

Value System	Potential Object(s) of Worship	Potential Biblical or Theological Problem
Pragmatism	Man-Made Methods	1. Reliance upon God and the work of the Holy Spirit can be all but eliminated when a reliance on methods becomes ultimate.
Consumerism	The Customer, the Product, and the Winner.	<p>1. When a product created to entice the customer is given greater attention than God it can become a spectacle or distraction that competes for the attention of the worshipper.</p> <p>2. When worship is designed primarily to serve the customer and compete in a market-based approach, the customer can become the object of worship rather than God (2 Tim. 4:3–4).</p> <p>3. When churches embrace a market-driven approach, they can begin to engage in competition with one another for customers. This undermines unity in the greater body of Christ (1 Cor. 1:12, 3:4; Psalm 133:1; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil 2:2, 1:27; Col. 3:14; Rom. 12:16; Eph. 4:1-6).</p> <p>4. Consumerism, by design, fosters discontent in order to persuade the customer to consume new products. Contentedness is a major teaching in Scripture (Phil. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 6:6-12; 2 Cor.</p>

		12:9-10; Prov. 19:23; Luke 3:14).
Technological Progressivism	Progress, Technology, and Humanity	1. The belief that human technological progress is both limitless and inherently good has the potential to eliminate trust in God, positioning human cleverness and innovation as primary salvific forces (Psalm 20:7; Gen. 11:1-9).

Pragmatism

The cultural value of *pragmatism*—closely related to the historical church movements identified above that have led to the confusion of the roles of evangelism and worship—became evident in the research. Simply put, *pragmatism* is a value system in which it is believed that the desired results can be achieved by applying the right methods. It is an American value in which something's value is measured by its ability to produce something good.²⁴⁹ When pragmatism becomes a primary value, the main question asked is, "Does it work?" In the case of churches that have been influenced by CGM theory, evangelism and conversion are the goal but attendance often becomes the standard by which success is measured.²⁵⁰ As a result, methods that result in increased attendance are often viewed in a positive light. While methodology is an essential and necessary element in any church, it is possible for churches to begin to rely more upon man-made *methods* and *techniques* than upon God, the power of the message of the Gospel, or the work of the Holy Spirit. When numerical growth—though potentially a positive outcome—becomes the primary objective in worship planning, worship planners can become more concerned with numerical results and the methods that deliver them than with planning biblically-sound worship. When the means of achieving numerical goals becomes ultimate, *pragmatism* can become an idol.

²⁴⁹ Sackett.

²⁵⁰ Danielson, 6.

Consumerism

Another dominant value system that emerged in this study was that of *consumerism*. The vast majority of concerns voiced in the literature of critics can be categorized under the heading of *consumerism* when we understand it to include all of the mechanisms of commerce including marketing, branding, production, consumption, etc. This may be an indication that consumerism is the most influential North American value system in this study. *Novelty, contemporaneity, individualism, entertainment, amusement, spectacle, physical appearance, celebrity, consumerism, marketing, competition, choice, emotional experience, sentimentality, therapy, and excellence* can all be explained by the values and mechanisms of a system of consumerism—which will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

The first danger of consumerism is that a product can come to be the object of worship rather than God. Of course, to some degree, production and consumption are inevitable. For instance, people must produce to earn a living and they must consume in order to survive. Productivity and creativity, when properly employed, can even be considered virtuous outcomes of being made in the image of God. Bezalel and Oholiab are mentioned prominently as skilled craftsmen who used their creative talents in the creation of the tabernacle (Exod. 36:1-3). Hiram was a craftsman who was especially skilled in working with bronze who came from Tyre to assist in the building of the first temple (1 Kings 7). When creativity and production in worship are properly motivated and honoring to God they can be essential components of biblical worship. On the other hand, creativity and production can also be responsible for producing idols. When Aaron crafted a golden calf for the Israelites to worship, God was greatly displeased (Exod. 32). It is when we replace the pursuit of creator God with the pursuit of the creation—essentially worshiping the product of our own hands—that we cross over into idolatry.

The second danger of consumerism lies with its tendency to make the consumer the object of worship. When churches began to embrace "promotional methods and congregation-building processes"—"all of them designed to exploit a highly segmented religious marketplace and capture a market niche of church members"²⁵¹—they initiated a process of redefining Christian worship in business terms. Arguably, this began in the 1980s and 1990s under the influence of the megachurch movement, but these practices remain common in many churches.

When we define consumerism as "the promotion of the consumer's interests,"²⁵² as the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary does, and employ this value in worship, it is not God who is being served in worship but the customer. The result is that the worshipper becomes the object of worship whose needs and demands must be met. In his dissertation, Raymond J. Rooney Jr. notes that this places the worship planner in a difficult position. He writes, "A decision must be made concerning whether the church's primary function is to provide a means of ministry to God or to meet the needs of the people. He/she must decide whether to plan and design the service to minister to God or to give the people what they want and expect."²⁵³ Dawn agrees, writing, "The contemporary demand to find a 'marketing niche' actually threatens genuine Christian community, for the purpose of true worship is to offer to God what will be pleasing to God."²⁵⁴

The fact that worship is intended to be in service to God rather than something that meets the needs and expectations of worshippers may come as a surprise to some Christians. To

²⁵¹ Donald A. Luidens, "Church Market," *Christian Century* 119, no. 16 (July 31, 2002): 28, https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ps/i.do?p=BIC&u=vic_liberty&id=GALE|A90534279&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon.

²⁵² Merriam Webster Dictionary, s.v. "consumerism," accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumerism>.

²⁵³ Raymond J. Rooney, Jr. "The Empty-Handed Church: Discerning Consumerism's Impact on Today's Christian" (D. Min. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY, 2016), 1, <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1805168059/abstract/FDE41EB13E204129PQ/2>.

²⁵⁴ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 130.

confirm this point, it is worth examining words for "service" in both the Hebrew and the Greek that are translated as "worship." Andrew E. Hill writes:

The basic meaning of the Hebrew root 'BD (*'abad*) is "work" or "service" (Exod. 5:18; Num. 8:25). However, the term can mean "worship" when used in the context of performing a service to false gods (Jer. 16:13) or the God of Israel (Exod. 3:12; Isa. 19:21, 23). The central idea of the word as it relates to worship is the notion of obedience to a set of divine commands, whether prescriptions for religious rites or rules governing behavior (Deut. 10:12, 20; Josh. 22:5). Service in this context is submission to the will of the deity and compliance with his divine directives.²⁵⁵

David Peterson makes a similar observation concerning the New Testament. He writes, "Another verb in the Greek Bible often translated 'to worship' is *latreuein*. In view of its use in non-biblical as well as biblical literature, it is more adequately rendered 'to serve.'"²⁵⁶ Peterson goes on to say, "*Latreuein* was rarely employed in Greek literature until the translators of the Septuagint gave it special prominence, using it to refer exclusively to the service rendered to God or to heathen gods, and especially service by means of sacrifice or some other ritual."²⁵⁷ Thus worship can be understood as an act of service unto God.

Yet when church and worship are viewed as a part of a religious services industry, the churchgoer is viewed as a customer whose business or brand loyalty must be competed for.²⁵⁸ In this scenario, rather than worshippers coming to serve God in worship, worship is designed to serve customers and to meet their needs. This is a reversal of biblical worship.

The third danger of consumerism is that it threatens Christian unity by forcing churches into a system of competition for customers. Dawn writes, "A capitalistic world must necessarily

²⁵⁵ Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts With Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 4.

²⁵⁶ David Peterson, *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 64.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ White and Simas, 155.

be competitive. Products must outsell all others in order for corporations to survive.

Consequently, success is inherently linked in our contemporary mind-set with winning the competition for numbers."²⁵⁹ Competing with one another in this way clearly goes against biblical teaching. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul addresses a situation in which competition has arisen among Christians concerning which teacher they follow. Addressing this error of competition, Paul describes the appropriate understanding of each leader's role saying, "We are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:9). Thus, the correct biblical view concerning competition between churches and pastors is that we are to be co-laborers rather than competitors.

Finally, consumerism necessarily creates feelings of dissatisfaction in order to generate repeat business. James K. A. Smith notes, "Usually the liturgies of the mall and market inscribe in us a sense that something's wrong with us, that something's broken, by holding up for us the ideals of which we fall short."²⁶⁰ After first demonstrating our shortcomings through marketing practices, consumerism promises a sort of redemption through the purchase and consumption of a product that is guaranteed to be a remedy for our feelings of inadequacy. But in contrast to the permanent redemption provided by Christ's redemptive work on the cross, consumerism can only temporarily satisfy our feelings of discontentment. In a very short amount of time, that which has been purchased or consumed will no longer assuage our dissatisfaction with ourselves and our circumstances and we will be forced to return and start the process over again.

Discontentment presents a problem for Christians because Scripture is very clear that Christians are to find contentment in Christ. Paul writes to the church in Philippi:

²⁵⁹ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 51.

²⁶⁰ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos press, 2016), 48.

I have learned to be content in all circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength (Phil. 4:11–13).

Ortego writes, "Paul is not so much self- sufficient as 'God-sufficient.' He is detached from the concerns about the outward features of his life because of his focus on other important things, the invisible and eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18) and the closeness of his fellowship with Christ on whose strength he constantly draws."²⁶¹ This is the model for Christian contentedness, and consumerism works in direct opposition to it by fostering discontent.

Technological Progressivism

Quantifiably, it can be documented that the use of technology in churches has been increasing in recent years. In one study that seeks to document the changing practices in American congregations, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mark Chaves write, "Recently developed communication technologies have permeated congregations' worship services in ways that change the collective experience."²⁶² They found that the use of projection has increased from 12 percent of congregations in 1998 to 46 percent in 2018-2019.²⁶³ This is, perhaps, not a surprising finding in light of the fact that technology has advanced at a high pace during that time. For the purpose of this study we must go further than merely establishing that the use of technology is on the rise and assess whether or not there are cultural values attached to the use of technology that are influencing worship practice in some NAECs.

²⁶¹ Ortego, 37.

²⁶² Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman and Mark Chaves, "Changing Worship Practices in American Congregations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 4 (2020), 675, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jssr.12682>

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 681.

As discussed in Chapter Two, *progress* is an inherent value to the North American context. The belief that humanity is on a course of continual improvement and that all innovation should be seen in a positive light has deep roots in the North American culture.²⁶⁴ In the modern digital age, this type of *progressivism* is deeply connected to advancements in *technology*. Hunt writes, "The modern notion of progress abandons moral discourse for technological know-how."²⁶⁵ In other words, there is often very little consideration or debate about whether or not new technologies should be employed. Postman notes that this sort of progressivism took hold in the nineteenth century. He writes, "We had learned *how* to invent things and the question of *why* we invent things receded in importance. The idea that if something could be done it should be done was born in the nineteenth century."²⁶⁶

The point, here, is not to say that technology is evil or that its use is necessarily wrong. Noah, following God's instructions, built a rather impressive piece of naval technology to preserve the human race (Gen. 6). On the other hand, our Lord was crucified in a particularly vicious manner on the cross—a cruel piece of Roman technology (Matt. 27:27-44; Mark 15:16-32; Luke 23:26-43; John 19:16-27). Thus, technology can be used for good or evil. Further, the use of technology by the church is not a new development. Pipe organs and flying buttresses have been among some of the impressive advances in technology that churches have made use of over the centuries.

However, the study revealed two primary issues concerning technology and technological progressivism. The first issue is that when technology begins to be served as ultimate, rather than

²⁶⁴ Hunt, 53.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁶⁶ Postman, *Technopoly*, 42.

being employed as a useful tool in the service of God, technology itself can become an idol.

Postman warns:

Technopoly is a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology. This requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs.²⁶⁷

It is entirely possible in churches for technology to reach such a point of prominence that it can be uncritically implemented and, in fact, served. Quentin J. Schultze, author of *High-Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* and professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College, notes that the key is to keep the church's relationship with technology in its proper alignment.²⁶⁸ His text provides a helpful guide for the responsible assessment and implementation of technology for worship. He suggests, "The key in using presentational technologies wisely is employing them well in a service of worthy purposes, not for their own ends. We should not use technology for the sake of technology but in support of commendable worship."²⁶⁹

The second issue that arose from the research is that despite the common assumption that technology is neutral, this is not always the case. The implementation of technology often comes with unintended and unforeseen consequences. Postman writes, "The uses made of any technology are largely determined by the structure of the technology itself—that is, that its functions follow from its form."²⁷⁰ He continues, "Once a technology is admitted, it plays out its

²⁶⁷ Postman, *Technopoly*, 71.

²⁶⁸ Quentin J. Schultze, *High-Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 13.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Postman, *Technopoly*, 7.

hand; it does what it is designed to do. Our task is to understand what that design is—that is to say, when we admit a new technology to the culture, we must do so with our eyes wide open."²⁷¹

To illustrate this point more clearly, let us consider the case of televised worship—whether it be the case of prominent televangelists of previous decades or the live-streamed events that we are familiar with today. Let us assume that the intention of implementing the necessary technologies is a virtuous one—perhaps with the goal of reaching an increased number of people with the Gospel message. This goal may be accomplished, but the technology used inherently reduces living people to two-dimensional images. This is part of the process by which speakers and musicians can begin to be made into celebrities. Wagner suggests, "Celebrity is created through repetition of mediated images that over time coalesce into a set of meanings and associations in the hearts and minds of those who consume them."²⁷² Dawn writes, "Celebrities are not heroes; they foster instead narcissistic idealization, spectacle, and passivity."²⁷³ The point is that technology may be used for one purpose (i.e. communicating the Gospel to the masses), but because it is not neutral, it may generate unintended results (i.e. creating celebrities who may become the objects of worship). The danger is that when churches hold to a cultural value of progressivism, non-neutral technologies may be readily admitted into Christian worship that result in unintended negative side effects.

Form and Medium

One of the unanticipated findings from the study was the emergence of a theme having to deal with *form* and *medium*. Form and medium do not fit easily into any of the cultural value

²⁷¹ Postman, *Technopoly*, 7.

²⁷² Wagner, 21.

²⁷³ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 51.

categories that have been established. They have more to do with how messages—both overt and covert—are carried. They are worth noting separately here because several authors drew attention to them and their impact seems to be subtle but powerful.

The concept of form or medium refers to the system by which a message is delivered.

Postman writes:

Although culture is a creation of speech, it is recreated anew by every medium of communication—from painting to hieroglyphs to the alphabet to television. Each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility. Which, of course, is what McLuhan meant in saying the medium is the message.²⁷⁴

What church leaders and worship planners must determine is whether or not a medium is well-suited to carry the Christian message. In other words, though it is often overlooked, form should be considered in the contextualization of a cultural element for worship.

Television, or any manner by which visual imagery is carried to the masses, came under scrutiny in many of the writings of cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians. Many challenged whether television and other image-based forms of communication are the best medium to carry the Christian message. In a culture that is in the process of transitioning from being word-based to image-based, this is an especially important question to answer. Hunt writes, "Out of absolute theological necessity, Judaism and Christianity are word-dependent in contrast to paganism, which is image-dependent. Pagan idolatry is Biblicism's chief competitor because one thrives in the absence of the written word and the other cannot exist without it."²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 10. This reference to Marshall McLuhan is derived from the title of the first chapter in his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; repr., London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 7, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/reader.action?docID=4643237>.

²⁷⁵ Hunt, 29.

As churches move to embrace image-based forms of communication, those media will need to be evaluated for their ability to carry the Christian message.

Another medium or form that became apparent in the research was that of musical style.

Most often, authors were concerned with the ability of pop music to carry the Christian message.

For instance, Gordon writes:

Since contemporary pop music has been developed for commercial reasons, and is almost exclusively associated with fairly superficial amusement, one must raise the question whether a musical form so associated with such superficial amusement is ever an appropriate vehicle for a religion that requires repentance, sacrifice, obedience, and selflessness.²⁷⁶

Harold Best argued in *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, that music is morally neutral, yet "seemingly capable of carrying strong or shifting moral messages."²⁷⁷ He reasons, "Even though music is wordless and deedless, the people making it and the contexts in which it is made are not. The more a piece of music is repeated in the same context, the more it will begin to 'mean' that context."²⁷⁸ Thus, whether meaning is carried by popular music due to its inherent nature or due to the meaning assigned to it through repetition in a given context, both Gordon and Best affirm that meaning can be carried by form.

A third form—and one that is especially relevant to this study—is that of the rock concert contextualized for use in Christian worship services. While several researchers noted that many CR churches seek to emulate a rock concert environment, very few sought to evaluate the rock concert as a medium. The dominant conversations around contemporary worship music has for decades revolved around content and style. But while lyrical content can be modified, and musical style may or may not be neutral, the rock concert medium may present a more difficult

²⁷⁶ Gordon, 60–61.

²⁷⁷ Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 55.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

hurdle. James K. A. Smith is one of the few scholars who has begun to address the challenges presented by the form of the rock concert in Christian worship. In a 2012 online entry he addressed this specific issue, writing:

In particular, my concern is that we, the church, have unwittingly encouraged you [worship team musicians] to simply import musical practices into Christian worship that—while they might be appropriate elsewhere—are detrimental to congregational worship. More pointedly, using language I first employed in *Desiring the Kingdom*, I sometimes worry that we've unwittingly encouraged you to import certain forms of performance that are, in effect, "secular liturgies" and not just neutral "methods." Without us realizing it, the dominant practices of performance train us to relate to music (and musicians) in a certain way: as something for our pleasure, as entertainment, as a largely passive experience. The function and goal of music in these "secular liturgies" is quite different from the function and goal of music in Christian worship.²⁷⁹

This is not to suggest that one type of worship style is better than another. Smith is careful to note that this is a matter of form—what we have also been referring to as medium—rather than stylistic preference.²⁸⁰ What Smith is observing is that as a performance-based form, the rock concert communicates a message that is antithetical to principals of Christian worship by discouraging congregational participation and making the band the center of attention instead of God.²⁸¹

Chapter Summary

This qualitative historical study sought to explore biblical principles, historical evangelical movements, principles of critical contextualization, themes addressed by cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians, and current research examining CR churches, in order to draw conclusions about how North American value systems, when made ultimate, may function as idols in some NAECs. Research showed that many of the characteristics of CR

²⁷⁹ Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands."

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

churches can be categorized as relating to the development of highly affective worship experiences, the production and consumption of goods and services, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of technology.²⁸² The research confirmed that church movements in evangelical church history have led to a philosophy in some churches that positions worship in the service of evangelism. Additionally, research revealed that cultural values of pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism represent strong forces at work in many NAECs under which many other concerns of critics such as Dawn, Gordon, Postman, Kim, and Meyers, may be categorized. Of these, consumerism appears to represent the greatest risk of syncretism. However, when taken to extremes, each of these cultural values is capable of competing with God for primacy in worship and in worship planning. An unexpected finding was that form and medium play a major role in generating unintended results—even idols—that can sometimes be antithetical to biblical worship. The final chapter will present a summary, a statement of the significance of the study, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and conclusions for the project.

²⁸² In referring to an "elevated use of technology," I am suggesting that some churches have chosen to embrace the extreme use of technology as a way of artificially generating a sense of transcendence in the worship service. Simultaneously, technology is being used to emulate the cultural liturgy of the rock concert—a form that I have argued is contrary to congregational worship. Technology itself is not evil or sinful, but it is not neutral. I am convinced that in some cases churches have allowed technology to become ultimate, thereby turning it into an idol.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief summary of the study including its purpose, procedure, and findings. An interpretation of the findings is provided, limitations of the study are acknowledged, and suggestions for future research are given. The chapter concludes with some practical suggestions derived from the study for pastors, worship leaders, and church musicians.

Summary of Study

In the late decades of the twentieth century, and the early decades of the twenty-first century, worship practices in the North American context have undergone rapid and significant changes. Although the so-called "worship wars" of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s between adherents of "traditional" and "contemporary" models of worship have shown signs of abating, what appears to be a new model—what is referred to in this study as the Cultural Relevance model of worship—has begun to emerge in recent years and stands to reignite further debate. This new model is deeply related to its contemporary, growth-oriented predecessors of earlier decades, but it has begun to exhibit new characteristics. Since the practices and identifying characteristics associated with the new model have only recently begun to be identified by a handful of worship scholars, there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to explain its emergence and understand its implications. This qualitative historical study was undertaken to identify the North American cultural values that may be exerting influence on the worship practices of some NAECs, to describe some of the characteristics of churches that place high value on cultural relevance, and to try to understand the relationship between the two.

In order to identify North American cultural values that exert influence on some NAECs, the works of cultural critics, media ecologists and worship theologians were examined for prominent themes—some of which were identified by the authors as North American cultural idolatries. Additionally, various sources written by contemporary scholars were examined in order to identify notable and shared characteristics of CR churches. Although certain megachurches exhibited the identified characteristics, churches of various sizes and backgrounds appeared to be engaging in the practices that came to light in the study.

Historical sources that dealt with worship movements in the North American evangelical church were examined in order to trace the development of the CR model of worship. Additionally, biblical passages having to do with idolatry and the relationship between church and culture as well as the works of biblical scholars concerning those passages were studied in an effort to develop an appropriate biblical viewpoint. Since the subject is related to the concepts of contextualization and syncretism in the North American context, sources having to do with these topics were also examined.

Summary of Purpose

The study began with a hypothesis that a new model of worship has been emerging in NAECs of various backgrounds and sizes in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Additionally, the researcher suspected that certain North American cultural value systems were exerting influence over the worship methodology of certain NAECs. The purpose of the study was to identify the North American cultural value systems that are at work, clearly define the characteristics of the CR model of worship, and attempt to see how those same North American cultural values may be working to influence the worship practices of the churches in the study.

Summary of Procedure

Initially, scholarly sources were gathered and studied through a process of qualitative document analysis with an emphasis on "discovery and description" in a search for "contexts, underlying meanings, patterns, and processes."²⁸³ As the researcher engaged with books, journal articles, dissertations, theses, and magazine articles, themes having to do with the inquiry began to emerge. Biblical principles having to do with the relationship between worship and culture, documents addressing the concepts of contextualization and syncretism, descriptions of the new model of worship provided by worship scholars and researchers, writings describing the historical development of worship services that are geared towards evangelism, and texts that sought to identify and warn about potential idols in the North American context were all examined in the process. Through this process of discovery, themes emerged that helped to explain how North American cultural values are working to shape the worship practices of many NAECs in general and CR churches in particular.

Summary of Research Findings

Primary Characteristics of Cultural Relevance Churches

The research supported the initial hypothesis that a new expression of worship has emerged in some NAECs in the early decades of the twenty-first century and that its characteristics include the development of highly affective worship experiences,²⁸⁴ the production and consumption of goods and services in worship,²⁸⁵ the involvement of the worship

²⁸³ Altheide et al., "Emergent Qualitative Document Analysis," 128.

²⁸⁴ Sanders, "*Panem et Circenses*: Worship and the Spectacle," 2.

²⁸⁵ Sanders, "Religious Non-Places," 76.

team in marketing,²⁸⁶ and an elevated use of technology.²⁸⁷ Researchers sometimes referred to the phenomenon as "the celebrity model of music ministry,"²⁸⁸ or "hipster church,"²⁸⁹ and various megachurches in the study exhibited the characteristics noted—though church size was not a determining factor.²⁹⁰ For this study, the terms "Cultural Relevance church" and the "Cultural Relevance model of worship" were used interchangeably with names given by other authors. Ultimately, the type of churches being investigated could be summarized as that which has placed a high emphasis on the pursuit of cultural relevance (i.e., relating to the culture).

The Historical Development of Worship as a Tool of Evangelism

Research revealed that churches pursuing cultural relevance as a primary value often do so out of a conviction that the primary role of the worship service is to attract and convert non-Christians.²⁹¹ In support of the second hypothesis, research revealed that this viewpoint can, at least partially, be attributed to historical movements in the evangelical tradition that have increasingly leveraged worship for the purpose of evangelism. The development of the worship service as a means of evangelism may have begun with the camp meetings of the Second Great

²⁸⁶ This is never directly referred to as marketing in the literature, but several sources mentioned the appearance of those on the platform as being a deliberate choice made by churches. These include: Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," 210–11; Wagner, "Music, Branding and the Hegemonic Prosumption of Values of an Evangelical Growth Church," 13–14; Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry: Characteristics and Considerations," 26.

²⁸⁷ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry: Characteristics and Considerations," 25–26; Myrick, "Double Authenticity: Celebrity, Consumption, and the Christian Worship Music Industry," 22; Sanders, "*Panem et Circenses: Worship and the Spectacle*," 9.

²⁸⁸ Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25.

²⁸⁹ Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," 210–11; Wagner, "Music, Branding and the Hegemonic Prosumption of Values of an Evangelical Growth Church," 13–14; Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry: Characteristics and Considerations," 26.

²⁹⁰ Bowler and Reagan examine several prosperity megachurches in their article, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship."

²⁹¹ Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church*, 3–5; Dawn, "True Worship, Real Evangelism," 455.

Awakening, which employed some of the first known worship services for "seekers."²⁹² The early nineteenth-century revivalist, Charles G. Finney, unapologetically established evangelism as a priority over worship, contextualized Christian worship by employing popular styles and downplaying clerical authority, and established a pragmatic approach by employing his "new methods."²⁹³ Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other evangelistic preachers such as Dwight Moody,²⁹⁴ Billy Sunday,²⁹⁵ and Billy Graham²⁹⁶ carried on the revivalist tradition.

Near the end of the twentieth century, many churches began to employ principles promoted by the Church Growth Movement.²⁹⁷ These included placing an emphasis on the importance of the visitor's experience and paying attention to environmental factors like the appearance and accessibility of the campus, architecture and furnishings, personal interactions, the appearance of those on the platform, and services like child care and children's ministry.²⁹⁸ Additionally, CGM theory promoted the homogenous unit principle, which suggested that people like to become Christians among others of the same race, language, and class.²⁹⁹ Seeker services—services aimed at the unchurched or unbelieving attendee³⁰⁰—emerged in the 1980s

²⁹² Redman, 6.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

²⁹⁴ Towns and Whaley, 182–87.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 239–43.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 268–69.

²⁹⁷ Redman, 12–13.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

²⁹⁹ Page and Gray, 175.

³⁰⁰ Redman, 3.

and 1990s as a result of the implementation of CGM principles.³⁰¹ Some churches, such as Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church, achieved megachurch status as a result of employing marketing-based approaches derived from the Church Growth Movement.³⁰² In recent years, similar approaches have been applied in the modern church planting movement³⁰³ and multisite models³⁰⁴ of church that seek to accomplish numerical growth through multiplication strategies.

North American Cultural Values

Additionally, the research uncovered a number of concerns from cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians that were identified as or associated with potential North American idolatries. These included, relevance,³⁰⁵ novelty,³⁰⁶ contemporaneity,³⁰⁷ individualism,³⁰⁸ entertainment,³⁰⁹ amusement,³¹⁰ spectacle,³¹¹ physical appearance,³¹²

³⁰¹ Redman, 12.

³⁰² Eagle, 591.

³⁰³ Association of Religion Data Archives.

³⁰⁴ Banks.

³⁰⁵ Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness*, 12; Guinness, *Dining With the Devil*, 63; Kim, 7.

³⁰⁶ Myers, 64.

³⁰⁷ Gordon, 103–28.

³⁰⁸ Gordon., *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns*, 88; Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 107; Kim, *Analog Church*, 105–06; Myers, *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 71.

³⁰⁹ Myers, 132.

³¹⁰ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 121.

³¹¹ Sanders, "*Panem et Circenses: Worship and the Spectacle*," 3.

³¹² Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 14; Myrick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 26; Sanders, "Ironically Religions, Blandly Fashionable," 496; Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better Louder," 199–200, 210, 212; Hicks, "Worship Leading, Ageism, and the Fear of Getting Old."

celebrity,³¹³ pragmatism,³¹⁴ consumerism,³¹⁵ marketing,³¹⁶ competition,³¹⁷ excellence,³¹⁸ emotional experience,³¹⁹ therapy,³²⁰ progress,³²¹ and technology (or technopoly).³²² Eventually, in support of the second hypothesis, pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism emerged as dominant cultural values under which the other terms could be classified.

For instance, many of the concerns listed could be explained by placing them within the framework of the dominant cultural value of consumerism. This, perhaps, requires a bit of explanation. When church is viewed as a religious services provider in a market-based economy, then certain business-oriented elements must necessarily be present. In this study, many of the elements of concern identified by cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians fell into a pattern that relates to commerce. For instance, the concerns of *entertainment*, *amusement*, and *spectacle* seem to indicate that a product, service industry, or entertainment industry exists. Perceived consumer needs are met through a type of *therapy* in the form of an *emotional experience* or a form of *sentimentality* in the worship service. The element of *celebrity* that is sometimes generated in CR churches is another product for consumption. *Individualism* reflects a customer service element in which it is paramount to meet the needs of the customer and

³¹³ Wagner, 19–24.

³¹⁴ Kim, *Analog Church*, 59–60; Hunt, *Surviving Technopolis*, 25; Stetzer, "What's the Deal With the Church Growth Movement: Part 2."

³¹⁵ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 64–65; Sanders, "Religious Non-Places," 74.

³¹⁶ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 64.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³¹⁸ Merick, "The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry," 25; Kauflin, "Idolatry on Sunday Mornings: Pt. 5".

³¹⁹ Gordon, 134.

³²⁰ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 87.

³²¹ Hunt, 52–61.

³²² Postman, *Technopoly*, 71; Myers, 161.

generate a satisfactory experience. *Marketing* takes place as the worship service is developed to appeal to a target market of customers. The *physical appearance* of those on the platform, including elements of *youth, fashion, and attractiveness* contribute to the marketing of the product. *Novelty* and *Contemporaneity* supply the demand for new and better products to be consumed in the form of new worship songs and stage designs that change with each new sermon series. Generational and stylistic worship options provide for the *choices* demanded by consumers in a *competitive* market. This is merely an example of how many of the concerns of critics may fall under the broader category of consumerism.

In further support of the second hypothesis, research revealed that the North American value systems of pragmatism, consumerism, and progressivism are all exerting influence on worship practice in many NAECs. The dominance of consumerism and its many components in the literature may indicate that it presents the greatest threat of syncretism in the North American context. The data seems to suggest that as many evangelical churches began to engage in market-based practices in order to generate church growth, evangelical Christianity began to merge with the North American cultural value of consumerism in some churches. Based on the concerns of cultural critics, media ecologists, and worship theologians, consumerism stands out as the North American cultural value that has the greatest potential to undermine the Gospel in the North American context. Additionally, pragmatism and progressivism both serve purposes in the overall market-based framework and were identified as prominent North American value systems in their own right that are at having an impact on many NAECs.

Forms and Media

In an unanticipated result, the study revealed the importance of forms and media in the chosen environments and delivery methods of many CR churches. First, worship spaces that are

designed to resemble corporate spaces like malls, movie theatres, and concert venues were frequently noted in the literature.³²³ While such spaces are designed to put North American churchgoers at ease, they also communicate something about the purpose of the space. Movie theatres and concert venues are designed for the generally passive consumption of entertainment. Malls are purposefully designed to promote consumption.³²⁴ Additionally, some authors questioned the ability and appropriateness of popular music to carry the Christian message.³²⁵ The rock concert form, contextualized for the purpose of Christian worship, was called into question on the basis that it discourages congregational participation and draws attention to the performance rather than God.³²⁶ Finally, the ability and appropriateness of visual imagery, particularly in the form of television and digital streaming technology, to carry the Christian message was frequently drawn into question.³²⁷

Relating the Characteristics of Cultural Relevance Churches to Historical Evangelical Movements and North American Cultural Value Systems

When one considers the characteristics of CR churches that have been identified from the research, including the development of highly affective worship experiences, the production of goods and services as a part of worship, the involvement of the worship team in marketing, and an elevated use of technology, little explanation is required to relate these characteristics to a philosophy of worship as a tool of evangelism or the North American cultural values of

³²³ Sanders, *Panem et Circenses: Worship and the Spectacle*, 5; Sanders, "Religious Non-Places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism," 73; Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," 187.

³²⁴ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 40–45.

³²⁵ Gordon, 59–63.

³²⁶ Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands."

³²⁷ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 116–17; Kim, *Analog Church*, 47–51; Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 20.

pragmatism, consumerism, and progressivism. In an effort to attract the greatest number of people possible, CR churches have sought to be culturally relevant and have employed methods that are largely driven by the cultural values of pragmatism, consumerism, and progressivism.

First, highly affective worship experiences are intended to contextualize the North American rock concert. These affective experiences are meant to generate a sense of transcendence in an effort to help people feel that they have experienced God's presence. The experience itself can be considered a consumable product. Second, the production of goods and services, including both the worship experience and actual goods for purchase, is clearly linked to the value of consumerism (in this case, the idea that the consumption of products is fundamentally positive). Third, the involvement of the worship team in marketing is linked to consumerism and the desire to attract a certain demographic to the worship service for the purpose of evangelism. Finally, the elevated and sometimes excessive use of technology cannot be separated from any of the three primary values of pragmatism, consumerism, or technological progressivism. In CR churches, technology is leveraged in a pragmatic sense to produce numerical results. Further, it aids in generating and delivering a consumable product. Finally, it is generally accepted, based on the assumption that progress in the technological realm is universally positive.

When Does This Relationship Become Problematic?

That a relationship exists between the practices of CR churches and North American cultural value systems seems clear. What is more difficult to determine is whether or not these practices that have been influenced by those cultural value systems in NAECs are necessarily sinful. Although one may feel uncomfortable with some of the practices described, Scripture is largely silent concerning what cultural practices are available for use in Christian worship. One

question that must be addressed is, "When do cultural values become idols?" Another is, "When are cultural practices inappropriate for Christian worship?"

In response to the former question, it seems that anything can become an idol when it is made ultimate. Best defines idolatry as, "The condition of self-deluded sovereignty by which we choose a god, assume it to be self-originating, craft a life system over which it is enthroned and then surrender to it, forgetting that its mastery is a figment of our imagination."³²⁸ Beale suggests that an idol can be anything that the heart clings to for *ultimate* security.³²⁹ When both of these perspectives are taken into account, it seems that life systems (or cultural value systems)—when relied upon and given ultimate authority—can become idols. In churches, the point at which methods, products, and/or technology (or pragmatism, consumerism, and/or technological progressivism) become idols is when they are made ultimate. The presence of methods, products, and technology do not necessarily indicate idolatry, but when God is replaced in worship by the associated value systems of pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism, idolatry takes place.

In response to the latter question, there appear to be at least two responses. First, cultural practices, beliefs, and values are inadmissible to Christian worship when they are antithetical to biblical teaching.³³⁰ Second, while some cultural practices may be reworked in a way that make them acceptable for Christian worship, it remains possible that they may not be helpful to Christian worship. For instance, while contextualizing a rock concert for Christian worship is not sinful, its form may discourage congregational participation and distract worshippers from

³²⁸ Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 163.

³²⁹ Beale, 17.

³³⁰ Stauffer, 65.

focusing their attention on God.³³¹ If a belief, value, or practice from the culture works against biblical principles of worship, then it should be excluded.

Statement of Limitations

Limitations in any research project are unavoidable. The researcher's personal experience and background may have influenced the inclusion and exclusion of certain sources and subsequently, the themes that emerged. The researcher's fifteen years of vocational experience as a contemporary worship leader are likely to have contributed to certain biases that may have emerged in the writing process. Further, the following limitations should be considered when drawing conclusions about the research:

1. Very little research exists concerning the emergence of the Cultural Relevance model of worship. Although some researchers have described the characteristics of specific megachurches and others have identified certain characteristics of "hipster" churches, very few have placed these characteristics within a broader movement or attempted to understand their relationship to the cultural forces that are influencing them.
2. While accusations of idolatry were fairly common in the literature, thorough arguments proving that idolatry was taking place were scarce. As a result, only the most significant and recurring themes were addressed in the study. Thus, the list of themes addressed is not exhaustive and it should be assumed that other forms of idolatry may exist in the North American context that were not included in this study.
3. Identifying the point at which cultural value systems cross a line and become idolatry is challenging since idolatry is a matter of the heart. Therefore, it is really only possible to acknowledge the dangers presented by cultural value systems that vie for the

³³¹ Smith, "An Open Letter to Praise Bands."

worshipper's attention and caution against allowing those value systems to become ultimate.

4. The themes addressed in the project were often difficult to isolate and study individually. Many were connected in what seemed to be a web of relationships with one another. Sometimes multiple themes were mentioned in the literature in a single paragraph or even an individual sentence. Thus, studying each theme individually may not have always been the easiest or even the most appropriate approach.

Recommendations for Future Research

In many ways, this project was an overview. The research revealed a multitude of issues and themes that could only be touched upon, but each could be a research topic in its own right. A few topics that seemed to require further research included:

1. The impact of the loss of more traditional generations. This was not a generational study, but generational dynamics deserve further inquiry. By and large, the "worship wars" were waged between the Boomer generation and the more conservative and traditional generations that preceded it. The disunity caused by the "worship wars" was rightfully lamented in the literature. However, the recent easing of the conflict seems to correspond with the aging and passing of the generations that fought on the "traditional" side of the conflict. The surrender of influence by the older generations to the younger generations may account for the decline in conflict and it may also help to explain why worship practices have become more contextualized in recent years. Further research could be pursued on the topic of the valuable contribution made by older generations to public discourse concerning worship practice during the worship wars and the effects of their absence from the conversation more recently.

2. Another related generational topic that came to light that deserves further research has to do with the fact that a generation has come of age that has no memory of more traditional forms of worship. The Silent Generation, Boomers, and Generation X still have a recollection of the differences between traditional and contemporary forms of worship, but much of the Millennial generation and Gen Z have been raised entirely in the "contemporary" church. Liturgical elements such as creeds and The Lord's Prayer, as well as the hymnody of centuries of Christian practice were largely rejected by the Boomer generation when they established contemporary seeker churches and now a generation exists that has little or no memory of such things. Further study needs to be done to determine the effects of the loss of tradition and liturgical elements among the younger generations.
3. One observation that resulted from this study was that market-driven priorities result in mono-generational practice. When churches identify their target market within a single generation, a congregation that reflects that demographic is a predictable outcome. Additionally, ageism³³² can become a problem in some congregations. A growing number of researchers, authors, and theologians are beginning to note the presence of ageism in churches—particularly as it applies to aging worship leaders—but little quantitative data seems to exist. This is perhaps due to the fact that churches do not wish to acknowledge this trend since it is clearly unbiblical and unethical. Further research needs to be done to expose this problematic trend and to search for solutions.

³³² Ageism can generally be understood as discrimination against a person or group of people on the basis of age.

4. Are seekers still seeking? Some churches that applied seeker-sensitive approaches in order to attract Boomers in the 1980s and 1990s achieved phenomenal numerical growth. As a result churches all across North American began to emulate the CGM principles that were employed. Thirty years later, churches continue to implement many of the same attractational practices but the middle-aged generation those practices were designed to attract has moved on into their retirement years. New research needs to be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of continuing the seeker model with subsequent generations.
5. Can pop music be considered an indigenous form of North American music? This is an important question when addressing the topic of contextualization from a missiological perspective. Contextualization generally assumes that there is a "heart" music in a given context. This is often associated with the folk music of a culture—musical forms that are culturally distinctive and developed over time. While some authors questioned the ability of popular music to deliver the serious content of the Christian message, few questioned whether or not mass-produced popular music can be considered indigenous.
6. Adding form and media to critical contextualization. The four steps of Heibert's critical contextualization lead to a stripping away of any unacceptable content or unbiblical practice in order to repurpose local expressions such as music, art, and drama for use in worship. However, it was revealed in this study that form and media are capable of carrying significant meaning regardless of content. In other words, form and media are not always neutral. Further research could be conducted with the

purpose of promoting the inclusion of form and media as considerations in critical contextualization.

Implications for Practice

This study revealed a number of findings that suggest that pastors, worship leaders, church musicians, and various other worship planners need to exercise a great deal of caution when pursuing cultural relevance in worship. Although the desire to share the gospel with those in the local culture in contextually relevant ways is an entirely appropriate and honorable motivation, the quest for cultural relevance has inherent dangers—especially when the worship service is seen primarily as a device of evangelism.

There are several pitfalls that worship planners need to avoid when working to be both culturally relevant and biblically faithful. First, the importance of the local body of believers coming together as the body of Christ to worship God can be lost in the effort to attract unbelievers to church. Worship planners need to keep in mind that the primary purpose of the worship service is the dialogical worship conversation that takes place between God and His people. The conversion of unbelievers as a result of witnessing vibrant Christian worship may be a happy result, but it is not the primary goal. Worship of God needs to be restored to its proper place as the ultimate priority in the worship service.

Second, when the worship service is seen as the primary avenue for evangelism, Christians are deprived of their calling to personally witness and can become complacent. In many churches, the responsibility of personal evangelism has been replaced with an institutional idea of evangelism. While Christians may feel compelled at times to invite someone to church (so that the worship service can do the work of evangelizing), many Christians no longer feel the burden to witness to their lost neighbors personally. This is because many churches have

encouraged the view that the worship service is the primary method of evangelism. Worship planners need to correct this wrong perspective by reminding the Christians in their congregations that they are sent into the world with the message of the Gospel.

Third, the pursuit of cultural relevance can lead to a desire for the culture's approval above God's approval. This can eventually lead to theological compromise. One of the problems with attempting to look like the culture in order to reach the culture is that churches can emulate the culture to the point that there is no longer any distinctiveness between the two. In this case, churches seeking to be culturally relevant can become entirely irrelevant because they lose their ability to be countercultural. The problem with garnering the approval of the culture is that unbelievers in the culture often hold values that are antithetical to Scripture since they do not yet know Christ, do not yet have the Holy Spirit, and are unlikely to have any familiarity with the Word of God. If the pursuit of cultural relevance is made ultimate, it can lead worship planners to compromise on biblical and theological issues in order to obtain good standing with unbelievers. In this way the message of the Gospel is watered down and a church can lose its effectiveness. When worship planners pursue cultural relevance, they must do so with firm convictions because the temptation to compromise is great.

Fourth, when worship is designed to appeal to a narrowly defined niche market, church populations and platform representation can become overly uniform in terms of age, race, appearance, and/or socioeconomic status. As a result, discrimination can become a problem in some churches. Unfortunately, this type of discrimination is sometimes defended on the basis that it helps churches reach a target market. However, this type of exclusiveness runs contrary to biblical teaching. Worship planners need to be careful not to become exclusionary in their efforts to appeal to too narrow of a target market.

Finally, worship planners must be wary of the cultural values at work in their churches that can quickly become idols. When cultural values like pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism are allowed to drive worship practice and are given ultimate priority, they can become idols that actually replace God in worship. These are particularly insidious because methods, products and services, and technology are all fairly benign when kept in their appropriate relationship to worship. However, when allowed to become ultimate, these value systems and their various components can become objects of worship, sources of pride, and replacements for God. If worship planners are unaware of the potential dangers of these value systems, churches can unintentionally begin to engage in idolatrous practices.

Summary

In combination with a philosophy that the primary purpose of worship is to serve evangelism, North American cultural values of pragmatism, consumerism, and technological progressivism have influenced many NAECs in the early decades of the twenty-first century. CR churches have, at times, engaged in practices that demonstrate the presence of these cultural values in an effort to relate to the culture for the purpose of sharing the good news of the Gospel. Although practices that reflect these North American values are not inherently sinful, they have the potential to become idolatrous when cultural values are permitted to become ultimate. Anything we allow to become ultimate can become an idol and in North America particular value systems appear to present the greatest risk. Worship planners should work to recognize the values that have the potential to become idols in their own contexts and take steps to ensure that God remains the sole object of Christian worship.

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