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"I'll Bring You More Than a Song": Toward a Reassessment of Methodology in the Study of Contemporary Praise and Worship

Jonathan M. Ottaway 

School of Divinity, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA; jonathan.ottaway@duke.edu

Abstract: In the recent study of Contemporary Praise and Worship (CPW), many studies have focused on musical repertory, including its text, music, and performance, as the foundational text(s) for theoretical analysis. In particular, scholars have relied on lists of the most popular songs that have been reported to Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI). This essay points out several critical weaknesses in the current overreliance on this methodology and instead contends for two underutilized methodologies—liturgical ethnography and liturgical history—that need to be developed in the scholarship. The essay argues that such a cultivation of methodology will enable the burgeoning scholarship on CPW to gain richer insight into the range of theological meaning expressed in CPW contexts.

Keywords: Contemporary Praise and Worship; CCLI; Pentecostal; Evangelical; Free Church; worship; liturgy; liturgical ethnography; liturgical history



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At the turn of the new millennium, a debate was emerging between liturgical scholars about the study of new forms of worship that were becoming prominent in Free Church¹ contexts. The framing of this debate, particularly in the questions that it raised about methodology and the study of Evangelical and Pentecostal worship, will help to illuminate a prominent methodological trend in recent studies of Contemporary Praise and Worship (CPW),² particularly those produced by congregational song scholars. Many of these studies have focused on the text and performance of a pre-defined musical repertory as the foundation of their analysis of the wider phenomenon of CPW. This essay cautions that such a methodology only reveals a small part of the theological framework present in CPW contexts. In response, I argue that new methodologies of liturgical ethnography and liturgical history need to be cultivated in the study of CPW to supplement these studies of musical repertory.

1. Structuralism versus Hermeneutics

In 1998, Gordon Lathrop published an essay in the liturgical journal, *Worship*, called "New Pentecost or Joseph's Britches? Reflections on the History and Meaning of the Worship Ordo in the Megachurches." This essay analyzed the worship structure (*ordo*) of megachurch worship.³ For Lathrop, this *ordo* of megachurch worship was a continuing embodiment of the "revivalist" *ordo* that had become widespread in the nineteenth-century camp meetings on the American frontier (Lathrop 1998, p. 527). The essence of this *ordo* was (and has remained) a threefold structure of song service (preliminaries), sermon, and "a 'harvest' of the converts" (Lathrop 1998, p. 531).⁴ For Lathrop, the ongoing practice and popular acclaim of such an *ordo* was a challenge to the very conceptualization of the Christian church. As Lathrop asked, "is the church centered on individuals and their processes of decision-making", as megachurch worship is, or should it be rooted in the "concrete and communal means which God has given [i.e., the sacraments], which bear witness to and give the grace of God, and in which God is present?" (Lathrop 1998, p. 533). With the issue thus framed, Lathrop urged the rejection of this megachurch *ordo* in favor of

the recovery of the Lutheran emphasis on the Mass made accessible as the path of liturgical renewal (Lathrop 1998, pp. 531–38).

In 2006, Melanie Ross published her reply in the same journal: “Joseph’s Britches Revisited: Reflections on Method in Liturgical Theology.” Writing as a representative of the Free Church tradition (both in a personal and scholarly capacity), Ross argued that Lathrop’s intervention had stoked unhelpful polemic rather than productive dialogue (Ross 2006, p. 528). For Ross, the critical problem was a methodological one—Lathrop’s use of a structuralist interpretive framework to understand Free Church worship. Ross argued that Lathrop’s structuralist methodology focused on the relationships that exist between liturgical components (rather than on the liturgical components themselves), saw liturgical meaning as emerging primarily from the juxtaposition of binaries, and searched for the deep patterns of meaning that underpin surface structures (Ross 2006, p. 530–33).⁵ Accordingly, in his assessment of megachurch worship, Lathrop focused on the deep patterns of meaning that emerge from the juxtaposition of liturgical elements. From the perspective of the Free Church, Ross noted that such an approach is deeply problematic, especially because this interpretive model prioritizes the insight and objectivity of the “expert” interpreter who can accurately exegete the meaning in the deep structures of worship. Such an approach entirely eclipses the insights and meaning that the situated participant, whether lay worshiper or professional practitioner, perceives in their worship (Ross 2006, p. 534).⁶

In order to engage in a productive dialogue with the Free Church liturgical tradition, Ross argued that *hermeneutics*, not *structuralism*, is the interpretive framework that “best plays to the analytic strengths of the Free Church” (Ross 2006, p. 536). Against the static, objective meaning that structuralism perceives in the liturgy, a hermeneutical framework engages the dynamic meaning of the worship that is “ultimately dependent upon socially, historically formed pre-understandings” (Moss n.d., as cited in Ross 2006, p. 538). Ross argued that a hermeneutic approach better attends to the dialogical nature of meaning-making in Free Church worship. Worship services do not merely enact a predetermined meaning contained in the liturgical text. Instead, meaning is co-created by both the interpreter and the text (Ross 2006, pp. 540–41). To focus solely on the text to the exclusion of the interpreter undercuts the ability to understand the meaning and values that practitioners and participants assign to their worship practices” (Ross 2006, p. 542). For Ross, such a commitment better reflects the *ethos* of Free Church worship where historical tradition does not carry the same burden of authority nor play the same role in shaping the *lex credendi* of the Free Church (Ross 2006, pp. 536–37).

Ross’s distinction between structuralist and hermeneutic methodologies in the study of Free Church worship provides a helpful framework through which to consider a prominent methodological approach in the study of CPW. Many recent studies of CPW have used its musical repertory—especially its lyrics, music, and performance—as the fundamental text under interrogation. While these studies have provided critical first analyses of an understudied liturgical tradition, such a methodological approach overemphasizes the static and objective meaning that can be discerned within CPW’s musical repertoire. Correspondingly, such studies can overlook the dynamic meaning-making processes at work within the liturgical event. These analyses explore only part of the theology that is performed in the liturgical event. Accordingly, as the scholarly study of CPW continues to develop, scholars need to cultivate additional methodologies that can explore the ways in which participants and practitioners shape and understand the liturgical event. Before I expand on this concern more fully, it will be helpful to provide a brief overview of this recent trend in the study of CPW.

2. Repertory-Based Studies of Contemporary Praise and Worship

In the recent literature on CPW, many of the studies have used the popular repertoire of CPW as the primary text by which to interrogate the meaning expressed by or formed through CPW practices. Most studies rely upon the lists of the top 100 or top 25 songs

that are published biannually by Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) in February and August (Baker 2021, 2022; Burggraff 2020; Burton-Edwards 2018; Jesse 2022; Sigler 2013; Thiessen 2022; Thornton 2017, 2019, 2021; Woods and Walrath 2007). Launched in October 1988 with the mission of saving churches the hassle of obtaining individual permissions for the copyrighted songs that they sang (Ruth and Lim 2021, pp. 153–54), CCLI has since become both the largest and the longest-running copyright company used by US churches. CCLI itself states (us.ccli.com) that 160,000 churches in the US use its services. Accordingly, CCLI's lists of the top songs that churches report using provide the fullest picture available of popular CPW repertoire. For scholars seeking to understand the content and structure of CPW, these lists offer a delineated repertoire that can be interrogated and analyzed.

While many studies carry out quantitative analysis of songs in the CCLI top 100 or top 25 lists, not all repertoire-based studies of CPW use CCLI's data in identical ways. Some studies have used CCLI's lists as a starting point from which to winnow a smaller subset of songs for study (Tapper 2017; Thornton 2020).⁷ Others do not carry out quantitative analysis of CCLI's data across the whole repertoire. Instead, CCLI's data defines the repertoire within which individual songs are treated as representative of the wider phenomenon and are subjected to close analysis (Ng 2019, 2022; Westerholm 2016; Zhang 2019). Finally, there are other studies that apply a similar methodology of studying a pre-determined repertoire of popular CPW music as the basis of their analysis. However, they use an alternative source (other than CCLI) to determine their repertoire.⁸

In using song repertoire as the basis of their study of CPW, scholars have largely focused on the theological themes that are expressed in the songs. After all, the value of studying these songs lies in the fact that they are expressions of Evangelical or Pentecostal "lyrical theology" that "both shape and reflect the theology of those who sing them" (Sigler 2013, p. 447). Thus far, the primary theological foci that scholars have analyzed in CPW songs are their trinitarian (Baker 2022; Ruth 2008; Tapper 2017; Woods and Walrath 2007, chp. 1) and eschatological (Ng 2019, 2022; Packiam 2017; Westerholm 2016) content. In exploring these topics, the studies tend to assess how CPW songs refer to and conceptualize these theological themes, especially in comparison with previous bodies of hymnody or with classic formulations of trinitarian or eschatological theology. This comparison forms the basis -from which a theological evaluation of CPW can be made.

Of course, some studies do not analyze CPW repertoire through external theological categories but instead explore the prominent theological themes that CPW songs themselves use (Begbie 1991; Cowan 2017; Jesse 2022; Johnson 2021; Thiessen and Bjorlin 2021). Since the theological content of the songs has been the most critical focus for these studies, much of the scholarship has focused on the lyrical content of the songs. However, recent literature has expanded this focus to also explore how the musical text and its performance develop and communicate these theological themes (Ng 2019, 2022; Zhang 2019). For example, Samuel Ng's recent essay explores how the musical structure impacts the eschatological content of CPW songs by constructing "musical analogues of eschatological doctrines" (Ng 2022, p. 3).

Two other focuses in repertoire-based studies have emerged recently, particularly in the work of Nathan Burggraff (2019), Anneli Loepp Thiessen (2022), and Shannan Baker (2022). In recent conference presentations, Burggraff has carried out detailed musicological analyses of the top CCLI songs. Burggraff's studies expose the musical shifts that have occurred with the popularization and dispersion of CPW music. In particular, Burggraff has shown how the past thirty years have witnessed a shift toward guitar-centered instrumentation, accompanied by a decrease in harmonic complexity and an increase in rhythmic complexity and vocal range (Burggraff 2019). By contrast, Thiessen's and Baker's research has pioneered a new area by exploring what the most popular CCLI songs reveal about the Christian songwriting industry. Thiessen's work particularly focuses on gender inequality within the industry, while Baker's studies explore questions of popularity and reception (Baker 2022; Thiessen 2022).

There are numerous reasons why repertoire-based studies have become engrained in the study of CPW, especially in the last fifteen-twenty years. Musical repertoire provides a stable framework for understanding CPW theology and practice. As a record of the songs that churches have reported using, studies based on CCLI lists provide a reliable picture of the content that churches have incorporated into their worship. Rather than centering “environmental, ecclesial, cultural, theological, historical, or political contexts in which contemporary congregational songs occur” (Thornton 2020, p. 4), repertoire-based methodologies offer a more direct engagement with the content itself. Practitioners use these songs because they express a familiar and licit way of relating to the God of Christian confession through the act of congregational worship.

Furthermore, the performance practice of CPW music also ensures a high correlation between the official text of the song and how it is actually used within Christian ritual. As Glenn Packiam (2017) notes, “Lyrics are an invariant aspect of the contemporary worship ritual. Few worship leaders attempt to change the lyrics of the songs they sing unless a particular line is ill-fitting within their church’s theological framework. Furthermore, lyrics are a canonical message because they are pre-encoded in; no worship song leaves sections with lyrical gaps to be filled by a worship leader or church” (p. 57). Responding against a perceived anecdotalism in earlier scholarly responses to CPW, using musical repertoire as the basis of scholarly analysis offers the possibility of a more systematic engagement with CPW.⁹

Finally, because CPW is a complex phenomenon that transcends denominational, racial, and global boundaries and also occurs both within and without corporate Christian worship,¹⁰ repertoire-based studies enable scholars to gain a fuller picture of this phenomenon. Studying the popular repertoire instead of focusing on individual contexts provides insights into CPW at its broadest level.

3. Methodological Issues in the Overreliance on Repertoire-Based Studies

Although repertoire-based studies have provided a solid foundation for a growing body of scholarship, an overreliance on this methodology also has limits for the insight it can offer on CPW.

There are basic practical limitations to this methodology. As Matthew Sigler (2013) notes, lists such as CCLI’s top 100 songs rest upon the assumption of the basic accuracy of CCLI’s data (p. 448).¹¹ Additionally, studying these repertoire lists provides no insight on the specific ways in which this repertoire is used (Sigler 2013, p. 448). This data does not reveal when these songs are used in the church year, when these songs are used throughout church services, what other songs are paired with them, whether these songs are sung alongside hymns that are outside copyright (and thus, are not reported to CCLI), whether amendments are made to the songs in their performance, whether the songs are performed in their entirety or in part, or what other liturgical actions or liturgical words may accompany or contextualize the songs. As Stephen Holmes (2013) argues, understanding CPW music necessitates engagement with its liturgical use in the wider unit of the time of worship (pp. 195–96). This recognition is particularly important as Holmes (2013) notes that a critical feature of CPW music is “its ability to be reshaped to meet particular needs and opportunities” (p. 208).

A related issue is that the exploration of CCLI lists is increasingly a limited platform from which to survey CPW music. While CCLI is a reliable way of understanding what songs have been sung in churches, Christian listeners today engage with CPW music across a wide array of platforms—Spotify, YouTube, Amazon Music, etc. CCLI data is certainly the most convenient and easily accessible information.¹² However, scholars make an important assumption if they assume that CCLI data is the primary means of understanding CPW music.¹³

There are deeper methodological issues present in the ubiquity of repertoire-based studies. One such issue is that this methodology entrenches the focus on CPW as a largely music-driven phenomenon. Although music is undoubtedly critical to CPW, music alone

is not the complete story. Rather, the methodological emphasis on repertory denotes a broader dominance of musicological methodologies in the discussion of CPW. Alongside the repertory-based studies that this essay describes, another critical methodology for the study of CPW has been ethnomusicology. While ethnomusicology shares some similarities with repertoire-based studies, its distinctive emphasis is on how practices—particularly musicking—shape contemporary Christian community and identity.¹⁴

This musicological emphasis in the study of CPW has had a critical impact on how scholars narrate and describe CPW, especially by eclipsing other liturgical, historical, and theological factors from the narrative. For instance, [Perez \(2021\)](#) demonstrates that the dominance of ethnomusicology in the study of CPW has established a historical narrative that emphasizes the music-industrial developments of the 1980s as the primary drivers of liturgical change. Conversely, Perez argues that the deeper liturgical-theological developments that took place in the aftermath of the 1940s Latter Rain revival have been unknown until recently ([Perez 2021](#), pp. 6–7).¹⁵ Similarly, [Lim and Ruth \(2017\)](#) challenge the description of CPW as a solely musical phenomenon by describing a plethora of other changes—presumptions, behaviors, and dependencies—that also accompanied the musical evolution (pp. 2–3).

Finally, an overreliance on the repertoire-based study of CPW adopts too narrow a focus for understanding CPW. In the same way that Gordon Lathrop's use of a structuralist interpretive framework led to a polemically charged assessment of megachurch worship, repertoire-based studies are prone to similar issues. Of course, some of the core commitments of structuralism that [Ross \(2006\)](#) identified in her debate with Lathrop—especially the production of meaning through the juxtaposition of binaries—are clearly absent from repertoire-based studies of CPW.¹⁶ However, in their search for deep patterns of meaning in CPW, in their assumption that an external interpreter can understand and define the meaning that participants experience in worship, and in their belief that songs (in their text, music, and performance) contain the primary meaning that is enacted in worship, repertoire-based studies are liable to many of the same methodological issues as structuralist interpretations of worship.

The meaning embodied in a CPW service, even in the time of musical worship that commonly begins the service, is more complex than the sum of the songs that are performed. As [Ross \(2006\)](#) reminds us, meaning is not solely located within the text (whether lyrical or musical) as it is performed (pp. 540–41). Instead, meaning in worship is co-created by an overlapping set of factors. Worshipers do not enter the worship event as a *tabula rasa* but as preformed worshipers whose personal experiences, attitudes, and expectations interact with the liturgical text, often in unpredictable ways ([Bradshaw 1998](#), p. 191). These interactions have both individual factors (such as the life experiences through which the worshiper understands the liturgical event) and corporate factors (such as the theological reflection in the tradition that establishes the very understanding of what Christian worship is and does). Thus, to study musical repertory is to study only one source of meaning in the worship event. Such a methodology prioritizes the meaning encoded in musical performance and text over the meaning that both shapes the worshiping context and the meaning that individual worshipers bring with them into the worship event.

4. Additional Lenses for the Study of Contemporary Praise and Worship

In the final section of this essay, I suggest two additional lenses that need to be deployed in the study of CPW. These methodologies—liturgical ethnography and liturgical history—provide critical additional lenses through which scholars should approach the study of CPW. Both methodologies access additional frames of meaning that can enrich our understanding of the CPW.

4.1. Liturgical Ethnography

Writing as recently as 2021, Melanie Ross argued that nearly two decades after liturgical ethnography had been theorized by Mary McGann, almost no scholars had explored

its possibilities as a methodology (Ross 2021a, p. 245). For McGann, the methodology of liturgical ethnography is focused on depicting the “landscape of meanings” as it dynamically, interactively, and holistically emerges within the liturgical experience (McGann 2004, p. xix). Noting that the broader discipline of liturgiology is necessarily oriented towards normativity, McGann described liturgical ethnography as having the potential to bring new liturgical insights and paradigms to the fore that can both confirm and critique normative claims (McGann 2004, p. xx).¹⁷

Liturgical ethnography is not a single methodology but involves a “‘cluster of techniques’ which grant the researcher access into the culture and meaning-making narratives” (Packiam 2017, p. 59). Across various ethnographic accounts, the most critical methodological components include the direct observation of worship services and the use of ethnographic informants who assist the analysis by translating, interpreting, and narrating their experiences (Packiam 2017, p. 53). This methodology does not necessarily ignore musical repertoire. Indeed, in Ross’s recent liturgical ethnography of Evangelical worship (2021a), music and preaching were key foci in her study (pp. 249–50). Instead, ethnographic research situates and contextualizes musical repertoire in the “cultural particularity” of the community; in the process, such contextualization reveals the “deep structures of thought and feeling that shape their practice and by which they interpret their defining encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ” (McGann 2004, p. xix).

The contribution that liturgical ethnography offers to repertoire-based studies is that it helps to expose different kinds of theological meaning-making that occur within the performance of the worship service. In his study of hope and CPW, Packiam (2017) helpfully distinguishes between the categories of “normative,” “operant,” and “espoused” theology (p. 53).¹⁸ While repertoire-based studies are able to access the operant theology— theology embedded within practices—of CPW, liturgical ethnography expands the range of understanding by exploring how the espoused theology—“the way people talk about theology ordinarily and in the course of life” (Packiam 2017, p. 53)—interacts with that operant theology.

Furthermore, liturgical ethnography expands the range of operant theology that can be accessed. Studying the popular repertoire of CPW music exposes part of the operant theology but is not able to access a more granular level of operant theology whereby songs are chosen, ordered, arranged, and contextualized by other liturgical words, prayers, and practices. In this, liturgical ethnography considers the performance of the entire worship service rather than just the performance of individual songs.

The possibilities of liturgical ethnography in the study of CPW are well demonstrated by Packiam’s study.¹⁹ Even though he used CPW repertoire to understand the nature of popular hope in CPW contexts, Packiam blended deep ethnographic study in two congregations alongside broader surveys of CPW practitioners that asked them to identify songs that particularly expressed Christian hope (Packiam 2017, p. 53). Such an approach offers a more nuanced understanding of hope in CPW contexts than might have been gained from a study of the repertoire alone. In particular, Packiam discovered that although the eschatological content within the actual CPW repertoire may be critiqued as low, worshippers still experienced a high degree of hope (Packiam 2017, p. 69). This study reveals a disjunct between operant and espoused theologies. To study one source of theology in CPW contexts—such as the operant theology of CPW repertoire—would only reveal part of the picture. By blending methodologies, Packiam demonstrated an important gap that exists between the espoused theology and the operant theology, in turn demonstrating a deeper appreciation of how participants process CPW music.

4.2. Liturgical History

If liturgical ethnography reveals the espoused theology in its relationship with the operant theology of CPW, one of the major contributions of recent works of liturgical history on CPW is the disclosure of the *normative* theology that undergirds CPW practice.²⁰ This normative theology—the “authority which informs and corrects operant and espoused

theology” (Packiam 2017, p. 53)—is critical for understanding the way in which historically-formed theological beliefs, hermeneutics, and metanarratives frame the essential activities of Christian worship and direct its practices.²¹

One of the most influential and important studies of CPW liturgical history has been Ruth and Lim’s 2021 book, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church*. In *A History*, Ruth and Lim describe the foundational theological and biblical ideas that have, through the last seventy years, become widespread among practitioners and pastors across a broad swathe of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. In particular, in Pentecostal and charismatic churches and organizations, Ruth and Lim described how a theology based on Psalm 22:3—that God inhabits the praises of his people—developed into the “Praise and Worship” movement. Simultaneously but separately, Ruth and Lim describe another theology, this time rooted in 1 Corinthians 9:22—“To all people I have become all things in order that by all means I might save some”—that developed into the “Contemporary Worship” movement. In both liturgical streams, Ruth and Lim narrate the development of these new normative theologies and describe how they influenced and evolved new worship practices.

Studies such as Ruth and Lim’s *A History* (2021) provide a critical window into CPW practice and theology. The history that is narrated describes the foundational concepts that give shape and meaning to Christian worship. For example, the normative Praise and Worship theology envisions worship as a dwelling place for the manifested glory of God that can only be attained through the right practices done in the right way. The normative Contemporary Worship theology envisions worship as a flexible and free construction that is primarily oriented to the tasks of evangelism and mission. These normative theologies provide an orienting rationale that predetermines the range of meaning that is expressed in CPW services and also in CPW songs. These theologies contextualize both individual songs and groups of songs as liturgical units. To believe—as Praise and Worship practitioners might—that songs are the means of entering the presence of God provides a powerful narrative that pre-interprets the meaning present within the text or musical performance of a song.

Such an approach offers new insights and contributions to the understanding of CPW that complement the insights of repertoire-based studies. Even though normative theologies of worship may not be stated in the worship service, liturgical history uncovers the deeper but implicit theological and biblical frameworks that shape practitioners’ and participants’ fundamental expectations of worship. Worshipers approach the liturgical event with predetermined understandings of the kind of divine-human encounter that takes place in worship, the boundaries or norms of such an encounter, the *telos* of that encounter (whether personal, ecclesial, or societal), and the practices that cause that encounter. None of these understandings emerged *ex nihilo* but evolved within Christian communities and movements that inculcated historically-traditioned theological hermeneutics that define licit theology (both implicitly and explicitly).²²

5. Liturgical Methodologies for the Study of Contemporary Praise and Worship

All methodologies have shortfalls and blind spots. This essay has highlighted some of the shortfalls that accompany an overreliance on repertory-based studies of CPW. The methodologies that I have highlighted have their own issues. Liturgical ethnography, especially in its appeal to the social sciences, risks ceding too much ground to anthropological modes of inquiry that eclipse any consideration of the theological factors at work in worship (Aune 2007, p. 160; Bell 1993, p. 114). Similarly, liturgical history on its own rarely provides guidance for the normative task of liturgiology. It can tell you what worship has been but can be a troublesome guide for what *should* be (Ottaway 2022, pp. 305–7).

As the study of CPW is emerging out of its nascent period, this essay is not a plea for the appropriateness of any one methodological approach to the exclusion of others. Rather, I argue that as this field continues to develop, a range of methodologies needs to be cultivated and developed among researchers to understand CPW more fully. Indeed,

further methodologies beyond liturgical ethnography and liturgical history need to be cultivated. One example of this is liturgical ethics, a methodology that explores “how specific affections and virtues are formed and expressed in the modalities of communal prayer and ritual action” (Saliers 1979, p. 173). Liturgical ethics could expand the discussion of CPW further to explore the ethical formation that is implicit and explicit in the songs, prayers, preaching, and practices of CPW.

In highlighting liturgical ethnography and liturgical history as critical methodologies, I highlight methodologies that access two elements of CPW that have been marginalized in the literature thus far. The first marginalized element is the study of CPW through a hermeneutic framework that attends to the participants and practitioners as critical actors within the worship service. The second element is the study of CPW through *liturgical* methodologies. While much of the literature about CPW has been generated by musicologists and ethnographers, only a small handful of studies about CPW have been produced by liturgical scholars. There are multiple reasons for this gap within the liturgical scholarship, such as the inherent mistrust of liturgical traditions that reject the ecumenical liturgical consensus (Ross 2014, pp. 10–31; Ruth 2014; White 1998, pp. 57–58) or the difficulty of accessing non-text-based worship (Ottaway 2022, pp. 27–28; Perez 2021, p. 25). Accordingly, there has been a regrettable lack of study of CPW as liturgy—as the interrelated embodiment of the church’s *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* (Ottaway 2022, p. 32).²³ Due to the global prominence of CPW, this study is long overdue. Only by cultivating liturgical methodologies for the study of CPW can scholars hope to gain a richer and deeper understanding of this tradition.

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Notes

- ¹ The Free Church is a group of post-Reformation Protestant traditions that historically have sought ‘freedom’ from fixed liturgical forms and civic authorities (Ellis 2004, pp. 25–30). Which traditions should be included in a definition of the Free Church is still a subject of debate (Johnson and Wymer 2023, Introduction, 6–9). However, the consensus expressed in volumes such as Johnson and Wymer (2023) is that the Free Church is comprised of three primary streams: Anabaptist, Puritan or Separatist, and Frontier. In focusing on CPW, this essay particularly focuses on Evangelical and Pentecostal expressions of Free Church worship that are normally categorized as Frontier traditions. (This category, first coined by James White in 1988, has been increasingly questioned in recent scholarship (see Ross 2021b).)
- ² Contemporary Praise and Worship is a term devised in Ruth and Lim (2021) to describe the historical convergence of two liturgical streams in the Free Church—Praise and Worship and Contemporary Worship (see pp. 1–3 and pp. 291–309). As this essay is broadly focused on the scholarly study of worship that has come after this convergence, I used this term broadly and inclusively.
- ³ While explicitly writing about megachurch worship, Lathrop’s essay also attempted to describe the Evangelical liturgical tradition more broadly.
- ⁴ At a deeper level, Lathrop argues that this revivalist *ordo* is, itself, an inheritance of the medieval *prone*, “the service of popular preaching and exhortation to penance” that was innovated because of the inaccessibility of the Mass (p. 531).
- ⁵ As Ross demonstrates, Lathrop is not the only liturgical scholar devoted to a structuralist methodology. Structuralist methodological commitments have been widespread among liturgical renewal scholarship throughout the twentieth century.
- ⁶ A second problem that Ross identified was that Lathrop claimed too high an authority for a liturgical *ordo* that has been widely contested (pp. 534–36).
- ⁷ Thornton’s study (2020) compares multiple national CCLI lists to create a smaller subset of transnationally popular repertoire. (Thornton’s approach does not rely solely upon repertoire assessment but, working within a semiological methodology, situates this discussion of repertoire in a broader liturgical and industrial context.) Tapper’s study (2017) studies CCLI’s data, but only within his specific denomination.
- ⁸ The studies by Tanya Riches (2010) and Nelson Cowan (2017) on the development of congregational song within the Hillsong movement are representative of this. See also Begbie (1991).

- See the critiques in [Woods and Walrath \(2007, Introduction\)](#) and [Westerholm \(2016, p. 13\)](#). Lathrop's study of megachurch worship (described above) is a helpful example of this anecdotalism. See also [Chan \(1999\)](#).
- The diverse nature of CPW is well illustrated by the contributions published in [Yong and Ingalls \(2015\)](#).
- There are two assumptions embedded here: first, that churches that use CPW music have purchased a license from CCLI; second, that churches faithfully and accurately report their song usage to CCLI.
- However, even then, CCLI only makes its current top 100 songs openly available and does not publicize historical data.
- In her recent study of Evangelical CPW music, [Ingalls \(2018\)](#) provides helpful insight into the variety of modes by which CPW music shapes individuals and corporate Christian bodies.
- For an overview of this literature, see [Perez \(2020\)](#). Elsewhere, [Perez \(2021\)](#) helpfully describes the disciplinary dominance of ethnomusicology in the study of CPW (pp. 6–7). While most of the repertoire-based studies that I have mentioned above do not appeal to ethnomusicology, both methodologies advance from a shared assumption of music's primacy as an expression of CPW.
- Indeed, Perez notes how a focus on musical-industrial developments has caused CCLI's role as a leading cause of the development of CPW to become overemphasized in the literature. Against this, Perez notes how the converse side of the story is not told: "CCLI is not treated as an entity that was founded by Pentecostals to solve a need that was created within Pentecostal churches practicing Praise and Worship because of a particular liturgical theology" ([Perez 2021, p. 24](#)).
- Even when studies use a quantitative approach to CPW repertoire to understand the deep structures of theological belief in CPW contexts, they still treat songs as individual units of meaning.
- It will be helpful to briefly distinguish between the methodology of liturgical ethnography that I am advocating here and ethnomusicology. Although ethnomusicology has been little mentioned in this essay, it has been one of the primary analytical approaches to CPW in the scholarly literature. Many significant studies of CPW have come from scholars in this field; see [Busman \(2015\)](#), [Ingalls \(2018\)](#), and [Porter \(2017\)](#). Furthermore, it is important to note that in studying CPW, ethnomusicological studies commonly include significant theological discussion, especially because, as [Busman \(2015\)](#) notes, "music is responsible for shaping the theological beliefs of participants as well as their embodied religious self-understandings" (p. 3). However, at its core, ethnomusicology studies music. While ethnomusicology may explore how music implicates questions of identity, community, and religious experience, it fundamentally describes "how music operates on peoples, places, and cultural objects" ([Busman 2015, pp. 10–11](#)). At the core of liturgical ethnography is a different object: Christian worship. Liturgical ethnography explores what happens when Christians "gather together in the name of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to meet God through scripture, song, prayer, proclamation, and the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper" ([Ross 2021a, pp. 3–4](#)). Accordingly, liturgical ethnography is rooted in a more theologically confessional epistemology and studies a different set of activities than ethnomusicology (even though it may overlap in the kinds of ethnographic sites that it works within and may share an interest in congregational musicking).
- Packiam also describes a fourth category of "formal [academic] theology" but this will not be considered in this essay.
- Although Packiam himself identifies his work as a "theological ethnography" (p. 43), his strong focus on Christian worship and the relative dearth of scholarly dialogue about liturgical ethnography suggest that this study might be fruitfully read as a work of liturgical ethnography. This dissertation was later published as ([Packiam 2020](#)).
- Of course, liturgical history is not restricted to the exploration of normative theology. However, as a methodology that relies more on textual study (albeit of diverse kinds) than on observation or informant-based research in liturgical ethnography, liturgical history is better positioned to explore normative theology than espoused theology.
- As a methodology, liturgical history names the "what" of Christian worship as it has existed across time. For many scholars, liturgical history has had a high priority in the liturgical method as the first methodological step. As [Senn \(1997\)](#) explains, "Historical study remains the primary tool of liturgiology because it establishes the *what* to which phenomenology addresses its *how* and theology addresses its *why*" [emphasis in original] (p. 43). Moreover, in the constructive work of liturgical theology, history also remains methodologically prior because theology is "a reflection on the [historical] tradition in its intersection with contemporary experience" ([Taft 1997, p. 13](#)). The most recent historical studies of CPW ([Ruth and Lim 2021](#); [Perez 2021](#); [Ottaway 2022](#)), though, have expanded the boundaries of liturgical history, envisioning the methodology as not just a description of the *what* but a deeper study of the broader development of theological, biblical, and hermeneutical ideas and their impact on Christian worship. This reflects the methodological influence of James White's maxim that "people are the primary liturgical document" ([White 1989, p. 16](#)).
- More recent studies have built upon *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* to explore how historically-traditioned modes of theology shape CPW practice ([Ottaway 2023](#)).
- Numerous other scholars in the past thirty years have noted the critical absence of liturgical study on the worship of the Free Church ([Perez 2021](#); [Ross 2014, p. 5](#); [Ruth 2014](#); [Wainwright 2004](#); [White 1989, 1998](#)).

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