

[Review] *Becoming What We Sing: Formation through Contemporary Worship Music*, by David Lemley



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*Well if you used to be a Christian then you never was
Just sittin' up in Church and sayin' what a Christian does
The world's got the gun, but the devil's got the trigger
Stand strong with faith, deeper than a t-shirt or a sticker*

—from the song “O. C. Supertones,” by The O. C. Supertones, on their debut album *Adventures of The O. C. Supertones* (1995)

The most memorable rock concert I've attended was pure madness—a voluntary bludgeoning by sound and by jostling teenagers. I loved it. On the way out, I bought a band T-shirt flaunting a rip-off of the Superman logo. I left exhausted, ecstatic, hoarse, and temporarily deaf. While there, my friends and I had found a kind of belonging; we weren't the only people who liked that music. We could be different and be Christian. We could go to rock concerts and still fit into church culture.

I had gone with friends to see The Orange County Supertones, a Christian ska band from California. It was the late nineties, somewhere outside of Houston, Texas. A music sampler box arrived at our church every few months, full of CDs, posters, and promotional materials. Several of us kids would dredge it for anything interesting you wouldn't hear on Christian radio.¹ We'd rake through the obscure CDs from Christian bands and pore over an awkward chart which proclaimed, “If you like [popular secular musician], then you'll love [similar-sounding Christian band]!” Once we unearthed the debut album of the Supertones, we were hooked.

That concert, and others like it, shaped me as a teenager. I found a kind of community. I bought CDs, T-shirts, and stickers, my consumption molding the identity I wanted, mirroring the secular world around me via acceptable alternatives. I felt a sense of belonging, but what was the effect? How—and for what—was I being formed through all this? In *Becoming What We Sing*, David Lemley creates a framework for understanding my experiences growing up in the 1980s and 90s in a developing Christian movement.

¹ Many of these bands, including the Supertones, were produced by Tooth&Nail Records. The indie Christian music scene in the 1990s is a labyrinthine narrative—a countercultural movement within the increasingly commercialized Christian music industry, which itself began as a countercultural movement.

The book explores contemporary worship music (CWM) as a formational practice, evaluating its function in liturgy and worship. Lemley traces the roots of CWM from its pop (more specifically, arena rock) origins into what is performed today. In distancing the book from the contemporary-versus-traditional “worship wars” conversation of previous decades, he approaches CWM as an effective practice, not simply a musical choice (10). We are asked to consider the connection between an artistic expression and the resulting behavior. What kind of being is rehearsed through worship centered on CWM (16)? Many have asked this question, and Lemley answers from cultural, theological, and historical perspectives.²

He begins with examining how participation in worship forms people. The book then considers pop music (and its culture) and connects the two topics: how pop-as-worship forms participants. The rock band U2 is spotlighted as a case study because of their “perceived influence on the evangelical imagination” (241). Next, the book considers CWM in church and as a liturgical practice, concluding that a distinction is needed: CWM is not intrinsically worship but can be a vehicle for it. The final chapter applies this to understanding how CWM can be an effective means of grace.

CWM and related artistic genres remain a lively topic of discussion in the academic world.³ *Singing the Congregation* (Ingalls 2018) studies modern Christian music from an ethnographic perspective. *The Spirit of Praise* (Ingalls and Yong 2015), based in cultural studies, is a series of essays exploring Charismatic-Pentecostal music and provides valuable background on the origins of CWM. A comprehensive historical account is found in *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church* (Ruth and Lim 2021).

But *Becoming What We Sing* offers its own distinctive viewpoint. Working with the disciplines of cultural studies, church history, theology, and Christian philosophy, the book probes the theological implications of CWM for the church. Lemley broadly reflects upon “How did we musically get here?” and then narrows to “How is CWM culture forming the church?” Unlike some other conversations about CWM, the book is interested in more than the musical style; this is a discussion of the artistic event and surrounding culture, within which music is but one element. Lemley studies CWM by evaluating space, participants, symbolism, time, material culture, an assessment of the lyrics, and the broader cultural context.

Music is a marker of identity, and for Lemley the relationship between CWM and its pop music roots has deep connections with consumerism. Is the culture of CWM inextricably associated with this commodification of consumption? “Popular culture is to be examined not merely for the moral content of each cultural text produced but for the identities participants rehearse as consumers” (14). Later he adds, “We must concede that, whatever its formative value might be, CWM brings with it a model for participation from pop music. And we must concede that pop music functions in a cultural economy that can challenge participation in the economy of the kingdom [of God]” (17).

² Frank Burch Brown writes, “Thus, in response to any uncritical willingness to adopt for worship whatever music people favor in their radio listening, one might ask: Is it possible that musicians in our notably secular era have become especially adept at shaping music to specifically erotic, recreational, and commercial purposes? If so, might it not be the case that regularly bending those sorts of music to the ends of worship would be rather like regularly choosing to praise or thank God in the tone of voice one would ordinarily use to order a pizza or to cheer a touchdown—or perhaps even to make the most casual sort of love?” (Brown 2003, 247).

³ There are comingled genres such as contemporary Christian music (CCM), praise & worship, and more. Other authors have their own labels, and there are notable differences between these, but David Lemley examines CWM as an outgrowth of the CCM movement.

There are deep resonances with James K. A. Smith's ideas about Christian formation, as explained in his trilogy on cultural liturgies (Smith 2011; 2013; 2017). For Smith, when Christians speak of all of life as worship, conversations emerge around both cultural and Christian liturgies as they intersect and interact. Lemley asks us to consider how Christians are formed by CWM as a liturgical event, with its roots in a consumerist culture.

The book left me with two broad principles. First, worship should be evaluated by how it forms worshipers—how they believe, belong, and behave (14). Among other sources, Lemley draws on the concepts of musicking (Small 1998) and Constance Cherry's criteria for effective worship (Cherry 2010). He writes, "How we musick . . . as a church has a powerful function, forming us into a certain way of imagining Christianity and a vision of what it means to be Christians" (16). He reminds us of the purposes of worship—spiritual and missional formation—and evaluates CWM on this basis. CWM should be understood by what it forms worshipers for, not how it makes them feel:

When worship is authenticated by the experience labeled "God showed up," and that experience bears no relationship to concrete transforming work, adoration has not met with kingdom action. This is not a sign of *effective sacrament* but *affective experience*. The community may give thanks for God's gift of the feeling this reminder of communion brings, but they must not mistake this for evidence of the Spirit's work in and for the community. (317; emphasis mine)

The second principle centers on creation versus consumption. Lemley stresses the importance of creativity, through which many of the culture-forming concerns around CWM, as with any artistic tradition, are dissipated. "The composing church could be the church at worship in self-offering co-creation, fulfilled in the joy of effective ministry in the Spirit" (318).

Lemley describes the "composing church," but I prefer the term "creating church." And the creating church is not consuming but actively localizing the gospel. People believe, belong, and behave through aesthetic choices. Christian communities should be creating in response to local needs, as contrasted with a passive, recipient mindset. The church radiating local creativity safely circumvents consumerist proclivities and reinforces its agency in how it chooses to worship.

Lemley writes about CWM from a Western viewpoint, but I read this book from a global perspective, based on my own experiences as an ethnodoxologist. Could these theological and evaluative principles apply in other contexts? The answer is yes, but this is freshly tilled soil. This book would benefit from unearthing the rich thinking around critical contextualization, hybridity, and localization within the disciplines of missiology, Christian anthropology, and ethnodoxology. Without labeling it as such, *Becoming What We Sing* advocates for critical contextualization in Western worship practices but lacks explicit connection to these other dialogues. All would profit from thicker multidisciplinary conversations around cultural issues such as CWM.

We in the West are reluctant to recognize it, but the gospel crosses a cultural boundary in entering our context, too; it is always expressed and understood through the hybridization of scripture and local culture (Shaw and Burrows 2018, 60). *Becoming What We Sing* is a step toward confronting our own Western syncretism. Though we only like to use that word when talking about the Other, we aren't immune. Lemley asks us to honestly, if uncomfortably, assess how the adaptation of our cultural practices forms us in worship.

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