

How “Pop” Are the New Worship Songs? Investigating the Levels of Popular Cultural Influence on Contemporary Worship Music

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It has become something of an obvious truism that many recently developed forms of Christian worship music reflect pop culture. Not only are these songs “popular,” in the sense of widespread dissemination and use, but they are also “pop”—that is, reflecting popular forms of a variety of non-worship music. Proponents of the new worship music advocate the similarity as part of their strategy, saying things like “Our songs sound like what people listen to on the radio and thus have been helpful in reaching them.” In contrast, detractors, noting the same connection between the new worship music and popular music, deplore the link and use it to raise the alarm for the integrity of worship.¹

Disregarding the question of whether the popular nature of the new songs strengthens the church or not, many scholars have remarked on the correlation between popular secular music and contemporary worship songs (CWS). The connection is now so widely accepted that it has become a mainstay of overview essays on the topic (Scheer 2013, 176). One recent encyclopedia entry simply uses the term “Christian Popular Music” as the label for the new music in all its sub-genres (Ingalls, Mall, and Nekola 2013).

What specifically makes the new worship music popular in terms of how it reflects popular music and pop culture outside the church? Most often, the emphasis on the popular nature of CWS notes the overlap in the sound of the two, especially with respect to the instruments used and the performance practices associated with the music. For example, in social historian Michael Hamilton’s seminal 1999 piece in *Christianity Today* trumpeting the “triumph of the praise song,” the subtitle identifies victor and loser: the guitar has beat out the organ. A change of sound was the perceived Waterloo of congregational music.

If we push beyond just the sound of this new worship music, a look at the language of the song lyrics suggests that the relationship of the songs to pop culture is not a simple or straightforward one. The CWS are not simply pop music with a Christian veneer. In some respects the words of CWS are immersed in popular

¹ For an example, see (Frankforter 2001, 45). For a more extensive review of such complaints, see (Nekola 2009).



culture, directly reflecting that relationship. In other lyrical aspects, however, these songs exhibit a significant degree of similarity with pop music, without being as “pop” as pop music. In other dimensions the lyrics are connected more closely to important changes in mid-twentieth century liturgical life generally—shifts which seem to have only a tangential connection to pop culture per se (although pop culture took notice of the changes in worship).

In other words, the relationship between CWS and pop culture is more complicated than has sometimes been portrayed, especially in non-scholarly literature arguing vehemently for or against contemporary worship songs. I hope to bring nuance to this discussion—even the scholarly portrayal of the correlation between popular secular music and CWS—by looking at three language-related dimensions of the lyrics of the most popular CWS: the structural form of the lyrics; the level of colloquial qualities; and the loss of archaic English.² Each of these dimensions, in turn, shows a different level of influence between pop music and CWS.

A fair method for compiling a CWS corpus

Given the controversy evident in discussions of CWS, I believe the key to a fair analysis is designing a neutral, objective method of determining a body of song, a method which does not predetermine the conclusions. Fortunately, the twice-yearly, Top 25 song lists from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), the copyright clearinghouse that grants churches permission to use the songs, provides such a corpus. These Top 25 lists are compiled from the usage reported by a sample of churches in six-month periods so that CCLI can pay out its license fees as royalties based on actual usage. The data below represent the 110 songs which have appeared on these lists for the United States, from the first list released in 1989 through the list released in February 2015. The CCLI was used not only to compile the corpus, but also for the form of the lyrics as found on its SongSelect website. (A list of the CWS considered in this article appears in the Appendix.)

Lyrical form

Of the three language-related aspects of the CWS that I am considering, the aspect that shows the closest connection to pop culture and pop culture influence is lyrical form—that is, verses, choruses, bridges, and

² This article builds upon recent work looking at the lyrics of CWS, including Woods and Walrath 2007. For a closer examination of the theology of CWS lyrics, see within that volume my essay “‘How Great Is Our God?’ The Trinity in Contemporary Christian Worship Music,” 29–42. Further exploration of the theology can be found in: Ruth 2008 and 2015; Thornton 2015; and Parry 2012.

other structural features.³ Assessing the forms of the songs shows that CWS have begun to follow the lead of recent pop music more closely, to the point of introducing musical forms not seen before even in early forms of contemporary Christian worship.

The issue is not just that contemporary worship songs generally differ from the strophic verse forms of older hymns or even the later adapted form in which a refrain is sung between verses. There has been an evolution in the most used forms of contemporary worship songs: the earlier simple forms have been supplanted by more complex compound forms involving combinations of verses, choruses, bridges and other miscellaneous pieces. This development likely means that English-speaking congregations worshiping with the latest CWS are singing structurally more complex music forms now than at any other time in Protestant worship history (even as perhaps the loss of 4-part harmony to a single congregational melody line has meant the songs have gotten less complex in other ways).

These complex forms reflect the influence of pop musicians, especially musicians popular in the 1990s. The groups scholars most frequently reference include Coldplay, Radiohead, The Proclaimers, R.E.M., Duncan Sheik, and—especially—U2.⁴ The influence of pop on worship songwriters is not surprising, and Greg Scheer notes this influence for all of CWS: “From Love Song to Third Day, it would be difficult to think of any praise and worship music styles that had no precedent in pop music” (Scheer 2013, 199). But connection and influence do not mean the forms of CWS have always mirrored the current state of pop music. In fact, although CWS always reflected popular music forms, they typically lagged behind them until the late 1990s.⁵ At that time the gap closed as more complex compound forms became predominant in the most used CWS.

Thus, according to musicologist Margaret Brady, the history of musical style in CWS in the United States, including the history of musical form, is one of an ever-shrinking gap between the trends in popular music and tendencies in CWS, until the gap disappears in the late 1990s with an “invasion” of music written by overseas authors and their close associates. Until the mid-1990s (based on the copyright dates for songs),⁶ the lyrical

³ For my analysis of the structural features of the lyrics, I am relying upon the presentation of the lyrics on the CCLI website. I cannot guarantee the accuracy of the CCLI labeling. Because I have looked only at the lyrics and not the musical (sound) features of the songs, as written or in practice, I acknowledge the limitations of my conclusions. Further work needs to be done with regard to a closer analysis of the music of these songs.

⁴ Scheer 2013, 187–188; Ingalls 2008, 139–140; Ingalls [forthcoming].

⁵ Brady 2007, 161, 163.

⁶ I am presuming a time delay of a few years between the copyright date of a song and its appearance on a Top 25 list.

forms of almost all CWS were either a simple chorus or a combination of verse (or verses) with chorus. Behind these forms are several styles: hymns, folk songs, pop songs, and Gospel music. But the lag between these songs and their non-worship counterparts could be significant. With a small handful of exceptions, the most popular CWS of the 1970s stayed firmly entrenched in the popular musical styles of the 1950s and 1960s. Even in the 1980s seven new songs were written in the style of 1950s pop song. By the 1980s, Brady asserts, at least some of the songs were only ten years behind and some were hedging close (Brady 2007, 157–160).

The gap closed in the late 1990s, with what ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls calls the “British Invasion”: songs from overseas songwriters and companies—first British and then Australian—made inroads into American repertoires.⁷ These songs had copyright dates starting in the mid-1990s, beginning with 1994’s “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever,” written by Martin Smith and recorded by his band Delirious?. Such songs represent one of two main styles found in the CWS of the 1990s: the “radio-ready pop style” forged by Australian songwriter Darlene Zschech from the Hillsong Church; and the “heart-felt, guitar-driven rock” of groups like Delirious? and Sonicflood (Scheer 2013, 187–188; Ingalls 2008, 135–137; Brady 2007, 160–161). The significant contribution of the latter style was the inclusion of the bridge as a common structural feature in CWS, meaning the form of the songs was a more complex, compound form which I will label as VC+ (verse-chorus + some other feature: bridge, pre-chorus, or ending, using CCLI designations).⁸ American songwriters, especially those associated with the Passion Movement, soon picked up on the overseas trend.⁹

The result has been a demonstrable shift in the musical forms of congregational song in contemporary services, not only in songs prior to the rise of contemporary worship per se, but in the standard repertoire of a contemporary congregation:

- Of the 57 songs¹⁰ with a copyright date prior to 1994 (the date of “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever”), only four have some element (such as a distinct ending) which might contribute to a VC+ form designation.¹¹ The other songs have verses only, a chorus only, or a combination of verses and chorus.

⁷ Although not all of the contributors to this new form of music are British (for example, Brenton Brown and Brian Doerksen), their songs were published by British worship music record labels; see Ingalls [forthcoming].

⁸ Scheer 2013, 189. For a discussion of main forms found in rock music, see Covach 2005, 65–76. Covach’s term is “compound.”

⁹ For the relationship of Passion-related musicians to the overseas influence, and for the influence of Passion-generated music on the period, see Sigler 2013, 451–452.

¹⁰ The copyright date for one song, “What a Mighty God We Serve,” is indeterminable. Nevertheless, it is included in this group since it predates 1994.

¹¹ And of these four, three have endings which are very weak.

- Since 1994, that situation has begun to change:
 - Of the fourteen songs with copyright dates between 1994 and 1999, nine have a VC+ form, and six of those songs include a bridge.
 - Thirty-nine songs have copyright dates of 2000 or later. Thirty-four of those songs have a VC+ form with either bridge, pre-chorus, or distinct ending combining with verse(s) and chorus(es).
 - Of the five without a VC+ form, three are hymns (“In Christ Alone,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross/The Wonderful Cross,” and “Amazing Grace/My Chains Are Gone”), one without and two with newly written choruses (or refrains).¹²
 - The two remaining songs (“Revelation Song” and “Your Name”) reflect the older pattern of verses with chorus.

In terms of the structural form, CWS now more closely approximate current pop forms than at any other time in their history. Although the structural shift had occurred in rock music forms in the 1960s and 1970s (Summach 2012, 168, 188, 230–231, 257), CWS took twenty or more years to catch up. The VC or VC+ form now dominates in both musical worlds. It seems a new standard has been set for how CWS will be constructed. Even with the growing interest in hymns—whether classic or newly written—the tendency is to make a simple verse form more complex by adding choruses/refrains. The structural complexity of the most popular songs today means contemporary worship has entered a new phase. The worship found on most Sundays in most churches is, to use the words of Matt Sigler, “not your mother’s contemporary worship” (462). With the shift in musical form in the late 1990s, it appears the most popular CWS authors write for a new generation, not the Baby Boomers who initially favored contemporary worship services. And this new generation of worshipers is enjoying CWS whose structures are deeply influenced by developments in pop music.

Colloquial qualities

Compared to the close symmetry now found in lyrical forms of pop songs and CWS, does the language itself show a similar level of connection or influence? No, it does not. Looking at the colloquial qualities of CWS lyrics suggests that these lyrics are drawn to developments in popular means of expression but not with the same level of influence as seen in their structural forms. Because the songs are intended for Christian congregations with a sacred text, the Bible—and the songs find their validation within that context and with that text—the level of colloquial expression is more moderate.

¹² “Chorus” is the designation for the newly written section which might also be called a “refrain.”

Beyond the question of CWS, there has been a longstanding shift in the colloquial level of song lyrics in America. This shift is itself part of a bigger change in the history of written English, as noted by linguists: namely, the increasing use of colloquial linguistic forms in written registers (Biber and Gray 2012, 314). Simply put, English users today increasingly write like they speak, using lexical and grammatical features associated with conversation, such as first person pronouns and contractions. Such tendencies, which have accelerated in the twentieth century, are known as the drift or colloquialization of written English toward more oral styles. Although different written registers in English have drifted at different rates and to different degrees, the tendency is widespread (Ibid., 315).

Poetry has not been exempt from the drift. David Perkins, in his *History of Modern Poetry*, notes a movement of poetic style toward actual life as poets have adopted the vocabulary, syntax, and rhythm of contemporary speech, producing works which sound more like how people talk (Perkins 1976, 306–307). Song lyrics, including pop and rock song lyrics, have followed this trend. Linguist John McWhorter, who suggests pop song lyrics have been de facto the main poetry of the United States since the mid-1960s, states that we value pop song lyrics the more they sound like real speech. More speech-like lyrics seem more true, sincere, and natural (McWhorter 2003, 82–95). Given this situation, it's not surprising that linguists, using a large corpus of pop song lyrics to do detailed, number-driven analyses, have confirmed that songs reflect conversation and other informal speech (Werner 2012, 19–50; Kreyer and Mukherjee 2007, 31–58). Song lyrics have a built-in propensity to reflect orality because of their special written-to-be-spoken or written-to-be-sung nature. People have pointed out that song lyrics sit “on the boundary between writing and speech” (Kreyer and Mukherjee 2007, 37).

How much have CWS lyrics participated in this drift toward the oral or conversational? A close examination of the poetic devices of rhyme and meter, as well as the speech markers used by linguists to assess the colloquial level of pop lyrics, shows that CWS have migrated with the rest of written English, but not to the degree of the typical pop song lyric. With respect to their poetic and syntactical natures, CWS lyrics do not reflect either older hymnody or current pop songs. They live somewhere in between.

A clear difference between older hymnody and the most-used CWS is the level of regularity in rhyme and meter, with a few exceptions within CWS. Since people engaged in colloquial speech do not normally express themselves with the high levels of rhyme and meter found in older hymn lyrics, I presume that in these two

features these hymns were a step away from the colloquial speech of their day.¹³ In contrast, CWS show a higher degree of colloquialism by having fewer regular rhyming schemes and consistently maintained meters. Only about one-third of the CWS show obvious rhyming schemes, and most of these songs are not the ABAB or AABB schemes so common to the four line stanzas of older hymnody. The fact that so many of the CWS have compound forms (that is, verses with choruses or verses with choruses and bridges) complicates rhyming and metrical consistency, although rhyming is a tad more evident than regular meter in such pieces. For example, authors often will have just two out of four lines rhyming in a verse or chorus, but the remaining parts of the song have a different rhyming scheme or none at all.

The major exceptions to this general rule about strict rhyme and meter in CWS are the contemporary adaptations of older hymns which appear in the list of CWS: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (The Wonderful Cross)”, “Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)”, and “How Great Thou Art.” In each case, clear rhyming schemes and meters characterize each of the originals. Likewise, the recently composed hymn “In Christ Alone” has consistent rhyming and meters.¹⁴

The exceptional nature of these older hymns can be seen by comparing two sets of original verses/stanzas to the newly written choruses added to them. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “Amazing Grace” both have acquired new choruses from contemporary songwriters. In both cases the poetic nature of the newly-composed choruses lacks the same consistency as found in the original verses.

Do CWS lyrics also reflect more colloquial speech with respect to speech markers used by scholars to assess the colloquialism of pop lyrics? In this comparison CWS do reflect how people speak to some degree, but not nearly to the extent of pop song lyrics. Recent linguistic studies have examined the colloquial character of a collected corpus of a large number of pop lyrics, examining them for a variety of markers.¹⁵ These markers include features like: the use of double negatives; deviant spellings which can be based on deviant pronunciations in speech (for example, *ya* for *you*, and *-cha* as in *whatcha*); use of the auxiliary *ain't*; use of *get* to form passives; use of common spoken forms (*gonna*, *wanna*, *gotta*, and *-in'* instead of *-ing* at the end of words); patterns of personal pronouns (especially the frequency of first and second person pronouns); the

¹³ Surely the high level of archaic English in 18th and 19th century hymns is due more to the ongoing influence of the King James Bible than to the preservation of these forms in everyday speech at the time.

¹⁴ These four strophic hymns are included within CWS because they have appeared on one of the Top 25 lists.

¹⁵ Werner 2012; Kreyer and Mukherjee 2007. These two studies are based on several hundred songs whose word corpus numbers over 170,000 words. In comparison, there are 10,707 words in the 110 CWS I examined.

absence of third person *-s* and invariant *don't* (the use of *don't* instead of *doesn't*); and the use of discourse markers (such as *you know*) and interjections (*er, um, ah*, and so forth).¹⁶

These studies confirm the conversational, informal nature of pop lyrics. But the low frequency of some aspects of colloquial speech, especially copula deletion (like omitting *is*) and the absence of third-person marking (the absence of the third person *-s* in verbs, and the use of *don't* instead of *doesn't*), suggest that pop lyrics need to be thought of as their own special register, not merely average speech set to music (Werner 2012, 43). A comparative examination of CWS suggests that their lyrics are even less colloquial than pop and rock music lyrics.

For example, none of the CWS use the deviant spellings for *you* (*ya* and *-cha*) that are frequently found in pop lyrics. Another recurring feature of pop lyrics, the auxiliary *ain't*, is only found in one song in CWS: verse one of "Awesome God." (I'll discuss the special character of this verse below.) Similarly, forms derived from colloquial speech like *gonna*, *wanna*, *gotta*, and a terminal *-in'* instead of *-ing*, common throughout pop lyrics, are absent or very exceptional in CWS lyrics. Of these forms, there is only one instance of *gonna* ("Trading My Sorrows") and three instances of a terminal *-in'* (all from verse one of "Awesome God": *puttin'*, *jokin'*, and *believin'*). Similarly, there are no instances in CWS of *get to* form passives and no third person *-s* verbs (for example, *they knows*). There are no discourse markers and no interjections beyond *O* or *Oh* (fifty-six total) and a very rare *yeah* (fourteen instances, with five of those in one song, "Oceans"). And there is only one instance in CWS of using *going* to form the future tense: *I'm going to praise him* from "All Hail King Jesus."

In fact, apart from the first verse of Rich Mullins's "Awesome God," many of the speech features which linguists have identified as recurring in pop song lyrics are entirely absent from CWS lyrics. Take away this one verse and several colloquialisms are to be found nowhere else in CWS lyrics. The seventy-six words of this one verse (seventy-six out of a total of 10,707 words in the entire CWS corpus considered here) contain eleven colloquialisms. Beyond those colloquialisms already mentioned, it has the only double negative and contraction of *them* to *'em* in this corpus. It has obvious colloquial phrases like "rolls up his sleeves," "puttin' on the ritz," and "wasn't jokin'." It also has what may be a present habitual progressive reflecting African-American vernacular English: *you'd better be believin'*. This verse is much closer to the common examples given in the pop lyric studies. Supposedly Mullins composed it, while driving, in imitation of the speech of a

¹⁶ While I looked to see the level of such markers in the 70 most republished evangelical hymns in America up to 1860, they are nonexistent in these 70 hymns. Of course, that tells us little about the level of colloquialism in these hymns according to 18th and 19th century patterns of speech. For a list of the hymns, see Marini 2002.

“hellfire and brimstone” preacher (Christensen and MacDonald 2003, 23; “Songfacts: ‘Awesome God’ by Rich Mullins”).

The exceptional quality of this verse, however, does not mean that other CWS are not also colloquial to some degree, including some aspects shared with pop lyrics. An abundance of first and second person pronouns is one such feature:

- In the 110 songs there are 151 instances of *I* (plus another sixty-eight in contracted form), 51 uses of *me*, and 208 of the possessive pronoun *my* (and one of *mine*).
- Likewise there are 56 uses of *we* (plus another ten in contracted form), 26 of *us*, and 59 of *our*.
- There are 154 of *you* (plus another twenty-five in contracted form), 230 of *your*, and 62 instances of the archaic second person pronouns (*thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine*, and *ye*) in both persons and its various cases.

Compared to the relative frequencies of first and second person pronouns in pop lyrics, CWS lyrics seem to have a higher frequency of first person singular and second person pronouns, suggesting that CWS lyrics are more like speech patterns in this respect than pop lyrics.¹⁷ This tendency may be attributed to the many CWS which are prayers directed from an individual toward God.

For third person pronouns, the CWS corpus contains 120 instances of *he* (plus eight more in contracted form), 86 of *his*, and 52 of *him*, all with reference to God or Jesus Christ. There are significantly fewer feminine and plural third person pronouns: zero for *she*; zero for *her*; four of *they* (with nothing additional in contracted form), five of *them* (including the *'em* in “Awesome God”), and one of *their*.¹⁸

The CWS lyrics also demonstrate several other markers of close relationship to spoken patterns. One is the propensity to use contracted verbs with pronouns: *I'll* and *I'm*, for example.¹⁹ Other contractions reflecting

¹⁷ Compare Table 2 in Werner 2012, 28. With respect to third person pronouns in pop lyrics, CWS lyrics have more instances of *he*, always referring to God or Jesus Christ, which is not surprising given the subject matter and purpose of worship songs. However, CWS lyrics have fewer instances of *it*.

¹⁸ Similarly, in the evangelical hymns most republished in the United States prior to 1860 (Marini 2002), there is a strong presence of first and second person singular pronouns, likely due to evangelical piety's strong emphasis on personal salvation, on the one hand, and the fact that many of the hymns are prayers, on the other. There are many more third person plural pronouns in the hymns than in CWS. But, because these hymns use the archaic *thee*/*thou*/*thy* forms to address God, reserving *ye*/*you* to address people, there are significantly fewer instances of *you*/*your* in the hymnody than in CWS.

¹⁹ Here are the number of instances for different forms in CWS: *I'll* (22); *I'd* (2); *I'm* (32); *I've* (12). Total first person singular: 28. *We'll* (1); *we'd* (0); *we're* (7); *we've* (2). Total first person plural: 10. *You'll* (1); *you'd* (2); *you're* (18); *you've* (4). Total second person: 25. *It's* (17); *that's* (5); *there's* (11); *he's* (8). It should be noted that no contractions are found using archaic pronouns.

deviant spellings based on common pronunciation are also present. One striking example is the recurring ‘*cause* instead of *because* (six instances). Finally, there are the many incomplete sentences or phrases: for example, verse two of Chris Tomlin’s “How Great Is Our God” in which the lines “Beginning and the End” and “The Lion and the Lamb” seem like hanging phrases.

The CWS lyrics contain other non-colloquial markers, which are most likely holdovers from the poetic techniques of previous congregational song. For example, there are three instances of an unusual *is he* construction as in Jennie Lee Riddle’s “Revelation Song”: “Holy, holy is he.” In fact, the large number of *O* or *Oh* injections (66 in number) appears to be a holdover from previous hymnody or biblical passages and less an indication of an actual colloquialism.

Therefore, the lesser colloquialism of CWS lyrics, compared to pop and rock lyrics, suggests moderating influences on the orality of CWS. Perhaps this colloquial moderation comes from the background of reading the Bible in the shaping of Christian liturgical speech. Even versions with updated English do not, to me, read like pure colloquial speech. And perhaps the moderation also arises from the intended use of CWS as corporate songs. Regardless of the precise reason, CWS lyrics lag behind the orality of pop and rock lyrics, but do show more colloquial markers than older hymnody.

The evolving language of prayer

One striking feature of the colloquial level of CWS, especially in comparison to hymnody written prior to the mid-twentieth century, is the gradual loss of archaic English. At first glance this loss might appear to be only a reflection of the greater colloquial quality of the genre—that is, just another aspect of pop culture’s influence on CWS. But to portray the loss of archaic English in CWS in this way would be to overlook the massive overhaul of the worship of all English-speaking Christians from the 1960s through the 1980s. The growing absence of archaic English in CWS is part of a larger phenomenon within the church. Thus this loss is more the result of the relationship between CWS and the church generally than between CWS and pop culture, although pop culture media itself reflects this shift.

Of the 110 songs considered for this study, only fourteen contain archaic English forms. The most used archaic forms are second person pronouns (*thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine*, and *ye*).²⁰ The early copyright dates of thirteen of

²⁰ In terms of frequency across the 14 songs, there are 19 instances of *thy*, 20 of *thee*, 17 of *thou*, five of *ye*, and one of *thine*. There are also multiple archaic verb forms: *hath* (5); *hast* (3); *liveth* (2); *panteth* (1); and *longeth* (1). There are also 10 instances of the archaic preposition *unto*.

the songs indicate that archaic English was a feature of some early contemporary songwriting but had disappeared by the mid-1980s. Only one song, “Days of Elijah” (1994), dates from after 1984 and includes an archaism; its archaic phrase “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” could simply be the composer retaining wording remembered from other musical renditions of the biblical phrase.²¹ Of the remaining songs, one was written in the 1920s but became popular in the 1940s (“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”), one dates from the 1940s (“How Great Thou Art”), and one comes from the 1950s (“Thy Lovingkindness”). The remaining songs were copyrighted from the early 1960s through the early 1980s.²² Several of these songs are biblical texts from the King James Version set to music.

Rather than reflect the influence of pop culture, however, the loss of archaic English in CWS lyrics after the mid-1980s more likely reflects similar changes in worship-related language within churches, both evangelical and non-evangelical. Simply put, all English-speaking Christians were updating—and were perceived in popular media to be updating—their corporate prayer language at that time; the lyrical changes of contemporary worship songs were just part of a broad shift occurring in all sorts of acts of worship.

A helpful landmark for seeing the previous practice of using archaic English when praying can be found in the editorial explanation for the English title of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, translated from the German. A footnote in the preface of the 1950 edition justifies the archaic language by noting that “thou,” although disappearing from modern English usage, still “remains in one important sphere—in prayer” (Buber 1950, vi, note 1). The implication is that in the mid-twentieth century English-speaking worshipers expected archaic English in only one significant sphere: the liturgical, and especially in prayer.

The limited use of archaic forms in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, published in the mid-twentieth century,²³ likewise shows how deeply ingrained the practice had been in Christian praying. Despite a clear desire to update the language as indicated in the preface, the editors decided to retain archaic language in prayer addressed to God (for example, in Psalms, and in New Testament passages like Acts 4:24-30).²⁴ The

²¹ The phrase could have been embedded in Robin Mark’s (the composer) memory by either “Godspell” or Handel’s *Messiah*. His account of the writing of the song indicates that it was done quickly between two services on a Sunday morning (Mark 2015).

²² These three represent strophic hymns with or without choruses. The other songs with archaic language are: “Ah Lord God” (1976); “Arise and Sing” (1976); “As the Deer” (1984); “Glorify Thy Name” (1976); “I Exalt Thee” (1977); “I Will Call Upon the Lord” (1981); “Our God Reigns” (1974); “Seek Ye First” (1972); “This Is the Day” (1967); and “Thou Art Worthy” (1963). Jack Hayford’s “Majesty” (1981) is also possible if one considers the word “unto” as archaic.

²³ The New Testament was published in 1946, and the entire Bible in 1952.

²⁴ For a description of the Revised Standard Version generally, see Wegner 1999, 320–324.

propriety of such language in prayer was so residual that the Revised Standard Version retained archaic forms for liturgical texts addressed to the resurrected and ascended Christ (Revelation 5:9-10), even though pre-resurrection conversations and post-resurrection (but non-liturgical) interactions with him simply used “you” when addressing him.²⁵ Similarly, two translations of the next decade, the New American Standard Bible (New Testament 1960; whole Bible 1971) and the New English Bible (New Testament 1961; whole Bible 1970), retained archaic forms in prayer, even though the desire for “contemporary” English was held as a principle of revision ([Lockman Foundation] 1963, Preface). “Contemporary” would soon mean eliminating the vestiges of archaic forms, as seen in the vast majority of recent English translations of the Bible.²⁶

This flood of new versions which do not retain archaic language shows the trajectory of Christian praying.²⁷ The revisions of the revisions (the New Revised Standard Version and the Revised English Bible) routinely eliminate archaic forms throughout. The use of archaic language in Christian praying has likely heard its death knell as more versions use updated language and fewer Christians use the King James. Even the New King James Version has followed suit in updating its archaic pronoun forms.

The decrease of archaic forms in new versions of the Bible and in CWS parallels the push for updating liturgical language in collections of liturgical materials—both official and unofficial, evangelical and non-evangelical—since the 1960s. In fact, by the end of the 1960s, the term “contemporary worship” regularly meant updated liturgical language, as liturgical scholar James White approvingly noted at the time (White 1971, 195).²⁸ Updated language in these resources not only meant eliminating archaic pronouns, antiquated verb forms, and outdated structures for phrases and sentences, but it also meant a preference for the straightforwardness of everyday speech in order to “tell it like it is” (Ibid., 1971, 198–200, 207). The contemporary language of everyday life seemed fitting for a view of worship as “God’s party” (Randolph 1975). It was difficult for mid-twentieth century Christians to party with thee, thou, and thine.

²⁵ Interestingly, the Revised Standard Version uses archaic language when addressing fallen Babylon in Revelation 18.

²⁶ Wegner 1999, 324ff. The Berkeley Version (New Testament 1945; entire Bible 1959) is another exception which retains archaic language.

²⁷ There has indeed been a flood of new versions in the 20th century, especially in the latter half. David Daniell claims there were over 1200 new translations of the Bible, or parts thereof, in English between 1945 and 1990. Of these, 35 were new translations of the whole Bible and 80 were New Testament alone. These 1200 new translations represent 40% of all translations into English, from Tyndale in 1526 to the start of the 21st century (Daniell 2003, 264, 267).

²⁸ This language-related definition for the term “contemporary worship” is another source for the term as it will evolve into a technical term for a certain stylistic kind of service in the 1990s. Note that linking “contemporary” to language predates the widespread rise of the term “contemporary Christian music.”

The updating of language in worship resources seems to draw from a similar impulse and, in fact, was inspired by these new Bible translations. One author in 1975, for example, supported his collection of contemporary-language liturgical texts by noting the power some had experienced in new language in the Bible: “The fresh new vocabulary of today’s language in modern versions had made truths which once were hidden or unappealing come alive as though God had spoken to us just today! The same thing needs to happen in our worship services” (Corl 1975, 5; see also White 1971, 201).

The desire for updated, “contemporary” language in worship stands behind the steady stream of new worship resources emerging in the late 1960s.²⁹ Denominations and private individuals published collections. Examples of the former are the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship and its two-volume *Contemporary Worship* series (1969), and the Church of Scotland's *Prayers for Contemporary Worship* (1977).³⁰ Such denominational resources were paralleled by collections from individuals. As one such resource—with the hip title of *Treat Me Cool, Lord*—explained, archaic prayer language was inappropriate not just because it was not current but because it undercut young people’s ability to pray honestly and really out of their own world (Burke 1968, 14).

Two of the denominational resources—the Methodist *Book of Worship* and United Methodist *Book of Worship*—are handy bookends framing the time period during which the language of prayer in English changed, including the language used in CWS. The 1964 *Book of Worship* of the Methodist Church mainly uses archaic pronouns and verb forms in its prayers. In contrast, the 1992 United Methodist *Book of Worship* contains virtually no archaic forms in its prayers (the Lord’s Prayer being the main exception) or in the Scriptures embedded within services (the King James Version for Psalm 23 in the funeral service is one exception).

This 25–30 year period from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s seems to mark the time during which archaic language was lost in written and extemporaneous praying in English. The period roughly parallels the one in which the CWS with archaic language were composed. The relative absence of archaisms in CWS after the mid-1980s suggests a smaller time frame of mid-1960s to the early 1980s as the critical period.

²⁹ White insinuates that the start of the “period of rapid change in the forms of worship” dates to about 1965 (White 1971, 1). Compare the similar dating of “creative worship” in Hustad 1981, 332ff.

³⁰ See also the multiple volumes of *Hymns for Now* for a Lutheran counterpart in new music (Kell, Steyer, and Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod 1967), and also [Church of Scotland] 1977.

A sampling of prayers from live worship recordings from the period supports this suggestion. Even as late as 1966 one Christian author could estimate—and complain—that 98 percent of all Protestant churches used archaic language in prayer in Sunday worship (Wilson 1966, 24). Similarly, samplings of worship services from Asbury Theological Seminary and of recorded prayers from evangelist Billy Graham show consistent archaic usage into the 1970s.³¹ From that period forward, prayer practice changed so that by the 1980s updated language was heard in the Asbury chapels, and from Billy Graham by the 1990s.³² Evangelical figures like California street preacher Arthur Blessitt (British Broadcasting Corporation, Television Service, and Time-Life Films 1972) and musician Keith Green³³ were using contemporary language in their extemporaneous prayers in the 1970s. Blessitt began his street ministry in 1967 using the King James Version, but quickly changed when he discovered the youth did not understand its archaic language. Using the Today's English Version, supplied to Blessitt by the American Bible Society, people touched by his ministry began using contemporary language in their praying and singing.³⁴

The media of pop culture reflect these ecclesiastical developments, but surely without causing them in worship generally or in CWS specifically. Portrayals of Christian prayer in movies and on TV shows reflect the loss of archaic language over the same time period. Movies like *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The 10 Commandments* (1956),³⁵ and *Patton* (1970),³⁶ and TV shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954), use archaic language in prayer.³⁷ Ironically, Monty Python, the British comedy ensemble, perhaps gives a window into the critical years of change. Whether in short sketches ("The Bruces," from the early 1970s) or movies (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, from 1975), Monty Python used archaic liturgical language to create humor. But in *The Meaning of Life* (1983), the prayer humor comes from the complete vacuousness of the vernacular phrases, not from the

³¹ The Asbury services can be heard at <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsevents> or <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsevents/chapelservices>, and Billy Graham at <http://billygraham.org/video>.

³² Hear his 1993 prayer at <http://billygraham.org/video/is-the-end-of-the-world-close/>.

³³ From a 1978 performance at Estes Park, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jd9MaBu3gAg>, accessed May 29, 2014.

³⁴ Arthur Blessitt, e-mail to author, May 29, 2014.

³⁵ This movie reflects the mixed usage which sometimes occurs. Moses at the burning bush addresses God as "you," but in the prayer at the end of the Red Sea passage uses "thee/thou." Perhaps the difference is whether the prayer is uttered as part of corporate worship. Compare the non-archaic language in the bar-scene prayer in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and the mixed usage in *The Apostle* (1997).

³⁶ The prayer in *Patton* is actually a historic text from one of Patton's chaplains in 1944.

³⁷ Even the television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) used archaic language in the Sermon on the Mount and in its version of the Lord's Prayer. For a shift from reading from the King James Version, see the city council scene in the two versions (1984 and 2011) of *Footloose*.

perceived absurdity of archaic prayer language. By the late 1980s, the practice of praying in archaic English seems so forgotten that some recent movies attempting portrayals of historical figures surely misrepresent their prayer language by making it modern.³⁸

With respect to the loss of archaic English in the most popular CWS, the influence most likely comes from broader developments in the church, given the significant changes taking place in Bible translations and in extemporaneous and non-extemporaneous liturgical speech. That occasional pop media were likely reflecting these changes, too, seems an incidental matter. Since pop lyrics had long lost archaic English—if they had ever used archaic expressions at all—the influence on CWS lyrics seems nonexistent.

Conclusion

A close analysis of the language of the lyrics suggests that CWS is an example of a longstanding propensity in Protestant worship history to use popular “sounds and styles in its music making.” This isn't a novel phenomenon, and so when CWS reflects the impulse to draw upon secular sources, some musicologists have noted that we should not be surprised (Ingalls, Mall, and Nekola 2013). In particular, with respect to CWS, an assessment of their words shows that this propensity involves not only the sound or style of the music, but also the songs' very language.

To say, however, that CWS is merely a wholesale co-opting of secular pop forms and influences, as some critics have suggested, is too simple. A close look at the language of the lyrics shows that the relationships of these songs to either pop culture or Christian piety are fluid and flexible. Perhaps living flexibly at this intersection—straddling it in some instances—can help explain the quick ecumenical popularity of CWS in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Rather than ask worshipers to uproot and travel to a new address to be able to sing, CWS emerged with suppleness from a locale which worshipers already occupied: the evolving intersection of Christian piety and pop culture. The complex “pop” nature of CWS—in some areas reflecting pop musical developments and in other areas reflecting changes in church piety—surely contributed to how contemporary worship songs so quickly became popular among Christians.

³⁸ For two examples, see the portrayals of American Civil War (1861-1865) soldiers praying, in the movies *Glory* (1989) and *Gods and Generals* (2003). See also prayer scenes in *A League of Their Own* (1992), set in the 1940s, and *We Were Soldiers* (2002), set in 1965.

Appendix: The 110 Contemporary Worship Songs

10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)	Glory to God Forever
Above All	God is Able
Ah Lord God	God of Wonders
All Hail King Jesus	Great Is the Lord
Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)	Hallelujah
Arise and Sing	Happy Day
As the Deer	He Has Made Me Glad
Awesome God	He Is Exalted
Beautiful One	The Heart of Worship
Because He Lives	Here I Am to Worship
Better Is One Day	His Name Is Wonderful
Bind Us Together	Holy Ground
Bless His Holy Name	Holy Is the Lord
Blessed Be Your Name	Holy Spirit
Breathe	Hosanna
Celebrate Jesus, Celebrate	Hosanna (Praise is Rising)
Change My Heart, O God	How Great Is Our God
Come, Now Is the Time to Worship	How Great Thou Art
Cornerstone	How He Loves
Days of Elijah	How Majestic Is Your Name
Draw Me Close	I Could Sing of Your Love Forever
Emmanuel	I Exalt Thee
Everlasting God	I Give You My Heart
Father, I Adore You	I Love You, Lord
Forever	I Stand in Awe
Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)	I Will Call Upon the Lord
Forever Reign	I Worship You Almighty God
Friend of God	Indescribable
From the Inside Out	In Christ Alone
Give Thanks	In Him We Live
Glorify Thy Name	In Moments Like These

Jesus, Messiah
Jesus Name Above All Names
Let God Arise
Let There Be Glory and Honor and Praises
Lord Be Glorified
Lord I Lift Your Name on High
Lord I Need You
Lord Reign in Me
Majesty
Mighty to Save
More Precious Than Silver
My Life Is in You, Lord
O How He Loves You
Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)
One Thing Remains
Open Our Eyes Lord
Open the Eyes of My Heart Lord
Our God
Our God Reigns
Praise the Name of Jesus
Revelation Song
Sanctuary
Seek Ye First
Shine, Jesus, Shine
Shout to the Lord
The Stand
Surely the Presence of the Lord
There's Something About That Name
This Is Amazing Grace
This Is the Day
Thou Art Worthy
Thy Lovingkindness
Trading My Sorrows
Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus
We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise
We Fall Down
We Have Come Into His House
We Will Glorify
What a Mighty God We Serve
When I Look Into Your Holiness
Whom Shall I Fear God of Angel Armies
The Wonderful Cross
You Are My All In All
You Are My King
You're Worthy of My Praise
Your Grace Is Enough
Your Love Never Fails
Your Name

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