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# The Message in Our Music : What Popular Congregational Songs Say about Our Beliefs

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**THE MESSAGE IN OUR MUSIC:  
WHAT POPULAR CONGREGATIONAL SONGS  
SAY ABOUT OUR BELIEFS**

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*Sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven. John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

Congregational singing is the primary activity around which the church gathers. This is not to assert the notion that “worship” and “music” are synonymous terms, but rather an observation about the activity typically engaged in when the people of God assemble. In the typical Protestant congregation, congregational singing often takes up as much time as the sermon, more time than prayer, (although some would argue that singing is a form of prayer<sup>2</sup>), and more time than the reading of Scripture (although some lyrics are quotations or adaptations of Scripture set to music). While “worship” is both a lifestyle and ritual response to God’s self-revelation, including His covenantal activity toward us and on our behalf<sup>3</sup>, when the word “worship” is used in present-day Christian culture, reference is most often being made to congregational singing.

Congregational singing is at once logocentric- communicating God’s Word and nature- and theocentric- focusing attention on God; praise. Congregational singing has long been considered an efficacious means to convey biblical truth and church doctrine. Church fathers such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther offered both encouragement and caution regarding the use of music. Recognizing that congregational singing is pedagogic and didactic, formative and expressive, Isaac Watts and John and Charles Wesley composed

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *Select Hymns*, Directions for Singing, 1761.

<sup>2</sup> “Whoever sings [to God, in worship], prays twice. Attributed to Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 C.E. (Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000], 1); John Calvin said: “As for public prayers, there are two kinds. The ones with the word alone: the others with singing. And this is not something invented a little time ago. For from the first origin of the Church, this has been so, as appears from the histories. And even St. Paul speaks not only of praying by mouth: but also of singing. And in truth we know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.” (John Calvin, *Geneva Psalter*, 1539).

<sup>3</sup> “The worship provisions of the Old Testament are presented as an expression of the covenant relationship established by God himself and Israel. Similarly, in the New Testament, worship theology is intimately connected with the establishment and outworking of the new covenant. Acceptable worship under both covenants is a matter of responding to God’s initiative and revelation, and doing so in the way that he requires.” (David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, [Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 19)

hymns as a means of doctrinal pedagogy, using their compositions to summarize sermon content. Robert Webber proposed: “Historically one could say that worship hands down truth, the early Christian community reflecting on its worship formalized this truth in creeds, and therefore these creeds and the truths they teach must shape our worship. Perhaps it could be put this way: *lex orandi lex credendi lex orandi*. Prayer shapes believing, believing shapes prayer.”<sup>4</sup>

Since congregational singing is pedagogic<sup>5</sup>, it simultaneously reflects current attitudes and thoughts about God, and shapes them.<sup>6</sup> Repetition of congregational songs forges a foundation of theological memory and understanding. If the theology of our congregational singing is shallow and shoddy, then it may both reflect a shallow and shoddy understanding of God, and shape a shallow and shoddy lifestyle. Therefore, careful attention must be given both to the content of individual songs (i.e., “Do we really believe what is being sung?”) and the corpus of what a congregation sings as a means of doctrinal pedagogy (i.e., “How is our system of beliefs shaped by what is sung over time?”). Just as creeds are succinct summaries of biblical truths, congregational songs are compact faith statements.<sup>7</sup> However, attention and long-term planning on the part of leaders is required to effectively use songs to guide congregational formation in doctrinal directions that speak to the totality of God and His will and purposes. Even when echoing biblical sentiment, lyrics may be incomplete, vague, or inaccurate theologically. Song selection must neither be limited to the lyrics of generic Christian-ized sentiments (“Praise God”) nor simply to the perceived “marketable” aspects of current cultural preference (“God is love”).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Paul A. Basden, ed., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 49.

<sup>5</sup> “Sacred songs are extraordinary in their capacity to compress and epitomize the most fundamental ideas of a faith community. In fact those who attempt to study religion without paying adequate attention to its sacred song run the risk of missing some key components of those belief systems.” (David W. Stowe, *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans*, [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004], 3).

“Hymns are typically said or sung in public worship, and the authors of a worship textbook reflect a widely held opinion when they say that ‘worship in all its forms and elements is laden with theological insights.’ In worship, ‘the theology is acted out, expressed in practice.’ So ‘worship is the vehicle of theology, communicating far more effectively than learned treatises even can.’ Perhaps we should simply accept the implication that hymn lyrics, as elements in worship, can be ‘vehicles’ of theology, putting into memorable language ‘what oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.’” (Wren, 351).

<sup>6</sup> “When a congregation sings together, its song is an acted parable of community. In the act of singing, the members not only support one another, but proclaim a community of faith reaching beyond the congregation that sings. Thus, the corporate inclusiveness of congregational song is *ecclesial*: it declares what the church aims and hopes to be, and reminds the singers of their common faith and hope, declares what the church aims and hopes to be, and reminds the singers of their common faith and hope.” (Wren, 93).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Westermeyer observes, “a group who sings together becomes one and remembers its story, and therefore who it is, in a particularly potent way.” Congregational song is creedal, because the words of familiar songs help shape a congregation’s theology, and music summons them in time of need. (Wren, 91).

<sup>8</sup> Christian musicians must be cautious about creating the impression that God is more present when music is being made than when it is not; that worship is more possible with music than without it; and that God might possibly depend on its presence before appearing. “If in making music or listening to it I assume that

St. Augustine famously wrote: “When it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, worship leader Bob Kauflin suggested: “Too often we can be tempted to choose songs because of the music rather than the theological content. We need to realize that when words are combined with music we can be deceived. Music can make shallow lyrics sound deep. A great rhythm section can make drivel sound profound and make you want to sing it again. If the words on the page are theologically shallow or vague, music won’t add anything. It will only give the illusion that the words are actually substantive.”<sup>10</sup>

It may reasonably be concluded that if the content of congregational singing trends toward generic Christian-ized sentiment, both the formation and expression of faith in daily living will also be generic. “If our songs aren’t specific about God’s nature, character, and acts, we’ll tend to associate worship with a style of music, a day of the week, a meeting, a reverent mood, a time of singing, or a sound. Worse, we’ll create our own views of God, portraying him as we like to think of him.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, behaviors in Christians that deviate from historic biblical moral reasoning and behavior could look remarkably similar to that of non-Christian behavior.<sup>12</sup> This may be reflected in inattention to or exaltation of certain behaviors over others: i.e., personal morality vs. social activity. In other words, “Current pop worship that is inattentive to truth will shape a worship that hands down a Christianity that may no longer be true.”<sup>13</sup>

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faith will bring substance and evidence *to* the music, so as to make it more “worshipful,” I am getting into real trouble. If I truly love the music- that is, if I have chosen a church that uses “my music” and I am deeply moved by it- I can make the mistake of coupling my faith to musical experience by assuming that the power and effectiveness of music is what brings substance and evidence to my faith. I may even slip fully into the sin of *equating* the power of music and the nearness of the Lord. At that point music joins the bread and wine in the creation of a new sacrament of even a new kind of transubstantiation. Or let’s say that I deeply love Jesus but I detest the music- it is not “my music.” What am I to do in the absence of a linkage between having faith and loving the music? Where is God in all of this? If he is in the music, I will never find him, because to me there is no substance of evidence, even though others are seemingly finding him there. Do I wait for the right kind of music so that my faith becomes effectual? Do I look for another church, hoping that my faith will be fed and my felt needs met? Or do I turn from music to the Lord, knowing that faith remains faith and the music is merely music and not a sacramental substance that mediates between God and me?” Harold Best. *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts*. [Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2003], 30).

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.50.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Kauflin, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Much that is central to the Christian life will not fit neatly into the management/marketing scheme. In effect, the “good news” has been filtered through a rather fine marketing sieve, the result being that many of the less marketable claims which God has on our lives have been removed, leaving for the consumer those aspects of the Christian faith most readily translated into terms of self-interest. (emphasis added) (Philip D. Kenneson, “Selling Out the Church in the Marketplace of Desire,” *Modern Theology*, Vol. 9 (no.4), pp. 319-48. Quoted in Cornelius Platinga, Jr., and Sue A. Rosenboom. *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking About Christian Worship Today*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003], 19)

<sup>13</sup> Robert Webber, “Blended Worship,” in Paul E. Basden, ed., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004), 49.

Congregational leaders must, therefore, be vigilant about both individual and long-term song selection as a means of communicating the totality of the truth of God.

### **Description of the Study**

What theology is embedded in the most commonly sung congregational songs? Since 1989 the Christian Copyright Licensing, Inc. (CCLI)<sup>14</sup> has published semiannual lists of the 10 songs most accessed by its users. While there are other print and digital resources, CCLI is the largest online site devoted to providing access to music for congregational singing. In 2007 Woods, et al<sup>15</sup> identified songs as having been used significantly from 1989 through 2005. They examined issues such as: inadequate reflection of the doctrine of the Trinity in the song lyrics, texts that speak to implications for social justice, and the connection and appropriateness of human expressions of romance to a relationship with God. None of the articles examined the lyrics with intention to summarize the general theological caste or to issues of particular doctrinal persuasion.

For the purposes of this study, the authors focused on the most popular songs from CCLI lists between 2006-2012, roughly coinciding with the spiritually formative years of current college students. (In 2013 this would mean typical undergraduate college students were likely ages 11-16 during the first year of the data- Jr. and Sr. high school.) Twenty songs were identified as having received significant usage during this time period. Ten songs were reported on every list and six songs appeared more than ten times, which appeared to be a natural break in frequency of appearance. Additionally, four songs were included because they showed extraordinary popularity during the few years they appeared, but could not have been statistically as high on the list due to a recent publication date.

The data presented 350 potential songs for review. However, only c.50 songs actually appeared in on the lists during the period reviewed. Further examination showed that the 16 “most used” songs, roughly 30% of the songs reported, represented 60% of the actual songs used.

### **Some Limitations**

It is not the purpose of this study to investigate or comment specifically upon issues of musical style, nor will assessment be made of music-lyric congruence. Rather, reporting will consist of data gathered from a primary resource for congregational songs.

1) Data were gathered from the Christian Copyright License, Incorporated (CCLI) website, 2006-2012. No other resource was examined. 2) CCLI statistics were gathered, in part, from a self-reporting body of clients. Earlier reported song usage may favor “trending” songs rather than actual or total song usage. 3) In more recent data, the CCLI server can tally the number of times a particular song was downloaded from its host site. It cannot record the number of times a song was actually used, or if previously download music was stored for later usage. 4) No consideration could be made for potential use of

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<sup>14</sup> us.ccli.com.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Woods and Brian Walrath, eds., *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 77.

hymnals, chorus, books, existing song libraries (including previous downloads), other resources (worshiptogether.com, praisecharts.com, sovereigngracemusic.org, etc.). 5) No consideration could be made to determine the theological content of other church service elements that may have offered a more balanced and broad theological pedagogy to individual congregations.

For the purposes of the theological analysis, the authors have chosen a bifurcated approach. First, the authors will consider theological doctrines which are held in common amongst Christian traditions. These doctrines include: Trinity (three persons, one nature) incarnation (two natures, one person), and salvation through Jesus Christ. This evaluation is necessary as many of the songs are intended as general-use worship songs, meaning that they can be sung regardless of the denominational affiliation of the church. Secondly, the authors evaluated the message of the songs as it associated with the free will / predestination debate, which functions as a denominational distinction. While other theological elements could be identified, this debate seems the most well-known. The following are the conclusions that the authors have reached.

### **Common Christian Doctrines**

In general, the authors observed that these top twenty songs were not deep theological reflections, and rather functioned as general or generic praise songs. This should not be read as an evaluative statement; but is rather intended as a descriptive statement, both of the song's function and the intent of the author. Moving beyond this, it is noted that many of the songs do not formulate any of the theological truths that Christianity holds to and instead focus on and affirm the Christian response of praise to God.

The authors also noted that, amongst these songs, there was very little development of Trinitarian thought.<sup>16</sup> Very few of the songs considered the Father and the Holy Spirit, while the focus of the majority was on the work of Jesus Christ. One notable exception was 'How Great is our God' wherein the second verse contains the concept of three in one, with the attendant identification of Father, Spirit, Son. While one might quibble with the ordering, one might also recognize the necessity of musical structure. However, this phrase is followed immediately by Lion and the Lamb, which are typical affirmations of Christ and could cause confusion by conflating Christology with Trinitarian thought.<sup>17</sup> A second exception is 'Open the eyes of my heart'. In the bridge of this song, the tri-partite Holy Holy Holy is affirmed, which is a traditional affirmation of God. This is then

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<sup>16</sup> It can be reasonably argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is a defining element of the Christian faith. This doctrine took hundreds of years and first two general councils to reach full articulation (Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils* [Liturgical Press, 1990], 33-132). The fact that the first general councils dealt with this issue is a helpful reminder of the centrality of the Trinity.

<sup>17</sup> Christ is referred to as the Lion of Judah in Rev. 5:5. The lamb imagery is present in John 1:29, 36 and throughout Revelation (Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 167 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003]). The image is also present in 1 Pet. 1:19, where Jesus is identified as the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. The Lion and Lamb are placed together in Rev. 5:5-6, wherein the author sees both the sense of triumph and sacrifice as connected in the work of Christ. The suffering and conquering motifs are often associated with the two advents of Christ. The popular image of the lion laying down with the lamb is not present in Scripture. The closest allusion is Isa. 11:6, where the wolf and lamb dwell together. In popular thought, the lion and lamb are often apocalyptic images of the peaceful millennial reign of Christ.

followed by the line ‘I want to see You’. While it may be that this singular ‘You’ references the oneness of God, which fits nicely with the preceding threeness, it seems more probable that this is a reference back to the singular ‘Lord’ in verse 1. This would again be a conflation of Christology with Trinitarian thought.<sup>18</sup>

While a Trinitarian focus may be lacking, there was a distinct Christo-centric focus. This can be seen in a focus on salvation, the recurring theme of atonement, and general references to Jesus. This leads to both positive and difficult elements.

First, it is noted that 12 out of the 20 songs make a general reference to Jesus or are completely about Christ. This serves to focus the attention on the person of Christ, but also serves to move attention away from His participation in the Godhead. In comparison, the other 8 songs are about God or the Lord, but only the two mentioned above have Trinitarian connections. Of these 8, two are also a bit ambiguous and are most probably referring to Christ without naming him (‘Blessed be your Name’ and ‘Open the Eyes of My Heart’). We would also here note that ‘God of Wonders’ mentions the Father without naming the other two members of the Trinity. However, when everything is tallied together, the picture that emerges is that of a deep focus upon Christ.

While the breadth of thought on the person and work of Christ is deep and well-rounded, this is not the case with these twenty songs.<sup>19</sup> By and large, this focus on Christ is upon the incarnation, the atonement, or both. To be sure, this is a key component within our Christology, and the seven songs that describe the atonement do so in a competent way. In particular, differing theories of the atonement: namely the substitution, satisfaction and ransom theories, are all represented. Having these major theories present helps the modern audience to become more familiar with precisely what is happening in the atonement of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This is somewhat reminiscent of the ancient concept known as modalistic Monarchianism or Sabellianism. Modalistic Monarchianism tended to focus on the unity of God at the expense of distinction, and therefore presented Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as different modes or presentations of the singular God. This protected the monarchy of God, but did not provide a real distinction between the three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit then became names that were applicable at different times (J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, [Peabody, Mass.: Prince Press, 2004], 119-23).

<sup>19</sup> The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth ecumenical councils all concerned the person and work of Christ. Of particular concern was the explanation of the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Christ; specifically the councils dealt with how human Christ is and how that humanity connected with the full divinity. Ultimately, the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) produced the definition accepted by most Christ groups today (Davis, 170-204).

<sup>20</sup> The concept of the atonement in much debated in modern scholarship, with a number to different theories having been proposed. Other, typically Western, theories on the atonement include: *Christus Victor* and Christ as Scapegoat. One of the more influential books on the theories of the atonement is Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An historical study of the three main types of the idea of the atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931). However, Aulén’s view and analysis are not without criticism, with many focusing on either the substitutionary theory or proposing a more non-violent theory. On the substitutionary theory, see J.I. Packer’s influential book: *What did the Cross achieve? The logic of penal substitution* (InterVarsity Press, 1973). On the non-violent theory, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2001). Most will recognize that no one theory of the atonement is complete in its description of the work of Christ in salvation and that it is best to hold the theories together in tension. This further recognizes that there continues to be a sense of mystery in the atonement.

Satisfaction:<sup>21</sup> ‘In Christ Alone’: This song distinctly talks about the wrath of God being satisfied. Here, it is through the sacrifice of Christ, whom the song describes as both God and man, that our offense is made right.

Substitution:<sup>22</sup> ‘You are my King’: This song distinctly features the idea of Christ’s death being in place of ours. ‘Lord I lift your name on high’: This song features the concept of Christ paying our debt on the cross.

Ransom:<sup>23</sup> ‘In Christ Alone’: This song engages with the ransom theory and the satisfaction theory in a number of places. Principally, it suggests that Christ’s death satisfies God’s wrath and that in the resurrection, humanity is freed from the curse of sin. ‘Amazing Grace’: In the additional chorus, the language of Christ as a ransom is prominent. ‘Jesus Messiah’: This song suggests that Christ is the ransom from heaven, and yet also engages with the substitution theory wherein Christ becomes sin for us. ‘Here I am to Worship’: This song talks about Christ fulfilling the cost for the redemption of humanity.

The 7<sup>th</sup> song is ‘Mighty to Save’, which does not present a theory of the atonement, but talks about atonement in general terms.

However, we might note that the moral influence theory of the atonement is lacking.<sup>24</sup> This may tie in directly with the fact that there is no mention of social justice issues in these songs as well.

However, while the theories of the atonement are well represented, there is not, overall, much depth on the incarnation. Only three songs deal with any sense of the incarnation. Thus, while ‘In Christ Alone’ carries a deep sense of the incarnation, particularly of Christ being fully God and taking on humanity, the other two songs leave something to be desired. ‘Lord I lift your name on high’ has a nice recounting of the work of Christ on earth, but fails to reach the point of resurrection, which is key to incarnational theology. The structure of the song points to Christ coming to teach and atone, but merely mentions

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<sup>21</sup> The Satisfaction theory of the atonement is typically traced to St. Anselm in the eleventh century. The basic concept of this theory is that human sin has offended the honor of God. This offense is infinite, which means that finite humans cannot atone for sin. Only the perfect human, the God-Man can offer the necessary sacrifice of atonement. Anselm describes this theory in his work, *Cur Deus Homo?*, in which he attempts to explain why it was necessary for God to become human (Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 1 [San Francisco: Harper, 1978], 153; Walter Lowe, “Christ and Salvation,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], 230-31).

<sup>22</sup> The Substitution theory of the atonement suggests that Christ goes to the cross in our place. God allows Christ to take our guilt upon himself and allows the righteousness of Christ to be given to us. This theory, sometimes seen as rooted in the theology of John Calvin, is particularly prominent in elements of conservative Protestantism (Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007], 340-43).

<sup>23</sup> The ransom theory of the atonement is also known as the classic theory of the atonement. This theory is founded on the concept that God and Satan are engaged in conflict which has spilled out to humans. Satan is the chief adversary, and the death of Christ on the cross signifies the victory of God and the defeat of Satan. In this sense, Christ is given as a ransom given on behalf of humanity, although it might be noted that there are differences of opinion in terms of who receives the ransom payment (Bloesch, Vol. 1, 152).

<sup>24</sup> The moral influence theory suggests that Christ’s work in life and on the cross influence humans to desire to live in conformity with his standards. Many criticize this theory suggesting that it doesn’t recognize the radical nature of sin.

that Christ went from the grave to the sky without giving any sense of the victory which was present. 'Here I am to Worship' also leaves something to be desired when it comes to incarnational thought. This song has some ambiguity when it comes to creation and incarnation, not entirely making it clear the extent of the work of Christ. It leaves a sense that Christ only came to redeem our sin; there is no element of teaching or deliverance from death, and no mention of the idea that he came as the savior of everything.<sup>25</sup> Rather, it appears that he is saving us from this world. This leaves the impression that creation was not good, which is not a decidedly Christian idea.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, while many of the songs focused on atonement related issues, there is very little regarding transformation or holiness. There are only three brief mentions of the concept:

'Forever' – mentions a reborn life

'Come, now is the time to worship' – mentions a surrendered life

'Jesus Messiah' – mentions that we receive his righteousness

The idea of transformation is central to the Christian proclamation of the work of Christ and ought not so easily be left behind.<sup>27</sup> Although these three songs at least mention the idea of a new life or of righteousness, none of them develops it to the same extent that the atonement is considered.

While none of these songs on their own presents any significantly deficient theology, we must consider the aggregate message of all of the songs taken together in order to see what is being emphasized and what is being left out. When taken together, these songs tend to focus on just the person of Christ and his atoning work. This focus on the atoning work of Christ means that little is said about the transformational element. This could lead to the conclusion that Christianity is solely about salvation and has nothing to do with sanctification.<sup>28</sup> Further, there is very little identification of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, leading to the conclusion that Christ is solely responsible for our salvation. This can, I think, lead in one of two directions, neither of which is desirable. The first

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<sup>25</sup> Christianity holds to the idea of the cosmic reign of Christ; that is that his reign extends over creation. Further, Revelation suggests that a new heaven and a new earth are being brought into existence. In this, creation is not something to be saved from, but is something that is being restored (Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 [Peabody, Mass.: Prince Press, 1998], 525; Allan D. Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ*, [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951]). For Galloway, see especially parts 1 and 2 which set the Biblical and historical foundations for the concept of a cosmic redemption.

<sup>26</sup> Many heresies in the early church would suggest that we are saved from this world. Typically these heresies featured some form of dualism (the idea that there are two gods) or something akin to a Gnostic cosmology. In these systems, the physical world was the product of either an ignorant or evil being while the soul was the product of the good God. The goal of existence was for the soul to escape the bounds of the created world. For a succinct discussion of ancient Gnosticism, see Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). On the difficulty and usefulness of the term 'Gnosticism,' see Michael A. Williams' groundbreaking work, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 31-65. It should be noted that the idea of transformation is not just the province of those in the holiness traditions, but is present in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and every major branch of Protestantism. The question of the mechanics of transformation differ, but the concept of transformation is present.

<sup>28</sup> Scripture makes it clear that sanctification takes place in the Christian life, with Paul indicating it as the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 6-8; Galatians 5-6).

direction is what is known as the economic view of the Trinity, which basically assigns certain roles to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which become known through God's self-revelation in creation and redemption.<sup>29</sup> For example, the Father is seen as responsible for creation, the Son for salvation, and the Spirit for sanctification. While this was a model often used in the early church, it was always used tentatively and was accompanied by the acknowledgment that the other two persons of the Trinity were involved in each distinctive aspect. In this way, early theologians sought to balance the threeness, which was emphasized by the economy, with the unity of God's nature.<sup>30</sup> However, in our modern songs, there is not even a single acknowledgment that the Father or Holy Spirit have anything to do with salvation, and thus separation, rather than unity, is emphasized.

The second possible direction is a sense of dualism. One of the elements which comes from overemphasizing Christ's role as redeemer is that it appears that Christ is the only one for us and that the Father is out to get us. That is, that God the Father is the judge waiting to condemn us, while Christ is the merciful one attempting to snatch us away from the hands of an angry judge. A key example of this is "In Christ alone." This song emphasizes the work of Christ in atonement, while his death satisfies the wrathfulness of God. This may suggest that there are two gods, one who judges and one who loves and saves. This is reminiscent of the classical heresy of Marcionism.<sup>31</sup> Again, the authors are not suggesting that any individual song is promoting Marcionism, but that, when taken together and without other balancing features, Marcionism is the impression which is left.

A second major feature of all of the songs taken together is a focus on individuality rather than participation in the church. In total, 13 of the songs had an individual focus, while only 5 exhibited a concept of participation in the church.<sup>32</sup> This decreases the sense of corporate participation and worship. This, however, is not terribly surprising within the

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<sup>29</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 104-15.

<sup>30</sup> By following this approach, Tertullian sought to avoid the heresy of modalism, which denied any distinction within God. In this, modalists were attempting to defend the monarchy of God, but failed to differentiate between distinction and separation.

<sup>31</sup> Marcionism was founded in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century by Marcion. Marcion apparently held that creation was too messy and must have been the product of a lesser, second deity who played favorites (preferential treatment of the Israelites), was judgmental, and was responsible for the Old Testament. In contrast, Jesus comes to tell of an alien or stranger God who is characterized by love. The classic study of Marcion is: Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of an Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1990). See also: R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion, On the Restitution of Christianity: an Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); Edwin C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948). On Marcion's relationship to the development of the New Testament canon, see Harry Y. Gamble, "Marcion and the 'Canon'," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 204.

<sup>32</sup> Those songs with an individualistic focus are: "How great is our God," "Blessed be your name," "Here I am to Worship," "Open the eyes of my heart," "You are my king," "Shout to the Lord," "Come, now is the time to worship," "Lord I lift Your name on high," "The heart of worship," "In Christ Alone," "Beautiful One," "Mighty to save," and "Amazing Grace (My chains are gone)." Those songs featuring a sense of church participation are: "Forever," "Holy is the Lord," "We fall down," "Everlasting God," and "Our God."

modern, American view of Christianity, which tends to be individualistic.<sup>33</sup> This is somewhat ironic, particularly as these songs are used in a corporate worship setting. This stands somewhat at odds with another missing element, which is a connection with social justice. In fact, in our analysis, neither of the authors discovered any real mention of social justice issues. This struck us as surprising given the emphasis in Christianity on social justice.<sup>34</sup> While this may simply be a function of the specific 20 songs used in this analysis, it may also be connected with the emphasis upon individuality and salvation. That is, if the focus is upon myself being saved, there is not much to be said about meeting the needs of fellow humans.

### **Denominational Distinctives**

This category mostly focused on the distinctives between Calvinism and Wesleyanism and worked mainly on looking at the predestination vs. free will debate. To ascertain if there was a Wesleyan or Calvinistic bent, the authors searched for certain key words that denoted either a freedom of choice or a more deterministic outlook. Songs that displayed these key terms were then evaluated to determine if they truly exhibited signs of Calvinism or Wesleyanism, or were using the terms for a different effect.

In sum, the authors discovered that only one song had an overt Calvinistic tone. This song was “In Christ Alone.” This particular song contains the themes of irresistible election and eternal security, which are hallmarks of Calvinistic thought. Other songs contained elements that implied determinism, but were not as clearly Calvinistic. These songs included ‘Beautiful One’ and ‘Here I am to Worship’. In terms of a Wesleyan focus, only one song, ‘Come, now is the time to worship’, displayed clear Wesleyan themes. In particular, this song describes the need to willingly choose Christ. In our observations, the rest of the songs were generically Protestant, perhaps purposefully designed to be acceptable in a variety of denominational traditions.

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<sup>33</sup> Richard J. Mouw, “The Heresy of ‘Individualism?’” *Christianity Today*, July 15, 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/julyweb-only/128-31.0.html?start=1> accessed March 15, 2014. In this article, Mouw suggests that Evangelicals need to nuance the idea of individualism, noting that a focus on a personal encounter with Christ is positive. However, when individualism points to simply focusing on one’s self being saved, then there are issues with a proper understanding of Christianity.

<sup>34</sup> Scripture consistently reminds of both the individual and corporate responsibility toward the poor, widow, orphan, and outcast (Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997]; Stephen Charles Mott, *The Use of the New Testament for Social Ethics*, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15, 2 [1987]: 225 – 260; Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007]). Early Christianity clearly demonstrated this through its practices in the first five centuries (Peter C. Phan, *Social Thought, Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 20, [Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984]).

## Conclusion

Congregational singing is a source of basic theological instruction, both reflecting and shaping what we believe. It is crucial, therefore, that we say what we believe when (not if) we sing.<sup>35</sup> The results of this study found that a representative sampling of the lyrics of the most popular congregational songs did not sufficiently express foundational concepts of the Christian faith. A further consideration, outside the scope of this study, is the relative market viability of the songs listed. The more broadly Protestant or generically Christian the lyrics are may contribute to their elevated use when compared to songs with potentially more specific doctrinal proclivities. And, although individual congregations may have a systematic plan for teaching Christian theology in other parts of the church service than congregational singing, the high comparative use of the top songs listed suggests that very few systematic plans are used for congregational singing; that instead, a random selection of songs are used, with little regard to any formal theological training for the congregation, or to even attempt to more comprehensively reflect a specific doctrinal teaching in any single service. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on pastors to avoid treating congregational singing as the “warm-up” for the “real” teaching time. It is incumbent on church music leaders to either choose or compose songs that connect to a specific theological concept in a comprehensive, systematic, and not haphazard way. To this end, church leaders could use the existing indices from even recently published hymnals, whose indices are often organized into songs based on specific connections to particular doctrinal teachings.

Another consideration is the issues of vocabulary and intention. Church observer and blogger Thom Rainer suggested that the millennial generation is looking for congregational songs with “deep theology.” And Rainer asserts that such songs have been found. After examining the most popular songs, this begs the question as to what millennials really consider to be “deep theology.”<sup>36</sup>

There are other issues that reflect an attempt to fundamentally redefine certain sung beliefs, and by extension, Christian teaching about the Atonement. In 2012, the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA) attempted to change the lyrics of “In Christ Alone,” one of the most popular and theologically interesting songs on the list. The proposal was to change “till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied” to “the love of God was magnified.” Perhaps on the surface, this change in lyrics could signify the hope of God’s love to those caught in the confines of sin. However, to expunge the text of any reference to God’s wrath, eliminates the severity of the sin committed, and therefore, the degree of sacrifice to which God would go to bring about His redemptive purposes. It

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<sup>35</sup> Most congregations- even the best singing among them- rarely know more than 200 songs very well (a number that includes Christmas carols, hymns like *Amazing Grace*, and children’s songs like *Jesus Loves Me*). Many congregations barely know more than 50. (John D. Witvliet, “Discipleship and the Future of Contemporary Worship Music: Possible Directions for Scholarship, Songwriting, and Public Worship,” in Robert Woods and Brian Walrath, eds., *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007], 190).

<sup>36</sup> Thom S. Rainer. “What Worship Style Attracts the Millennials?” *The Christian Post*, April 3, 2014. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/what-worship-style-attracts-the-millennials-117322/> accessed April 3, 2014.

may, further, have been reflective of the PCUSA's attempt to alter their traditional stance on certain hot-button doctrinal issues within general Protestantism.

It is not the contention of the authors that singing any of the songs considered is particularly wrong. Taken together, however, the aggregate theological teaching of this group of congregational songs is insufficient in its reflection of broad and historic Christian theology. It is reasonable to conclude that a steady musical diet of nothing but the theology of these congregational songs will form a shallow understanding of Christian faith, leading to a shoddy version of Christian living. It is evident that far greater attention must be given to the theological content of the entire service, and the music most specifically. If 90% of the New Testament instructions concerning worship are given in the plural form, this stands in stark opposition to the notion of anemic American individualism as a model for the Christian life, as found in 13 of the songs surveyed. Perhaps the corporate content and context for our songs must be reassessed for how they teach us to build up and edify the Body of Christ as a core of God's workers who share the same location and community, and the same mission within that community. Perhaps if our music teaches us to glimpse God in the powerful ways of His self-revelation, we will see ourselves like Isaiah- as people of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips. And perhaps, once our lips are touched and cleansed with coals, we also will be sent to touch others with coals, finally able to fulfill Paul's mission of reconciliation. May we sing better songs and learn better theology, so that our congregational singing will spur within us the desire to be God's people tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, just as we are when we gather to sing.