Perhaps Contemporary Music is Not That Contemporary

Comparing Classic Evangelical Hymnody and the Hottest CCLI Worship Songs

Part I: Nouns (What They Say about the Trinity)

Lester Ruth

Duke Divinity School
Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

Challenging a Common Opinion

- A common opinion is that hymns and choruses are very, very different.

- My goal is to challenge that opinion, noting where there are common strengths and weakness in both bodies of song and suggesting some things for pastors and musicians to do make up for those weaknesses.

The Two Bodies of Song

- The most republished Evangelical hymns (hereafter EH) from 1737 to 1860 in the United States: 70 hymns from 86 hymnals

- The most used contemporary worship songs (hereafter CWS) from 1989 to 2013 on the twice-a-year Top 25 lists from CCLI for the United States: 100 songs

Here are the Lists of Songs

Note: In slides which follow CWS=list of 100 contemporary worship songs and EH=list of 70 historic hymns

This Session's Focus: Nouns for God

Specifically, how Trinitarian are both bodies of song?

Trinitarian Questions Asked

- Do the songs name the Trinity or all three Persons of the Trinity?

- Do the songs direct worship toward the Trinity as a whole or toward one of the Persons of the Trinity?

- Do the songs remember the activity of the divine Persons among themselves?

Trinitarian Questions Asked

- Do the songs see worship as participation in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity?

- Do the songs use the character of inter-Trinitarian relationships to explore a desired character for church relationships?

EV and CWS on the Trinity

- Summary comparison: There is a weak Trinitarian quality out of sync with either classic Christian worship materials or apostolic naming practices for God found in the New Testament

Specific Similarities

- Relatively little referencing of God as being Triune

- Virtually no worshiping of God for being Triune

- Only infrequently is there a naming of more than one divine Person at a time

- Many uses of more general names for deity: God, Lord, King

- When there is explicit naming of a divine Person, it is much more likely to be Jesus Christ.

Why the Weak Trinitarian Quality?

- The influence of the Psalms on evangelical songwriting
- Evangelical affections/emotions are stimulated by salvation and thus are drawn to the Savior
  - Reinforced by portrayals of Jesus Christ as the main (solitary?) actor in the dynamics of salvation
  - Reinforced by Jesus' Incarnation giving him an "advantage" over God the Father and the Holy Spirit in affect-driven worship
- Thus Evangelicals <u>really</u> emphasize an ancient practice to direct worship *to* Christ and not just *through* Christ

What Your Should Not Pull From This Study

- A condemnation of either body of song
- Absolute characterizations about every song in both types of song
- Absolute decisions about any one songwriter or any one congregation or any one service
- The idea that the meaning of a song is only in its lyrics

Explicit Naming

CWS

- All 3 Persons named within song: 4 songs (4%)

- Explicit reference to 1st Person, including use of "Father": 14 songs (14%)

- Explicit use of "Father": 5 songs (5%)

- Explicit reference to 3rd Person: 8 songs (8%)

EH

- All 3 Persons named within song: 3 songs [clearly] (4%)

- Explicit reference to 1st Person, including use of "Father": 16 songs (23%)

- Explicit use of "Father": 11 songs (16%)

- Explicit reference to 3rd Person: 10 songs (14%)

Explicit Naming

CWS

- Explicit reference to the 2nd Person: 49 (49%)

- Explicit use of "Son," Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ: 37 (37%)

- Use of other names where context makes these refer to 2nd Person: 12 (12%)

EH

- Explicit reference to the 2nd Person: 52 (74%)

- Explicit use of "Son," Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ: 39 (56%)

- Use of other names where context makes these refer to 2nd Person: 13 (18%)

Comparison
Generic Naming

CWS

- Occurrences of "Lord": 60 (60%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 35 (35%)
- Occurrences of "God": 44 (44%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 21 (21%)
- Occurrences of "King": 22 (22%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: about 7 (7%)
- No explicit name or title: 8 (8%)

EH

- Occurrences of "Lord": 41 (58%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 16 (23%)
- Occurrences of "God": 41 (58%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 20 (29%)
- Occurrences of "King": 17 (24%)
  - Undeterminable Person association: 4 songs (6%)
- No explicit name or title: 1 (1%)

Worshiping the Trinity

CWS

- Songs worshiping God for being Triune: 1

- Additional songs worshiping the whole Godhead, naming all 3 Persons as recipients of worship: 2

EH

- Songs worshiping God for being Triune: 1

- Additional songs worshiping the whole Godhead, naming all 3 Persons as recipients of worship: 1

Comparison
Worshiping the Persons

CWS

- Worshiping the 1st Person:
  - Of 14 clear references to the 1st Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 4 (4%)

- Worshiping the 3rd Person
  - Of 8 clear references to the 3rd Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 4 (4%)

EH

- Worshiping the 1st Person
  - Of 16 clear references to the 1st Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 6 (8%)

- Worshiping the 3rd Person
  - Of 10 clear references to the 3rd Person, songs directly addressing this Person: 4 (6%)

Comparison
Worshiping the Persons

CWS

- Worshiping the 2nd Person:
  - Of the 49 songs that make distinct reference to the 2nd Person, songs that directly address this Person as the recipient of worship: 41 (41% of the 100 songs; 84% of the references to Christ)

EH

- Worshiping the 2nd Person:
  - Of the 53 songs that make distinct reference to the 2nd Person, songs that directly address this Person as the recipient of worship: 28 (40% of the 70 songs; 53% of the references to Christ)

Comparison
Two-Person Songs

CWS

- In the entire corpus, 16 songs (16%) make possible mention of two Persons within the same song.

- Of the 16 songs, 12 are 1st/2nd Person songs (12% of the total; 75% of this subset)

- Of the 16 songs, 3 are 2nd/3rd Person songs (3%; 19%)

- 1 indeterminable

EV

- In the entire corpus, 17 songs (24%) make possible mention of two Persons within the same song.

- Of the 17 songs, 10 are 1st/2nd Person songs (14% of the total; 59 % of this subset)

- Of the 17 songs, 7 are 2nd/3rd Person songs (10%; 41%)

Comparison
Activity Among the Divine Persons

- Very, very little

- Compare to the sermons in the book of Acts and the first chapters of the letters of Peter and Paul.

Liturgical Participation, Church Fellowship, & the Trinity

- Both bodies of song share little reflection on worship as an activity of the church and on church fellowship, especially as either might be defined by engagement with the Triune life and activity of God.

Where the Two Bodies of Song Do Differ with Respect to Naming the Triune God

- The differences are subtle.

- The differences are usually relative, not absolute; it is a question of level of degree, not stark contrast.

Significant Difference:
Direct Address to God as Recipient of Worship

- In CWS, there is a greater frequency and manner of direct address.

- CWS comes through the front door of worship, boldly, aggressively, repeatedly, without knocking, whereas EH tends to slip in through the back door by praising in indirect ways.

- Number of songs including direct prayer:
  - EH: less than half
  - CWS: more than 60%

Examples: Indirect vs. Direct Praise

Indirect EH Example

All hail the power of Jesus' name!
Let Angels prostrate fall:
Bring forth the royal diadem,
To crown Him Lord of All.

Direct CWS Example

I exalt Thee, I exalt Thee

I exalt Thee, O Lord.

I exalt Thee, I exalt Thee

I exalt Thee, O Lord.

Verse 1

For Thou, O Lord, art high above all the earth.

Thou art exalted far above all gods.

For Thou, O Lord, art high above all the earth.

Thou art exalted far above all gods.

Significant Difference: Direct Worship and Exhortation

- EH: greater likelihood of human to human exhortation, invitation, etc., for which ye/you is a handy marker of greater consciousness of other people

- CWS: tends to emphasize the activity of human worship more, i.e., verbs like "worship" and "praise" much more likely

Examples: Worship and Exhortation

EH Exhortation Example

Come ye sinners poor and wretched,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power;
He is able,
He is willing; doubt no more.

CWS Worship Example

I love You, Lord,

And I lift my voice

To worship You.

O my soul, rejoice.

Take joy, my King

In what You hear.

May it be a sweet, sweet sound

In Your ear.

Difference
Personal Pronouns

- A clear distinction between EH and CWS:

  - In EH the second person personal pronoun for divine/human address is "thou/thee." "Ye/you" is used for person to person speech.

  - In CWS the pronoun is overwhelmingly "you" for both divine/human and person/person address.

  - The loss of the "thee/thou" and "ye/you" can create some confusion in CWS when romantic imagery is used.

The Pronouns Make All the Difference

EH Romantic Imagery Example

- From "My God, My Life, My Love" by I. Watts

Thou art the sea of love
Where all my pleasures roll,
The circle where my passions move,
And center of my soul.

CWS Romantic Imagery Example

- From "Draw Me Close" by Kelly Carpenter

You are my desire.
No one else will do
'Cause nothing else
Could take Your place
To feel the warmth
Of Your embrace.
Help me find the way
Bring me back to you.

In EH, "thou" tends to refer to a Divine being.

In CWS, who is the "you"?

Couple Pronoun Issue with How Poetic Tension is Created

- Recurring feature to create tension in CWS: the greatness of the Divine and the non-greatness of the human singer

- Feature to create tension in EH: a stronger, more recurring acknowledgment of human sin and failing with related issue of Divine provision for this problem

Examples: Different Poetic Tensions

Common Sentiment for EH

- From "Jesus, My All, to Heaven is Gone" by J. Cennick

Lo glad I come, and thou blest Lamb,
Shalt take me to thee, as I am;
Nothing but sin I thee can give;
Nothing but love would I receive.

Common Sentiments for CWS

Lord, I give you my heart (Reuben Morgan)

How Great is Our God (Chris Tomlin)

General Pastoral Suggestions

- There is a need to develop reasonable Trinitarian expectations for worship services as a whole and for individual acts of worship.

- Every act of worship does not need to be explicitly Trinitarian but every service should create a sense that God is Triune with ever increasing sensibility to this revelation over time.

- Does the service as a whole create that sense in a way that mimics and resonates with New Testament modes of expression?

Specific Pastoral Suggestions

- Contemplate the sermons in Acts and the first chapters of letters by Peter and Paul: what names are used for the three Persons and what verbs are used to relate the Three? Learn to pray like this spontaneously and look for worship materials that reflect these dynamics.

- Couple worship materials with more explicit Trinitarian naming practices with more generic songs.

Specific Pastoral Suggestions

- If you are trying to expand your congregation's range of songs to sing both bodies of song, particularly if it is unfamiliar with one type of song or the other, help the people know to shift expectations about the songs. If someone expects a hymn to be like a contemporary song or vice versa, that person is likely to be frustrated.

Specific Pastoral Suggestions

- Consider this way of structuring contemporary worship sets:
  - Start with songs honoring God the Father (explicitly),
    - transitioning to
  - Songs that remember God's saving work through Jesus Christ,
    - transitioning to
  - Songs asking for us to be empowered and filled with the Holy Spirit (to be in the Spirit).

To Go Further

- Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*
- Frank D. Macchia, *The Trinity, Practically Speaking* (available in electronic Kindle edition)
- Go to the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship website (worship.calvin.edu) and search for "Trinitarian."

Question and Discussion Time