One of my favorite artifacts from the history of Christian worship is a 1641 Puritan woodcut portraying the Puritan perspective on the state of the question in British worship. It portrays three clergymen, each holding a book, with a single caption over each head. The captions represent the Puritan interpretation on the ways of worship derived from each book. Above the Puritan minister holding the Bible the caption affirms “Of God.” Above an Anglican holding a Book of Common Prayer it says “Of Man.” And above another Anglican holding a book of superstition the caption warns “Of the Divell” (i.e., Devil).

Over church history these three basic options—divine, human, devilish—have provided the lenses through which interpreters often have viewed varying ways of worship and told their history. Occasionally, in contentious moments, combating interpreters have used them to promote or denigrate the same phenomenon of worship, not just describe different approaches to worship. Not surprisingly, given the contention surrounding the introduction of “contemporary worship” in the latter half of the twentieth century, this same spectrum of opinion has emerged in attempts to explain the origin and history of this liturgical phenomenon.

All agree that in the second half of the twentieth century new ways of Protestant worship emerged in the United States and elsewhere, even before the term “contemporary worship” emerged. Some early groups using these new ways of worship simply called it “worship,” with a particular affinity for associating worship with extended singing to God. “Praise and Worship” was also another widespread label, especially in the 1980s and very early 1990s. Some sub-groups of practitioners have, from time to time, used other names like “seeker services” or “modern worship,” which have survived
for a season but have not gained the broad traction of “contemporary worship.” This latter term is the most inclusive and well-known term for the phenomenon. (Earlier uses of the term “contemporary worship” refer to a more general sense of “worship resources fitting for the time,” not the more technical sense that emerged in the 1990s.)

Notwithstanding the fluidity of labels, this liturgical phenomenon has some recurring characteristics. Among the most common are a musical style derived from pop music, a propensity to adapt worship to meet targeted groups, extended times of singing, physical expressiveness, and informality. In recent years there has been an increased electrification of worship, too. By the early 1990s, this cluster had begun to be called “contemporary worship,” especially in literature aimed for mainline Protestants. The term set up an easy contrast to “traditional worship,” an ill-defined term that has generally meant former ways of Protestant worship.

Beyond that simple description is where the historical disagreements begin. Historiographies vary on where the phenomenon began, when it occurred, why it occurred, how and where it spread, and, especially, what it means. Attempts at telling the history use divergent interpretations of contemporary worship’s history approximating the range found in the Puritan woodcut: contemporary worship and its history is divine, human, or devilish (or, at least, dangerous or threatening). By the divine and devilish categories I mean those approaches which put a strong emphasis, one way or the other, upon the phenomenon’s meaning with respect to the activity of God within the church. In contrast, in the “of man” historiographies, I group those works which seek a more neutral theological assessment even while offering a more detailed human-centered assessment.

Each of the approaches to the historiography of contemporary worship has something to contribute while also suffering from some deficiency. Writing as a liturgical historian for other liturgical scholars, I will review briefly the state of the question on the telling of contemporary worship’s history, not to draw a conclusion on contemporary worship itself, but to make suggestions about the future
direction for the historical study of the phenomenon. Simply stated, there is no satisfactory, thorough history of contemporary worship. What is needed is an approach that combines the strengths of the three approaches: the familiarity with and sympathy for primary material; a thoroughness, rigorousness, and objectivity appropriate to an academic inquiry; and a care for documenting the complexity and details of the historical development through time of this way of worship. No work within any of the three bodies of literature—divine, human, or devilish—has yet achieved this combination of strengths. Thus the liturgical academic guild remains without a thorough, useful history of an important liturgical development of the twentieth century.

The two competing theological historiographies (“of God” and “of the divell”) will be covered first, prior to the review of the human-centered literature.

“Of God” Histories of Contemporary Worship

Not surprisingly, the body of literature which brings a positive theological interpretation to telling the history of contemporary worship comes from evangelical authors closely familiar with the phenomenon; many are Pentecostal. Authors with this interpretive lens write in a popular vein or easily accessible textbooks. Within the “of God” approach, there are two main subdivisions.

The first subdivision is those authors who use the notion of a God-given revival or awakening to mark major developments in liturgical history.\(^1\) The goal among authors in this subdivision is descriptive: they wish to celebrate times when God has moved in an extraordinary way and note the

worship that attended those movements. Their histories of contemporary worship tend to be incidental in that their focus is not on contemporary worship per se but on a broader worship history. It so happens that this phenomenon is the outgrowth of God’s most recent dealings.

The interesting thing about their use of the revival/awakening framework is the sense of accelerating time in the lists of divine movements. Although the various lists differ on naming these movements, the lists agree there is a growing frequency to how often God brings about an important awakening that results in liturgical changes. Typically the initial frequency between awakenings was several centuries, but in more recent times the revivals have come in ever-quickening waves of decades or years. This sense of accelerating time may be due to the authors’ greater familiarity with more recent events, but it is as likely due to an evangelical awareness of the imminent return of Christ. (Surely God becomes more active, rather than less, as Christ’s return grows nearer.)

Regardless of the reasons why the lists emphasize a sense of more frequent worship-altering awakenings, this sort of history creates a heightened sense of urgency as the time between revivals decreases. Closely linked to that sense of urgency is another: a sense of expectancy that there is a forward development in worship since God is bringing about these revivals. God is bringing worship to perfection or, at least, renewing it. Thus these authors portray a positive theological assessment of recent developments in worship, including contemporary worship.

Despite this perception about recent developments, these authors vary on how strongly they associate divine activity with specific innovations. Sometimes the portrayal is vague: after people have experienced a move of God then certain new worship practices emerged. Sometimes the linkage is a bit stronger: as people were filled by the Holy Spirit they began spontaneously to do something new in worship, e.g., raising hands in worship. Occasionally, the authors will follow the trajectory of their logic
and ascribe specific practices to the direct activity of God as in the giving of new songs or in extended
times of singing praise.²

Whether one agrees with this theological reading of recent worship history, it is useful to note
what is omitted. By framing the critical issue as God’s activity, these histories do not delve into a more
nuanced assessment of culture affecting worship. Thus these histories are uncritical in accounting for
the popularity of new practices or for people’s propensity for new developments. Another omission is
that these histories are not thorough. They ignore whatever liturgical developments do not fit the
revival paradigm. And thus these histories do not consider the issues involved when the phenomenon
of contemporary worship hits mainline congregations in the 1990s.

But liturgical historians would be remiss in ignoring this literature, despite its limitations.
Written by contemporary worship insiders, this first subdivision of “Of God” historiography shows
familiarity with the development of specific practices. Similarly, these books are helpful for locating
possible points of origin for practices, especially Pentecostal or lesser known branches of evangelicalism.
Apart from Pentecostal histories of contemporary worship, for example, there is little mention of the
possible influence that the Latter Rain revival in mid-century Canada had in introducing practices that
would eventually become mainstreamed in contemporary worship.

The second subdivision in the “of God” approach comes from advocates prescribing new ways of
worship. Beyond sympathetically reporting on the rise of new forms of worship, authors in this
subdivision seek to promote them. They shape their history to fit that goal. Often these authors are
much-published Church Growth experts and others with an entrepreneurial spirit seeking to renew the
church today.³

²Hamon, Prophets and the Prophetic Movement, 114, 116.
³See, for example, Lyle E. Schaller, It’s a Different World! The Challenge for Today’s Pastor (Nashville: Abingdon
Press, 1987), 229; C. Peter Wagner, ed., The New Apostolic Churches (Ventura: Regal, 1998), 18ff; and M. Rex
The two subdivisions in the “Of God” historiography share the same sense of accelerating historical time, resulting in a heightened sense of the importance of the present. But there is an important distinction between the two subdivisions: the advocates structure time not by God-given revival but by a sense of cultural change. Cultures are changing and so the church also must change to include the most people possible in worship. Simply put, worship needs to be in the forms for which a people’s culture has shaped them to participate well. This desire to be responsive to cultural change stands behind a presumption that what is new in worship is better, which is another characteristic shared with the first “Of God” approach.

Although there is a shared sense of the importance of the present time, there is also a difference in how they portray its criticalness. Authors telling history by revival point to the present as a time of divine blessing. In contrast, contemporary worship advocates, using changing culture to bring a sense of urgency, describe the present as a time of divine challenge and opportunity. “Will churches today follow God’s leadership to respond effectively?” is the recurring question in their literature. History is thus told for a pragmatic end. With this perspective, contemporary worship arose not as much from spontaneous reaction to an experience of God or by direct divine gift (the portrayal in the first “Of God” approach), but by intentional human adaptation (albeit under God’s guidance) to meet the needs of today’s worshiper.

If these authors depict contemporary worship as human invention then why is this form of historiography still an “of God” interpretation in its history? For one thing, this second subdivision typically sees the evangelistic success of churches using new forms of worship as part of “an extraordinary work of God,” even a “reformation” as important as the one in the sixteenth century.\(^4\) In

addition, this literature suggests that it was God who lifted up visionary leaders who responded to the present challenge well.\(^5\)

The eagerness to promote contemporary worship limits this second strand as historiography. While it does contribute a sense of cultural assessment missing in the first type of “Of God” history, its pragmatic purpose cuts off the objectivity needed for a fuller historiography. The literature, while familiar with potential primary sources, overlooks historical details and strands (e.g., Pentecostal and Charismatic) that would not serve promoting contemporary worship. It also suffers from a simplistic portrayal of previous periods of liturgical history in order to set up a sense of a clear choice for today’s churches, i.e., traditional vs. contemporary.

Notwithstanding the deficiencies of both strands of the “of God” literature, liturgical scholars would be derelict in overlooking this body of work. The “of God” historiography does give some sense of the multiple points of origin and development for contemporary worship, including some that often are overlooked (Pentecostal and Charismatic). This literature helps us get some sense of the complexity of writing a solid history by showing that contemporary worship has never been a monolithic phenomenon.

“Of the Divell” Histories of Contemporary worship

Histories which sought to portray contemporary worship negatively appear in the mid-1990s. Although none explicitly attribute this style of worship to the demonic,\(^6\) the ferocity of critique is strong nonetheless, reflecting the sense of danger these authors perceive in the phenomenon. Most of the


\(^6\)I am not counting some earlier Christian literature that did associate pop-based forms of worship music with the divell. For this history, see Anna E. Nekola, “Between This World and the Next: The Musical ‘Worship Wars’ and Evangelical Ideology in the United States, 1960-2005” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009).
authors are liturgical scholars and members of various academic liturgical guilds. While not all liturgical scholars write about contemporary worship in this manner, and others switch in and out from a judging perspective, most are suspicious.

“Of the divell” histories arise in the mid-1990s as liturgists became aware of alternative ways of worship being promoted to and adopted by mainline congregations. (The term “contemporary worship” had emerged at the same time as a way to promote alternate ways of worship to mainline denominations.) This push set contemporary worship at odds with the work of liturgical scholars who were deeply invested in renewing mainline worship along the lines of the ecumenical Liturgical Movement. The result is a surge of articles that attempt to place the phenomenon within a disparaging historical context coupled with theological and pastoral critique. Unfortunately, the rush to write meant that little time was taken to gather and assess a breadth of primary material from across the phenomenon. Consequently, these early histories tended to focus on the strand of contemporary worship that was the most threatening: the pragmatic approach linked to a few significant megachurches and often known at the time as “seeker services.”

To provide the historic framework to interpret the rise of this strand, liturgists fell back on a widely accepted paradigm to interpret the phenomenon, the Frontier categorization developed by James F. White.\(^7\) Liturgists suspicious of contemporary worship were likely drawn to White’s Frontier category because his own description of this tradition as a “black hole” that “tended to swallow up” all other liturgical traditions in America seemed like it fit the growing crisis precipitated by the rise of contemporary worship.\(^8\)

Where “of the divell” histories contribute most is in analyzing the motivations of some who practiced contemporary worship, namely, a desire to evangelize well. In this way, these histories help

\(^7\)Citations of Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), the book in which he develops his fullest description of the Frontier tradition, abound. Additionally, White taught many of these liturgists as they came through the doctoral program at the University of Notre Dame.

\(^8\)Ibid., 178-9.
set this one strand of contemporary worship within a longer historical trajectory of pragmatic American Protestant worship. But, by being mesmerized by a few megachurches and limiting the historical review, these histories largely miss the diversity within the larger contemporary worship phenomenon, both in origins and evolution.

By using White’s Frontier paradigm, the various histories tell a similar story. The “frontier” term is the key. The story begins by noting the shift in worship that takes place with the rise of camp meetings at the beginning of the nineteenth century on the American frontier. The shift was a pragmatic one as leaders designed camp meetings primarily to evangelize people, not glorify God. Ministers became sensitive to seeing what produced the best results and were eager to replicate these measures. This pragmatic approach took a step forward by the mid-nineteenth century through Charles Finney, whose ministry standardized the perspective and instilled it as a widespread way of approaching worship generally. According to this history, the pragmatic perspective tended to create a three-fold order of worship (preliminaries, sermon, invitation and response) in which the music had an important role of preparing people to respond to preaching.

This sort of contemporary worship historiography then jumps a hundred years to note the rise of a missiological theory by Donald McGavran, who had done sociological analysis of why some missions seem to grow in numbers and others did not. Applied to an American context, this missiological theory sparked a resurgence of liturgical pragmatism as assessment began of those churches which were growing numerically. The result was a body of literature and network of workshops, consultants, conferences, and newsletters known as the Church Growth Movement. The dominant perspective within this Movement was a pragmatic one as churches sought anew what would work well to produce the most results among people today.

The Movement soon highlighted the rise of a few key megachurches which utilized seeker services (i.e., services designed for religious seekers) which reflected camp meetings in several respects:
purpose (evangelistic rather than doxological), design (using a three-fold order), and perspective (a recurring impulse toward creativity to find the best way to reach people). Sacraments had a minimal role in these churches. The megachurches most often highlighted in these histories were Saddleback Community Church, Community Church of Joy (a Lutheran church in Arizona), and especially Willow Creek Community Church.

Some histories end by noting how a description of megachurch seeker services often turned into a prescription for seeker services. Mainline congregations, aware of declining numbers, bought into the pragmatic liturgical approach. Seeking to replicate the methods of these megachurches, desperate leaders introduced contemporary worship into mainline congregations. Thus the "of the divell" histories cast a similar historical trajectory to explain the rise and dissemination of contemporary worship: origins in frontier camp meetings, standardization through Finney, resurgence in the Church Growth Movement, new expression in megachurches, and then mainline adoption. Some form of this portrayal was standard among liturgical scholars starting in the mid-1990s. With initial expressions by James White himself (United Methodist; 1994)\(^9\) and noted Lutheran scholar Frank Senn (Lutheran; 1993, 1995, 1997, 2002),\(^10\) other authors who used this approach in the first ten years include Thomas Schattauer (Lutheran; 1995),\(^11\) Rhoda Schuler (Lutheran; 1996),\(^12\) Gordon Lathrop (Lutheran; 1998),\(^13\) Edward and Sarah Webb Phillips (United Methodist, 2000),\(^14\) and Todd E. Johnson (Evangelical Covenant; 2002).\(^15\)

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The pinnacle of this approach came in Chae-Dong Han’s 2004 dissertation. While Han articulates a nuanced connection between the Frontier tradition and megachurch seeker services (he differentiates between revivalism and the Frontier tradition, for example), he does not provide essentially a different history. Using a genealogical analogy, Han suggests that a seeker service is not the same as an early camp meeting in terms of form. Rather it is a descendant: a seeker service is a “daughter” of camp meetings. While Han builds his case on a closer reading of primary material from the megachurches than do previous scholars, he does not consider the wider phenomenon of contemporary worship. The impression is that contemporary worship is synonymous with pragmatically-motivated, megachurch-influenced forms of this style of worship.

Since the time of Han’s dissertation, the histories of contemporary worship produced by liturgical scholars have stagnated on the whole. No one has questioned the basic Frontier framework although there has been some nuancing. For example, Bryan Spinks has been able to place the Finney/seeker service characterization of the pragmatic strand of contemporary worship within his overarching metaphor of the current liturgical situation being like a “worship mall.”

The most significant nuance has been the recognition of a second strand of contemporary worship associated with the services of churches like the Vineyard movement. Often authors recognize

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16 Chae-Dong Han, “Tradition and Reform in the Frontier Worship Tradition: A New Understanding of Charles G. Finney as Liturgical Reformer” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 2004).
17 Ibid., 3.
the Pentecostal or Charismatic backdrop to this strand. But the references to this strand are passing and not explored deeply.

Notwithstanding some nuancing of the Frontier interpretation, it continues as the dominant portrayal when liturgical historians must account for this phenomenon within larger surveys of worship history. Sometimes the phenomenon simply is ignored in historical surveys.

According to this Frontier interpretation, what makes contemporary worship “of the divell”? What is problematic about this liturgical phenomenon? To associate it with the so-called Frontier tradition is not simply a way of explaining historical development but is also a way to question its pedigree and legitimacy. This questioning was particularly strong in the earliest uses of this explanation in the 1990s.

Some of the critique is pastoral. Frank Senn, for example, wonders about whether mainline leaders, whether at the denominational or congregational level, will be able to resist the lure of larger numbers promised by promoters of the new way of worship. He fears that many will see adopting the new style as a simple panacea without asking deeper questions about other things that bear on worship attendance. Similarly, he questions whether there is a limit to the endless possibilities of novelty so that later generations will desire something more rooted in tradition. Todd Johnson raises another pastoral concern, namely, that pragmatic worship associated with youth ministries has formed its participants in such a way that the ability to participate in traditional worship is undermined. Instead, participants are

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20 For example, Frank Senn in many of his later writings. See also William A. Dyrness, A Primer on Christian Worship: Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 64-5; and Matthew Lawrence Pierce, “Redeeming Performance? The Question of Liturgical Audience,” Liturgy 28, no. 1 (2013): 54-62.


22 Senn, Christian Liturgy, 690-2.
dependent upon ways of worship too fully imbibing of middle-class suburbia, which is a concern raised by Senn as well.  

The harshest critique has been theological assessment by Lutheran scholars. Their negative theological assessment is multi-faceted but seemingly comes down to one issue: preserving the role of God in corporate Christian worship. At one level, they critique Frontier contemporary worship for making people, not God, the primary actor in worship. The fear is that contemporary worship is too dependent upon human instrumentality. Its practitioners, this line of critique argues, view worship as a human creation to be judged by its effect on people. Complicating this erroneous end of worship is that the effect is judged on people individually, not on the church corporately, thus reinforcing a destructive individualism into Christianity. Thus the anthropology inherent in its pragmatism is questioned. Not only is there the questionable emphasis upon the individual response and decision, but there is a too optimistic view of the human person.

But even more fundamentally, the novelty of contemporary worship challenges the normativity of classic forms of Christian worship. Throughout the literature providing this critique, there is the presumption of a text-based, calendar-organized, sacrament-centered form of worship that is portrayed as having broad ecumenical consensus at the present time, as well as integrity across time. The ecclesial breadth and tradition centeredness of this classic form of Christian worship is not simply a historic fluke according to this historiography. Rather, it represents a sense of the divine institution of the classic forms and order of Christian worship. As Gordon Lathrop succinctly stated it in his critique of contemporary worship, having the Triune God present in the midst of the Christian assembly means

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24 For example, see Senn, Witness of the Worshiping Community, 19, 28ff and The People’s Work: A Social History of the Liturgy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 275.
worship takes a “concrete liturgical form.” Apparent, it is not the form of megachurch contemporary worship.

Thus this type of contemporary worship has dual flaws according to the “of the divell” historiography. It shifts the grounds for assessing worship from how well a service glorifies God to a more human-centered concern. And it contradicts the God-givenness of classic forms of worship.

The resulting portrayal is predictable. Contemporary worship is not simply an alternative way of worship. It is a foreign intrusion and a threat. It challenges the “massive ecumenical consensus as a result of the Liturgical Movement” as well as the liturgical tradition which is in continuity with the universal church throughout history. This perception lingers. As Maxwell Johnson recently expressed it, recent developments—specifically megachurches, the Church Growth movement, and the development of seeker services—challenge the historic priority of sacramental worship and, ultimately, its underlying premise of a particular theological understanding of how God is believed to act in the world and church. The fear of the Frontier does not die easily.

The irony is that both the “of God” and “of the divell” historiographers have failed in the same way to produce a thorough, solid history of the rise of contemporary worship. Both are hampered by the same handicap: making theological judgments about the phenomenon too quickly and thus cutting off a more systematic examination based on careful review of a range of primary materials. Thus a too-simple story is being told by both bodies of literature. The historiographies of both “of God” and “of the divell” approaches lack attention to contemporary worship’s multiple points of origin, the reasons for its origin, attentiveness to the development in specific liturgical practices over time, awareness of shifting

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27. Senn, Christian Liturgy, 637ff.
theological explanations, and the evolution of roles of leadership and popular participation, among other possible topics.

Simply put, these very sorts of things which liturgical historians are trained to observe and write about, with careful attention to the range of primary materials, have not been documented carefully by these historians with respect to this liturgical phenomenon. Instead, they have engaged in an abbreviated discussion of a single strand of contemporary worship as it existed in the 1990s.

“Of Man” Histories of Contemporary Worship

Unhampered by the need to provide theological assessment, “of man” historiographies provide a way forward to a more comprehensive, multi-faceted history of contemporary worship without having although no one has yet written that sort of history. Nonetheless, the “of man” histories being written, mainly by musicologists and social scientists, eclipse almost all of the historiography coming from liturgical scholars.

Specifically “of man” historiographers model a care for primary material largely absent in the other histories. Therefore the failure of “of man” historiographers to provide a comprehensive history is not due to an omission with primary material; rather, it seems due to methods which focus on a single issue and/or upon specific case studies. Consequently the works in this vein do not provide a chronological overview of the whole contemporary worship phenomenon except to provide a backdrop for an in-depth analysis of single issues, congregations, or figures. Even when there is a historical overview, the historical topic is narrowly drawn. One example is the nature of evangelical fighting over forms of worship music.30 As of yet there is no comprehensive history of the entire liturgical phenomenon although the musicological studies come closest to that goal. The histories currently

30Nekola, “Between This World and the Next.”
available are of some particular piece of a larger mosaic, whether the history of a particular figure or institution or specific component like music. Even Bryan Spinks’s *The Worship Mall*, the best attempt to date by a liturgical historian to document contemporary worship, is mainly a collection of case studies of several dramatic developments.

“Of man” historiographies use a variety of human-centered frameworks and interpretive lenses to tell the history of contemporary worship. This literature breaks into two main subdivisions.

The first subdivision involves authors using sociology and other social sciences to document particular congregations, figures, or movements. The grandfather of these studies is Donald Miller’s much-cited sociological study of what he calls “new paradigm” churches: Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel.31 Miller’s work is not a history of worship practices within these churches but is a history of these worshiping congregations with special focus on their leaders and institutional dynamics. It is a history of these churches, not of the details of their liturgical evolution, even though the first two of these churches (Calvary Chapel and Vineyard) have been important in the general development of contemporary worship. Other social scientists have applied similar methods to document some of the largest megachurches, often giving some historical overview—mainly of larger institutional concerns—in the process.32

The attention social scientists give to primary material in their studies also allows them deeper insight into the actual liturgical dynamics found in congregations. Geographer Justin Wilford, for example, documents how worship in the small groups of Saddleback Church, a megachurch in southern

California, is key in how its members develop a sense of liturgical assembly and also the ability to participate well in larger gatherings.33 This conclusion is a critical observation but easily is overlooked.

A more recent sociological study by sociological Stephen Ellingson is potentially useful to the telling of a broader history of contemporary worship. Rather than look at large, exceptional congregations, Ellingson looks at nine Lutheran congregations to provide case studies of the dynamics of liturgical change and addition occasioned by contemporary worship within mainline denominations.34 Again, close work with primary material is the hallmark of this work as in other examples of the “of man” approach. Unfortunately for liturgical historians, Ellingson’s work does not document the evolution of contemporary worship over time as much as it explores the dynamics that take place within congregations as this form of worship was added to their liturgical life.

A group of musicological studies is the second subdivision of the “of man” historiographies. Of all the disciplines, musicology is the one that has made the most significant advancements in telling the history of contemporary worship. As with the other types of “of man” historiography, this advancement is due to careful study of a range of primary materials without applying an a priori theological assessment. But this subdivision does not produce an overarching liturgical history because the focus stays tightly drawn upon music.

Indeed, histories of contemporary worship’s music were some of the first historical overviews available.35 Even in these early historical overviews, musical scholars highlight a complexity to the larger phenomenon that has escaped liturgical histories, notably, the multiple points of origin, numerous influential sources beyond megachurches, the rise of new innovations, and the process of dissemination.

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By close attention to contemporary worship music’s texts, style, structure, instrumentation, and performance practice among other aspects of the technical aspects of music, later authors give a glimpse into the evolution of contemporary worship—at least its music—over time. In fact, musicological overviews are now venturing categorizations of the sub-eras of contemporary worship music, a scholarly step that no liturgical historian can yet make to the larger phenomenon.

In particular, recent dissertations by young musicologists are deepening knowledge of the musical aspect of the phenomenon. These musicologists exemplify how work with primary material is essential to the study of contemporary worship. Anna Nekola’s dissertation traces the debates about pop-influenced music in late twentieth century evangelicalism even while placing this debate within a longstanding argument over whether music’s meaning and power resides within the musical form itself. Ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls’s dissertation details the use of music within two congregations as well as the highly influential Passion Conference. (Do most liturgical historians even know what the Passion Conference is?) While her ethnomusicological method keeps her highlighting social history and cultural concerns, a recurring focus on the people dimensions has her documenting performance practices which point to larger liturgical issues, which in turn could lend information for a broader history of contemporary worship.

Similarly, ethnomusicologist Deborah Justice’s study of a Tennessean Presbyterian church documents the actual dynamics in mainline congregations which have both traditional and

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38 Nekola, “Between This World and the Next.”

39 Ingalls, “Awesome in This Place.”
contemporary worship. Justice’s work offers much for liturgical historians who would want to follow up. Specifically, Justice goes beyond tracing the history of contemporary worship music to investigate other issues which need to be considered to begin writing a complete history of contemporary worship. Foremost among these is consideration of the term “contemporary worship” itself and the place it has played in the promotion and adoption of alternative forms of worship within mainline denominations.

Of all the historiographies being offered on contemporary worship, it is the musicological vein of “of man” scholarship that expands most rapidly and fruitfully. Unlike the work of most liturgical scholars with respect to contemporary worship, the scholarship of musicologists has not stagnated either with respect to the number of studies or the interpretation of the phenomenon. More dissertations are on the horizon. Those having written dissertations have begun to publish articles. And published proceedings of conferences highlight growing musicological interest in the topic.

But even with continued advancements in musicological studies, it is not likely that this line of scholarship will provide an overarching history of the phenomenon of contemporary worship. Musicologically-centered historiography on contemporary worship tends to dig deeply but not broadly. Because music is the central concern, musicologists handle in a peripheral way the breadth of liturgical topics which should be included in a thorough history.

The Need in Contemporary Worship Historiography

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41Ibid., 12ff.
43See the multiple relevant essays in Monique Ingalls et al., eds., Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).
Despite the limitations of their work, sociologists and musicologists on the whole have written better liturgical histories of contemporary worship than liturgical scholars. The list of liturgical historians who have offered fresh contributions in the last ten years on this phenomenon is very short indeed. From liturgical historians, both the amount of writings and the historical interpretation have languished. Bryan Spinks’s *The Worship Mall* is the major exception.

Liturgical historians need to apply themselves anew so that a thorough liturgical history of contemporary worship can be written. What is needed is documentation comprehensive in the following ways:

- Bullet Covering all time periods since the mid-twentieth century;
- Bullet Noticing the multiple points of origin to the phenomenon as well as the various lines of development over time;
- Bullet Marking a sense of the evolution of contemporary worship over the last half-century so there is an ability to divide its history into sub-periods; and
- Bullet Encompassing the range of topics that would be needed for a full liturgical history.

Within the last decade musicologists have begun to achieve the first three of these needs with respect to the music of contemporary worship. But contemporary worship is not merely music, despite its importance in this form of worship. Thus for liturgical historians to leave the historiographical field to musicologists means that there are critical topics not likely to get enough attention if a thorough *liturgical* history of contemporary worship is to be written.

For liturgical historians used to writing such comprehensive histories of other times and other places, the list of things still waiting to be covered adequately for contemporary worship is pregnant. No one has yet assessed the role and range of prayer, preaching, and use of Scripture in these alternative forms of worship. The evolving role of technology and adaptation of space needs closer review. The non-musical arts—drama, dance, and even clowning—largely are undocumented. Apart
from a few case studies noted above, no one has attempted describing the process of promotion,
adoption, and reception of contemporary worship across a breadth of both mainline and evangelical
congregations. The rise of new nondenominational churches which have never known any other way of
worship should be included in this description. Even the patterns of naming new services and new
congregations offer a rich topic for study. Similarly, liturgical historians should explore the role of
parachurch ministries, like Methodism’s Walk to Emmaus or the 1990’s Promise Keepers rallies, beyond
the fine work already done on youth ministry\textsuperscript{44} to see how local congregations and worshipers became
attracted to contemporary forms of worship.

Moreover, the musicological studies have not exhausted the musical issues involved in the
history. The role of coffeehouses for the creation and distribution of new songs in the 1960s and 1970s
is but one example.

Incredibly, apart from diagnosing the pragmatism of a handful of megachurches, liturgical
historians have not ventured into the largely unexplored fields of the theologies and pieties which stand
behind the variety in contemporary worship. For examples, one looks in vain for a comprehensive
analysis of the types of theological rationales provided for how to construct a musical set. (For that
matter, no one has yet documented the rise of the term “set” as an important liturgical term in this
world.) Also overlooked are the critical roles Isaiah 6 and Psalm 22:3 (God is enthroned on the praises of
Israel) have played in some circles as the organizing principles for worship. Simply put, liturgical
historians have not yet documented well who was teaching what and where in the various strands of
contemporary worship. What have been the assorted theologies behind the larger phenomenon? We
do not know.

Theology and piety are not the only critical topics to which liturgical historians should be drawn
naturally. A cultural impulse for creativity or novelty, often in the drive for authenticity, rebounds time

\textsuperscript{44}See Thomas E. Bergler, \textit{The Juvenilization of American Christianity} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).
and again when reading primary materials of early or late contemporary worship. But the scholarship of liturgists often overlooks this critical backdrop, except perhaps in occasionally connecting contemporary worship to Baby Boomers. Liturgists should explore more closely, for instance, shared cultural sensibilities between contemporary worship’s efforts for worship true to the people with similar impulses in text-based traditions’ desires for liturgical inculturation. Perhaps liturgical historians are hamstrung by not knowing how to handle or assess inculturation in non-text-based, Free Church liturgical worlds.

But the largest critical topic overlooked in the writing of contemporary worship history has been the thorough documenting of its Pentecostal and Charismatic origins. That omission would include the review of both those strands which have remained within these circles as well as the spill-over effect of Pentecostal and Charismatic emphases into forms of worship adopted by others. These emphases in contemporary worship are not an inconsequential matter, but are critical and pervasive. Indeed, one young church historian, Wen Reagan, characterizes the entire contemporary worship phenomenon as the “pentecostalization” of American worship. If that is the case, how can liturgical historians skimp on their investigation of the phenomenon’s Pentecostal and Charismatic character, instead focusing narrowly on a pragmatic, megachurch-related strand?

Why is there no satisfactorily thorough history of contemporary worship from liturgical historians? What accounts for the difficulty—or inertia—in writing this history? Several hurdles and shackles for liturgical historians exist.

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46 Although mainly concerned with the United Kingdom, a positive example for considering this dimension might be Pete Ward, *Selling Worship: How What We Sing Has Changed the Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

47 Reagan, “Sing a New Song.”
First, I suggest that to place all contemporary worship within the category of “Frontier worship,” as learned from James White, limits a more accurate describing of the phenomenon. For one thing, because White separates out Pentecostal worship as a separate liturgical tradition, liturgical historians easily can overlook the Pentecostal and Charismatic dimensions in contemporary worship if they try to force the whole phenomenon within the “Frontier” category. This temptation is accentuated by the paucity of liturgical historians’ work on Pentecostal and Charismatic worship in the second half of the twentieth century. Again, liturgical historians seem overly dependent upon White, whose work is strongest in detailing the origins of Pentecostalism, not its later manifestations. Thus liturgical historians have not noticed how the development of contemporary worship indicates recent shifts within Pentecostal worship itself.48

Moreover, the Frontier characterization has made it easy to overlook dimensions of the phenomenon which do not quite fit. For example, there is a hyper-Jesus attachment found in contemporary worship’s content that is found within evangelicalism generally over the last 300 years, with no specific connection to some so-called Frontier. Or consider how the Frontier paradigm gives a chance for liturgical historians to leapfrog over significant mid-twentieth century developments like innovations within mainline youth ministries that helped set the stage for contemporary worship.49 Or, even more surprisingly, the influence of a Quaker ethos among early Vineyard worship.50 But on the whole liturgical historians have been too mesmerized by some practitioners’ pragmatic mind frame (this mind frame does not apply to all) and by a 3-fold order of worship (again which does not apply to all) to see the phenomenon’s complexity.

49 Bergler, The Juvenilization, 91.
Secondly, to focus on a few megachurches and their seeker services has curtailed the writing of a thorough, accurate history. For instance, focusing on the megachurch aspects makes it sound like the story is merely a top-down, big-church-to-small-church development. Thus the subtle impact of antecedent phenomena is missed as well as internal dynamics that created the desire for new forms of worship within mainline congregations. The history of the role of denominational evangelism offices is one such key aspect.

The focus on megachurches also minimizes the popular nature of the reception of these new ways of worship. It was not simply that pragmatic leaders foisted contemporary worship upon entirely resistant parishioners. It has been gladly received by many, including some in mainline congregations, some of whom express a deep contentment in worship for the first time. Promotion and adoption was not merely pragmatic, but was popular among already existing members. Furthermore, there is now a whole generation, even within mainline congregations, for whom this has been the main or only form of worship they have known. Current histories minimize these sorts of dynamics.

Moreover, there’s a geographic omission that results from looking at only a few megachurches. By focusing on Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois or Community Church of Joy in Arizona, this historiography overlooks the criticalness of the West Coast, especially southern California (not to mention the global nature of the phenomenon, including British and Australian influences on American practices). While occasionally there is some review of that area’s Crystal Cathedral or Saddleback Community Church, it is actually two other congregations, rarely mentioned, that are more critical in the history of contemporary worship: Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa and the Vineyard Fellowship in Anaheim. While Crystal Cathedral and Saddleback might get more public notice, these two latter churches are as influential, if not more.

Thirdly, liturgical historians’ mainline denominational perspective can also be a stumbling block to a fuller history. The work of most liturgical historians on this topic seems driven by a concern of
mainline congregations adopting this new form of worship in opposition to the official denominational liturgical reforms. To frame it only in terms of this limited sort of “worship war” means easily overlooking how Free Church denominations like Baptists appropriated contemporary worship. To frame the history from a perspective of intrusion into mainline congregations is to miss the story in Free Church settings as well as the development of nondenominational churches, which have never known another type of worship.

But why bother with the effort that will be involved in liturgical historians researching contemporary worship carefully? Why write its thorough, serious history? I would suggest the answer resides with the implicit ecclesial stewardship involved in being a liturgical historian, namely, an ongoing responsibility for helping to shape the worship of congregations today.

Of course, the first liturgical historians attempting their descriptions of contemporary worship—mainly “of the divell” perspectives—had that perspective. I am proposing that this sense should continue to motivate us to not allow our scholarship to languish. We should imitate the rigorous professionalism of the “of man” historiographers and gain the breadth of awareness of the “of God” historiographers to push forward our own research on this topic.

If liturgical historians still want to be pastorally influential, continued careful study would allow a fuller, more accurate, and more helpful response. I find it embarrassing that sociologists and musicologists know more of this phenomenon’s actual history than the academic liturgical guild. But it is the latter, not the former, who teach the liturgy courses taken by future church leaders.

Since it is no longer a matter of if our churches will work in a contemporary style, the concern must be how they can worship in this style in the most scripturally, theologically, and pastorally sound manner. To be able to address those issues well arises only from a careful, invested historical study of where contemporary worship came from, how it has developed, and where it seems to be heading.

51 Terry W. York, America’s Worship Wars (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003) is a helpful correction.