

Christian Contemporary Music: Its Role in the Lives of Young Christians and Its Use in the Ministry of Their Church

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I will admit to you that, from one point of view, I resent having to present this essay. That admission is not a slam at your Program Committee; the assignment was as much my idea as it was the committee's. It was conceived during a casual enough conversation on the work of the synod's Commission on Youth Ministry. I think I said something like, "One of these days I'm going to have to study the whole business of Christian Contemporary Music." The man with whom I happened to be speaking was a member of your Program Committee. I think he said something like, "We were just saying at our last meeting that we ought to have a paper on Christian Contemporary Music." Thus the essay before you.

The cause of the resentment is this: Christian Contemporary Music has become an issue in the church. A WELS parochial school teacher, in an unprinted manuscript on rock music in general, opines, "The camps have formed. We are literally at a crossroads in the history of the church...What we do with Christian rock will have a lasting effect on the church of tomorrow."¹

I simply cannot agree that the issue is that serious. It isn't 25 years ago that the church stood at a similar "crossroads" over Christian folk music and Christian jazz. Periodicals from that era are full of invective anti-traditional and anti-contemporary. Ralph Thibodeau, a Roman Catholic, wrote in an article entitled "Threnody for Sacred Music 1968 or The People of God Have Been Had," "...we have now been reduced to a non-community of non-singers performing non-music."² Teenagers and their youth advisors were insisting on "Kum Ba Ya, My Lord" (El Shaddai's uncle?) and "Allelu." Guitars stuck their big toes into corporate worship to test the waters and, in most cases, they may as well have entered topless—crowds on the beaches (actually, in the benches) were aghast! Both musical genres eventually were deterred. The waters of corporate worship were not conducive to those styles and, after a degree of experimentation, their adherents agreed. Both left their mark and left. No one died; no one needed to have lost the faith. The church survived. This essayist has a feeling a similar history will be written about this controversy.

The quoted WELS teacher is correct, however, when he says that "the camps have formed." Those who are opposed to Christian Contemporary Music are *very* opposed to it; those who favor it are *very much* in favor of it. James Chute found that out last fall when he gave the blast to Christian rock in *The Milwaukee Journal*. "They [Christian rock artists] all make the same fatal mistake: that somehow the lyrics change the music's context, its subliminal message."³

A few days later Chute got the blast back in the *Journal's* "Readers' Views" column: "Chute hasn't got a clue to the way the music works." "Chute is a musical bigot." "I found James Chute's recent article laughable."⁴ Jennifer Green of Phoenix, in a letter to *The Northwestern Lutheran*, wrote: "When you realize that rock music is an expression of our generation, don't you think it would be better to use it to bring more young people into church, rather than drive them away by attacking the subject?"⁵ James and Mary Rogers, in another letter to the editor, stated: "Rock music grants a sensual license to the listener to do whatever he chooses."⁶ One cares little about battles that go on outside the church, but one wishes those inside might take a little more care about becoming polarized. With a little more intelligence and a little less emotion—and with a closer eye on the history books, the polarization might well be avoided. Perhaps any resentment the essayist feels is caused primarily by the determination on both sides to be right and by their insistence that their rightness is rooted in orthodoxy. Just last Wednesday I received in the mail a letter from a Michigan woman which included this plea: "We must provide leadership which will 'save the children' from the Devil's piping. We must contend for the faith if we are going to pass on the truth to coming generations. Please help us!" She was reacting to the sale of Amy Grant records by Northwestern Publishing House.

Having said what I've said, I will go on to say that my resentment is unfair. Your essayist has had the benefit of thinking seriously about the subject of CCM (hereafter the shorthand for the subject at hand) for more than six months. For the past four or five weeks he has almost eaten and slept it. He has had the opportunity to participate in the give-and-take that comes with classroom discussions and private conversations. He has replaced some initial opinions with new ones and has proceeded to throw some of those out, too. Despite a great deal of study, what he is giving you in this essay is still, to a great extent, subjective opinion. If he has heartburn even after so much time for digestion, his resentment over those who have not had that same opportunity is misguided.

The essay before you is about 20 years too early. For instance, wise reflections on Geoffrey Beaumont's *Twentieth Century Folk Mass* (1956) were not published until the late 1960's. Trends in church music are difficult to analyze while they are in progress. Add to that disclaimer the honest admission that I am no great friend of teenagers, nor am I a father to one. I am much more comfortable with Johann Bach than I am with Twisted Sister or Amy Grant. I must also admit that I did not read everything I could have read; the libraries (WLS Library as well) are full of volumes on rock, but CCM is too new to have received much serious press. Students loaned me CCM records and I listened for two weeks to Chicago's WCFL, a CCM radio station. I had to fight the constant temptation to turn the dial back to WFMR!

Finally, this essay is not addressed to teenagers. Some of what I am going to say would seem paternalistic to them. With some points they would be quick to argue. I expect an audience of pastors and teachers will accept as "givens" things teens might consider foolish. I am speaking herein to people who influence teenagers, who react to them, who lead them, and who are responsible before God for them. The subject matter cannot be spoken about without them, but the final word (if there is one) cannot be spoken by them and perhaps not even to them. We are the ones, finally, who must be the leaders of the discussion on:

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To most adults, even to those who listened to popular music during their adolescence, the music of teenagers is irritating. But then, so are a hundred other things about teenagers. Teens are as addicted to their clothes as they are to their music (and just as guilty of exclusivity on the subject of either) and yet no one is producing—and no one is asking for—a line of Christian Contemporary fashions. The truth is, today's music does more than irritate; it frightens us.

Such a fear certainly is justified. Name the sin, popular music exalts it: disrespect to religion, Satanism, the drug culture, sexual perversions of every sort, and suicide. As if the words aren't bad enough, we read about back-masking whereby hidden messages adhere subliminally to the mind of the hearers. Music Television (MTV) had 19.3 million subscribers on 2000 different cable systems in 1984.⁷ 85% of MTV's audience is between the ages of 12 and 34. WELS adults aren't the only ones who feel the terror. The Department of Health and Human Services, the National Organization of Women (NOW), the Parent-Teachers Association of America and numerous national editorialists have called for some sensibility in the production of advertisement of rock music. Adults can't be blamed when they see a very real connection between rampaging teen pregnancies, drug addiction and suicide rates and rock music.

Those same adults have found it futile to simply say "Turn off the music!" Rock music has been for thirty years and is still today as much a part of the teenage experience as is acne. Murray the K, one of the first great disc jockeys and an observer of the rock phenomenon from its inception says, "[Teenagers] absolutely craved something that could be their own, something that their parents couldn't share, and certainly it wasn't property or real things, it was music."⁸ Another WELS teacher, David Payne, agrees: "For many of us rock music is a way of life. We grew up with it, we courted to it, studied to it...perhaps even danced to it! It tucked us into bed at night and greeted us in the morning."⁹ It has taken 30 years, but most adults have come to the realization that "Rock and Roll is here to stay, it will never die!"

That sense of defeat together with the terror has led some parents and church leaders to conclude that the best way to deal with the issue is to cleanse rock by changing its lyrics. Steve Lawhead wrote an entire book promulgating that point of view (*Rock Reconsidered*). His point? “Rock music is music in the language of the rock generation. Our [Christian] message can be carried effectively through it.”¹⁰ Both in a video presentation (*Rock and the Christian’s Role*) and in many public appearances, Pastors Mark Freier and David Kriehn mean to say about the same thing:

Part 2 [of the video] acquaints you with Christian Contemporary Music as a musical alternative for Christians. This video introduces some of the current Christian artists and their music, and gives you some pointers on how to choose only the best. If you think that Christian artists don’t have the talent of the secular rock stars or that Christian Contemporary Music is glorified organ music, you will be in for a big surprise. Christian music offers the same variety of music styles as the secular rock industry, but the words sure are different!¹¹

The Northwestern Lutheran has put its imprimatur on Christian rock by David Payne (quoted earlier), who credits the new music with improving his spiritual life. The Northwestern Publishing House displays CCM prominently at its retail store and in its flyers and uses Amy Grant as part of its advertising program on Milwaukee’s largest radio station, WTMJ.

At least a few members of the WELS have noticed that this positive attitude toward Christian rock to be a new point of view. Pastor Reuel Schulz, reacting to one of Payne’s articles, addressed a letter to the editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran*:

More than a decade ago Carlton Toppe wrote an editorial in *TNL* about “Christian Rock.” Toppe stated: “‘Christian’ or ‘Gospel’ rock...is the attempt to unite Christian words to beat music. This is a yoking together of the spiritual and the carnal. The words intend to glorify God; the beat appeals to the flesh, even to sensuality. The words say one thing, but the music says something else,” Has Payne’s article supplanted Toppe’s position in our synod?¹²

President Toppe also wrote in the same editorial: “Vulgar, sexual rock beat was always part of pagan worship; it has no place in the Temple of God.”¹³ Northwestern’s former president is not alone in his opinion. Evangelist Jimmy Swaggert: “I emphatically state that it is impossible to touch anyone’s heart with contemporary music...it sounds so much like the world, but it does not elicit a response from the heart toward God.”¹⁴ Frank Garlock, Bob Jones University:

Rock music, by its inherent nature, its associations, its atmosphere, its proponents, and its results, has shown itself to be the enemy of decency, morality, and spirituality...I believe that those who try to use this music are ignorant of the devil’s devices and have been duped into thinking that this is the way to reach teens for Christ.¹⁵

An editorialist writing from a non-Christian point of view agrees:

The contemporary Christian musicians would have us believe that changing the words changes the music’s very nature, as if the power of music resides in the words alone; as if music can be completely severed from its cultural and social context and suddenly take on meanings not only removed, but contradictory to those contexts...The music’s message is clear, and adding the words Jesus Christ to the lyrics does not make one bit of difference.¹⁶

The question that needs to be answered before any other is this: does the rock beat itself eliminate Christian Contemporary Music from consideration as a substitute for rock in the lives of our youth?

In order to answer that question we have to take a trip back in time to find the roots of rock. In the beginning, there was not rock, but there was music of the downtrodden and the poor. Downtrodden blacks had rhythm and blues; downtrodden whites had country; downtrodden non-conformists had jazz. It is likely that all three idioms borrowed from one another because all three waltzed together in the ghettos and back alleys of America's large cities. And all shared at least one characteristic: a strong, driving beat.

The heavy beat of rock has something to say about rock and it will be said. But this is the point at which something else needs to be said. This essayist does not accept the theory that the beat of rock is a Satan-influenced inheritance of African tribal rites or that the infamous "backbeat" of rock (the beat falling on the off-beats of the rhythm, e.g., syncopation) has inherent corrupting powers. Without offering much justification, I will say simply that I found no evidence that convinced me the theory was true; I found some evidence that black music picked up its beat after slavery arrived on our shores. If it is the backbeat which sinks teenagers into a moral morass, why don't today's teenagers react to the Rolling Stones in the same way they react to Mötley Crüe? Both groups employ the same backbeat and yet teenagers do little more than listen politely to such antiquated groups as the Stones. I'm much more inclined to agree with Steve Lawhead's analysis: "Rock music cannot take you anywhere you do not want to go."¹⁷

The downtrodden of America did want to go someplace—up—and the music, especially that of black America, was their social revolt. Black music was "hot," it showed the frustration felt by many blacks, it allowed for the fun they found in few other places—and that includes fun of the sexual variety. As the movement for equality gained impetus, so did the beat of the music.

By the time World War II came to a close white America was frustrated, too. It was during the war that black and white Americans had interacted for the first time, in defense plants and on battlefields—and in music halls and nightclubs all over the globe. Young G.I.s had seen the world, they had risked their lives for liberty and they were in no mood to accept the status quo of conservatism. The music which reflected the black revolt was appealing; besides, it was chic. When another war (Korea) loomed on the horizon that association dropped down a level, to those who had been too young for the last war but who were just the right age for this one. American teenagers were feeling pretty grown up, what with the prospect of killing and being killed as soldiers, and they had plenty of time to think about it—the scaled down job market was flooded with veterans. There is more yet. The world was getting smaller. Radios and phonographs were more common than ever. Television was the new rage. The war cured the Depression; parents had money again and they lavished it on the "future of America," their children. The era of the teenage consumer is born. The record companies and the rhythm and blues artists gave America's white and black teenagers just what they wanted—a music to rebel by. It had no name until Alan Freed called it *rock and roll*.

What gave rock and roll its impetus, besides the attitude of teenagers (which was there before the music) was that adults hated it. That hatred proved the point the teens wanted to make. If America's youth wanted to say with their music that things were not right, then adult hatred for that music proved that adults figured things were right. That "rub" simply made the young more restless and rock and roll reflected the restlessness. So did James Dean's sneer and Elvis Presley's pout.

The lyrics of that early rock, of Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Little Richard—even of Elvis—were so tame they're almost cute today. "If you listened to rock in the mid-50's, you'd hear a defense of prosperity, consumerism, contracts, institutional loyalty, power, and reason."¹⁸ The words of the music defended marriage, virginity, Eisenhower and the work ethic. But the revolt was there; it was in the music and the beat.

The stage was set for a confrontation between adults and teens. The battle would have occurred had it not been for a delaying action. The three Bobbys—Vinton, Vee, and Rydell—didn't seem so rebellious at all. Chubby Checker and his Twist made most adults chuckle. Middle-class mothers swooned privately over Frankie Avalon, Fabian, and Kookie Ed Byrnes while their daughters swooned publicly. The Beach Boys and their surf music didn't seem nearly so dangerous as did Little Richard and his sensual groaning. Adults began to lay down their opposition. They can't be blamed for assuming that the worst had past and that rock and roll was what they had hoped it would be: a fad.

And then came folk. The popular music of the early 1960's completely disarmed the majority of adults who were concerned about teenage rebellion. The Weavers, the Kingston Trio, The Chad Mitchell Trio, the Brothers Four and the New Christy Minstrels had two things going for them: they looked good and they sounded good. In reality they were all just a smoke screen under which lurked a new form of teen rebellion: the folk lyric. Before adults realized what was happening, Peter, Paul and Mary, Woodie Guthrie, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan were singing about a social and political upheaval that was far more rebellious than anything Elvis ever did with his gyrating hips.

Not a few historians are convinced that the decade of the 1960's will rank as one of the turning points in world history. The essayist is not inclined to disagree that it may rank along with the fall of Rome, the Reformation, and the Industrial Revolution. The church was at the center of the first turning point, the middle class at the second, the working man at the third, and, without a doubt, the young determined the last. I have mentioned already some of the factors I believe contributed to the revolution: the Second World War, an efficient mass media, easy money, time to burn. All of these factors gave teens an easy ability to challenge the presuppositions of adults. In the early 60's two more events lifted the lid off whatever social conformity remained: the death of a popular president and the birth of an unpopular war. Neither event had a thing to do with music. Both events carried the American youth generation, already desensitized by the 1950's, into open rebellion. And the music—both folk and rock—reflected the rebellion.

Just about every expert on rock music sees Vietnam as a catalyst in the development of rock. The essayist thinks they overlook the assassination of John Kennedy. Kennedy was the leader of the young. In their collective mind “they” killed the leader (remember how many were convinced Lyndon Johnson was behind the assassination) and then “they” killed his followers in Vietnam (Johnson's war). I'm also ready to say that the same factors played an important part in another revolt that was a part and yet separate from the teen revolution—the black revolt. Together blacks and teenagers were burning cities, society and presuppositions by 1967. Herbert London says, “By the end of the decade, this nation was in the midst of a psychological reign of terror.”¹⁹

The reflection of the rebellion that folk music was producing quietly started brush fires on college campuses and in coffee houses. The explosion came with the Beatles and it burned on the wider stage of television. John Lennon and the rest seemed innocuous enough at first. They brought rock and roll back, but they changed the style; rock was born with the Beatles. Bob Dylan married folk to rock. The Rolling Stones gave rock a hard and angry side. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin appeared screaming obscenities. Woodstock insulted the nation; Altamont (“death was in the air”²⁰) sickened it. Music revealed to American adults just how the children felt. Predictably, the adults reacted to the revelation instead of the feeling.

Music was not the only medium which expressed the frustration (supposed and, if we're honest, real) which teenagers felt in the late 60's. Clothes, hair, drugs, language, along with music all sang the theme song. None was the cause of the other, but all supported each other. And together they painted, by the dawn of the 70's, an ugly picture. The mood of young America was anti-everything. The philosopher Ivan Turgenev gave this sort of thing a name: nihilism. “A nihilist is a man who does not bow down before any authority; who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverences that principle may be enshrined in.”²¹ The Kent State killings occurred in 1971; that should have been the peak of the rebellion.

But in the same year Bill Graham closed his Fillmores (Fillmore East in New York and Fillmore West in San Francisco), the great rock temples of the 60's. The mood of American youth was beginning to change. The establishment wasn't quite so suspect after it told its president in 1974 that crime doesn't pay. The 1976 Bicentennial poured down the throats of both adults and teenagers a healthy dose of nostalgia. The energy crisis hit the nation. The economy began to falter. Her president told America that her country was no longer what it had been. By and by teenagers became less concerned with idealism and more concerned with egotism. The *Me Generation* was born. Daniel Yankelovich observed in 1974: “The students of today are predisposed to reconcile themselves to society, feel less alienation and hope they will be able to function constructively within it.”²² Philosophers had a name for this too—narcissism, after the Greek mythological character who fell in love with his own reflection.

Once more the music of rock reflected the prevailing attitude. Barry Manilow, James Taylor, John Denver and Elton John sang quiet, introspective songs about love and commitment. Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen came on stronger but not rebelliously. Disco was the marching band of the era. Disco was all show-off; there was little more in the music than a beat to dance to. But it gave teenagers and young adults a chance to have all sorts of self-centered fun. “If it feels good, do it” was the motto of the day. The rock regime didn’t exactly die. (Ask Bill Veeck, Chicago White Sox executive. His 1979 post-game promotion which gave rock fans a chance to burn disco albums ended in a riot.) But with Elvis’ death in 1977, revolution rock was almost dead and gone.

Most adults breathed a sigh of relief. Not only was this a pleasant change from nihilism, these adults were rather narcissistic themselves. The fact of the matter was that, while adults were not affected by the music of the 60’s, they were molded by other reflections of that era. The soft rock of the mid- and late 70’s was not displeasing to most adults, despite lyrics that some WELS Christians would still consider objectionable. Even President Carter could say, “After listening to [Bob Dylan] records...I’ve learned to appreciate the dynamism of change in modern society.”²³

If narcissism is the philosophy of the 1980’s and if you are willing to accept the premise that rock reflects the attitudes of the people, then it makes sense that our decade has witnessed a blossoming of rock styles. Turning the radio dial takes one from theatrical rock to glitter rock to black superstar pop rock, to disco, to jazz, to country, to southern rock, art rock, women’s rock, LA rock, etc., etc. Almost every man, woman, teenager and child in America hears some form of rock music each day. Most of it affects us no more than did a Tommy Dorsey tune in 1940. Why, then, the prevalent antipathy to rock music? Hard rock is the culprit.

Hard rock is one term among several that describes the same style; punk rock, acid rock and new wave are others. Groups like Kiss, AC/DC, Van Halen and Twisted Sister are the grandchildren of the nihilistic rock of the 60’s. The attitudes and actions of these groups are just as demented as were those of their grandparents, e.g., the Rolling Stones. Fact is, they have not nearly the following. But these are the groups to which adults react in the same manner—and for the same reasons—as they reacted in 1967.

Hard rock is not the sort of rock most teenagers subscribe to on a regular basis on 1987. The tastes of today’s teenagers are eclectic, and with the variety rock offers, they can be eclectic. Their choices in music will most often be determined by their own attitudes and, to a greater degree, by what is popular among their peers.

When God created society and the human beings who form it, he determined that the time would come in a child’s life when he would leave father and mother. But before he can leave father and mother he has to leave childhood. He has to take the step that turns him from a child into an adult. If that step took only a moment, no one would have bothered to think of a word to describe the process. But the step takes more than a moment and that’s why somebody decided to give the process a name: adolescence. The essence of adolescence is rebellion

Professor David Kuske, in his unpublished education text (used in Christian Education courses at WLS) writes about the paradoxes which are observable in teenagers:

Psychologically teenagers have a great deal of energy, but their energy is quickly spent.

Intellectually teenagers know it all, but are very insecure; Emotionally teenagers are sometimes “way up” and sometimes “way down”; Volitionally teenagers must have a reason before they will do anything, but they do most things on their own on whim.²⁴

You’ll notice the sources of a teenager’s rebellion as you observe the intellectual and volitional characteristics. Teenagers are bound to be determined to do things themselves, to be different from their parents and other adults. This, I believe, is an essential part of the process that leads from childhood to adulthood. Teenagers perceive they are different if they are just the same as other teenagers, the same in dress, in language, in activity and in music. The more he is the same as his peers, the more he is different from adults. Sadly, the more he is different, the more upset his parents become!

The task of the Christian adult is to allow the teenagers in their charge a wholesome degree of latitude without approving or allowing the breaking of God's will and the subsequent damaging of faith. Put in other terms: we may allow rebellion against us as long as it is not rebellion against God. And—this is critical—our reaction to teenagers must be based on their attitudes, not on the basis of what we perceive to be the manifestation of their attitudes. The fact is, the manifestation may not reveal the attitude at all, but only the strong desire to be like his peers and unlike his parents. Permit an example: A teenager may revel in his different music and in his different clothes just to be different from us and the same as his peers. His desire to be different in this case is natural, not rebellious. Another teenager may be hooked on classical music and dress according to adult norms but at the same time be quietly rebelling against parents, church and God. The adult who acts against the difference in the first case denies the teenager a part of the natural growth process—and likely drives the adolescent into actual rebellion. The parent who fails to act in the second case allows his teenager to sink into spiritual death.

Rock music was born in the midst of rebellion. During the 1950's the rebellion was in the beat of rock and roll. But the rebellion came first and the music came next. Rock and roll was succeeded by folk in the early 1960's and the rebellion was in the lyric. But the rebellion came first and the lyric was its reflection. The Beatles joined lyric to beat and both were rebellion, but the rebellion came first and what history now calls rock was a manifestation of the most serious era of rebellion since the Industrial Revolution. During the 1970's and 80's rock diversified and today reflects a variety of tastes and attitudes. The diversification itself is a manifestation of the "me first" attitude of today's America. Hard rock, the successor to the rock of the 60's, remains reflective of revolt. The teens of today are surely rebellious. Understand what I mean when I say their Creator made them to be so. But not all of them, not even a majority, are in revolt. They must be different from us and they are different in their own minds by being like their peers. Their determination to listen to "their" music need not have anything to do with rebellion against God, church, or parents, but in most cases is simply an effort to maintain something for themselves which adults have nothing to do with. This essayist is convinced that the place of confrontation between teens and adults cannot be music or clothes or language. It must rather be at God's will. The teenager must know what God says about sex, drugs, Satan, religion, idolatry, money, etc. The teenager who understands those concepts and has faith to put them into practice will likely still want to be different in his/her musical tastes. Music need not be a symptom of revolt nor will it force a Christian teenager to go against the will of his Lord. I believe that the Christian adult who reacts negatively to teenagers and their music solves no problems—and, if history can teach—may in fact create problems. Without a doubt it has been adult disapproval which has in part perpetuated the popularity of rock music. Perhaps it even made the Youth Revolution worse than it needed to be. Finally, no record company will cut a disc if there is no market!

The observation that Christians throughout the New Testament era have put religious thoughts to popular tunes says something about the strength of Christian faith. Faith will Christianize whatever it can. Popular tunes are easily Christianized—all one needs is poetry. The Meistersinger lied of the 15th century became the Lutheran chorale. "*Innsbrück, ich muss dich lassen*" carries the text "Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadow." The folk style of "*Edelweiss*" is not far removed from "God Loves Me Dearly." The Negro spiritual is a classic example of the marriage between secular music and sacred words. The phenomenon has continued in our century with both jazz and folk music. The idea, therefore, of Christian Contemporary Music is hardly new.

The same recording industry which noticed the revolt of the 60's and signed contracts with recording stars who would reflect the revolt surely noticed the growth of evangelicalism in America during the 70's and 80's. Capitalists all, they contracted with artists who would reflect in popular song America's newfound religious mood. These companies noticed the same eclectic tastes your essayist has observed and so CCM comes in every imaginable package: soft rock, country, jazz rock, pop, hard rock, folk, etc. On the heavy side are groups like Resurrection Band, Stryper, Petra, Sweet Comfort Band. On the lighter side are Amy Grant, Debbie Boone, Sandi Patti, Second Chapter of Acts. I see nothing wrong with CCM in general. You know my feelings about the opinion that the rock beat (backbeat) is the devil's beat; I don't accept it. Some musicologists (admittedly pro-CCM) contend that "*Ein feste Burg*" is written in backbeat! I have also tried to prove that the

beat of rock, like the lyrics, are rebellious and damaging only when an attitude of rebellion is present in the mind of the listener. Some take exception to the lifestyle of some Christian artists. Amy Grant, in particular, comes under attack. *Sword of the Lord* (I have only a clip which arrived in the mail) quotes her as saying “Total abstinence is not the way. Having fun is okay. Nobody’s perfect and God loves them anyway.” But we need to take care when we eliminate CCM because of the lifestyle of some of its performers. We seem to have no trouble at the organ with Paul Manz, a theological liberal of the first rank.

The problem with CCM in the essayist’s opinion is not with its essence but with its use. What role can CCM play in the lives of young Christians? My answer: Not as much as some would suggest.

I do not agree, as I have explained, that parents need to push their teens to replace secular rock with Christian rock. When a teenager’s difference is being maintained by sharing musical tastes with his peers, the adult who insists that the teen listen to Christian music instead may as well insist that he listen to Bach. The adult may succeed only in driving the teenager to a deeper commitment to his music. If a teenager has a sinfully rebellious streak already, what has a parent gained if he insists upon Christian heavy metal? The beat of Stryper (a Christian heavy metal group) is just as strong as Van Halen’s. The beat in both cases is a reflection of his rebellion.

Even the advocates of Christian music (at least the confessional advocates) admit that some CCM has lyrics that are Scripturally objectionable. Millennialism, Arminian conversion, a Reformed emphasis on activism are an ever-present risk with CCM. As I listened to Chicago’s WCFL during the last few weeks I’ve heard any number of talk shows that are blatantly false at worst and misleading at best.

All of this means to say that Christian Contemporary Music isn’t necessarily the answer to combat the rock our teenagers are listening to today. Parents who are looking to CCM as the “safe way out” to combat the problems of popular music will get no pat on the back from this essayist. From a practical point of view, it may be easier to expose the errors of secular rock than it is to expose the errors of Christian rock; “better the devil we know than the devil we don’t.” Adults need to know what their teens are listening to and what they’re doing and that’s true if they’re listening to Amy Grant or Bruce Springsteen. Teenagers need God’s advice concerning the real issues of adolescence: casual sexuality, drugs, Satanism, idolatry, stewardship, etc. Our teens must be exposed to God’s Law and they must live in an atmosphere of his grace. And with teens especially, our actions say as much as our words. If our teenagers continue to be led by sensitive, evangelical adults who lead by word and example, our teenagers will use their music wisely. They know where the Christian music is; they know the problems with secular music. Guide them wisely and they will choose well.

In many cases, of course, teenagers have opted already for Christian Contemporary Music. Here’s how one teenager pledged his allegiance to the heavy metal sound of Stryper: “Stryper proves that Christians (like yours truly) can rock as hard as anybody else! It’s about time that people realized that we aren’t a bunch of goody two-shoes wimps, but we are rockers of the heaviest kind!”²⁵ When our Publishing House puts out a prominent display of Amy Grant, it isn’t because the NPH Board is pushing a new style of religious music; there is a recognition that CCM is popular among our people. A recent concert at Wisconsin Lutheran High School featuring PTO, a Milwaukee-based CCM group made of WELS pastors and teachers, drew over 800 enthusiastic supporters. The idiom has become a regular part of gatherings where young people are present, e.g., youth rallies and conventions of WELS Lutherans for Life. With all that popularity, you may have guessed what’s coming: CCM wants to come to church! We’ve seen the function of the music in the lives of young Christians. Now we want to take a look at its use in the ministry of their church.

A congregation’s total ministry expands beyond what happens in church; even its ministry of music isn’t confined to Sunday morning. But corporate worship is still the primary part of our ministry and it is the location of the greatest share of our music. Before we can talk about music in particular, we need to consider corporate worship in general.

Without the proclamation of the Word worship is empty. Luther wrote: “When God’s Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read or even come together.”²⁶ To this orthodox churches before Luther and after him have subscribed. The second function of corporate worship is to afford the believer an opportunity for praise. Again Luther: “And one should admonish to worship willingly, not reluctantly or by

constraint, or for the sake of reward, temporal or eternal, but alone to the glory of God and the neighbor's welfare."²⁷

It is at this point that the church has had problems throughout her history. The questions are always being asked: In what *form* ought the Word be preached and in what *form* ought praise be offered? The former question is easy enough as far as the spoken Word is concerned. Where the question becomes difficult is at the proclamation of the Word in art and in music. The latter question concerns music again. What musical forms are appropriate for corporate praise? The same question is asked about language: How can the people best express their praise to God? The whole problem could be solved easily if forms in worship were simply abolished. Luther longed for a congregational worship without form, in which real Christians could gather and share God's Word. As he looked around for members he discovered "I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it."²⁸ The reformer was led to conclude about worship forms: "We cannot live without them!"

The reason these form-determining problems arise, it seems to me, is that Christians tend to fall into one of two camps as they consider corporate worship. One camp tends to be very concerned that corporate worship be *objective* in character, focusing on Christ, Word and Sacrament. Generally, this is where the church's professionals pitch their tents. The other camp tends to want very much for worship to be *subjective*, to be people-centered. Generally, this is where the man in the pew feels more comfortable. If these two points of view do not seem to be radically different, a closer look will reveal how deep the difference really is.

The professional knows his church history well enough to understand what subjectivism has done to the Gospel. He will point to the era of Pietism and prove how that subjective strain of theological emphasis destroyed the Word for the people. He will maintain that the orthodox church in history presented to its descendants a clear picture of Christ and the Word in art and music. This point of view carries its adherents almost necessarily to join objectivity with sacred and subjectivity with secular. In this mindset subjectivity always accompanies the secular. It is obvious that the individual who espouses this objective viewpoint will be wary of what the people call popular in either music or language.

The common man knows people better than he knows either history or theology. And he knows that people like to feel good about coming to church. This individual has trouble appreciating the professional's insistence upon a sacred/objective art; what the professional calls good and edifying, the common man finds to be outside his experience. He is not exactly sure what he likes in art, but he is sure that he likes what he knows. Nobility of expression means little to him if it lacks ability for expression. "*Christ lag in Todesbanden*" may be very objective, but it doesn't say what he wants to say on Easter morning. And besides, the common man (to say nothing of the common teenager) can't sing it!

As if the resolution of these two points of view were not difficult enough, the profusion of "common men" adds to the problem. If we are to abide by the "worship-form-which-I-know" principle, who determines the "I"? Every Christian individual has a unique set of circumstances which has determined what gives him joy. Jack Boyd, a musician from the Churches of Christ, wrote in a *Newsweek* article recently: "A dear lady once asked me to lead the congregation in a particularly noxious hymn. I asked why she wanted it. She said, 'They buried my daddy with it.'"²⁹ The same hymn may have done nothing for another lady sitting in the same bench.

Despite the irreconcilable differences which seem to stand between the objective and subjective schools of thought and despite the impossibility of determining whose subjectivity will hold the day, the church, amazingly, has solved these problems through the centuries. Martin Luther joined his commitment to objectivity with the folk song idiom of the Meistersingers. Johannes Riedel writes: "Luther did not want all of his hymns to be austere, ascetic, or restrained. On the contrary, he gauged the probable effect of the hymn upon the man in the pew and deliberately aimed at freedom, variety, and popularity."³⁰ When the objectivity of the post-Reformation era, began to seem stifling, Paul Gerhardt created poetry that related theology to faith:

Dearest Lord, Thee will *I* cherish. Though *my* breath fail
in death, yet *I* shall not perish, but with Thee abide
forever there on high, in that joy
which can vanish never.³¹

Johann Schein, Melchior Franck, Melchior Vulpius, Johann Ebeling reveal the influence the popular Italian waltz had on their composing in tunes like “*Das neugeborne Kindelein*” and “*Die güldne Sonne.*” Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) gave the common man an opportunity to listen to common dance rhythms in his hymns, e.g., the still popular tune “*Werde munter.*” None of these examples sounds so innovative to our ear, but the common man of each era could hear his music coming through in church. At the same time he was singing a theology that was golden!

The professionals in England and America followed the German example to a point. Isaac Watts ended the tyranny of metrical psalmody and allowed the common man to sing the truths of Scripture in a more familiar New Testament language. John and Charles Wesley searched for the man the Anglicans and the Congregationalists forgot and produced an easy to understand set of popular hymns like “Oh, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing.” The diversity of the American culture brought into the church songs from the camp meeting (“Just As I am”), the black community (“Go, Tell It on the Mountain”), the south (“Amazing Grace” and “Son of God, Eternal Savior”), and from the evangelical crusades of Billy Sunday and Billy Graham (“How Great Thou Art”). For as long as music has played an important part in society (primarily since 1300) the church has employed the song of the common man in its corporate worship.

Doesn’t all this prove that there is room in the church for Christian Contemporary Music? Of course it does and of course there is room—but with certain qualifications that both teenagers and youth leaders need to come to grips with.

There is a great difference between musical pieces and musical style. Luther offered to the church of his day hymns in the *style* of popular music, as we have shown. But there is evidence that only one tune was ever borrowed directly from the folk music of his day, “*Vom Himmel kam der Engel shar.*”³² Crueger’s great melodies were not French dances, but in the style of the same. We sing none of the popular folk songs of the 1960’s in church, but Natalie Sleeth is definitely writing music for children’s chorus in that style. Modern music has been with us since before the turn of the century, but 80 years and more passed before Richard Hillert (in *Lutheran Book of Worship*) composed liturgical music in the modern style.

The church has always preferred to allow a style to develop before it was assimilated into corporate worship. Jazz was 50 years old when Geoffrey Beaumont brought it into church, figuring its time had come. But even after 50 years jazz was not a universal style and so the experiment failed. The folk music Luther adapted was several hundred years old and was deeply engrained in the minds of rural German Christians. This cannot be said of CCM, nor of its rock or of its folk strains. *Church Music* editorialized in 1969: “[Christian rock] is by no means a common language of the American people, and still less of the people of the church.”³³ Times have changed in 18 years. Folk is beginning to become common, but the commonality of rock is years away.

Teenagers must face the fact that the association between sacred rock and secular rock is not nearly distinct enough in 1987 for the church to be ready to accept its style. If a respected leader of the church could so condemn it (rightly or wrongly) only fifteen years ago and another leader assume that position was still in place only eight months ago, does it seem that the church is going to be ready to call rock a common language? Luther could compose easily in the accepted folk style of his era but he could also write, as he introduced the 1524 *Wittenberg Hymnal*: “The youth should be weaned away from love ballads and carnal songs and be taught something of value in their place, thus combining the good with the pleasing, as is proper for youth.”³⁴

Adopting the style rather than the specific also helps the church maintain the balance between the objective emphasis on the Word and the subjective focus on popularity. In other words, it allows the church to compose lyrics which are fitting for its theology. *The Lutheran Hymnal* contains some hymns which don’t say much (“Nearer My God, to Thee,” “Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me”) but none of them says less than “El Shaddai,” likely high on the WELS CCM Top Forty chart:

Through the years you made it clear
That the time of Christ was near.
Though the people couldn’t see

What Messiah ought to be.
 Though your Word contained the plan,
 They just could not understand
 Your most awesome work was done
 Through the frailty of Your Son.

El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai
 El-Elyon na Adonai
 Age to age you're still the same
 By the power of your name.
 El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai,
 Erkamka na Adonai
 I will praise you till I die
 El-Shaddai.

Not every hymn in church need be of the “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” variety, but we need to retain some standards.

In choosing style over substance the church also has found a way to adopt music which is primarily “performance” oriented for use by a worshiping congregation. It was one of Luther’s cardinal principles that the members of the church not only be allowed to participate but that they should actively participate in worship. Lutheran worship has retained that idea and still today employs the choir only to carry along the congregation. Much of what CCM is producing today is still “performance music.” Composers will have to work with the style before it becomes workable for the people in the pew. Instrumentation will have to accompany simplification. Acoustical guitars have had their chance to support congregational song and have been found wanting. Amplified guitars might solve the volume problem, but one wonders if even large congregations will ever be able to find musicians who can use electric guitars well enough even for choir accompaniment. Proponents of CCM in church do well to recall another era in church history during which a performance-oriented music ministry (the age of the Bach cantata) almost destroyed congregational song. The Crystal Cathedral’s choirs and vocal ensembles make beautiful music, but have you noticed how little and how lackadaisically its congregation sings?

The time will come when the music of the era which began in 1952 and continues in 1987 will infiltrate the corporate worship of God’s people by means of its style. Then today’s teenagers—who will be adults by then—will experience just what black Americans are experiencing today in mainline churches: the joy of singing God’s praises in a style that is dear to their hearts and their history. By then their fellow Christians will be able to worship comfortably with them in the same style, and they will worship in styles their neighbors have found comfortable for years. The only problem will come from a new wave of teenagers who will be insisting that these adults adopt the hymns of the young. I suggest you keep an eye on those adults and on their reaction!

I wonder sometimes if our teenagers are really all that determined that “their” music ought to come to church. My mail indicates teenagers are having a good deal of trouble changing from “thee” and “thou” in the *Sampler*. The voices I hear insisting that CCM be brought into church are most often the voices of adults. Surely these adults are genuinely concerned about the future of our youth. They are justified in their concern. However, I submit that CCM does not and will not solve the problems young people are facing today. Pushing youth into CCM may, in fact, cause as many problems as it solves. And pushing CCM into an unwilling church—and failing in the process—may have no other effect than to alienate teenagers from the church’s corporate worship. What salutary, faith-building benefit does this sort of statement have for young people: “If you think that...CCM is *glorified organ music*, you will be in for a big surprise.” I ask you to judge what impression teenagers gain from that. In an essay entitled “Martin Luther Is Alive and Well and Writing Acid Rock Hymns in the Wartburg”, *Church Music* lists what it believes Luther’s principles would be if he lived in our era:

What would Luther do today if he were the organist and choirmaster of St. John's Beyond the Tracks? We can't know, of course. But judging by what he did in the 16th century he would do something like the following:

1. He would conserve and cultivate Gregorian chant, the motet, Anglican chant, the anthem, the chorale and all its attendant music. (There is no record that Luther ever told musicians of his time to throw away their heritage.)
2. He would set about personally to write some new songs and he would borrow liberally—but very selectively—from the current idioms. He would absorb and reflect both the “serious” music, new and old, and the popular idioms of our day just as he did in his.
3. He would probably condemn in unmistakable language some of the jazz and rock music, but he would do this largely on moral grounds, objecting to the texts and to the spiritual aura created by the combination of text, tune, and manner of performance.
4. He would encourage and request the most gifted poets and musicians to get busy and write new music for the new situation in the church. He would tell them to make some new songs for Christians to sing happily to God. And he wouldn't give them any other rules.³⁵

What is the role of Christian Contemporary Music in the lives of young Christians? Young people will have their music. My generation had its genre; yours did too. Teens will listen to their music to be different from us and to be like their peers. If they determine to tune in to CCM, fine; if not, that's fine, too. Whatever they listen to (even if it's Bach), those who lead them do better if they teach teens to be wisely selective in their music than if they select music for their teens; if they have a deeper understanding of Law and Gospel than of the newest CCM hits; if they explore attitudes before they judge musical tastes.

And what use does Christian Contemporary Music have in the ministry of the Church? Employ it at rallies and at gatherings where teenagers are in abundance. Use it and rejoice with it—and identify it for what it is: youth music. Only when it comes into the church does it become church music. It is not that now, not most of it. But someday the style will become church music and a form of the music will take its place along with the many styles the church employs to lead its many members in praise of God. Music in church is not my music or your music to a greater extent than it is the music of teenagers. It is church music and that makes it the music of every Christian of every era.

However, if we are going to be able to succeed in convincing teenagers that church music is valid and vital, we had better use it wisely and well. Richard Hillert, one of the best of today's church music analysts, wrote about the threat of popular music:

The very presence of a revival of popular music in the church is a price the church is paying for having inflicted musical boredom and for perpetuating its habits of musical parochialism instead of wholeheartedly participating in the adventures of renewal.³⁶

Our church body has a 100 year old commitment to put forward its best efforts when it comes to theology. We stand alone in the Lutheran world with our loyalty to the inspired Scriptures. But how carefully and how completely have we emulated Martin Luther who wrote: “I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise.” And again: “Not in vain, therefore, do the fathers and the prophets want nothing more intimately linked to the Word of God than music.”³⁷

In their book, *Rock, Bach & Superschlock*, authors Myra and Merrill state:

Someday in 1997, some old professor can write an exhaustive recount of what really happened back there in the late 70's and early 80's, and the truth will be known. Until then, most accounts will be lopsided.³⁸

Since this essay comes ten years early, that opinion is likely correct. For this reason (and since the most recent edition of the paper lets us know that its "Letters" section will indeed continue) this essayist is not going to honor the request of *The Northwestern Lutheran's* editor to summarize the main points of this paper for several installments in our church paper. The study did what I wanted it to do: it forced me to get to know the issues which concern Christian Contemporary Music. I am not convinced my opinions will not change sometime in the future. I pray this effort will have served you as it has me.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁷ Lawhead, Steve, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
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- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- ²⁰ Lawhead, Steve, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
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