

Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth. *Lovin' On Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017. 162 pages. \$29.99.

No two words are more inflammatory in the study and practice of worship than “contemporary worship.” “Worship wars” have divided congregations into camps, forcing pastors, parishioners, and musicians to “pick a side” between traditional and contemporary worship. Liturgical Studies has largely been dismissive of contemporary worship, especially in terms of musical and lyrical style, which has left a void in recounting the stories of this movement. Now, the long-awaited moment has come: a concise, but robust study of the history and practice of contemporary Christian worship has hit the bookshelves.

Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth’s *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* tells the story of contemporary worship in a way that goes beyond musical stylings. Structured in accordance with James F. White’s *Introduction to Christian Worship* chapter headings, Lim and Ruth discuss contemporary worship through the categories of definitions, time, space, music, prayer, the Bible, preaching, and sacramentality. Consequently, *Lovin’ on Jesus* may be read in tandem with White’s book or it may stand independently. This book is well-organized for classroom use, accessibly written, and is suited for liturgical scholars, historians, [ethno]musicologists, students, pastors, and contemporary worship leaders alike.

Prior to discussing the history of contemporary worship, one must define the term. Lim and Ruth offer nine defining qualities within four larger groupings:

- Fundamental presuppositions: using contemporary, nonarchaic English; a dedication to relevance regarding contemporary concerns and issues in the lives of worshipers; and a commitment to adapt worship to match contemporary people, sometimes to the level of strategic targeting.
- Musical: using musical styles from current types of popular music; extending times of uninterrupted congregational singing; a centrality of the musicians in the liturgical space and in the leadership of the service.
- Behavioral: greater levels of physical expressiveness; a predilection for informality.
- Key dependency: a reliance upon electronic technology (2-3).

In the 1960s, the “fundamental presuppositions” listed above are what constituted contemporary worship, irrespective of musical style. It was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that contemporary worship became synonymous with contemporary worship music, which was codified more widely in the 1990s through Mainline Protestant implementations of contemporary worship (22-23).

Although Lim and Ruth write as liturgists, they allow the historical and theological commitments of contemporary worship to make their own vernacular contributions to “traditional” liturgical categories. For example, liturgical time in contemporary worship is conceived of in terms of “achieving flow” (32). Liturgical space is spoken of as “fluid,” especially through technological mediation (56-57). In the music chapters, which constitute the heart of the book, contemporary worship songs are situated within their historical context, then evaluated generously in theological and musicological terms (79-81). On liturgical prayer, the authors uplift extemporaneous prayer and its standard, but learned formulae (101). For biblical foundations, Lim and Ruth cite the ubiquitous use of Psalm 22:3 (“you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel”) in Pentecostal literature as a justification for worship (111-115). In their discussion of “sacramentality,” they argue for worship music’s near-instrumental sacramental effectiveness by drawing parallels to Roman Catholic theologies of Eucharistic consecration

(121-123, 134). The strength of this book lies within Lim and Ruth's ability to allow contemporary worship to generate its own idiomatic scholarly grammar as an established, non-derivative movement of Christian worship.

Their research methodology is both a textual study of primary sources, as well as an oral history project. Given the "con-temporary" nature of the study (i.e. "with the times"), Lim and Ruth incorporate seamlessly the voices of many authors and songwriters who are still living. Additionally, they demonstrate the diversity of contemporary worship as they incorporate voices of color global and domestic throughout the historical narrative.

Lim and Ruth complement one another well. Swee Hong Lim's musicological expertise balances Lester Ruth's historical acumen. The book itself is replete with helpful textboxes, photographs, and diagrams. At 162 pages, the project is indeed "concise," leaving readers wanting more. As such, the six-page bibliographical "For Further Study" section is a helpful and necessary inclusion. On a more critical note, organizing the book à la James White is helpful, but sometimes comes across as forced, especially when chapters occasionally overlap in content. Also, as expected with co-authored works, there are moments when smoother written transitions are needed.

Overall, *Lovin' on Jesus* is a brilliant, generous, accessible, and first-of-its-kind contribution that will benefit many classrooms in the burgeoning study of contemporary worship.

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