

Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth. *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship: Understanding the Ideas that Reshaped the Protestant Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. 368 pages. \$44.99.

Publications like *Christianity Today* have declared the “Worship Wars” over. In 1999, Praise and Worship was declared the winner,<sup>51</sup> and in 2011, it was suggested that at the very least a truce had been called.<sup>52</sup> However, for denominations such as my own (Mennonite Church Canada), conversations around *traditional* compared to *contemporary* ways of worshipping are ongoing. As I have engaged doubtful practitioners on the gifts of contemporary praise and worship, I have observed that a lack of understanding of the theology and history of praise and worship music is one of the most significant drivers of their skepticism. Misunderstanding of the origins, scriptural basis, and practical goals of the movement have left “traditional” worship leaders with unanswered questions and doubts that turn quickly to fears. And, until recently, there were few resources available to remedy this gap.

Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong’s newest volume, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship: Understanding the Ideas that Reshaped the Protestant Church* offers scholars and practitioners alike a much-needed history of both contemporary worship and praise and worship music, parallel movements that redefined how communities worshiped throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Building upon the strong foundation laid out in their first volume, *Lovin On Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, Ruth and Lim present the ideas in this book as two distinct yet related rivers: the river of praise and worship and the river of contemporary worship. For many, these two histories have been previously understood as one, erasing the unique intent of each movement.<sup>53</sup>

The river of Praise and Worship is traced back to 1946, when Canadian Pentecostal leader Reg Layzell received the conviction that praise is the biblical way to experience the presence of God, based on Psalm 22:3: “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.” This belief shaped the development of praise and worship as it became more liturgically and theologically defined, welcoming new musical expressions while holding to an emphasis on God as enthroned by the praise of the people. As it progressed, the movement brought with it a resurgence of resources to train musicians in the style of praise and worship, which was characterized by a lengthy period of worship that required specialized leadership. A by-product of this increasingly popular liturgical style, however, has been that as it was transmitted, the core theological conviction became blurred. Worshipers have become distanced from the original position that “God inhabits of the praises of his people. This way of worship is a gift from God to

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs: How Guitars Beat out the Organ in the Worship Wars,” *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/july12/9t8028.html> (accessed May 2, 2022).

<sup>52</sup> Mark Galli, “The End of Worship Wars,” *Christianity Today*, March 11, 2011, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/march/endworshipwars.html> (accessed May 2, 2022).

<sup>53</sup> See pages 311–313 for a brief overview of these two distinct yet parallel movements. Some readers may find it helpful to read this summary before beginning the book.

renew the church” (311). Indeed, the widespread adoption of this way of worshipping has, in some cases, overshadowed the original theological intent.

The second river examined is that of Contemporary Worship, which is defined by the core theological conviction that a gap exists between worship and the contemporary church, and that it is the job of Christian leaders to find ways to bridge this gap. The text of 1 Corinthians 9:22 provided a biblical foundation for outreach through worship: “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” Worship leaders and visionaries within this movement sought to be highly relevant and accessible, using relatable language, informal dress, and popular musical influences to close the distance between the church and an increasingly disengaged society. These practices garnered avid support from the Church Growth movement, as modeled by several large and influential congregations which avidly promoted contemporary worship.

Held together, Ruth and Lim suggest that the ideas of Contemporary Praise and Worship can be summarized as “presence and purpose” (xiii). Praise and worship has prioritized praise as a mechanism through which to invoke God’s *presence* in worship. Contemporary worship emphasizes using relevant and accessible ways of worshipping for the *purpose* of drawing people to church. Together, these movements have revitalized not only mainline North American worship, but also Christian congregational music around the world. Far beyond their early influence in Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Evangelical communities, they have blossomed into liturgical practices that influence nearly every Christian denomination.

Overall, this book serves as a robust liturgical history for worship planners, engaged congregants, scholars, and so many more. It helps to make known key figures who had largely been forgotten and explains theologies of worship that remain a mystery to many. Now, when confronted with questions on the heavy emphasis on praise in early contemporary worship or the decision to use popular music in worship to engage youth culture, I am grateful for a resource that explains with diligence and respect the nuances of this movement. This book is sure to give all who read it a deep appreciation for the Spirit led, scripturally based, and musically rich history of contemporary praise and worship.

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