

The Celebrity Model of Music Ministry: Characteristics and Considerations

BY NATHAN MYRICK

Introduction

It is no doubt apparent that Christian churches are evolving in unforeseen ways in North America, to say nothing of the entire world. One of the most striking evolutions is the effect of consumer culture on Christian worship practices. As I argued previously, this consumer impulse has resulted in a new model of music ministry in many Protestant congregations: the Celebrity Model.¹ Characterized by carefully performed “Modern Worship” music as congregational song, and impelled by the value of “double authenticity”² in the production of “sacredized” artifacts,³ the Celebrity Model is a unique, yet not unprecedented, liturgical form. While some might chafe at my terms and descriptions, I have not used them to point out some malfeasance in Christian worship. Instead, I have chosen to name and describe what I have observed and researched so that the reader may decide for her/himself the morality of what I describe. If there is a malaise in consumer Christianity, then we are all guilty of perpetuating it because we buy Christian things like hymnals, scores, music recordings, and books. Those looking for an axe are sure to find one, but I will caution that it is double-bitted. Beware lest you lop off your own leg.

I ended my previous article by noting that much remained to be said about the Celebrity Model, promising that I would answer some of the questions raised by my initial foray. While I certainly will never be able to answer every possible question raised, I begin this essay by revisiting these questions and offering what answers I have to their charges. What about churches that do not have a celebrity worship leader? What does the Celebrity Model of music ministry look like? What are its best, healthy practices?

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¹Nathan Myrick, “Double Authenticity: Celebrity, Consumption, and the Christian Worship Music Industry,” *THE HYMN* 69, no. 2 (2018): 21–27.

²“Double Authenticity” is the two-fold process of determining the legitimacy of an individual Worship Leader and the (ostensibly) musical artifacts they have produced. This process, as I described it previously, is synergistic in that both person and artifacts must fulfil the dual criteria of artistic merit and faithful service to a local church. In a still thicker set of dualisms, these twin criteria become matched with another set: first, these criteria must be fulfilled in order to be commercially viable, and second, commercial viability becomes the final component of the double authenticity process. See Myrick, 24-25.

³“Sacredized” refers to the status of an object that was produced for commercial use and consumption yet has been authenticated for use in sacred worship. See Myrick, 26-27.

In Practice:

Characteristics of the Model

You do not need to be a celebrity to practice the Celebrity Model. Some congregations are simply too small and lack the resources to fund a celebrity worship leader adequately in order for him or her to craft and market their artifacts. Some do not wish for the attention celebrities receive and are instead content ministering through a secondary relationship with the musical artifacts produced for such purposes. That is to say, they draw from the repertory of commercially produced Modern Worship music that has been doubly authenticated and perform it faithfully, but do not pursue nor desire celebrity status. Interestingly, this reality seems to have contributed to the success of the model, as those who see the value in such a model seek out the artifacts that have been confirmed as sacredized for their own uses. This practice contributes to the popularity of Modern Worship leaders who have achieved some measure of success. In this way, the Celebrity Model is not reserved for celebrities, but instead is a model that has wide appeal and acceptance among North American evangelical Christians and is able to adapt to a wide variety of congregational sizes, locations, and budgets.

Owing to the value of “double authenticity,” the Celebrity Model may be externally characterized by several of the following practices. First, while most liturgists and worship leaders of all types place emphasis on musical excellence, the Celebrity Model emphasizes excellence in production value as well. This is most often observed as rock ‘n’ roll style concert lighting, black rooms, curtains, and staging which accentuate the attention directed towards the stage; accurate, timely audio mixing by the technicians; digital visualization aids which project the lyrics (as well as visual depictions of the lyrics in some cases) for congregational participation; and IMAG (image magnification software). This emphasis on production seems designed to cultivate an atmosphere of wonder and excitement, both enhancing the music and creating the experience of a cultural good that survives in the memory of the congregation. Scholars such as Monique M. Ingalls, Anna Nekola, Andrew Mall, Tom Wagner, Jon Dueck, Swee Hong Lim, and Lester Ruth have noted the role that technology plays in achieving excellent production for contemporary worship music performance; the Celebrity Model depends on proficient use of this technology for its efficacy.⁴

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⁴Monique M. Ingalls, Andrew Theodore Mall, and Anna E. Nekola, “Christian Popular Music, USA,” *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*

Second, and perhaps most obviously, the Celebrity Model draws its repertory from the CCLI charts and Spotify playlists of Modern Worship music as described by Ingalls and others, while also placing great value on any original compositions offered by the staff or congregation.⁵ These compositions adhere to the sonority of the standard repertory, with live production emphasizing synthesizers, electric and acoustic guitars, and lead vocals. Harmony vocals and bass guitars tend to be less emphasized in the front of house mix.⁶ Acoustic drums are often enclosed within a Plexiglas “cage,” as many drummers call it, and electronic samples and beats are often employed via laptops using software such as Ableton or Garage Band. These devices are employed so that the audio engineer has greater control in crafting an auditory experience for the congregation which, together with background tracks played through laptops or keyboard synthesizers, helps to more closely align the live performance with the doubly authenticated recorded artifacts it seeks to emulate.

Third, the Celebrity Model makes great use of YouTube and other digital streaming technologies. With obvious commercial appeal and marketing value, videos that can be widely disseminated at little cost to the congregation offer an attractive means of cultural production, as streaming services allow consumers to easily locate and possess the artifacts that nourish and identify them. Moreover, these services serve to bridge the gap between genuine celebrity and authentic worship leader, allowing congregations with limited budgets and exposure to showcase their abilities, on the one hand, and lead their congregations in worship that faithfully adheres to the formal and production characteristics of doubly-authenticated Modern Worship.

Fourth, the Celebrity Model is often characterized by youthful worship leaders who are dressed according to current popular fashions, as churches who embrace the model are often populated by younger congregants, often in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. This practice appears to be mostly due to the relative newness of the model; Christians who have identified with Christianity through lifestyle items are generally in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. I suspect that Celebrity Model churches will likewise age with their congregations, as people who build

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 online; Monique M. Ingalls, “Transnational Connections, Musical Meaning, and the 1990s ‘British Invasion’ of North American Evangelical Worship Music,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Ana Reily, 2015, 425–45, *Oxford Handbooks Online*; Anna E. Nekola, “Negotiating the Tensions of U.S. Worship Music in the Marketplace,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Ana Reily, 2015, 513–29; Andrew Mall, “‘We Can Be Renewed’: Resistance and Worship at the Anchor Fellowship,” in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique Marie Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 163–78; Jonathan Dueck, *Congregational Music, Conflict, and Community* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Tom Wagner, “Music as Mediated Object, Music as Medium: Towards a Media Ecological View of Congregational Music,” in *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, ed., Anna Nekola and Tom Wagner, *Congregational Music Studies* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2015); Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017).

⁵Ingalls, “Transnational Connections,” 425–45.

⁶Dueck, *Congregational Music, Conflict, and Community*, 118.

a shared identity are unlikely to depart too far from it (barring unusually traumatic experiences, of course).⁷

Fifth, churches who use the Celebrity Model often do not have any formal music education program. Due primarily to the fact that the value of musical performance lies in proficiency in a certain style, it is more likely that the church will seek to fill a vacant worship leader position with an established worship musician than to train a relatively unknown member of the congregation. This, I suspect, will change as these churches age, and there are already indications of this change in older Celebrity Model churches, such as Bayou City Fellowship in Houston, Texas, where worship leader Robbie Seay incorporates teenage musicians into the worship band, in addition to leading and teaching youth worship bands.

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, Celebrity Model churches may be characterized by an emphasis on supporting local businesses, and congregants are encouraged to start their own, as an act of “culture making.” In addition to the artifacts of music, other industries are understood as contributing equally to the transformation of culture through the production of consumable goods. Coffee, apparel, foodstuffs, as well as visual, performing, and plastic arts, are all encouraged by Celebrity Model churches, as the work of creating a gospel-centric culture is understood as a holistic enterprise. The multicultural modern worship ensemble Urban Doxology provides an excellent example of this aspect of the Celebrity Model when oriented towards themes of social justice and reconciliation.⁸

From Rock Star to Guru: Evaluation and Considerations

The Celebrity Model of music ministry, with its emphasis on authentic faith through production of cultural commodities and participation through possession and consumption of those commodities, has been an object of scorn for many church music scholars during the past several decades.⁹ Accused of being superficial, hyper-individual, and materialistic, many churches who employ the Celebrity Model have done little to effectively refute these accusations and alleviate fears of collusion between church and industry. Yet the success of the model can hardly be disputed, and those who have insisted on its imminent demise remain evidently mistaken.

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⁷For example, see Kara Eckmann Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011) for more about how the effects of communal formation are long-standing.

⁸See urbandoxology.com or arrabon.com for more about how this aspect of the model operates.

⁹For example, see Marc, “5 Reasons to Kill Christian Music,” *Bad Catholic*, February 23, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/badcatholic/2013/02/kill-christianmusi.html>; Matthew P. Schneider, “The Shallow Psychology and Theology of Christian Music,” *Regnum Christi*, February 7, 2017, <http://live.regnumchristi.org/2017/02/shallow-psychology-theology-christian-music/>; John Blanchard, Peter Anderson, and Derek Cleave, *Pop Goes the Gospel: Rock in the Church* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1989), 117–119.

While it may be convenient to understand my reading of authenticity through production and consumption as negative, it must not always be so. Despite what appears to be a purely consumeristic approach, this description of the Celebrity Model reveals that production, rather than consumption, is the inertia of the model. Considered from the perspective of Andy Crouch's *Culture Making*,¹⁰ the impulse behind the creation of culturally appealing items and goods is a perspective which sees all of life as being potentially good or at least redeemable by God's grace, even rock and popular music. One of the most pronounced critiques of the early Christian music industry was that it was a derivative form of music;¹¹ Modern Worship is, despite comparisons to U2 and Radiohead in its early incarnations, a readily distinguishable musical sonority, as Ingalls and others have noted.¹² To the charge of materialism, the simple reality of current North American life is material—is the applicability of the gospel stymied by this material reality? Moreover, an immaterial world is that of the Gnostics, not of the gospel. As church historian N. T. Wright has pointed out, a theology that understands the world as divided between material and immaterial is a recapitulation of what he calls “nineteenth-century dualism.”¹³ Certainly, the charge of materialism carries connotations of disposability and immediacy. Instant gratification is often, when made ultimate, a silent killer to sustainability. Yet Charles Wesley reputedly wrote more than six thousand hymns:¹⁴ How many of those are known, not to mention sung, today? A handful. Should we be surprised when only a few Modern Worship songs out of thousands remain in the canon of Christian hymnody a century from now?

Still, significant dangers remain for practitioners of the Celebrity Model of music ministry. American society seems infatuated with those who rise above the throng, and our worship of celebrity remains a powerful challenge to Christian monotheistic commitment. In a similar manner, many who engage in the Celebrity Model and attain a measure of success find themselves in constant contact with forces that seek to deify them; indeed, in a consumeristic culture, the desire to deify often becomes a desire to consume. Should the worship leader survive these attempts at consumption, the constant allure of unequitable power and prestige can be difficult to abate. In the words of a one worship musician, “all celebrity worship leaders are narcissists.”¹⁵

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¹⁰Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

¹¹For instance, Christian albums were marketed in bookstores as “Christian” versions of secular artists. I remember Rainbow Books in Bemidji, MN, having tags under CDs calling grunge band Grammatrain a “Christian alternative to Alice in Chains” in the mid-1990s. See also Samuel James, “Where Did All the Christian Music Go?,” *Samuel D. James*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/inklingations/2015/06/19/where-did-all-the-christian-music-go/>, for example.

¹²E.g., Ingalls, “Transnational Connections”; Ingalls, Nekola, and Mall, “Christian Popular Music, USA.”

¹³N.T. Wright, lecture at First Church of the Nazarene, Pasadena, CA, May 1-3, 2014.

¹⁴William Jensen Reynolds, David W. Music, and Milburn Price, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, 5th ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Pub. Co, 2010), 74.

¹⁵Mike Dodson, interview with author, March 1, 2017.

Hyperbole notwithstanding, not all worship leaders are narcissists, and as individuals who have found meaningful identity in the lifestyle afforded by Modern Worship music have matured and their Celebrity Model leaders have embraced their pastoral vocation, a shift in focus seems to have occurred. While the initial impetus for the model was tied into the ideal of church growth using music as an authenticating attractant for North Americans of a certain age and persuasion, once those people have committed to a congregation, fulfilling the purpose of attraction becomes paramount. Despite the revivalist antecedents of the model's singular aim of personal salvation through conversion, practitioners of the Celebrity Model have recognized that such aims are temporary and unsustainable. After salvation, the Christian must continue to live; what lifestyle are they to live into? A worship lifestyle, of course. Indeed, dozens of books extolling the virtues of a “worship lifestyle” have been published since the dawn of the new millennium, with Mark Labberton's *The Dangerous Act of Worship* and James K. A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom* being but a very few examples.¹⁶ If published work is not enough evidence, try typing “worship as lifestyle” into an internet search engine.

Indeed, the focus of the Celebrity Model worship service is no longer the immediate salvation of the individual alone (although this continues to play an important role), but rather is the lifestyle of worship. As C. Randall Bradley has observed, the act of worship has replaced conversion as the focal point of many evangelical worship services.¹⁷ This shift derives itself theologically from the Westminster Confession of Faith, which states that “the chief end of [hu]man is to glorify God and enjoy him [sic] forever.” If the goal of humanity is to glorify God, then it stands to reason that worship is an integral part of that endeavor; thus, worship as a lifestyle may, in good conscience, be understood as the ends to which conversion aims. It therefore follows that after conversion has been accomplished, the task of forming Christians into worshippers comes to the fore, and many Celebrity Model worship leaders and churches have understood and embraced this orientation.

A particularly salient example of this recognition is prominent worship leader, speaker, blogger, and author Zac Hicks. In his recent book, *The Worship Pastor*, Hicks argues passionately for worship leaders to understand their task as one of pastoral ministry, acting as a shepherd and sustainer of the congregation's worshipping life.¹⁸ After a successful Modern Worship album and popular ministry as a “celebrity worship leader,” Hicks realized the significance his example of worship lifestyle was having, while simultaneously realizing the temporal limits of his vocation; what does a no-longer-youthful worship leader have to offer? He returned to

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¹⁶Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

¹⁷C. Randall Bradley, *MUS 6346 Research in Music Ministry*, class lecture, Baylor University, Waco, TX, March 28, 2017.

¹⁸Zac M. Hicks, *The Worship Pastor: A Call to Ministry for Worship Leaders and Teams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 13–20.

seminary,¹⁹ and has transitioned into the role of sage and pastoral mentor for aspiring worship leaders. In conversation with Hicks, it is evident that he is acutely aware of the limitations of lifestyle branding and authentication through production of consumable artifacts, and his trajectory is in response to this recognition. By highlighting how worship leaders have a pastoral function in their congregations, Hicks hopes to offer a guide to faithful stewardship of God's people through worship.

The Celebrity Model, despite the evident dangers of unsustainability and egoism, can be a powerful means of Christian discipleship when the focus of the service moves beyond the means of effectiveness—the generation of authentic cultural artifacts—and embraces the pastoral role its practitioners inhabit. Pastoral leadership in Modern Worship may indeed be a means of transforming the lifestyles of those who so identify.

A final warning is necessary: celebrity can be a disease that infects equally, regardless of musical style and ecclesial forms. I have chosen to call this model the “Celebrity Model,” and in so doing have risked conflating the allure of fame with a certain style of congregational worship. To this I must firmly

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¹⁹First for a Master of Divinity and later for his Doctor of Ministry degrees.

say “No!” Instead of naming it as a statement of goals, (in the sense that the model intends to make its practitioners celebrities), I have named it as a statement of origins; the Celebrity Model is such because it seeks to emulate a model that was derived from a certain marketing strategy that gained prominence following Ingalls’ British Invasion. To be sure, the model was enabled and made acceptable by the revivalist models that preceded it coupled with the success of the Christian music industry and contemporary worship music, but the particular criteria of double authenticity through production and subsequent possession and consumption of lifestyle facilitating artifacts differentiate the model significantly enough to require a name. In so naming it, I hope that scholars and practitioners may be able to engage thoughtfully and faithfully with the practice, and in turn help to refine and reorient the model towards its best ends and incarnations. 🙏

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