

BOOK REVIEW

Becoming What We Sing: Formation Through Contemporary Worship Music

Lemley, D. (2021). *Becoming What We Sing: Formation Through Contemporary Worship Music*. Eerdmans. 272 pages.

Due to James K.A. Smith's proliferating influence, the field of worship studies has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the formational capacity of gathered worship. However, contributors have primarily focused on intellectual formation through lyrical content and Christian habits. David Lemley's *Becoming What We Sing*, a new volume from Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies, looks deeper into Contemporary Worship Music's (CWM) modes of participation and formation, asking the question we've been avoiding: What happens when our primary means of spiritual formation (CWM) was forged in the fire of commodification (pop music)?

Working from the premise that singing is an ecclesiological act, Lemley states his goal for the volume, which is to examine what type of person and what type of church is formed by the mainstream ordo of Scripture and CWM (Lemley, 2021, p. 7). Lemley rightfully approaches CWM as pop music that has its own "symbolic matrix" (Lemley, 2021, p. 103) embedded in a preexisting cultural liturgy and often brings that baggage along when imported into the Christian liturgy. In consideration of the genre, Lemley pushes his audience beyond aesthetic concerns or purely lyrical/theological considerations to ask the most important question: "Does participation in this cultural liturgy [CWM] rehearse a cruciform identity commensurate with the vision of God's kingdom economy?" In conclusion, Lemley believes that "CWM *can* enable an authentic experience of Christian devotion and expression of Christian faith." However, this optimism is qualified. He argues that "If CWM is to serve as a means of grace rather than merely a form of engaging entertainment, it must serve as a liturgical symbol capable of calling for the faithful reproduction of Christian maturity and mission—the love of God and others—through its right relationship to the geography of liturgy" (Lemley, 2021, p. 16).

To illustrate CWM as a liturgical symbol with loaded potential, Lemley draws a parallel between uses of CWM

and the Corinthians' abuse of the Lord's Supper that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 11:17-33. For the Corinthians, the bread and wine are not just Christian symbols; they are bound up in a cultural context where meals are agents of social and economic division. This is the opposite of the radical unity that the symbol is supposed to signify. Lemley identifies CWM as a liturgical symbol that is similarly intertwined with liturgies of popular consumption whose unthoughtful use can taint its sacramental significance. If the liturgical symbol fails to depict the reality that it symbolizes, then it is inauthentic worship that will not result in an authentic *lex vivendi*. Lemley urges his readers to see CWM not as a mere genre, but as "a model of participation" (Lemley, 2021, p. 8) that ought to constitute a trifold formation of believing, belonging, and behaving. Therefore, Lemley does not suggest that Christians abandon CWM. Instead, he exhorts readers to confront the areas where CWM, as a mode of participation from a competing cultural liturgy, might undermine the Kingdom's economy of grace (Lemley, 2021, p. 5). Potential areas of conflict, according to the author, are commodification, celebrity, heightened values of self-expression and affection, performance, and the darker sides of capitalism as it relates to music production and industry.

Attempts to seriously consider suitable genres for worship often rely on aesthetic considerations, which inevitably boil down to preference. Therefore, Lemley's greatest contribution in this work is the provision of a deeper vocabulary and interdisciplinary model for engaging with the genre of CWM. The author is charitable to a variety of traditions, preferring to use the language of opportunities and limitations for formation rather than ascribing an inappropriate moral dichotomy of right or wrong to music genres. While Lemley's book is geared toward academic audiences and will prove generative amongst other scholars, I hope to see Lemley's valuable insights made accessible to local church leaders for broader application. Additionally, *Becoming What We Sing* provides a much-needed model for interdisciplinary worship studies that educators can use in training future worship leaders and liturgists. David Lemley's *Becoming What We Sing* is a

fitting and timely contribution to worship studies that invites readers to self-consciously utilize CWM as “effective sacrament” rather than an “affective experience” (Lemley, 2021, p. 235) in service to the liturgy and for the goal of missional living.

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