

# **Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship**

**Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan**

Clint Brown led his 5,000-member congregation, FaithWorld, as the rock star of God's promises for divine prosperity.<sup>1</sup> Rather than take the microphone at the close of worship, he remained center stage in the blackened auditorium as he sang every solo and preached every word, his voice cushioned by the thick, sweet sounds coming from speakers tucked into every wall and warmed by the lights shifting with his every mood. Brown rose to fame in the 1980s as a best-selling gospel<sup>2</sup> artist and the worship leader of World Harvest Church, one of the largest prosperity churches and televangelism hubs.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1990s, he launched FaithWorld as his own electric form of Pentecostalism, quick to show believers how to use their faith to gain divine rewards. Every Sunday, his multicultural<sup>4</sup> congregation packed the Orlando auditorium—a building that was equal parts sanctuary, television studio, and professional soundstage—to hear the singing preacher half-speak, half-croon a message that knit together praise and the hope of abundance. The service was a swirling spectacle of colored stage lights, images splashed on over-sized screens, and traveling spotlights. Guitarists, drummers, and backup vocalists filled the stage behind Brown as he led the swaying crowd in the latest contemporary worship hits and songs drawn from his own heavily publicized albums.<sup>5</sup> The blinking stage and bass reverberating deep in their chests must have felt like a sanctified rock concert, but Brown closed these services with a reminder to the crowd and the at-home internet viewers that it was something more. It was an opportunity to turn their lives around, for they were "Name It and Claim It-ers," those who could name their desires—even sing them—and, in faith, claim victory over them.<sup>6</sup> This was church, he said, for victors, winners, and "waterwalkers" who knew how to make their praises count.

The dazzling choreography of light, sound, media, marketing, and showmanship emerging from some of the largest prosperity churches around the United States and across the globe, in many respects, was simply an encore performance of a long history of evangelicalism's perpetual reinvention of old-time religion.<sup>7</sup> Its characteristic market savvy, media innovation, and cultural aptitude adopted a pragmatic openness to almost any means under the banner of "evangelism." Conservative Protestants (evangelicals, pentecostals, fundamentalists, and, more recently, prosperity gospel believers alike)<sup>8</sup> were often anything but conservative when it came to the clever assimilation of modern trends, a reflexive pragmatism that would open their hearts to weigh the benefits of varied demand-side strategies over the last half century, from market research, seeker sensitive services, and church growth specialists to televangelism and the supersized congregations of 2,000-plus dubbed "megachurches."<sup>9</sup> The enormous success of music such as that coming out of PaithWorld did not represent a departure of evangelicalism's endless appropriation of popular culture but, rather, its next iteration, elevated to a previously unthinkable level of sophistication and scale. It was a revolution in production spurred by the industrialization and professionalization of the church sanctuary. Prosperity churches at the turn of the twenty-first century embraced the industrial apparatus and performative practices of the modern music industry, leveraging the commercial ecology of the industry (artists, producers, distributors, marketers) to provide a captivating musical experience for their congregants.

This article attempts to make four claims about the new contemporary worship music<sup>10</sup> emerging from a network of megachurches, domestic and international, devoted to the prosperity gospel. First, we argue that the prosperity gospel has had a significant impact on contemporary worship music in the United States as a result of its leadership in the twin rise of the megachurch and televangelism. Second, from the 1990s onward, these prosperity megachurches pioneered forms of worship music inspired by "arena rock," taking advantage of both the scale of their sanctuaries and the sophistication of their audio/visual production in order to create an environment that mimicked large, professional rock music venues.<sup>11</sup> The resulting "arena rock worship" was a shift toward a sound uniquely designed for larger venues; worship was now a rock liturgy—an orchestrated experience of timing, lighting, volume, and performance. Billy Graham might have had Johnny Cash's guitar to entertain the crowds, but these modern megachurches rolled out an adrenaline-charged worship experience akin to a U2 concert with all

the trimmings.<sup>12</sup> Third and fourth, respectively, these prosperity megachurches were well positioned to market this new sound both industrially and doctrinally. Industrially, these megachurches possessed the resources and entrepreneurial spirit to act as able partners with the expanding worship industry in the production, marketing, distribution, and tracking of new worship music. Doctrinally, the prosperity gospel offered a theological rationale for the optimism, force, and scale of arena rock worship, reasoning that music provided mechanistic and emotive tools for unleashing spiritual forces in the singer's life. This theological message was frequently overlooked as another expression of the sweet, therapeutic overtones of popular religion, but there was a deeper theological rationale at work for the prosperity megachurches writing and producing this sound. Whether the music was the gospel stylings of Clint Brown or the driving cadences of a Hillsong chorus, prosperity megachurches crafted and popularized a Sunday experience for the blessed that was, in short, bigger, better, and louder.

### **Defining the American Prosperity Gospel**

With a term as historically nebulous and popularly derided as "prosperity gospel," a preliminary word on definitions is in order. The American prosperity gospel is a popular theology of modern living drawn from diverse theological sources and contributors.<sup>13</sup> The most direct lineage can be traced to the pentecostal healing revivals that bloomed in the economic summer of the postwar years as part of a wider pentecostal attempt to find the Christian means to spur God to answer prayer, particularly for healing.<sup>14</sup> As pentecostal denominations were growing more institutionally minded and evangelicals were garnering national attention (and respectability) for their newfound cultural clout and their fresh-faced spokesman, Billy Graham, these rough and tumble revivalists thrived on the religious margins with their own mandate to keep the era of signs and wonders alive.<sup>15</sup> They were on a quest to discover what one evangelist described as "the Spiritual Formula that contains real power."<sup>16</sup> Though preachers frequently disagreed about the formula's precise ingredients and many iterations of the prosperity gospel abounded, these revival preachers could all agree with the words of the Oral Roberts Ministry theme song, "God is a good God."<sup>17</sup> The emerging movement had expanded on a minority tradition in early pentecostalism (championed by evangelists such as E. W. Kenyon, John G. Lake, and F. F. Bosworth) that combined metaphysical confidence in the power of the mind and spoken word with a Holy Ghost quest for signs and wonders. It was

a nascent theology of verbal power that first spread through pentecostalism in the 1950s and 1960s as an upstart "signs and wonders" revivalism grappling with the newfound economic and social mobility (and cultural acceptance) of pentecostalism. The message spread to new white, decidedly middle-class audiences with the advent of the charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s, outgrowing its pentecostal domain to become a fleet of megachurches, conferences, associations, ministries, and Bible schools scattered across denominations and independent churches. By the late 1970s, the prosperity gospel had become a household faith, garnering wide African American and Hispanic membership as it saturated radio and television, religious paperbacks, and the pulpits of large congregations springing up across the suburban Sunbelt. It was the coming of age of the prosperity gospel, a newly assertive pentecostalism enjoying warming relations with the broader American evangelical culture and society as a whole as newly fervent social, political, and economic players on the national stage.

Theologically pentecostal and ecclesially independent, the prosperity gospel typically centered on four themes: faith, wealth, health, and victory.<sup>18</sup> Faith, spoken aloud, loosed spiritual forces. Its evangelists developed an understanding of faith as a tool to activate spiritual power that drew blessings into the believer's life. Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, T. L. Osborn, and a host of independent pentecostal healers spread this heavily mechanical vision of what right-believing and right-speaking Christians could accomplish. The movement hit its stride in the televangelistic 1980s as many pentecostals and newly minted charismatics accepted faith as a proven instrument of Christian power.<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on verbal proclamation, called "positive confession," earned the prosperity gospel the nickname memorialized in the Grammy-winning Clark Sisters' song, "Name It, Claim It." The lyrics detailed the straightforward system of faith theology:

If you just grasp with your mind / then you ought to be able  
to speak it with your mouth / it's yours, it's yours . . .  
Just name it and claim it / It's yours, it's yours,  
yours for the asking / yours, it's your blessing;  
whatever you need from the Lord.<sup>20</sup>

Believers began to sing about the performance of faith, introducing new idioms to the Christian vocabulary. Songs about "releasing their faith," "speaking their faith," and believing God *for* things, emphasized the activation of faith through word and worship. Donald Lawrence's "I Speak Life," "Let the Word Do the Work," and "The Law of Confession," to name a few, detailed the process:

There is a law for confession. You just say what God has said.  
 Speak the word, speak the word (3x)  
 You just speak the word.<sup>21</sup>

Faith was faith because it achieved measurable results: health and wealth. Believers looked to their own bodies and wallets for evidence of the power of God at work in their lives. It was a straightforward promise. As the gospel legend Shirley Caesar crooned:

No peace in the home, and no peace on the job,  
 The bills are due, and your health is failing too;  
 God is concerned and He's working it out for you.<sup>22</sup>

Believers expected faith to yield restored bodies and prosperous lives, though they were divided on the extent and immediacy of how God "worked it out." Christian Music Hall of Famer John Kee used his ballads to lay claim to mansions, espousing a form of the prosperity dubbed "hard prosperity"<sup>23</sup> for its direct and almost instantaneous connection between spoken (or sung) faith and results.<sup>24</sup> Hard prosperity had been the popular language of 1980s televangelism, and its musical stylings could be heard around the world as the movement spread in all directions, rapidly developing indigenous expressions and local celebrities as prosperity megachurches cropped up in pentecostal hotbeds across Europe, Central and South America, Africa, Asia (especially East and Southeast Asia), and Australia. A musical anthem of hard prosperity emerging from an Atlanta prosperity megachurch, for example, praising the benefits of having "more than enough . . . I'm coming to get my stuff" might be sung in Sydney, Australia, or Lagos, Nigeria, the very next Sunday.<sup>25</sup> The globalization of the prosperity gospel was under way, carving out channels of rapid communication and exchange particularly between these enormous independent ministries, who pumped its books, cassette tapes, and then DVDs, television programs, and music into the global flow of popular religious media.<sup>26</sup>

Proponents of a "soft prosperity" dominated from the 1990s onwards with a new language and its accompanying soundtrack. Leaders turned down the high emotional pitch and extreme promises that had characterized the previous decade in favor of feel-good messages of the postmodern turn toward therapeutic religion. Soft prosperity lacked the heavily mechanistic vision of give and get that had dominated in the glamorous and consumptive 1980s, happily generalizing about the more roundabout way that faith returned blessings. The music of soft prosperity was often almost lyrically indistinguishable from other praise and worship music, whose use of transactional

and material metaphors for matters of salvation and sanctification (as well as a sentimental and persistently positive tone) frequently resonated on the same register. Take, for example, this enormously popular refrain from contemporary worship music giant Darlene Zschech of Sydney's Hillsong Church:

When I'm weak, You make me strong  
When I'm poor, I know I'm rich.  
For in the power of Your name  
All things are possible.<sup>27</sup>

Most listeners might never even hear the song's undergirding theology of literal wealth increase and the invocation of Jesus' name as a spiritual force for it resembled the sweet and soft solicitations for transformation so common in praise and worship music. Her closing declaration that "all things are possible" leads us to the prosperity gospel's final theme—victory. From the triumphant names of its megachurches (World Changers, Winners Church, etc.) to its ministerial logos (soaring eagles, trophies, and shining globes), the prosperity movement reveled in the thoroughgoing certainty that committed Christians always prevailed.<sup>28</sup> Jesus' death and resurrection flooded the world with new victory and financial reminders of believers' redeemed status as God's children. As the gospel singer Donald Lawrence sang in "Back to Eden":

Our families blessed; finances blessed  
Our mind and spirit; our bodies blessed  
We were tempted and we fell  
Jesus came now all is well.<sup>29</sup>

This rich inheritance allowed believers the ability to overcome all obstacles in their lives. It was not enough to be merely saved. Christians were empowered with, as Ricardo Sanchez sang, the "very same power that raised Christ from the dead," power that would lead every right-speaking Christian to inevitable triumph<sup>30</sup>—triumph over racism, triumph over job loss, triumph over family separation. As the prosperity gospel matured into a full-orbed movement with 24-hour television programming, packed crusade circuits, and a sprawling network of enormous churches, its preachers inspired audiences and stirred crowds like old-fashioned revivalists had done before. But, as we shall see, the extravagant performance of this newly industrialized worship experience was also its own theological argument. In the spectacular choreography of worship like that of Hillsong Church and FaithWorld, the promise of faith, health, wealth, and victory would take on sound and color as a rich performance of the good life.

### **Bigger: The Impact of Prosperity Megachurches and Televangelism on Contemporary Christian Worship**

The American prosperity gospel sanctified a message of *more*: more faith, more happiness, more health, and more goods to enjoy what God had in store. This message of abundant living had become a robust movement by the 1970s, when its famous evangelists—Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, T. L. and Daisy Osborn, Gordon and Freda Lindsay, Pat Robertson, and others—had built up a host of Bible schools, magazines, revival circuits, conferences, large churches, and radio and television programs that brought this gospel into the national spotlight. Its celebrities proved to be on the forefront of two major developments that would revolutionize the promotion and experience of contemporary Christian worship: the megachurch and Christian television.

The prosperity gospel's impact on contemporary worship music is inseparable from the rise of a super-sized' congregational form dubbed the "megachurch." From the 1960s onward, religious conservatives of all varieties—evangelical, fundamentalist, and pentecostal in particular—had begun to embrace market-driven models of ecclesial identity that focused their attention on large-scale growth and a cast of heroes who had achieved it.<sup>31</sup> Congregations of 2,000 or more earned the title of megachurch, the moniker for an increasingly common form of church life that offered a dizzying array of services to the many Americans drifting from urban to suburban surroundings. The shift was both paradigmatic (touting concepts like "seeker-sensitive," "target audiences," and "full service churches") and demographic as Protestant churches across the theological spectrum began to witness a remarkable concentration of believers in their largest churches.<sup>32</sup> Megachurches represented a formal institutionalization of the crowd—the lifeblood of revival—and enshrined the kind of preacher able to keep them.<sup>33</sup> By the 1980s, a host of prosperity preachers stood at the helm of colossal congregations as masters of a popular revivalist discourse made for the masses and shaped by the logic of the marketplace because it had been tested there, in the bustle of competing gospels with persuasive preachers and enterprising means.<sup>34</sup> The proof of the prosperity gospel could be found in the number of filled seats, and, by that reckoning, argued the Los Angeles pastor Frederick Price, "every church should be a big church."<sup>35</sup>

As the megachurch gained momentum as an American institution throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these supersized churches—and those aspiring to join their ranks—began to realize the significance that music could have on membership. In the 1980s, many

**Table 1: Prosperity Megachurch Distribution by Size Compared to Megachurches Nationally<sup>36</sup>**

Number of Attendees	Percentage of Prosperity Megachurches	Percentage of All Megachurches
2,000–2,999	14.8	53.8
3,000–3,999	17.4	19.1
4,000–4,999	7.8	11.1
5,000–9,999	23.5	12.0
10,000 or more	36.5	4.00
	100.0	100.0

churches started to seek out an in-house singer/songwriter to shape and perform a complementary musical vision for the church. Senior pastors found that musical collaborators who shared their theological commitments could craft Sunday services that would attract and hold membership. Rod Parsley, senior pastor of World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, and his worship leader at the time, Clint Brown, earned a reputation as the quintessential pentecostal preacher and singer team. “No one could preach like Rod, and no one could sing like Clint,” recalled a former staffer at a South Carolina megachurch.<sup>37</sup> By the 1990s, this preacher-singer combination had become the gold standard of megachurch growth. Other famous prosperity duos arose, including Lakewood Church’s Joel Osteen and Grammy-winner Israel Houghton, Free Chapel’s Jentezen Franklin and worship leader Ricardo Sanchez, and Hillsong Church’s worship leader Darlene Aschech and pastor Brian Houston, who together brought the church in Sydney, Australia, worldwide fame.<sup>38</sup>

These musical duos would have remained a sideshow in a sea of megachurches, but the prosperity gospel itself was moving center stage. The movement was unusually top-heavy and its message preached from many of the largest churches in the country. Though fewer than 10 percent of megachurches as a whole can be called “prosperity churches,” prosperity megachurches dominated the top tier of the nation’s biggest congregations.<sup>39</sup> As seen in Table 1, though only 16 percent of all megachurches held more than 5,000 members, almost 60 percent of prosperity megachurches boasted these hefty attendance rates. In fact, the average prosperity megachurch drew

**Table 2: Top Syndicated Television Ministries (1981)**

Television Ministry	Number of Viewers
Oral Roberts	2,351,000
Jimmy Swaggart	1,780,000
PTL Club	1,050,000
700 Club	705,000
Kenneth Copeland	381,000

Source: Margaret M. Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement: Is There a New Pentecost?* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 175.

roughly 8,500 believers. From their perch at the top of the megachurch pyramid, prosperity megachurches had grown so large that their influence rivaled seminaries, publishing houses, and entire denominations.<sup>40</sup> Though seemingly far-flung, these megachurches held tight associational connections to one another, bound in a global network of pulpits and platforms that shared media and messages across states, countries, and continents with lightning speed.

The second major development that pressed the prosperity movement to the forefront of contemporary Christian worship was the rise of vast Christian television empires. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, religious television itself had become a playground of prosperity preaching as most major religious networks—Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Praise the Lord Network, Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, and Jan and Paul Crouch's Trinity Broadcasting Network—had been established by insiders of the movement.<sup>41</sup> By the mid-1980s, the electronic church had ballooned to twenty-five million viewers and made prosperity preachers into familiar faces in living rooms across the nation. For example, see Table 2 for a list of the top five syndicated television programs of 1981; each was famous for preaching a version of the prosperity gospel.<sup>42</sup> Each learned to ride the rollercoaster highs and lows of old-fashioned camp meeting preaching, the footage interspersed with tight camera shots of audience members moved from sin to repentance to triumph. Prosperity preachers had conquered the small screen, and their newfound importance that earned them connections and influence in the wider conservative American Protestant world (fundamentalist, evangelical, and pentecostal networks of large

churches in particular) would cement their impact on the character of contemporary Christian worship.

Prosperity preachers became the gatekeepers of television musical acts, and, in many ways, it was a perfect fit. The sweet theatricality of televangelism, coupled with its almost endless appetite to fill programming (particularly when programming expanded to twenty-four hours a day in the late 1970s) encouraged guest musicians to become a regular spectacle for millions of American viewers. Their back-to-back variety and talk shows had become the coveted openings for new and established artists and the era's most important popularizer of contemporary Christian musical acts. Religious television had proven to be one of the 1980s' most obvious signs of the expansion of the prosperity gospel and the seemingly unlimited frontiers of revival, with musical acts building the emotional crescendos that heightened the sense of spiritual crisis and invited viewers to take immediate action.<sup>43</sup> Televangelism was infused with the pietistic cultivation of experiential faith and, in particular, the power of religious feeling.<sup>44</sup> Broadcasts were acts of mass spiritual persuasion, via the ebb and flow of emotion, as audiences were transfixed by sentiment more than doctrine. Particularly for those who taped their programs before live audiences, music became an indispensable tool for televangelism's ceaseless sentimentality. One of the 1980s' most-watched programs, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's *PTL Club*, embodied this perfect marriage of musical feeling as a part-talk and part-variety show that attracted a wide range of preachers, media personalities, and Christian recording artists to perform live before their enthusiastic and silver-haired studio audience. Tammy Faye Bakker's laughter, banter, tears, and bursts of song were magnetic on camera, a platform she also used to launch her own albums, including her 1987 record, *We're Blest*, that pictured her batting her famous eyelashes under a deluge of white mink.<sup>45</sup> Televangelism (like all forms of American revivalism since that of George Whitefield) pulsed with the charisma of the man or woman at the helm who seemed to call down the Holy Spirit with a word or a song.<sup>46</sup> Whether the young Jimmy Swaggart was preaching a prosperity message or tickling the ivories, his voice shook the rafters and stirred the soul.

It was, of course, an old maxim that great preachers should keep great performers at their sides. Since the Second Great Awakening, musical performances by famous songbirds have been inseparable from the planning and orchestration of an American revival. The soundtrack of mass conversion was sung by giants such as Dwight Moody's partner, Ira Sankey (dubbed the "Sweet Singer of

Methodism"); Billy Sunday's Homer Rodeheaver, who warmed up his audiences with a combination of jokes, trombone solos, and rich baritone; and Billy Graham's gospel sensation, George Beverly Shea, who toured the world with the "Protestant Pope" for more than sixty years.<sup>47</sup> Some revivalists, such as Aimee Semple McPherson, preferred to do it all themselves—smoothly transitioning between preaching, acting, and singing in one service. Sister Aimee and her army of backstage hands creating the extravagant lighting sets and stage props, thespians filling the supporting roles in her weekly dramas, and talented singers and musicians filling the choir and booming brass band combined Hollywood glitz with pentecostal holiness with such success as to become the most significant forerunner of modern pentecostal televangelism.<sup>48</sup> In old forms and new, musical revivalism captured the spirit of both the minister and the message, ready-made for the masses.

The immediate effect of religious television was a dramatic improvement in the quality of performances and production of the Sunday morning Christian worship experience. The popularity of these televangelists spurred the rising ranks of prosperity-preaching congregations to experiment with broadcasting their own services, bringing their message and music to ever-expanding audiences. Rex Humbard, author of *Your Key to God's Bank*, was an early pioneer.<sup>49</sup> His multimillion-dollar church was one of the first constructed to double as a television studio, with room for stage lighting, sound and video equipment, and a 5,400-seat auditorium. Humbard's show, *The Cathedral of Tomorrow*, was broadcast by more than 650 television stations worldwide—more television stations than any other American program including *The Johnny Carson Show*—and starred the harmonies of his staff singers, The Cathedral Quartet, and his own family act, the Rex Humbard Family Singers. (Even Elvis Presley called himself a fan, so much so that Humbard would one day be tapped to preside over the king of rock and roll's funeral.) Oral Roberts's grand return to television in the late 1960s brought with it a new resolve to make religious television worthy of primetime audiences. His television specials spent millions of dollars transforming Holy Ghost religion into a marvel of choreography, set design, and scored music, as well as the stomping ground for Hollywood stars like Jerry Lewis and Johnny Cash. His costly experiment with mass entertainment paid off: twenty-five million people tuned in to his 1975 Thanksgiving broadcast.<sup>50</sup> As megachurches swelled in the electronic shadow of the expanding televangelist empires, more and more pastors would follow this example in a bold new age by being willing to take the financial risk and began to use their worship as a platform for television broadcasting.

The rise of the prosperity megachurch and the advent of televangelism cemented the collaborative celebrity of preachers and their worship leaders and, more broadly, reflected the institutionalizing and modernizing of the American evangelicalism's deeply commercial mindset. The prosperity gospel was a natural heir to the market-savvy evangelicalism born out of the competitive religious free market of disestablishment and nurtured in the jockeying populism of mass revivals that pressed its preachers to adapt constantly to bring old-time religion to new audiences. From George Whitefield's teaser campaigns to Charles Finney's anxious bench and Billy Sunday's sparring matches with the devil, one of American evangelicalism's most enduring features was that it tried to have none, at least when it came to methods of appropriating culture. Christians could be *in* but not *of* the world as God had sanctified the logic of the marketplace—audience-centered practices with a populist orientation that privileged results over finesse and reach over respectability.<sup>51</sup> The prosperity gospel shared its ruthless utilitarianism and its commercial imagination, adding an economic language to this economic logic. When the movement converged with the rise of arena rock, it proved not simply to be a meeting of two heavily marketed gospels but also the outward reach of a thoroughly modernizing faith whose appropriative goals would lead its pastors into new innovations, this time in contemporary worship.

### **Better, Louder: From Adult Contemporary to Arena Rock**

Megachurches as a whole were setting a higher standard for musical entertainment among American congregations by the 1990s, with the vastly increased resources devoted to production, lighting, timing, and entertainment value.<sup>52</sup> But a handful of prosperity megachurches would pioneer a full-orbed auditory experience as they sought a sound suitable for their larger venues, heftier crowds, and more famous faces.<sup>53</sup> They were transforming Christian worship into a form of arena rock, a change that would comprise four major turns. First, the sentimental choir-backed vocals and piano that had given contemporary worship music its distinctively "adult contemporary"<sup>54</sup> sound was amplified and reworked, by the close of the century, into a full-throttle rock experience that could envelop thousands of listeners in light shows, fog machines, and thumping rock anthems. Second, the megachurch stage became a newly professionalized sphere. A trained audiovisual staff was required to synchronize the lighting, manage the complex routing of audio channels on the soundboard, and craft pristine acoustics in the resonant spaces of the massive

sanctuary.<sup>55</sup> And the volunteer musical talent of yesteryear gave way to expert musicians, animated divas, and rakish guitarists who could command a stage or linger over a solo with ease. Third, this new worship experience required a frontman, the likeable persona of the music team and the charismatic impresario who could guide the giant congregation from song to song through the worship experience. These singing and songwriting leaders would become, like the young Clint Brown had been, the musical mirror of the senior pastor and the face of their church's emerging brand. Finally, the shift to arena rock began a corresponding obsession with youth and the next generation. Rock music and its supporting industry had been born and raised in the strategic marketing of generational rebellion;<sup>56</sup> as the megachurch sanctuary came to mimic the rock arena, it followed its sanctification of the beauty and vibrancy of youth.

These four hallmarks of arena rock worship appeared clearly in the decade-long musical evolution of one of the world's largest prosperity churches, Australia's Hillsong Church.<sup>57</sup> In the early 1990s, the music ensemble at Hillsong (then known as the Hills Christian Life Center) looked like most large evangelical or pentecostal churches featuring a sentimental form of pop music led by a cadre of amateur musicians and choirs that, despite its "contemporary" label, was clearly identifiable as "church music." These adult contemporary ballads were belted out from a crowded Hillsong stage with several lead singers, a choir that ranged between twenty-five and fifty members, and instrumentation that included drums, background electric guitars, synthesizer, and bass. The overall effect was endearingly casual. Dressed in their pressed boxy suits and blazers as if coming straight from work, the musicians were virtually indistinguishable from their business-casual audience, whom they entertained in the glare of a bright auditorium rather than the dramatic darkness of a stage performance.<sup>58</sup> But the success of two musical experiments—the annual Hillsong conference and their youth ministry music—began to spur wider changes.

The annual Hillsong conference, begun in 1986, featured a week of nightly worship rallies that required renting facilities of epic scale to accommodate a sound to match. In 1995, Hillsong moved the conference from their worship space in Baulkham Hills to the giant State Sports Centre in Sydney's Olympic Park. The expanded arena and stage provided room for a massive choir, ornate stage props, and even synchronized dancers in the thick of a large musical ensemble, all led by the energetic (and recently hired) Darlene Zschech.<sup>59</sup> Free from the restraint of an instrument, Zschech brought new life to the role of lead singer, roaming the stage with a wireless

microphone, passionate facial expressions, and spirited hand gestures. The musical theatricality of revivalism was now aglow with the dynamic color changes and moving spotlights of professional stage lighting, as well as crooned in a diverse representation of musical styles ranging from country rock to soft pop to black gospel.<sup>60</sup> These improved and more complicated production changes were also incorporated into weekly services when Hillsong moved from the Hills Centre to a larger facility in Norwest Business Park in Baulkham Hills in 1997. If the annual conference had to be more impressive each year, then the weekly service could not fall too far behind. The musical innovations from the conference echoed back to the weekly services over time, slowly replacing the keys-driven and multivocalist-dominated style that had marked contemporary worship music since the early 1980s.

The second catalyst for Hillsong's transformation came from its youth ministry. In the 1990s, Hillsong invested heavily in the Australian Assemblies of God youth ministry, Youth Alive, recording albums and hosting concerts with them.<sup>61</sup> Youth Alive concerts catered to their teenage audiences with a distinctly rock style, the stage shaking with distorted electric guitar riffs and driving rhythms from drum and bass. Their worship leader was Marty Sampson, a long-haired teenager with a gritty, nasal voice that mimicked Nirvana's Kurt Cobain or, closer to home, Daniel Johns, lead singer for the Australian grunge band Silverchair.<sup>62</sup> Sampson was instrumental in helping young worship leaders Reuben Morgan and Joel Houston, Hillsong pastor Brian Houston's son, start their own Hillsong youth band in the early 2000s. Within a decade this band, Hillsong United, had become a global hit, reaching number one on Billboard's Christian charts and number five on Billboard's top 200.

Hillsong United's musical influence on the Hillsong brand was marked by a series of stylistic and production changes. The band had captured the generational spirit that made rock culture the dream world for the forever young.<sup>63</sup> From their animated stage theatrics to their hipster dress and ironic tour interviews, Hillsong United embodied the allure of youth culture, integrating its emphasis on beauty and carefree vibrancy into the church's image.<sup>64</sup> Further, the band also provided the mother church with a pipeline of new talent and songs. Like a European youth-development soccer club, Hillsong United developed and funneled artists, songs, and a cutting-edge, youth-oriented musical aesthetic into Hillsong's main musical offerings. This allowed the megachurch to develop the "next generation" of worship aesthetic in-house. Undergirded by a prosperity rationale that always emphasized the bigger and better, Hillsong United was

both a successful marketing campaign that tapped into the youth market and a musical incubator where the next best song or artist could emerge under Hillsong's brand.

The lessons learned from its annual conferences and youth ministries remade worship at Hillsong Church. In 2001, the choir was pushed to the back of the stage. The house lights were darkened, the stage blanketed by patterned lighting, and fog machines allowed floor-based spotlights to paint the stage with swaths of color.<sup>65</sup> A few years later, the choir was split in two and relegated off-stage to either side, further focusing the audience on the worship leaders and the rock band accompanying them. Fog machines poured layers of haze on stage, while several video screens lit the platform with lyrics and zoomed-in frames of worship leaders' faces, fraught with emotion. Many of the lead vocalists now embodied the role of the rock musician by playing guitars, both acoustic and electric. By 2006, the Hillsong Conference fully spotlighted the music and leaders of Hillsong United, featuring songs powered by driving tom rolls, distorted guitars, and punk rock melodies. At the same time, the conference also featured professionally produced video presentations that fused with the musical production to create immersive, cinematic experiences. The result was a Christian duplication of a major rock concert, where roaring crowds, blaring guitars, and strobe lighting created an electric atmosphere.<sup>66</sup>

In the incessant global circulation of prosperity media, Hillsong Church's professional and youthful brand of arena rock was reshaping American Christian musical sensibilities and generating endless imitators.<sup>67</sup> The 26,000-member Gateway Church in Dallas, Texas, became famous for its television program, *The Blessed Life*, and for being the home to Christian recording artist Kari Jobe and their in-house musical production, Gateway Worship. In Redding, California, Bethel Church's surge in popularity could be traced to its worship band, Jesus Culture, which featured worship celebrity Kim Walker-Smith and mimicked Hillsong with a hard rock sound, well-produced albums, and an annual conference, all marketed toward youth. A Hillsong Church plant in Virginia Beach would create a young megachurch called Wave Church, whose variations on Hillsong anthems generated its own waves of youth revivals in its rock-driven nightly worship.<sup>68</sup>

Hillsong's universal acclaim and epic record sales not only placed a prosperity megachurch at the forefront of Christian worship music but also revealed the commercial alliance that had emerged between prosperity megachurches and the Christian worship music industry. In the United States, the fresh young sound of arena rock would marry an economic theology with the voracious cultural savvy

of evangelicalism in an increasingly commercial world of Christian music.

### **Capitalizing on the Christian Worship Industry**

In its quest for bigger, better, louder, the new prosperity megachurch platform capitalized on the expanding industry for contemporary worship music. Prosperity megachurches, already plugged into a dense network of international ministries, shared the logic of promotion and high quality production with the growing worship industry that matured at the turn of the century. Emerging in the early 1990s and evolving over the decade, this industry coalesced around record labels, distribution companies, licensing firms, and charting publications associated with the production and distribution of contemporary worship music.<sup>69</sup> The industry developed as a subgenre of contemporary Christian music, which had been established as a profitable business since the late 1970s.<sup>70</sup> The worship music industry was broadly supported by the wider world of American evangelicalism, where contemporary worship music was regularly heard in services across denominations and theological traditions.<sup>71</sup> But as major centers of the consumption and production of contemporary worship music, prosperity megachurches found a unique synergy with the worship music industry. Replete with massive congregations, expansive television exposure, and a boon of talented worship artists in their employment, prosperity megachurches provided the worship music industry with an accessible market of consumers and a cadre of worship superstars who could produce chart-topping hits. Meanwhile, the worship music industry provided prosperity megachurches and their worship leaders with three critical advantages: a new stream of revenue, song and artist visibility, and worship leader celebrity.

A new revenue stream for worship songwriters and their publishers emerged almost overnight with the founding of Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) in 1988. CCLI provided copyright licenses for the use of songs in church bulletins or projected on sanctuary screens, songs that had become popular in the “post-hymnal” age, and quickly became the sole reporting agency for licensing contemporary worship music sung in congregations.<sup>72</sup> This licensing structure effectively transformed Sunday morning services into cover band venues, where the equivalent of mechanical royalties were collected and then distributed to worship songwriters. CCLI saw success because it provided churches with the peace of mind that came from a blanket copyright clearance, allowing them to use

various worship songs written by diverse songwriters, while it provided songwriters and their publishers with royalty paychecks, creating a fresh source of revenue and a financial incentive that would grow an industry. Prosperity megachurches mostly benefited from CCLI's licensing structure indirectly as it created a new platform that would grow the visibility and marketability of their worship leaders beyond their local congregations. But some prosperity megachurches, such as Hillsong, Lakewood, and Gateway Church, also benefited directly as they established their own publishing houses to administer the music of their worship leaders, taking a cut of the royalty payments that CCLI collected.

The emerging worship music industry also provided worship artists and their churches with a new level of visibility in the marketplace and in American Christian popular culture. The 1990s witnessed the advent of three metrics for charting the trends and commercial expansion of contemporary worship music: CCLI's Top 25 list, media research firm Nielsen's Soundscan, and *Billboard* magazine's top Christian chart.<sup>73</sup> Each would become not simply catalogs but pacesetters for the burgeoning industry. CCLI's charting of top worship songs created direction for churches interested in taking a demand-side perspective on worship music. Rather than focusing on local or denominational music, churches could now ask: what songs do people want to sing in church? What worship songs are popular? CCLI created a pulse on the most popular worship songs in the country, raising awareness of the national market for worship music that was emerging. Hillsong's ascendancy in the worship music market could now be narrated with numerical precision—worship leader Darlene Zschech's "Shout to the Lord" has remained on CCLI's top 25 lists for the last fifteen years.<sup>74</sup>

The combination of all three of these reporting mechanisms resulted in the legitimization of this new sector of the music industry and a growing emphasis on seeker-sensitive worship experiences bolstered by market-tested songs with proven results. Any church was able to use these charting mechanisms to update its image, learning which songs and styles were current, and become more data-driven in its market analysis of potential members. In doing so, churches could move from abstraction to context, from a template to a market-research-driven custom experience where the worship music was geared toward church growth and target audiences.<sup>75</sup> In this, many prosperity megachurches were culturally suited to the task. Most had been built self-consciously with church growth principles of branding, target marketing, and data-driven demographics in mind, strategies that senior pastors digested in their steady diet of

paperbacks and leadership conferences devoted to the topic.<sup>76</sup> The unusually high number of prosperity megachurches with the nation's largest attendance records made their senior pastors symbols of the religious marketplace itself, reputations many encouraged by referring to themselves as CEOs and entrepreneurs, overseers of churches sometimes dubbed "franchises."<sup>77</sup> Prosperity theology had taught them the essential connection between the undergirding spiritual laws of the universe and believers' spiritual mastery of their own supply and demand; it was a vision of a Newtonian universe propelled by cause and effect so propelled by God's laws of sowing and reaping that some preachers speculated that even non-Christians or Wall Street itself might be ruled by its processes.<sup>78</sup> The commercialization of the worship music industry fit hand in glove with the entrepreneurial imagination of prosperity megachurches.

The growing industrialization of contemporary worship music increased competition that shifted, by the late 1990s, toward an artist-centered branding strategy easily adopted by prosperity megachurches. As the combination of CCLI, Soundscan, and *Billboard* charts brought visibility to the contemporary worship music market, artists and record labels began to turn their attention to this growing demand for church music. From the 1980s to the mid-1990s, worship record labels—such as Maranatha! Music, Vineyard Music, and the charismatic/pentecostal Integrity Music (formerly Hosanna! Music)—released a flood of worship albums, a compilation series of live recordings that threw out artist recognition in favor of a focus on the songs and the experience of live worship. As Integrity Music's general manager, John Coleman, remembers, "In the early '90s, we were definitely nameless, faceless church music."<sup>79</sup> Integrity Music recorded a wide range of artists and venues, among them a host of growing prosperity megachurch worship acts. The 1987 *Arise and Sing* album, for example, was recorded at Victory Christian Center, one of the decade's most vibrant prosperity congregations sitting in the shadow of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Ron Kenoly, worship pastor of the Jubilee Christian Center in San Jose, California, became one of Integrity Music's rising stars in the early 1990s with his record *Lift Him Up*.<sup>80</sup> Integrity Music took a different approach than the other record labels by highlighting the experiential nature of live worship through the performance of one worship leader.<sup>81</sup> It was a fortuitous choice, for as the worship business grew in revenue and visibility, artists and their labels began to market individual worship leaders to distinguish their product from the pack. The turn toward worship artist celebrity was most noticeable in album art, and the album art from Hillsong Church was a case in point. Hillsong's *People*

*Just Like Us* (1994) featured a shot of Sydney's famous Harbor Bridge while the front cover of *Simply Worship* (1996) had a photograph of an angel statue. But by 1997, Darlene Zschech, Hillsong's famous worship leader, became the primary advertisement for *All Things Are Possible* (1997), *Touching Heaven, Changing Earth* (1998), *For This Cause* (2000), *Blessed* (2001), *You Are My World* (2001), *Hope* (2003), and more. Once dominated by faceless and nameless artists, by the turn of the century, the worship music industry had transformed into a celebrity platform.

Meanwhile, famous CCM artists who normally did not write and produce music for church services entered the market and found meteoric success. Michael W. Smith's *Worship* (2001) and *Worship Again* (2002) had sold 1.7 million and 769,000 copies, respectively, by 2008, while Third Day's *Offerings: A Worship Album* (2000) and *Offerings II: All I Have to Give* (2003) had sold 961,000 and 764,000 units, respectively, by the same year.<sup>82</sup> As these big stars entered the worship music market, they further pushed the marketing and branding strategy of worship music toward the celebrity of the artist or worship leader. Take, for example, the widely popular compilation series *Songs4Worship*, a collaboration begun in 2000 between Integrity Music and Time Life Music that featured popular songs sung by famous worship leaders. Within a decade, the *Songs4Worship* series had released more than thirty albums and sold more than twenty million units. Time Life vice president and executive producer, Mitch Peyser, explained that the formula was so successful because it "gave many fans their first chance to hear praise and worship in their homes performed by top worship leaders."<sup>83</sup> The series' success and visibility catapulted it beyond the orbit of Christian bookstores and landed it into general retail and on Christian radio, where it found tremendous success.

Prosperity megachurches capitalized on the emerging worship music industry and its celebrities by hosting and recording the biggest names in Christian worship, becoming some of the most coveted sponsors in the worship music scene. With state-of-the-art sound systems that competed with professional concert venues and captive weekly audiences numbering in the thousands, megachurches had the resources to bring in top talent for "worship concerts," combination entertainment-praise experiences, and even live recordings. Christian music artists embarking on multicity tours found these megachurches to be indispensable concert venues. Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, was one of the most sought-after destinations, hosting diverse acts such as worship giant Phil Wickam, Latin pop star Ricardo Rodriguez, Christian rockers

Sanctus Real, Hillsong United, and Passion worship leaders Matt Redman and Christy Nockels.<sup>84</sup> Michael W. Smith not only debuted his highly anticipated album at Joel Osteen's megachurch but he also recorded his worship experience in America's largest church for a companion DVD project, *A New Hallelujah*, with Lakewood's worship leader Israel Houghton, special guests, and a 250-person choir before thirteen thousand listeners.<sup>85</sup> A handful of these supersized congregations, outfitted with high-quality production equipment geared for televangelism, began to open record labels of their own. Creflo Dollar's Arrow Records began to recruit artists of gospel and Christian hip-hop, while Paul Morton's Tehillah Music Group released mass choir productions.<sup>86</sup>

The expanded visibility of worship leaders and their popular songs—whether heard on the radio, sung by a worship band at a local church, or featured in concert at a megachurch—increased the power of celebrity in both the commercial calculus of the worship music industry and in the growth logic of prosperity megachurches. The celebrity of a worship leader had become a major means of selling records and advertising their home churches. Certainly, prosperity megachurches were well suited to capitalize on the rising power of worship leader celebrity because their models were already structured to build up and benefit from the senior pastor's celebrity.<sup>87</sup> With the addition of a famous worship leader, prosperity megachurches cultivated a "celebrity synergy" between their pastors and worship leaders.

The rising profile of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, offers a window into the significance of several of these factors—the shift toward arena rock, increased artist visibility, and an emphasis on musical celebrity—in the success of both church and pastor.<sup>88</sup> Like Hillsong's move to arena rock, Lakewood experienced its own musical transformation at the turn of the century. In the 1990s, John Osteen's Lakewood Church, dubbed the "Oasis of Love," featured a large choir, which backed vocalist leaders who were accompanied by an instrumental ensemble led from the piano.<sup>89</sup> In this musical setting, the face of Lakewood's worship was the enthusiastic Gary Simons, who alternated between pep leader, entertainer, choir director, and spotlighted crooner. With a wireless microphone in hand, Simons energetically paced the stage, alternating between smiles and grimaces with intense passion as he belted out traditional hymns with a booming tenor vibrato and directed the congregation with the ferocious swoops of his arms. Though Simons embodied a larger-than-life persona that imitated professional gospel entertainers and vocalists, he also maintained the trappings of mainstream, white Protestant

worship. Well-groomed and fitted in coat and tie, Simons's image went hand in hand with the traditional blue-robe choir swaying in time behind him. The modern instrumentation was loud but visually absent, hidden behind the choir and the colonnades that adorned the stage of Lakewood's sanctuary. The brightly lit platform was set up to feature the choir and the lead singers, but the equally lit sanctuary also highlighted the interaction between the music team and the congregation.<sup>90</sup> The result was a modernized version of the classic choir and piano combo: modern entertainer was fused with the choir and its director, music led from the piano was embellished with rock instruments, and stage theatrics merged with congregational participation. Gary Simons was no renowned worship star. He had no hit albums, had written zero popular worship songs, and carried himself with an aesthetic rooted in traditional southern gospel, not in the pop and rock styles emerging in contemporary worship. At John Osteen's Lakewood, Simons was a talented stage persona that led the music well and combined entertainment and a southern gospel aesthetic popular among older television and congregational audiences—but he was not a celebrity that Lakewood could use to enlarge its brand.

All of this changed once Joel Osteen took over his father's pulpit in 1999 and transformed the worship at the Houston megachurch into a major platform for the Lakewood brand. The young pastor hired seasoned Christian artist Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff as Lakewood's new worship director in 2000 and a second worship leader, Israel Houghton, in 2001. Cruse-Ratcliff grew up singing in the Cruse Family, a musical outfit that won two Dove awards and had led worship for several different ministries before joining Lakewood. In 2001, Israel Houghton was more of a draft pick, but Osteen clearly saw the potential of the up-and-coming worship leader. Though he had not yet won any of his four Grammys, Houghton had already begun developing his infectious style, fusing black gospel, rock, pop, and folk into songs that attracted both black and white audiences.<sup>91</sup> Lakewood's expansion into the former sports arena complex for the Houston Rockets further transformed the church's musical style and setting. With the headlining of Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff and Israel Houghton, the choir moved from the main platform to adjacent raised bleachers, while the once-invisible instrumentation was now featured directly behind the worship leaders, though cordoned off by a low wall that visually separated the singers from the band. Now the house lights dipped low while the stage lighting took on the dramatic coloring and dynamic spotlighting of professional concert venues. All of these changes resulted in an intense focus on the worship leader,

a secondary focus on the performing band behind them, and a minimal focus on the choir. As the stage production moved from traditional church to rock concert, believers who were barely visible to each other joined their voices and locked their attention on the spotlight before them.

As Lakewood's service took on the high production values of a rock concert, the musical presentation was buttressed by the addition of cinematic elements, which came naturally to a church regularly featured on TBN and led by the former television producer Joel Osteen. Lakewood services began with a music video powered by the hit track "Beautiful Things," a slow-motion inspiration drama of smiling people in the springtime of life, interspersed with beaches at sunrise or the earth refreshed by rain and driven by the crescendo of tom and kick drum.<sup>92</sup> The lush video created both an aural soundscape and a visual landscape of the good life that reached its climax with the Lakewood music team exploding onto stage with bright lights and electric guitars ringing out the final chords. The transition from the choreographed cinematic vision of the abundant life to its live embodiment on stage was seamless, a blurring of the lines between media and church. And it was not the pastor but the worship leader who bridged those two worlds, as it was music that connected them. The music video and the live music at Lakewood shared all of the accoutrements of professional audio production—compressed vocals, heavily EQ'd instruments, reverb bus tracks—and served as constituent parts of the soundscape that drove the liturgy of the service. Lakewood's worship was its own parade of "beautiful things," flattering light and cushioning sound powered by an invisible professional production team.

The liturgical revolution that came as a result of these changes in audiovideo production, artist and song visibility, and musical celebrity meant that, beyond the pastor's sermon, the worship leader's musical performance sat at the heart of the service. The old complaint that revivals were carried on the back of the revivalist found a modern incarnation as the newly commercialized worship leader often became as much the "face" of the church as the pastor. Joel Osteen must have realized this, for his first hires quickly moved Lakewood's music away from the chorus-dominated traditional gospel setting to a slickly produced concert venue that soloed the talents and eventual fame of its worship leaders. With such dynamic worship leaders, a weekly attendance of more than twenty-five thousand, and millions more around the world tuning in to its television broadcast, it was not long before Lakewood secured a record contract with Integrity Media, one of the largest Christian worship music record labels.

Integrity released Lakewood's albums, *We Speak to Nations* (2002) and a follow-up *Cover the Earth* (2003), featuring only the two stars on the cover and the name "Lakewood," a revenue bonanza that was "celebrity synergy" at its best.<sup>93</sup> Osteen provided Cruse-Ratcliff and Houghton with salaries, an enormous captive audience, television exposure, and free promotion as the worship leaders at the largest church in America; the success of Cruse-Ratcliff and Houghton, in return, not only launched solo albums and books but also kept their home church in the spotlight.<sup>94</sup>

While megachurches—particularly prosperity megachurches—always emphasized their pastoral icon, the rise of the Christian worship music industry provided a new avenue for leveraging the power and draw of the renowned worship leader to grow and promote a church. Skilled in the celebrity trade and furnished with world-class musical talent, entertainment venues, and massive audiences, prosperity megachurches such as Lakewood were well positioned to capitalize on the combined fame of pastor and worship leader alike.

### The Work of Worship in Prosperity Megachurches

Prosperity megachurches had helped transform Christian worship from soft pop ballads to an immersive experience of flashing light and enveloping screens.<sup>95</sup> But the worship music produced by and for prosperity megachurches did not simply provide a religious mirror of secular paradigms. It had its own theological justification for cultivating a totalizing worship environment: the movement wanted to unleash the power of positive confession.

Within the setting of congregational worship, music served as a vehicle for the cultivation and transmission of the power of faith. This understanding of faith elevated the spoken word—in speech and in song—to new heights as the primary tool of unleashing God's divine blessing. As such, prosperity worship was neither simply affective as a harness for the right spiritual feeling nor merely pious entertainment for those seeking to attract new members—it was where song transformed faith into action, belief into power. As Lakewood Church's 2002 album declared, "What you hold in your hand is more than just good music. This is a tool. It is a weapon."<sup>96</sup> Clint Brown's attempt to shape his message and his brand around the creation of a "Judah People," a people of praise, included not only an annual worship conference but also enclosed CDs for every copy of his book of the same name.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, when Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff released her own "declarations of God's promises," the resulting

*Spoken Word Collection* featured positive confessions laced with melodies.<sup>98</sup> The indictment of worship music as infectiously positive and repetitive (pejoratively dubbed “7/11” music for its habit of repeating only seven words, eleven times) had its own particular function inside the prosperity tradition. The repeated phrases of beloved times, though sometimes lyrically sparse, did the heavy lifting of invocation and incantation. Praise effectively released spiritual power and bound God to God’s promises. As Joel Osteen explained, “As you listen to this music, it is my prayer that you use it as an instrument—a vehicle that will carry the deepest expressions of your heart straight into His Throne room . . . enabling you to walk in victory in every area of life.”<sup>99</sup> Or as Clint Brown crooned: “We’ve learned that praise produces breakthrough, weapons, anointing, walls, and overflow.”<sup>100</sup> Praise was never simply praise. It was power.

The jubilant confidence that prosperity believers poured into praise was most evident on the day Christians were supposed to live without it. It was Good Friday in Houston, Texas, the prosperity megachurch capital of the United States, and I (Kate Bowler) was looking for a service to attend. After eight years studying prosperity megachurches, I had never managed to visit any of these congregations during the liturgical nadir of the Christian year, the ponderous moment when the Messiah’s crumpled body was buried and his beleaguered followers were frightened and missing. After a number of phone calls to find service times (and one surprisingly terse conversation with an administrative assistant who wondered what the religious occasion was), I realized why I had never seen a prosperity church in the throes of Holy Week. Only one propped open its doors for the occasion, Lakewood Church. I followed the long line of cars into the cavernous parking deck, walked the maze of concrete hallways, and stepped into the bright atrium that encircled the 16,800-seat auditorium. Every minute or so I saw a smiling host and heard the same chirpy greeting: “Happy Good Friday!” The darkened sanctuary was cushioned by the low sounds of Israel Houghton’s latest album and the faint tinkling of the waterfall that cascaded down both sides of the stage. Projected advertisements for Victoria Osteen’s latest book, *Love Your Life: Living Happy, Healthy, and Whole*, cast a white and pink glow. The lights dimmed lower as the worship band took the stage and the first lines of Isaac Watts’s soulful hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” began. According to the songs we sang and the sweet words between them, Jesus remained dead and buried for two anthems before the building rock ballad “This is Our God” returned the congregation to the pounding rhythm of loud, celebratory music. Returned to the land of the living, the congregation

applauded as Victoria Osteen took the stage, her honey-blond hair bouncing as she pumped her fist in the sky.

"Isn't it great we serve a risen Lord!" she crowed, and the audience answered back with hoots and cheers. She preached a short sermon on gratitude for what God had done, the responsibilities for tithing that accompanied it, and the benefits this brought in return. She was perfectly at home in the theological world that began, as she said, with the risen Lord. As she spoke, thick plumes from the fog machines swirled like Holy Spirit ether above our heads. A towering golden globe, the church's symbol of victory itself, glimmered as it spun in slow rotation. It would always be Easter at Lakewood Church.

In the vastness of the space, the pageantry of the liturgy, and the messages of unending victory, megachurches attempted to recreate an eschatological festival. God was shown to be present, bless abundantly, and end spiritual deferment. These palatial spaces—almost bare caverns filled with light, projected images, and enveloping sound—cultivated their own spiritual imagination. As Robbie Goh argued, this "performance of the mega" made the larger-than-life character of the experience into a liturgical materialization of the invisible God.<sup>101</sup> In this, the soundtrack of the American prosperity gospel played a significant part. The largesse of the musical experience reinforced both the grandeur of the space and the theological abundance of the message itself. Though the same music and production strategies could be found in churches big and small, often unhinged from a prosperity logic, there was a reinforcing rationale that existed between the sanctuaries prosperity megachurches created and the message they preached—we might call it a "performative prosperity gospel." The sight of hundreds of swaying bodies of a full-robed choir or waves of rippling sound pouring through a blackened auditorium made concrete a singular vision of God come down to earth.

The performative prosperity gospel had found its acoustic analog in the megachurch turn to arena rock worship, a transformation that both leveraged and supported the narrative of success, abundance, and celebrity that marked prosperity theology. The high production quality, attractive singers, talented musicians, charismatic worship leader, and the concert atmosphere pioneered by prosperity megachurches reinforced the message that echoed through the walls—that God had blessed his children with power, talents, youth, and beauty. Once a middle-aged man's game, the worship leader had become the symbol of spiritual maturity combined with perpetual adolescence. Rising megachurches always seemed to have a youth-

driven worship team in the making. Megachurches such as Gateway Church and Bethany World Prayer Center that learned to perfect this Hillsong/Lakewood formula were rewarded with their own swelling numbers.<sup>102</sup> The transformation from adult contemporary to arena rock effectively scaled the music with the prosperity message. It provided both an immersive aurality as a close proxy of transcendence for a new generation and a sensory experience where beauty, celebrity, and marketing fused into a soundtrack for the blessed.

## **Conclusion**

The prosperity movement has a maxim for those bits of good fortune that can only be orchestrated by God: some blessings cannot be taught, so the saying goes, they can only be caught. Timing is everything, even to prosperity preachers such as the Word of Faith old-timer Charles Capps, who reminded believers to confess positively that “I am always in the right place at the right time because my steps are ordered of the Lord.”<sup>103</sup> In keeping with their own advice, prosperity megachurches were well placed *and* well suited to leverage the emerging worship music industry with its emphasis on celebrity and production quality. They were well placed because they were inheritors of Christian television and venues of celebrity worship leaders, premier markets where massive audiences consumed worship music as a major commodity. They were well suited because they were, like record labels, incubators of musical talent and seasoned promoters of their brands. As contemporary worship music and its professional production came to play a more important role in prosperity megachurches’ attractions and liturgies, the worship music industry provided a sister industry able to promote, distribute, and develop further these musical artists who became additional faces for these churches.

But prosperity megachurches also took it one step further as their theological outlook overlapped with the business logic of the music industry; the blessed life was well-marketed, outcome oriented, and required the constant, hard work of self-promotion before audiences both worldly and divine. Blessings caught instead of taught was as true for the music industry as it was for prosperity folk. Musicians had to claim their talent, be bullish, and aggressively position themselves to capitalize on a ripe moment. Rather than passive “naming and claiming,” the prosperity gospel preached good news fraught with active participation. The blessed life was vigorously claimed, promoted, marketed, and believed. When prosperity megachurches brought arena rock to Sunday morning, they laced entrepreneurial

vision with theological imagination. In doing so, they sang what they preached, fusing professional production, celebrity promotion, and slick marketing with sonic liturgies that foregrounded the good life as young, beautiful, celebratory, and, of course, loud.

## Notes

1. Congregational visit, FaithWorld Church, Orlando, Florida, May 18, 2011.

2. "Gospel music," as a term, has a long and contentious history. Musicologist Stephen Shearon argues that, over its 150-year history, gospel music has developed into four separate traditions: northern urban gospel, sung in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century revivals of Dwight Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Billy Sunday; southern gospel, which usually featured small ensembles (often quartets) and developed and carried the American shape-note tradition through the twentieth century; black gospel, which emerged from black Baptist churches in the 1930s and fused slave spirituals, jubilee songs, blues, and jazz with Anglo-American hymnody; and country and bluegrass gospel, which developed in tandem with country and bluegrass music mid-twentieth century. In this article, we use this term interchangeably between these different traditions. For more on the development of and distinctions in gospel music, see Stephen Shearon et al., "Gospel Music," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2224388>, accessed May 16, 2014.

3. In the late 1980s, Rod Parsley preached and Clint Brown sang, making Ohio's World Harvest a showpiece of prosperity gospel televangelism. Founded in 1977, World Harvest Church (formerly Word of Life Church) grew to megachurch stature in the 1980s and to televangelism fame in the 1990s. See "About World Harvest Church," World Harvest Church website, <http://whclife.com/AboutWhc.aspx>, accessed June 1, 2013.

4. "Multicultural," in this congregation as in the American religious landscape as a whole, is difficult to document with precision. The congregation is advertised as multicultural, and, though the membership is mostly black, this could also mean multiple nationalities are represented. For more on the history, significance, and construction of a multicultural megachurch identity, see Gerardo Marti, *Worship across the Racial Divide: Religious Music and the Multiracial Congregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

5. Clint Brown's album *Release* was also the centerpiece of the church's sustained theological focus for several months. On my visit, there were screens kept on stage with the word "release" that also served as a reminder to "release" tithes to the ministry. Congregational visit, FaithWorld Church, Orlando, Florida, May 18, 2011; Clint Brown, *Release*, Habakkuk Music, 2012.

6. The language of "claiming victory" is common parlance inside the prosperity gospel. It is used to indicate that a future conflict has already been successfully resolved (victory) through the proper declaration of words (claiming).

7. In these years of prolific scholarship on American evangelicalism, definition has become an especially tricky task. David Bebbington famously defined it by its shared biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism, and others, such as Douglas Sweeney and Mark Noll, offer similar doctrinal shorthands. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989); Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); and Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010). Others, such as Timothy Smith and Randall Balmer, have characterized it by its diversity, either as an "evangelical mosaic" or a "patchwork quilt," respectively. See Timothy L. Smith, "The Evangelical Kaleidoscope and the Call to Christian Unity," *Christian Scholar's Review*, January 1, 1986; Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Molly Worthen argued that American evangelicalism is better defined by its shared questions: how to reconcile faith and reason, how to know Jesus, and how to act on this faith (*Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013]).

8. George Marsden provides the most helpful and widely used definition of fundamentalists as "militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicals" (*Fundamentalism and American Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980], 4) or, as Jerry Falwell put it, an evangelical who is angry about something. While fundamentalism earned its reputation for repudiating culture, those willing to operate on a national scale (like Jerry Falwell and now his son Jonathan) were as willing as any evangelical to play with cultural tools of engagement, albeit on their own terms. See Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). The prosperity movement, as an offshoot of pentecostalism, was most willing of all

religious conservatives to adapt to trends, seeing accommodation with modernity as a theologically desirable outcome. For pentecostalism's gradual entry into popular culture, see R. G. Robins, *Pentecostalism in America* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2010).

9. For an extended treatment of the role of market research, seeker sensitive churches, and church growth strategies in evangelicalism, see Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 124–76.

10. We use the term “contemporary worship music” in this article in a technical sense to mean congregational music built around pop music forms and driven by the piano or guitar. Since the 1970s, contemporary worship music has evolved into a subgenre of contemporary Christian music (CCM) as well as into a music industry, replete with its own record labels, music stars, and distribution companies. It is important to note that the terms used to describe this type of music are contested and changing. “Praise and worship” and “modern worship” are other common monikers used to describe the same genre, while this music has also been placed under the even more problematic term “gospel.” For more on the naming conventions of contemporary worship music, see Lester Ruth, “A Rose by Any Other Name: Attempts at Classifying North American Protestant Worship,” in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Todd Johnson (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 33–52. For a detailed consideration of the history of contemporary worship music, see Monique Marie Ingalls, “Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), or Anna E. Nekola, “Between This World and the Next: The Musical ‘Worship Wars’ and Evangelical Ideology in the United States, 1960–2005” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009). For the historical roots of Christian rock, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, see David Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), and Larry Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For other scholarly work on contemporary worship music, see Anna Nekola, “‘More Than Just a Music’: Evangelical Christian Anti-Rock Discourse and the Origins of the Culture Wars,” *Popular Music* 32 (October 2013): 407–26; Deborah Justice, “Public, Private; Contemporary, Traditional: Intersecting Dichotomies and Contested Agency in Mainline Protestant Worship Music,” *Folklore Forum* 40 (2010), at <http://folkloreforum.net/2010/04/19/public-private-contemporary-traditional-intersecting-dichotomies-and-contested-agency-in-mainline-protestant-worship-music/>; Robert E. Webber, “Praise and Worship Music: From Its Origins to Contemporary Use,”

*Pastoral Music* 27 (February 2003): 21–23; and Eric Gormly, “Evangelizing through Appropriation: Toward a Cultural Theory on the Growth of Contemporary Christian Music,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 2 (2003): 251–65.

11. We use the term “arena rock” here as shorthand for extravagant rock shows hosted at large entertainment or sports venues. The musical/performative genre of “arena rock” emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the introduction of new amplification technologies that allowed rock bands to present louder and cleaner performances at large venues and was pioneered by bands such as the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and the Who. In the 1970s and 1980s, these shows also incorporated light shows and pyrotechnics as part of the rock spectacle. Because the genre often defined a type of performance rather than a sound, multiple rock subgenres were associated with arena rock, including hard rock, heavy metal, glam rock, and modern rock. In the early twenty-first century, modern rock bands such as U2 and Coldplay continued to develop the arena rock concept with global tours that incorporated large stage structures and digital video projections. For our purposes, prosperity megachurches pioneered the importation of performative elements of spectacle featured in arena rock and translated them for use in the cavernous spaces of megachurch sanctuaries, creating what we call “arena rock worship.” Like the term arena rock, arena rock worship describes the setting and practices involved in a performance rather than the music itself.

12. See Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 141.

13. Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. chap. 1.

14. Early American pentecostalism has been largely defined by its emphasis on speaking in tongues and, as Grant Wacker detailed, its primitivist and pragmatist impulses. See Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). The prosperity gospel represents both a minority position inside of denominational and independent pentecostalism and a movement that has outgrown its bounds.

15. For more on evangelicalism’s reengagement with American culture in the postwar years, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Randall Balmer,

*Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); and Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

16. Perry Hayden, "The Lord's Work . . . Henry Ford and I," *Voice of Healing*, June 1954, 4.

17. Stuart Hamblen, "God Is a Good God," Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1956.

18. Bowler, *Blessed*. See chap. 2 for "faith," chap. 3 for "wealth," chap. 4 for "health," and chap. 5 for "victory."

19. *Ibid.*, 77–107.

20. Clark Sisters, "Name It, Claim It," *Sincerely*, New Birth Records, 1982.

21. Donald Lawrence, "The Law of Confession," *The Law of Confession*, Part I, Verity Records, 2009.

22. Shirley Caesar, "He's Working It Out for You," *He's Working It Out for You*, Sony Records, 1991.

23. For the distinction between "hard" and "soft" prosperity, see Bowler, *Blessed*, 97–98, 125–27.

24. John Kee, "I Believe," *The Essential John P. Kee*, Verity Records, 2007.

25. William Murphy III, "Overflow," *The Sound*, Murphy 3 Ministries, 2007. Murphy served as the worship leader at Bishop Eddie Long's New Birth Missionary Baptist for a number of years before starting the dReam Center in 2006.

26. Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

27. Hillsong Music, "All Things Are Possible," *All Things Are Possible*, Hillsong, 1997.

28. World Changers Church International (Atlanta, Georgia) and Winners Church (West Palm Beach, Florida). For examples of triumphant logos, see Lakewood Church's golden globe and Winner's Church in Queens, New York, for its gleaming trophies. Lakewood Church website, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Home.aspx>, accessed May 1, 2014; Winners Church website, <http://www.winnerschurch.com/>, accessed May 1, 2014.

29. Donald Lawrence, "Back II Eden," *The Law of Confession*, Part I, Verity Records, 2009.

30. Eree Chapel, "Very Same Power," *Jentezen Franklin Presents Power of the Cross at Free Chapel with Ricardo Sanchez*, 2009.

31. For more on the history of the megachurch, see Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), and Scott Thumma, Dave Travis, Rick Warren, et al., *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

32. Mark Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context," *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2006): 329–46. For more on the liturgical change involved in "seeker sensitive" services, see Lester Ruth, "Lex Agendi, Lex Orandi: Toward an Understanding of Seeker Services as a New Kind of Liturgy," *Worship* 70 (1996): 386–405.

33. For more on American revivalism, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Russell E. Richey, "From Quarterly to Camp Meeting," *Methodist History* 23 (July 1985): 199–213; Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Kathryn Teresa Long, *The Revival of 1857–58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Roger Robins, "Vernacular American Landscape: Methodists, Camp Meetings, and Social Responsibility," *Religion and American Culture* 4 (Summer 1994): 165–91; and Ann Taves, "Methodist Enthusiasm," in her *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

34. For more on the significance of revivalists and rhetoric, see Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). See also Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

35. See Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 127.

36. National megachurch data used for comparison is drawn from Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 8 (table 1.2).

37. Sheri Winesett, "Pentecostal Preacher to Prosperity Powerhouse: A Case Study," unpublished paper in the author's possession.

38. Some famous prosperity megachurch preachers simply did it all: William Murphy III, the gospel music artist behind the praise anthems "Let It Rise" and "Praise Is What I Do"; Paul Morton, overseeing bishop of the Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship who released hits like "Chasing after You," "Wonderful God," and "Show Us Your Glory"; and Marvin Winans, of the Winans family gospel dynasty, who founded his own thriving megachurch, The Perfecting Church, in Detroit, Michigan.

39. For the summary table of megachurches dubbed "prosperity" and a theological, educational, associational, and rhetorical rationale for these methods, see Bowler, *Blessed*, appendices A and B.

40. See *ibid.*, 184. America's largest megachurches should not be imagined only as Sunday worship houses but rather as ministerial empires, frequently complete with their own Bible schools, secondary schools, publishing house, television program, and roster of allied speakers and supporters. Their electronic mouthpiece carried the voice of the senior pastor so clearly that the average American was far more likely to know their local megachurch pastor's latest book than that of even the most popular theologian, denominational or otherwise.

41. Religious television had originally been a vehicle for the Protestant mainstream until the 1960s, when a landmark federal decision made religious broadcasting into a for-profit market. See Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), esp. chap. 6.

42. Jimmy Swaggart would retract his support for the prosperity gospel the following year and engage in an ongoing feud with prosperity preacher Marvin Gorman, a sparring match that only ended after each man had exposed the other's sexual misconduct.

43. As the historian Edith Blumhofer argued, "In a sense deliverance evangelism never died; rather, it remade itself into the electronic church" (Edith Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993], 217).

44. The heart language at the pietistic core of revivalist preaching has a vast literature. See especially Fred van Lieburg and Daniel

Lindmark, *Pietism, Revivalism, and Modernity, 1650–1850* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

45. As Douglas Harrison argues, Tammy Faye’s infamy as a heavily costumed “gospel diva” and evangelical nonconformist reflects a desire on the part of white evangelicals to be recognized and yet not “succumb to the blandishments of the secular celebrity’s worldly elegance” (*Then Sings My Soul: The Culture of Southern Gospel Music* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012], 147).

46. Russell E. Richey, “Revivalism: Definition in the Spirit of the Camp Meeting,” unpublished paper in author’s possession. Richey argues that revivalism has always struggled with the conflation of the revivalist with the revival, as seen in the First Great Awakening (James Davenport) and the Second Great Awakening (Lorenzo Dow).

47. For more on these revival duos, see Kevin Kee, “Marketing the Gospel: Music in English-Canadian Protestant Revivalism, 1884–1957,” in *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology*, ed. Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 96–122.

48. For more on the innovative techniques of Aimee Semple McPherson, see Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

49. Rex Humbard, *Your Key to God’s Bank* (Akron, Ohio: Rex Humbard Ministries, 1977).

50. David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 266–72.

51. For more on evangelicalism’s history of media innovation, see Shayne Lee and Phil Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005); and Frank Lambert, *“Pedlar in Divinity”: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737–1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

52. There is a much longer history of rock, pop, and folk music making their way into Christian worship services. For white American evangelicals, this trend picked up steam in the Jesus movement of the

1960s and 1970s, where Christian folk and rock music emerged from churches like Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, and was popularized at large Christian festivals and revivals such as Explo '72, a large conference hosted by Campus Crusade and headlined by Billy Graham in Dallas, Texas. For African American Christians, the trend began much earlier in the 1920s and 1930s, when black musicians and composers such as Thomas Dorsey, Rosetta Tharpe, and Mahalia Jackson combined blues, jazz, and ragtime with nineteenth-century gospel music and black spirituals to create black gospel music. For more on the music of the Jesus People, see Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, and Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*. For more on the birth and development of black gospel, see Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Bob Darden, *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

53. The transformation from adult contemporary to arena rock in worship music also occurred outside of churches. The hard rock style that had been common at Christian music festivals since the 1970s invaded worship music in two ways in the mid-1990s. First, British songwriter Martin Smith and his band Delirious? brought the delayed guitar rock of U2 in a "British invasion" of American churches with hit songs like "Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble?" and "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever" (see Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place," chap. 4). Second, evangelist Louie Giglio jumpstarted the "Passion Conferences" in Austin, Texas, developing the outdoor festivities into the launching pad for future evangelical worship stars Chris Tomlin, David Crowder, and Matt Redman. Steeped in the evangelical revival tradition, Passion created the first Christian music festival focused entirely on worship instead of evangelism or subcultural entertainment. However, it was prosperity megachurches that first imagined what the production and consumption of arena rock could look like within the walls of a sanctuary. When it came to the influence of megachurches in shifting the worship soundscape toward a large rock production, prosperity megachurches were at the forefront.

54. Like arena rock, "adult contemporary" is not a pure musical genre marked by specific musical styles, conventions, or instrumentation. Instead, it is generally conceived as a consortium of popular music genres, from easy listening jazz to soft rock to pop, with broad radio appeal. For our purposes, however, the adult contemporary sound of contemporary worship music from the late 1970s to the late 1990s was marked by a broad though definable musical style. More often than not, songs were led from the piano or synthesizer instead of from the acoustic guitar or

even from a drum and bass foundation. The music also frequently featured jazz elements (often a saxophone or brass section interlude); a highly compressed, even quiet, electric guitar; and a focus on a small ensemble of singers, usually singing the melody in unison. For many churches, the adult contemporary sound was a compromise between hard rock and no rock music. For others, like Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church, it was precisely because of its broad radio appeal that adult contemporary became the dominant mode for contemporary worship music.

55. For Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, operating the technical production of weekly services required a media director, an audio director, and a full-time staff of a dozen specialists. See Mark Martof, "Technologies for Worship Reach New Heights at Lakewood Church," *Technologies for Worship Magazine*, March 2005, <http://www.tfwm.com/Lakewoodfeature>.

56. For more on rock music's grounding in youth rebellion and its subsequent marketing, see Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chap. 13; and Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), chaps. 5-8.

57. Since the import of its popular worship anthem "Shout to the Lord" in the mid-1990s, Hillsong music has been a major influence on contemporary worship music in America. In this globalized movement, Hillsong music's style, performative culture, and commercial structure looked and sounded no different than any American counterpart. Hillsong regularly distributed its music through the American worship label Integrity, its artists often shared the concert stage with American counterparts, and its leaders regularly rubbed shoulders with their American colleagues at conferences on both continents. Hillsong music, then, did not represent the indigenization of contemporary worship music but its globalization, mirroring American musical culture, practices, and sensibilities a world away. For an introductory consideration of Hillsong's music, see E. H. McIntyre, "Brand of Choice: Why Hillsong Music Is Winning Sales and Souls," *Australian Religion Studies Review* 20 (2007): 175-94, and John Connell, "Hillsong: A Megachurch in the Sydney Suburbs," *Australian Geographer* 36 (2005): 315-32. For an introductory consideration of Hillsong's lyrical and liturgical theology, see Tanya

Riches, "The Evolving Theological Emphasis of Hillsong Worship (1996–2007)," *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 13 (2010): 87–133.

58. For a live recording of worship at Hillsong Church in 1993, see "Hillsong—Let Your Presence Fall—Stone's Been Rolled Away 1993," Youtube video, 3:11, posted by "psrman1," February 19, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kezvYAbXyL8>.

59. Darlene Zschech replaced Geoff Bullock as worship leader at Hillsong Church in 1996. Zschech would go on to become the first female worship leader featured on an Integrity Music live worship album. Even in 2013, she remained one of the most visible female worship leaders in the world—a famous songwriter, author of several books, and a seasoned singer who performed for the Pope at the Vatican and for the President of the United States. See Camerin Courtney, "The Power of Praising God," *Today's Christian Woman*, March 2001, <http://www.todaychristian-woman.com/articles/2001/march/3.36.html>.

60. See the 1998 Hillsong Conference DVD for examples of the various musical styles and stage productions that Hillsong utilized in the late 1990s. DVD playback is available at "Hillsong Shout to the Lord (1998) DVD," Youtube video, 1:12:20, posted by "janejarh," March 21, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGe3L4Yc9yE>.

61. Hillsong, though a brand and force of its own, had roots in the Assemblies of God denomination. Brian and Bobbie Houston founded the Hills Christian Life Centre in 1983 within the Australian Christian Churches, the Australian branch of the Assemblies of God. Brian Houston would go on to serve as the president of the denomination in Australia for twelve years, from 1997 to 2009.

62. For an example of Sampson's spot-on Cobain vocal timbre, see his performance at a 1996 Youth Alive NSW event at "Marty Sampson—Chosen One Youth Alive NSW 1996," Youtube video, 4:52, posted by "Racheljda," December 15, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZDX-Wx1ZHK>.

63. Thomas Bergler makes a similar argument for the cult of youth that emerged in American evangelical churches in the late twentieth century, where musical changes played a significant role in growing younger congregations and developing robust youth ministries. In the twenty-first century, Hillsong has played a central role in further developing and popularizing what Bergler saw as the "juvenilization" of American worship music via its wide distribution of albums in the American market. For more on the development of the cult of youth in

American churches, see Thomas E. Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

64. Hillsong United's youthful vibe was on full display in a "behind-the-scenes" documentary featured on Hillsong United's 2008 DVD, *The I Heart Revolution*. Mimicking the common FBI warning label at the beginning of DVD movies, the documentary began with a warning that "the following footage contains tomfoolery, shenanigans and horseplay of every nature." See Hillsong Music Australia, *The I Heart Revolution: With Hearts as One*, Castle Hill, NSW, Australia, Hillsong Music Australia, 2008.

65. See the live recording of the song "Made Me Glad," in Hillsong Music Australia, *Blessed: Hillsong Live Worship*, Castle Hill, NSW, Australia, Hillsong Music Australia, 2001. Also available at "Made Me Glad & Through It All—Hillsong Music Australia—DVD Blessed," Youtube video, 13:32, posted by "Renam Pablo," April 5, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiZr3p0IQEU>. For an example of the adoption of professional stage lighting in a contemporary worship service at a megachurch, see Deborah Justice, "Sonic Change, Sacred Change, Social Change: Music and the Reconfiguration of American Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2012), chap. 6.

66. See the beginning of the 2006 Hillsong Conference DVD—Hillsong Music Australia, *Mighty to Save: The Sound of Worshipping Generations*, Castle Hill, NSW, Australia, Hillsong Music Australia, 2006, or the beginning of the 2007 Hillsong Conference DVD—Hillsong Music Australia, *Saviour King: Hillsong Live*, Castle Hill, NSW, Australia, Hillsong Music Australia, 2007. The opening session of both conferences integrated film and live musical accompaniment that built the emotional energy of the audience before the Hillsong band exploded on stage.

67. It is hard to overestimate Hillsong's influence on contemporary worship music. With global assets worth \$150 million, the Hillsong brand has become a global empire. Hillsong's churches operating in Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the United States all serve as ambassadors of the Hillsong brand and experience. However, more potent than any Hillsong church is its music label, which has now published more than one hundred albums—fifty of which have gone gold or platinum—and won several Dove awards and nominations over the last fifteen years. The main engine behind Hillsong's continuing brand expansion has been its contemporary worship music, now sung in thousands of congregations around the world every week. See Adele Ferguson, "Prophet-Minded: Pentecostal Churches Are Not Waiting to

Inherit the Earth; They Are Taking It Now, Tax-Free," *Business Review Weekly*, May 2005, 34–41.

68. Ethnographic visit, Wave Church, Virginia Beach, February 8, 2010.

69. Publishers and record labels such as Maranatha! Music, Vineyard Music, and Integrity Music joined with licensing companies such as CCLI and publications such as *Worship Leader* to form the core of the worship music industry. In the twenty-first century, the online portion of the industry has exploded with websites such as *worshiptogether.com*, *worshipsonline.com*, and Paul Baloche's *leadworship.com*. The worship music industry in America, of course, is much older, dating back to psalter publishing in the eighteenth century and then a diversification in hymnal publishing in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of new hymns and gospel songs from authors such as William B. Bradbury, John R. Sweney, Fanny Crosby, and Ira Sankey. The twentieth century brought a shift from sheet music and songbooks to radio and recordings as the primary means of distribution and consumption, while gospel music diversified into different subgenres aimed at different markets. At the same time, American evangelicals, primarily through the convictions of the Christian fundamentalist subculture that emerged in the early twentieth century, began to distance themselves from popular cultural forms while at the same time building parallel cultural worlds that, paradoxically, rejected secular values while measuring success in terms of the secular market. Aimee Semple McPherson's simultaneous appropriation of Hollywood celebrity and rejection of Hollywood values was a fitting example. By the mid-twentieth century, religious record labels such as Word Records provided means for the professional recording of southern gospel music and eventually contemporary Christian music as well. Thus, when contemporary worship music finally industrialized in the 1990s, subgenres of black and white gospel music had been commercially marketed and distributed for decades. For more on the commercial history of worship music, see Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2002); Harrison, *Then Sings My Soul*; Mouw and Noll, *Wonderful Words of Life*; and Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), chap. 8. For more on American evangelicalism's strained relationship with popular culture, see Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

70. For a history of contemporary Christian music (CCM), see Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*; Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999); and William D.

Romanowski, "Rock 'n' Religion: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry" (Ph.D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 1990).

71. Though contemporary worship music emerged in the charismatic church network of Calvary Chapel and Vineyard churches in the 1970s and early 1980s, by the 1990s, it had made its way into most evangelical and some mainline denominations. By that time, the major worship record labels Maranatha! Music, Vineyard Music, and Hosanna! Music marketed new contemporary worship music to larger audiences while CCLI provided a licensing service to use the music in worship services.

72. Though Geoff Shearn's U.K. organization, Christian Music Association (CMA), developed a licensing program in the 1980s, Howard Rachinski's CCLI became the sole operator for licensing in the United States and, eventually, the dominant global operator by the 2000s. While serving as a music director at Bible Temple in Portland, Oregon, Rachinski began developing a licensing organization that would meet the needs of churches using what were, at the time, unconventional musical settings that involved leading music from overhead projectors instead of out of hymnals. Starpraise ministries, CCLI's predecessor, was born in 1985 and offered blanket licenses for specific copying activities in churches. Rachinski eventually secured access to hundreds of publishers and more than two hundred publisher catalogs, which then attracted more than 9,500 churches to sign up for licenses in CCLI's first year of operation. See "Who We Are > Company Profile," CCLI website, <http://www.ccli.com/WhoWeAre/CompanyProfile.aspx>, accessed September 2, 2013.

73. Nielsen's Soundscan technology first appeared for mainstream genres in 1991 but adopted the Christian/gospel genre in 1995. Soundscan provided systematic tracking of album sales for stores with Internet access and a point-of-sale inventory system. Soundscan data was then offered as a subscription service for music industry executives and companies. Billboard eventually based its charts on Soundscan data. For contemporary worship, Soundscan provided industry executives with a means to track the growth of worship music sales around the country. Billboard then translated this data for consumers and other church leaders via its charts. For more on Soundscan's integration with CCM, see Deborah Evans Price, "Contemporary Christian Music: With Media Exposure and Chart Success, Contemporary Christian Artists Are Baptized into the Mainstream," *Billboard*, April 27, 1996, 34, 36.

74. "Shout to the Lord" debuted on CCLI's top 25 list in August 1998 at number 19. By August 1999, it was at number 2. It remained at

number 2 until August 2003, when it fell to number 3. A year later, it fell to number 4, where it remained until February 2006. Since then, it has seen a slow decline but was still on the list at number 25 as of February 2013. See "Top 25 Songs," CCLI Website, <http://www.ccli.com/Support/LicenseCoverage/Top25Lists.aspx>, accessed August 15, 2013.

75. Prosperity megachurches were not the only organizations to take advantage of new market-research-based business models available for worship music. Bill Hybel's Willow Creek Church in South Barrington, Illinois, and Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, were two of the first churches to pioneer market-research models for church growth. By the early 1990s, the market culture and logic that was integral to Willow Creek's success made its way to other megachurches and aspiring megachurches. This came, in part, through the Willow Creek Association, a "franchising" of the Willow Creek seeker strategy that provided consulting materials for other churches that desired to mimic Willow Creek's approach. But in other ways, Willow Creek's success and national visibility provided its own advertising. Rick Warren and Saddleback Church followed a similar franchising strategy in the late 1990s with the release of Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* and its associated materials for churches. For more on Willow Creek's seeker service and its use of contemporary worship music, see Ruth, "Lex Agendi, Lex Orandi." For more on Saddleback's seeker service and its use of contemporary worship music, see Justin G. Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

76. The church-growth movement emerged from the work of Donald McGavran, particularly from his development of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in the 1960s and 1970s. The movement has significantly shaped American megachurches' development of "seeker sensitive" worship services, which almost always incorporate contemporary worship music. For a general overview of the movement, see Glenn Lucke, "Church Growth Movement," in *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expressions*, ed. Gary Laderman and Luis D. León (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2003). For a primary source consideration, see Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

77. Bowler, *Blessed*, 102–3.

78. This was an argument as old as the rise of the first millionaires as Protestants tried to account for what made the business world tick. From New Thought's Napoleon Hill to "rags to riches" authors like

Russell Conwell, many penned thick defenses of the righteous workings of the market. See Bowler, *Blessed*, 31–34.

79. Deborah Evans Price, "Praised Be!: Worship Music Jumps from the Church to the Charts," *Billboard*, October 11, 2008, 28.

80. Two 1993 albums, *We Are One* and *Rejoice Africa*, were recorded at the prosperity megachurch Rhema Church in Johannesburg, South Africa. There were other Hosanna recording artists, such as Robert Gay, Ed Gungor, and Jack Hayford, who, though they did not sit firmly within the movement, were sympathizers within the larger prosperity orbit.

81. Still, Integrity Music's worship series in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a compromise between the faceless approach of the earlier era and the artist-dominated approach that would emerge in the late 1990s. While each album featured one worship leader, the album art highlighted clip-art instead of images of the artist or worship band.

82. Price, "Praised Be!" 28.

83. *Ibid.*, 29.

84. Sanctus Real and Hillsong United came to Lakewood in 2007, Phil Wickam and Ricardo Rodriguez in 2011, and Matt Redman and Christy Nockels in 2012.

85. Price, "Praised Be!" 27–29.

86. T. D. Jake's Dexterity Sounds, Hillsong Music, Fellowship Church Grapevine's UOI Records (under Creality Publishing, Inc.), Creflo Dollar's Arrow Records, and Mars Hill Music are but a few of the many megachurch record labels that produce praise and worship music for a national market.

87. Prosperity megachurch websites were a great example, often featuring large portraits or headshots of their pastor(s) with advertisements for their most recent books or speaking tours and links to their personal websites.

88. Phillip Luke Sinitiere, "Preaching the Good News Glad: Joel Osteen's Tel-e-evangelism" in *Global and Local Televangelism*, ed. Pradip Ninan Thomas and Philip Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 87–107.

89. Large churches that had vast musical resources, such as Lakewood, would buttress the piano and the choir with a variety of instrumentation, including drums, bass, horns, strings, and occasional electric guitar flourishes. The musical style at Lakewood represented a fusion of gospel subgenres, featuring an emotive, swaying choir

influenced by black gospel, a small cadre of vocal leaders with microphones that played on the small ensembles found in southern gospel, and a song repertoire that featured classic hymn texts such as "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" and "Amazing Grace."

90. For an example of this musical production on an average Sunday morning, see broadcast footage from a full service at Lakewood under John Osteen's tenure at "John Osteen—When you are discouraged. (Full Service)," online video clip, Youtube, July 3, 2011, <http://youtu.be/IQT-N9GOMFo>, accessed June 1, 2014.

91. Houghton's music proved to be an important attraction, as Lakewood boasted one of the largest multiracial churches in America. For more on music's critical role in marketing to different ethnic demographics, see Marti, *Worship across the Racial Divide*. For more on Houghton's approach to multiethnic worship, see Wen Reagan, "Blessed to Be a Blessing," in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park: Penn State University Press, forthcoming).

92. See Lakewood Church, "Beautiful Things Open," online video clip, YouTube, September 24, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SVDB3h6d4w>, accessed June 1, 2014.

93. See Charles Ward, "Praise Be the Music—Lakewood's Profile Is Rising on the Way to Compaq Center Move," *Houston Chronicle*, December 7, 2003.

94. Lakewood was not alone in attracting top talent for permanent church positions. For the most talented or popular worship artists, the largest megachurches offered appealing employment. Big-name worship artists beyond Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff and Israel Houghton, such as Darlene Zschech, Martha Munizzi, and Ricardo Sanchez, all served as worship leaders at prosperity megachurches, bases from which they could record and produce new material and tour outside of Sunday morning services while still maintaining the stability of a salaried position.

95. See Jill C. Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), esp. chap. 6. Stevenson argues that megachurches, particularly evangelical megachurches, intentionally create "affective atmospheres" around specific brands that allow believers to experience a customized spiritual experience.

96. Lakewood Live, *We Speak to Nations*, Hosanna! Music, 2002, CD insert.

97. Clint Brown. *Judah People: A People of Praise* (Denver, Colo.: Legacy Publishers International, 2006).

98. Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff, *The Spoken Word*, RPM Music, 2011.

99. Lakewood Live, *We Speak to Nations*, CD insert.

100. Brown, *Judah People*, 28.

101. See Robbie B. H. Goh, "Hillsong and 'Megachurch' Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic, and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism," *Material Religion* 4 (2008): 284–304. The "performance of the mega" may also be drug-like. In a mixed-methods sociological study, Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk found that many megachurch "attendees described an intense need or desire for the emotional and spiritual megachurch experience, some equating it to a type of drug or high, analogous to how some exercisers describe a 'runner's high' and being addicted to exercise." They proposed that what they coded as "emotional energy" (EE) in their interviews "may primarily represent an oxytocin 'cocktail' . . . which generates feelings of being 'high' or elated." "Megachurch services may be particularly conducive for increasing oxytocin," Wellman et al. explained, "since they combine group singing with the display of other's emotional experiences [via live video recordings projected on large screens] in an aesthetic context that encourages emotional expression." See James K. Wellman, Katie E. Corcoran, and Kate Stockley-Meyerdirk, "'God Is like a Drug . . .': Explaining Interaction Ritual Chains in American Megachurches," unpublished manuscript, 2013.

102. See the youthful co-marketing of a church and its music on the homepage of Gateway Worship: "About Gateway Worship," Gateway Worship website, <http://gatewayworship.com/>, accessed June 1, 2013.

103. Charles Capps Ministries, Inc., Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/CharlesCappsMinistries>, posted January 31, 2013. The term "Word of Faith" comes from the publications and ministry of Kenneth Hagin, popularly (and incorrectly) assumed to be the originator of the prosperity gospel. For the multiple distinctions of prosperity terms, including Word of Faith, see Bowler, *Blessed*, appendix B.

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**ABSTRACT** This article makes several claims about the relationship between praise and worship music and prosperity megachurches. First, it argues that the prosperity gospel has had a significant impact on contemporary worship music in America owing to its leadership in the twin

rise of the megachurch and televangelism. Second, beginning in the 1990s, prosperity megachurches pioneered forms of worship music mimicking "arena rock" that capitalized on both the scale of their sanctuaries and the sophistication of their audio/visual production. The result was a progression toward music that would be a liturgy of timing, lighting, volume and performance designed for large venues. Finally, prosperity megachurches were ideally situated to benefit from this new music, both in the music industry and in their theology. Prosperity megachurches partnered with the expanding worship industry in the creation of new worship music, while the prosperity gospel theologically undergirded the affective power and performative pageantry of Christian arena rock, narrating worship music as a tool for releasing spiritual forces of prosperity. The result was a Sunday experience for the blessed that reinforced the celebration of God's abundant blessings through music that was bigger, better, and louder.

*Keywords:* Prosperity, megachurch, worship, music, Hillsong



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