
Singing the Congregation

*How Contemporary Worship Music
Forms Evangelical Community*



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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CHAPTER 5



Worship on Screen

Building Networked Congregations through Audiovisual Worship Media

Chapter 4 began to address what happens when contemporary worship music “goes public”—that is, when it is taken out of spaces set aside for religious practice and becomes a public performance. This chapter builds on the foundation established in the previous chapter, examining the new social constellations emerging around contemporary worship music as it weaves in between live performance spaces and public spaces online. Digital audiovisual worship media—whether live-streamed worship services, user-generated YouTube worship videos, or prerecorded audiovisual materials for use in live worship settings—forms the material nodes of new congregational networks. These types of media serve both as extensions of congregations into virtual spaces and as sites enabling new modes of online congregating. This chapter demonstrates that new digital audiovisual technologies and the avenues of online communication along which they travel not only give evangelical worshippers new ways to transmit, share, and discover worship songs; rather, they also strongly condition the practices that evangelicals consider necessary parts of worship. Through audiovisual worship media experienced on small personal screens and large projection screens in church, conference, and concert settings, once-separate aural and visual strands of evangelical devotion are drawn together into a powerful experiential whole. The networked mode of congregating centered around these audiovisual worship experiences challenges the boundaries between public and private worship as it blurs the lines between individual, institutional, and industry authority.

Throughout this chapter, I use the term “networked congregation” to describe the interconnected modes of congregating that digital audiovisual and social media technologies enable.¹ (“Networked congregation” describes a specific instance or gathering, while the related term “congregational network” indicates plural, overlapping networked congregations.) Here I draw inspiration from Heidi Campbell’s notion of “networked religion,” a term she has coined to explain “how religious experience, belief, and practice are lived out online through dynamic social relations and interaction” (2012, 65). While Campbell’s definition focuses primarily on religious expression on the Internet, she notes that scholars cannot easily disentangle online religious practices from the activities in offline contexts on which they are based. Because online and offline spaces are often closely linked, networked religion entails a “complex interplay . . . between the individual and the community, new and old sources of authority, and public and private identities in a networked society” (65). Kiri Miller provides another helpful conceptual model in her work on the musical “communities of practice” that are formed through social media platforms like YouTube. For those with a shared affinity for—or even simply curiosity about—particular music styles or techniques, social media provides not only a new way to consume musical recordings but also “new channels for teaching and learning, for transmitting practical knowledge and drawing together communities of practice,” (17) which then translate into offline, face-to-face music-making.

Campbell’s observations about networked religious practice and Miller’s discussion of online communities of practice centered around music-making can both be readily applied to congregational music-making within digital-age evangelicalism. Contemporary worship music—along with the audiovisual technologies necessary for its successful performance—has been one of the most significant single factors in the rise of evangelical networked congregations and congregational networks. The various forms of digital audiovisual worship media create the nodes of these diffuse congregational networks and serve both as extensions of congregations into the virtual realm and as sites for the creation of new networked congregations. These technologies have enabled networked congregations to expand globally as far as digital technologies and the Internet reach; therefore, like Chapter 4, this chapter’s discussion also moves beyond the bounds of the United States. Here I draw from ethnographic research in the United Kingdom and Canada, as well as an online ethnographic study centered on fifty online worship video “fieldsites” (see also Ingalls 2016 and Ingalls, forthcoming) that gathered perspectives of field-research consultants living in the United Kingdom, Iceland, China, Hungary, Germany, and Malaysia whom I met online. Accounts from interlocutors from my online fieldsites are complemented by a close reading of amateur- and professionally produced worship videos, important multimedia nodes for networked congregations. The discussion ends by

examining networked congregations on an international scale, analyzing the musical offerings and discourse on the online sites of global worship brands, including Hillsong, based in Sydney, Australia; Passion, based in Atlanta, Georgia; and Jesus Culture/Bethel, based in Redding, California.

Networked congregations are often centered around the “worship experience,” an affective time of personal communion with God mediated through contemporary worship music (for further discussion, see Chapter 1, pp. 42–49). Though evangelicals perceive worship experiences to be highly personal, this chapter discusses the extent to which elements of this experience have become standardized and media-dependent. The worship experience draws together once-separate threads of sonic and visual evangelical devotional practice and depends increasingly upon audiovisual screen media to induce it within local contexts; further, the worship experience relies on a combination of live experiences, social media, and professional Internet media to spread it further. The sections of this chapter examine several components of the worship experience and the screen cultures in which it is embedded in order to better understand the new evangelical networked congregations, communities connected through shared affect and affinity. The audiovisual worship experience at the heart of the networked congregation is transforming evangelical sociality and reconfiguring the balance of power between individuals, evangelical institutions, and commercial industries.

WORSHIP EXPERIENCE AND SCREEN CULTURE: THE RISE OF DIGITAL AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA WITHIN EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

For an understanding of worship music’s role in producing networked congregations, it is necessary first to examine a significant technological development: the pervasive use of audiovisual technologies in worship, particularly digitally projecting song lyrics and still and moving images onto large central screens during congregational singing. The following vignette, by depicting an evening worship service in suburban New Jersey, illustrates the common aspects of the pervasive congregational worship “screen culture.”

Morristown, New Jersey, March 2006

At 7:25 p.m., I drive into a Baptist church parking lot in suburban New Jersey for the church’s Sunday evening gathering. Earlier in the week, I arranged over email to have a conversation after the service with the worship leader, a friend of a friend

whom I haven't yet met in person. Walking into the foyer, I find myself in the middle of a dozen casually dressed twenty-to-thirty-somethings who are milling about and chatting. As I approach the open doors to the sanctuary, a smiling greeter shakes my hand and offers me a flyer for an upcoming event.

I find a seat in the darkened auditorium and look around the room. The two rows of cushioned pews on either side of a central aisle face the stage area. Flanking the stage are two "pits" on either side—one for piano, the other for organ—and a large cross hanging above the organ at the front right. The sanctuary is very dark—though there is a forest of electric chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, each is turned to the dimmest possible setting. A warm orange glow from overhead spotlights bathes the stage, which is ablaze with firelight from candles of all shapes and colors, many on rustic wrought-iron candle trees, others adorning the floor and banister around the organ. A dark-golden curtain divides the stage into front and back halves, and carefully placed potted plants soften the starkness of the curtain. Four worship-band musicians—a keyboardist, guitarist, bass guitarist, and drummer—are onstage conducting sound checks and tuning their instruments. The overhead speakers are piping instrumental music that sounds vaguely Celtic, featuring a string ensemble with synthesizer and earthy-sounding drum timbres.

At the front of the auditorium hangs a large projection screen. Acting as the central reference point of the auditorium from any vantage point, the screen towers above everything else on the stage. Even the cross, hanging ten feet lower at the front right, is dwarfed by the screen. Projected onto the screen is a logo with the evening gathering's name "Liquid" superimposed on a square photograph of a single drop of water falling into a pool and creating rings.

The worship service starts gradually with a lengthy instrumental introduction to the first worship song, during which a message for the gathered worshipers is projected onto the screen: "Silence . . . use this time to prepare for worship." When the musicians begin to sing, the song lyrics are projected onto the screen so that the congregation can sing along. The first song's slides feature the text in the upper right-hand corner, framed by two panels that display photographs of Rio de Janeiro's Christ of the Andes against a striking azure sky. The same image is used as the slide background throughout the second song, though the song lyrics never mention Jesus explicitly. The onscreen image creates a link between the figure of Christ and the lyrical references to "God" and "Lord." The lyrics to the third worship song, "Pure Light," feature a golden-brown background pierced by a brilliant white ray of light. The visual imagery seems clearly intended to complement the song lyrics, which praise Jesus as the Light of the World.

During the Scripture lesson that followed the worship set, the screen never darkens, as a succession of words, images, and schematic drawings are projected to illustrate the speaker's points. After the speaker finishes, the screen is again filled with lyrics to the final song along with a series of new background images that change several times throughout the song. After the final strains of the closing

song die away, the projection on the screen returned to the opening “Liquid” logo, proclaiming once again the identity of this particular worship gathering.

In this church service, the screen occupies a central role in worship: it is a necessary accompaniment for congregational singing, in which a mixture of song lyrics, images, and other texts are projected onto it. In a conversation after the service, the worship leader told me he took great care to choose images he believed complemented and expressed the song lyrics. Indeed, in the course of the service, I noted a place where background images added a new layer of meaning: in the second song, an image of Jesus was projected as a background to song lyrics that never mentioned Jesus by name. And the pre-service message illustrated that the screen can also become an authoritative “voice” in its own right, whether conveying information or delivering instructions to the gathered congregation.

I attended this worship service as an audiovisual technological sea change was occurring in evangelical worship. In the early to mid-2000s, the integration of audiovisual technologies within the service just described represented the technological cutting edge for a mid-sized US congregation; a decade later, this audiovisual setup has become standard. The use of projection technology within evangelical worship has a much longer history; churches, camps, and conferences had been using analog overhead projectors to project song lyrics and other visual materials since the 1960s. In the early 1990s, large and well-resourced gatherings made the move to digital projection. Many local churches felt pressure to adopt not only the music, but also the entire audiovisual technological setup that characterized these large events (see Schultz 2004; Nekola 2009; Mall 2012; Lim and Ruth 2017). Lim and Ruth 2017 notes that the 1990s were the tipping point for the use of electronic technologies within North American Protestant churches, evidenced by “the emergence of trade magazines, conferences, consultants, and church staff” devoted to audiovisual technologies within corporate worship (47). As digital projection technologies became more affordable, more and more churches began to adopt them. In 2002, evangelical media theorist Quentin Schultze wrote that many evangelical churches feel compelled to adopt what he calls “high-tech worship” that “relies extensively on computer-based presentational technologies” (2004, 20).

There is no one comprehensive source that quantifies evangelical use of digital projection onto screens in worship; however, several individual large-scale research surveys together corroborate Schultze’s assertion that the digital projection had become the norm by the early 2000s. According to the Barna Research Group’s poll of US pastors, the number of churches using computer projection technology in their worship services rose from

39 percent in the year 2000 to 62 percent in the year 2005 (Barna Research Group 2005). According to Christian Copyright Licensing, whose data draws from five years of annual surveys of over 11,000 North American church subscribers, there has been a gradual but steady rise in churches using computer song-lyric projection. In 2007, 78 percent of their subscribing churches used computer projection; by 2011, 84 percent did (CCLI 2012a, 2012b).²

Digital projection technology enabled churches to project not only song lyrics, but also other visual media, including backgrounds, images, videos, and other texts for contemplation during worship. Integrating multimedia into church services was justified as necessary to engage the new generation of “digital natives” living in postmodern North American societies for whom digital media technologies were the “indigenous” system of communication (Wilson 1999; Bausch 2002). In *The Wired Church* (1999), one of the first evangelical theological reflections on the use of digital technologies for worship, Len Wilson asserts that the projection screen has become “the stained glass, and the cross, for the electronic media age. . . . Icons were the Bible for the illiterate, and the screen is the Bible for the post-literate” (41).

It did not take long for marketers to seize upon the idea that visual aspects of worship were an untapped spiritual resource. In a three-page advertising spread in a 2007 issue of *Worship Leader* magazine, Church Multimedia frames the spiritual import of its product in these words:

Worship leaders, pastors, children’s ministers, youth pastors, small group leaders and many more have all begun to tap into the spiritual aspect of the visual aesthetic. The response is often a service that carries a tone of excellence and captures a community that is able to give their undivided attention to the teaching of the Word. The visual language is already being spoken in our world; it is now up to leaders to learn how to communicate in that vernacular . . . Read on to discover where to get the tools you need to enhance the visual aesthetic of your service of worship. (2007, 36)

The tools for visual enhancement that followed the advertisement’s introduction included LCD projection equipment customized for church use, lyric presentation software, and sing-along worship DVDs for adults’ and children’s services. These products have now become standard wares in the well-established market for audiovisual equipment and software designed specifically for use in worship services. Along with hardware like digital projectors with retractable screens and now flat panel screens, worship presentation software abounds. The cover story of a 2014 issue of *Christian Computing Magazine*’s contains an annual Church Management Software Overview that surveys nineteen different software packages designed for use in congregational worship (Hewitt 2014). These programs can include everything from

a bare-bones package of image backgrounds for worship-song slides to expansive worship presentation software packages that include not only a database of song-lyric slides and background visuals, but synced accompaniment soundtracks to which church choirs or congregations can sing along.³

Quentin Schultze observed in 2004 that “digital media have created such an explosion in available material, especially images and information of all kinds, that access to texts is no longer linked to any kind of authority” (92). Churches and parachurch ministries have struggled to develop training courses and resources to keep pace with the rapid growth in the audiovisual commodity market. Practical magazines such as *Technologies for Worship*, *Christian Computing Magazine*, and *Church Production Magazine* arose in the early 2000s to help music directors and ministers merge the technical, aesthetic, and theological aspects of projection technology in their churches.⁴ And the omnipresence of digital visual media has led to the rise of a new kind of specialist in churches: the “visual worship” expert, responsible for locating and curating vast libraries of visual materials, designing or downloading song-lyric slides, and attending to presentational media during congregational singing. Many major contemporary-worship music conferences in the United States now feature seminars and sessions on visual media. The National Worship Leader Conference I attended in 2012 offered a visual media track—separate from a more general “tech team” track—as one of fourteen tracks offered. Here, church leaders could attend hour-and-a-half workshops that included organizing and curating visual media for worship, considerations for setting song lyrics, multi-screen and environmental projection, and, for the advanced visual media user, improvisatory “VJ-ing.” The year 2013 marked the beginning of an annual worship conference geared toward digital visual artists, known as SALT. This three-day training event and trade show is designed for the professionals and volunteers responsible for presentational media in evangelical churches.

Digital audiovisual technologies for worship are now well established in North American congregations of all sizes, complete with their own product market and recognized experts in an area some are calling “visual worship.” As the next section will show, along with evangelical screen culture has come an easily transportable set of audiovisual devotional practices that could be taken up into online spaces and spread even further. These widespread online devotional practices have further entrenched evangelical congregational singing as a site of audiovisual convergence (F. Holt 2011) in which song lyrics, images, and music are combined into a powerful experiential multimedia whole—a state of affairs increasingly capitalized upon by a powerful evangelical media industry. The next two sections of the chapter describe how auditory and visual elements work together within the evangelical worship experience.

WORSHIP ON THE SMALL SCREEN: DIGITAL ICONOGRAPHY AND THE EMERGENCE OF AUDIOVISUAL PIETY

In each of the modes of congregating discussed previously in this book, contemporary worship music is used to facilitate a transformative encounter with God that evangelicals often refer to as the “worship experience.” Owing in part to the widespread incorporation of digital presentational technologies and screens within corporate worship, the worship experience has become irreducibly audiovisual, combining two existing strands of evangelical devotional practice: the musical devotional practices that accompany contemporary worship music and the visual piety surrounding the image. An examination of audiovisual tools for worship created and shared online by evangelical amateur video creators reveals how essential the visual dimension has become within the evangelical worship experience.

For a better understanding of what images serve as evangelical “icons” during worship and how they help to produce the worship experience, it is helpful to examine amateur-created evangelical devotional music videos on YouTube, which their creators simply call “worship videos.” To make a worship video, video creators overlay commercial audio recordings of their favorite contemporary worship songs with a variety of visual effects, including still photographs, motion imagery, song lyrics, and Bible verses. The visual effects in these videos differ markedly in quality; while some videos feature high resolution photographs, video clips, or texts, others contain visual media that is warped or heavily pixelated. Many of these videos—sometimes in spite of their visual quality—garner hundreds of thousands or millions of views, generate long strings of comments, and motivate thousands of viewers to subscribe to worship-video creators’ YouTube channels or to post their own video responses. In their study of communities forming around Christian worship videos on YouTube, Daniel Thornton and Mark Evans (2015) observe that these song videos “have transcended their local church expressions, their denominational origins and even their commercial identities to become facilitators of . . . imagined evangelical community centered around music” (157).⁵ Over the course of examining a selected group of fifty worship videos for popular contemporary worship songs⁶ (see Ingalls 2016), I engaged in conversation with over a dozen amateur worship-video creators, a diverse group of evangelical women and men who included a PhD student in ornithology from upstate New York; a self-employed computer repairman in California who was also his local church’s webmaster; an Icelandic university student; a Hungarian office worker; a Chinese house church pastor; a middle-aged youth pastor from the Midwestern United States; and a sixty-seven-year-old retiree from rural Texas.

Over the course of multiple conversations over a variety of media, including phone, text, email, Skype, Skype chat, Facebook, and Instant Messenger, I found several things that this diverse cast of evangelical worship-video creators had in common. All worship-video creators I spoke with were explicit that the primary purpose of their videos was to inspire worship, and many added that an important secondary purpose was communicating the faith to non-Christians. Mark from California summed up these dual purposes: “To me the purposes of creating worship videos are to glorify God and also provide a medium for some sort of evangelistic efforts.” Some described the act of creating the videos as an act of worship itself. In one conversation over email, Rebecca from Scotland reflected on why she created her first worship video and then articulated what she saw as the purpose of worship videos:

I chose a song that I loved . . . and I felt that by creating a worship video, it’s still worshipping the Lord yet it is also a simple and effective way of sharing the Gospel. To me, a worship video’s purpose should be to show to others the love of God, and the love the person who made it has for God. It should be used as *an outer expression of a person’s inward faith* [emphasis mine], whether someone makes a video to share on YouTube, for use at their Church service, [or] even for their own personal worship. (email correspondence, March 26, 2012)

In describing the purpose of worship videos, Rebecca employs a theologically significant phrase—“an outward expression of an inward faith”—that evangelicals often use to describe the purpose of Christian baptism. This choice of expression underscores the spiritual seriousness with which video creators regard their creations.

Creators of these worship videos realize that it is worth investing their time and effort in choosing changing image backgrounds, rather than simply placing the songs online with lyrics, because of how images enhance the affective and spiritual experiences of music for worshipers. For worship-video creators, images are an important layer that works together with the digital text and music to point to God’s work in the world. James, a rural Texas retiree and prolific worship-video creator, told me that for each of his videos he conducts general Internet image searches and combs through “hundreds of pictures of things that point us to God” (YouTube message, February 11, 2012). Mark, a California-based computer repair technician, described his desire to create a powerful “overall experience” through superimposing a mixture of still images, video clips, and Bible verses in addition to the lyrics. In doing so he hopes to draw viewers in and reinforce the message of the worship songs by appealing to both aural and visual senses: “Worship music, where the message is powerful and easy to understand . . . in collaboration with the images touches on the viewer’s senses, which [are] audible and visual as well as allowing them to take in information through reading and processing” (email correspondence,

March 9, 2012). When asked how he chose which images to pair with worship songs, Mark claimed divine inspiration, reflecting that “I have an idea of what to use, but as I’m searching for them, [God] ultimately chooses the right one, uses me, and places it all together.” Jónas, a nineteen-year old worship-video creator from Iceland, writes that “it’s important that we see pictures that can help us understand the lyrics” (Skype chat, February 13, 2012). Many YouTube worship-video commenters post appreciative comments for a video creator’s choice of effective images. These are a few posted in the comments section for Jónas’ worship video for the song “Our God”:

LBAlltheway123: the song is amazing and the pictures are gorgeous and makes everything even more amazing!

OksieFoxy: It’s amazing—watching pictures of Jesus doing these things and realizing, “It’s real! He did this, and He is ready for you to be saved.”

Amy Mayfield: Excellent job of matching the photos to the song! I especially like that every time the phrase “our God is stronger” was sung, we saw Jesus on the cross.

Tara Hershey-Lette Hughes: This video is amazing! Love the song, & the pictures make that much greater! God bless whoever made this!

Alena N.: This video is . . . is . . . AMAZING! The song itself is awesome, but the pictures make it so much better!⁷

Each of these comments reinforces that viewers find devotional images to be an experientially powerful component of worship videos, enhancing and even shaping how they interpret the worship song. Despite the vast differences in their creators’ life situations, geographical locations, and denominational backgrounds, when the fifty worship videos were analyzed together, a constellation of common genre characteristic emerges that provides strong evidence of the extent to which visual dimension has become integral to the evangelical worship experience.

Table 5.1 shows the prevalence of the most commonly used kinds of visual media among the videos in my study. This table shows that song lyrics are one of the most important features of amateur worship videos: nearly three quarters of worship videos in the sample include the full song texts. But even more prevalent than song lyrics are still and moving background images. In my fifty-video sample, the three types of images used most frequently were nature images, depiction of worshipers, and depictions of Jesus. By examining why creators use these common visual categories and how viewers respond to them, we can better understand today’s worship videos as extending and expanding on ties to preexisting evangelical visual devotional practices that also used images to enhance the emotional experience of belief.

Table 5.1. VISUAL ELEMENTS WITHIN
THE SAMPLE OF 50 YOUTUBE WORSHIP VIDEOS

Element	Prevalence
Images	88%
Song lyrics	74%
Nature images	64%
Depictions of worshiper(s)	38%
Depictions of Jesus	32%
Scriptural quotations	20%

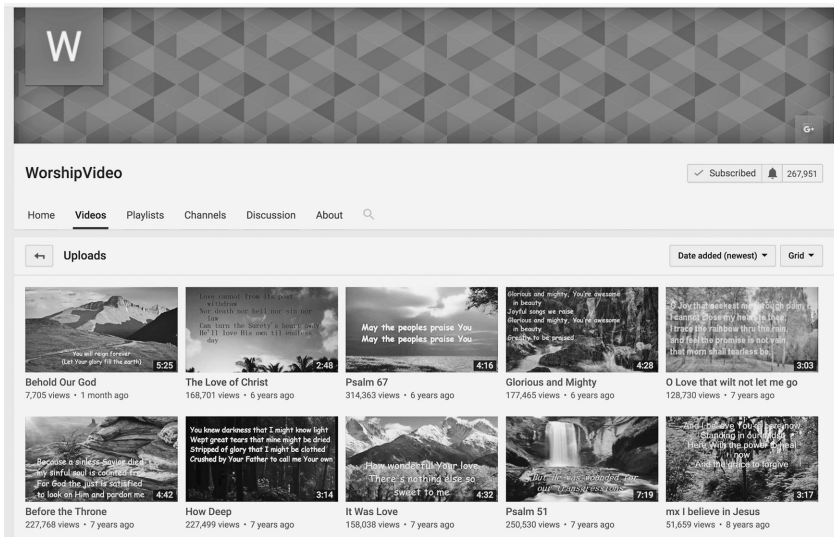


Figure 5.1: “WorshipVideo” upload index (2017).
Screenshot by the author.

By far, the most common type of images used in worship videos are still photographic images of nature, including seascapes, mountaintop vistas, and pristine forests, as well as close-up images of flowers and fauna. In most of song videos, these nature photos have little to do with the song lyrics, as the lyrics to these top-ranking worship songs tend to be fairly abstract. Figure 5.1 is a screenshot taken from the video page for an anonymous video creator whose worship videos have garnered over 269 million views, illustrates the prevalence of nature imagery.

Video creators who relied on nature photos told me they used them to point to aspects of God’s beauty and power, using images of the creation to point to a benevolent Creator. They believed that nature images could provide a worshipful atmosphere while not distracting the viewer from the lyrical content

or message of the song. Andrew, a creator from China, told me, “I almost exclusively use nature pics. I feel these better show God’s creation without distracting too much from the lyrics” (email correspondence, February 27, 2012). Rebecca from Scotland similarly wrote that she chose primarily nature photos because she wanted “simple backdrops to the song lyrics” that did not “distract or detract from them” (email correspondence, March 26, 2012). Mark from California, who saw the purpose of his videos as both inspiring worship among Christians and evangelizing non-Christians, remarked that he believes God uses the biblical messages of the songs “combined with images of his [God’s] beautiful creation . . . sometimes [to] open an individual’s heart up and make him/her think” (email correspondence, March 9, 2012). He believes worship videos replete with scenes from nature “plant seeds in the hearts of those who do not believe, a little at a time.”

Each of these worship-video creators idealized complementation, an interrelationship between musical and visual media described by Nicholas Cook in which forms of media are seen to work on separate levels to achieve a unified effect (Cook 1998a, 103–5). In this case, video creators see nature photos as serving the dominant medium—the sung texts—by working in the background to enhance, not detract from, an atmosphere of worship. Indeed, according to David Morgan, a historian of American visual culture, nature imagery has become a long-standing theme within American religious art because “many wish to regard [immensity] as the imprint of a higher reality” (2007, 232). Further, many nature photos evidence what Morgan calls, referring to the nature photography of Ansel Adams, “the sublime evacuation of human presence from nature” in which the images “register in their size and pristine antiquity some sort of awful gesture, the trace of something before humanity” (232). Nature images are uniquely capable of placating Protestant iconoclastic tendencies, providing a shadow of the sublime and providing visual evidence that stands in for an unrepresentable God.

While nature images may predominate within worship videos, there are two other important categories of images that challenge any easy designation of Protestant iconoclasm.⁸ The second most common image type among the selected worship-video sample is a depiction of a single worshiper or groups of worshipers, shown with arms outstretched in prayer. The posture of hands upraised, a common expressive worship practice in evangelical and charismatic congregational singing, has become a more or less universal evangelical symbol for worship (for further discussion, refer to pp. 54–58 of the Introduction). In analyzing music, lyrics, and visual elements together, I found that worship-video creators commonly placed worship depictions at the musical climaxes within the song, especially at the beginning of a song’s chorus where the instrumental texture, melodic height, and volume increase. The composite image in Figure 5.2 shows worshiper silhouettes used by three different worship video creators at the beginning of the anthemic chorus of the song “Blessed Be Your Name.”

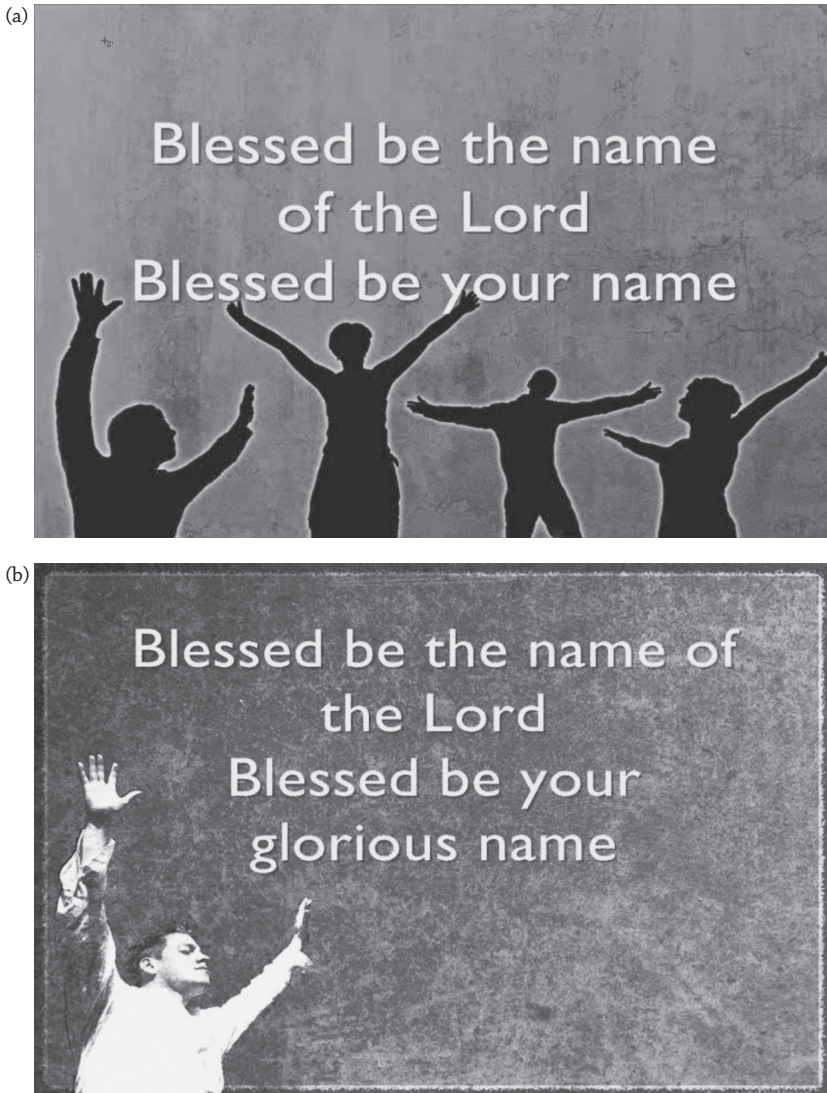


Figure 5.2: YouTube worship video images from the chorus of “Blessed Be Your Name,” from Charlesc28 (2006), strings n harmony (2007), and RIP KING OF POP (2008). Screenshots by the author.

Worship videos rarely include photorealistic depictions of worshipers. Most often, worshiping bodies are featured as dark silhouettes against the backdrop of a plain color or highly stylized natural setting. Worshiper images often resemble the silhouetted bodies from ads made popular by Apple’s iPod advertising campaign beginning in 2005. Justin Burton describes why the dancing silhouettes were key to the overwhelming success of the ad campaign: the dancers were “blank [human]-shaped spaces that could be filled with whatever identity a particular audience most wanted from [the iPod]” (2014, 7).



Figure 5.2: Continued.

He continues that this process of identification works two ways: “As [viewers] are invited to imagine themselves in the place of the silhouettes, they are also subsumed in Apple’s overarching brand personality. The dancing every/wo/man in the silhouette ads [becomes] a nearly blank space in which any viewer might construct a persona alongside Apple’s own brand identity” (7).

Likewise, by modeling the posture of worship at musical climaxes during these videos, the videos' creators show that they have internalized certain expectations of devotional practice and gesture. But they use worshipers not only to represent the act of worship, but also to actively *inspire* the act of worship. By invoking the bodily posture in which the viewer should be receiving the video, the creator inspires some viewers not only identify with or recognize the act, but also experience a bodily response. This dynamic is described by film scholar Vivian Sobchack, who argues that certain religious-themed films encourage the embodied experience of transcendence through "cinematic strategies meant not only to represent but also to present and solicit transcendent or 'spiritual' states of being from the viewer" (2008, 197). Despite the apparent limitations of the film media sensorium, religious moviegoers experience an embodied sense of "transcendence in immanence" that is "formally shaped and experientially heightened" by the sensual enhancement produced by image and sound (197). Similarly, in her study of pentecostal-charismatic video in Ghana, Marleen de Witte has argued that for viewers watching televised charismatic church services in a posture of worship, the visual representation of the worshipping bodies of pastors and congregation members become "'living icons' mediating the power of the Holy Spirit to the spectators by appealing to [viewers'] full sensory being" (2009, 202). Watching the actions of other worshipers "may trigger the viewer's embodied sensory memory of live church events and thereby evoke an experience of spirit presence" (193).

The third type of image used in worship videos mediates divine presence even more directly. Figure 5.3 shows the third type of image used most frequently in worship videos: depictions of Jesus.

The diverse array of Jesus figures in YouTube worship videos includes evangelical popular art from the nineteenth century to the present day, Orthodox and Catholic icons, and stills from films about the life of Jesus such as the International Bible Society's *The Jesus Film* (1979) or Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Common subjects include scenes of the crucifixion, Jesus with the world in his hands, Jesus as King, or Jesus as shepherd. Figure 5.2 shows the range of images of Jesus used in YouTube worship videos of the song "Our God." David Morgan has shown that, though US evangelical Protestant churches may eschew visual aids to devotion in their public worship, individual believers have long used mass-mediated images of Jesus as objects of private devotion. For instance, in examining the historical use and popular understanding of the popular devotional art of Warner Sallman, Morgan asserts that for pious viewers, Warner Sallman's mass-produced representations of Jesus "make visual, and therefore in some sense embody, the personal savior, who 'saves, comforts, and defends' them" (1996, 192). This representational practice corresponds to a key feature of evangelical Christianity: the importance of a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Through images



Figure 5.3: Depictions of Jesus from YouTube worship videos for “Our God,” from Always4Jesus7 (2011), juanguaco (2011), rosinkrans17 (2010), and Maltesepilgrim (2010). Screenshots by the author.

of Jesus, “Christ’s personal significance for one’s life is made visual: the face that one sees belongs to the divinity who cares personally for one’s welfare. This visual personification of Christ clearly serves the evangelical imperative for a personal relationship with Jesus. Christ is encountered face-to-face” (1996, 193).

Exploring the resonances and functions of the three most common image types in worship videos suggests some of the ways that images, text, and



Figure 5.3: Continued.

music come together to form a potent experiential whole. The nature images in worship videos evoke an atmosphere of worship. Depictions of worshipers model the bodily posture of devotion, giving viewers a template to project past and present experience. And depictions of Jesus remind their viewers of the Divine Subject of worship. As a result, viewers are enabled not only

to identify with or recall worship in church settings, but also to experience a real-time physical and emotional response in front of their computer screens. Indeed, among the digital cacophony of trolls, theological debates, shout-outs, and prayer requests, some YouTube users use the comments section for testimonies of how this particular video has invoked a personal experience with the divine. For many worship-video viewers, the video reminds them of powerful “live” worship experiences in the past—for instance, the first time they heard this song in church or at a conference. Some viewers also post narratives of their responses when watching the worship video, ranging from singing along loudly to the video, to being moved to tears by the video, to experiencing chills or goosebumps, or to feeling moved to spontaneously raise their hands in worship in front of their computer screen. These responses indicate that YouTube users who view worship videos whose bodies are inclined in what Sobchack refers to as “mimetic sympathy” with the worshiper icon experience physical reactions associated with expressive worship in congregational settings (Sobchack 2004, 2008). Worship videos model a particular devotional posture and invite their viewers to adopt it. For those YouTube viewers who approach the videos in a posture of worship, it appears that worship videos can produce the “worship experience” that they recognize from congregational worship, mediating a sense of divine presence and evoking the same expressive worshipful responses as affective times of congregational singing.

HEARING AND SEEING GOD’S WORDS: KATAPHATIC PRAYER AND THE MULTIMEDIA WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

The previous section illustrated the convergence of visual and aural worship practices to create new audiovisual devotional practices. For a better understanding of how these elements work together to help produce the evangelical worship experience, anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann’s observations on evangelical prayer practices provide a useful framework. The assumptions that ground evangelical prayer, according to Luhrmann, are that “God wants to be your friend; you develop that relationship through prayer; prayer is hard work and requires effort and training; and when you develop that relationship, God will answer back, through thoughts and mental images he places in your mind, and through sensations he causes in your body” (2012, 41). In order to experience divine connection, she argues, evangelicals must develop a framework to interpret both the bodily sensations and thoughts (which, she notes, are often treated more like perceptions) that are generated during the time of prayer and “learn to trust that they really are [God-generated]” (41).

Luhrmann describes evangelical prayer as “kataphatic,” dominated by a flood of images, words, and sounds. Kataphatic prayer “asks people to dwell

lovingly on what is imagined . . . they engage the senses, they evoke vivid memories, and they generate powerful emotions” (162). Interpreting God’s voice, then, involves cultivating an inner sense, acquiring the “learned skill of picking from among the many sources of input which ones resonate deeply and attribute them to God” (184). In Luhrmann’s view, hearing is the privileged sense in kataphatic devotional practices, and she asserts that evangelical prayer primarily “cultivates the auditory imagination” (184). Evangelical prayer practices centered around contemporary worship music, however, have elevated the visual dimension to a new prominence; here, sound and sight cannot be so easily separated, and visual stimuli can act as powerful interpretants alongside spoken and sung words. Within both individual devotion and private worship centered on music, contemporary evangelical worship has become a site of audiovisual convergence.

Within contemporary worship environments that are highly audiovisual, there are more communicative media forms involved, and therefore many ways to interpret God’s voice. I recount one memorable event from field research at a worship conference in the United Kingdom, an occasion that drove home to me just how important the comingling of input from multiple media are in producing spiritual sensations and interpretations:

November 17, 2012—Morning Session at the Mission: Worship Conference, Eastbourne, United Kingdom

During an extended weekend in November 2012, I attended a conference for leaders of contemporary worship music in the southern coastal city of Eastbourne, United Kingdom.⁹ I was one of about 1,500 participants gathered in the Congress Theatre, the largest performance venue in the city’s modest-sized conference center complex, for a two-and-a-half-hour morning session. To my left sat Sharon, a middle-aged church pianist and singer who chose the songs for the volunteer worship band at her small nondenominational evangelical church in Kent. Before the session began, we introduced ourselves and engaged in small talk for a few minutes, exchanging stories about music at our churches and highlights of the conference so far. The morning session began with a forty-minute worship set led by Brazilian worship leader Nivea Soares, followed by a short message and forty-minute set from US worship leader Paul Baloche.

Immediately after the service ended, I was taken aback when Sharon turned to me and effervesced for several minutes about a powerful spiritual experience she’d had during the opening worship set. Excitedly, she opened her conference program book and pointed to an advertisement page on which she had scrawled numerous words and phrases that had stood out to her during the singing. Most of them, I noticed, were song titles and lyric fragments. Sharon told me that during one particularly powerful worship song led by Nivea Soares, she had closed her eyes and seen swirling blue and green colors forming an orb of light. She said that after she

had opened her eyes, she was shocked to see exactly the same colors projected on the screen behind the song lyrics. She interpreted this correspondence between what she had seen with her eyes and with her mind's eye as a message from God. Sharon prayed fervently that God would reveal to her the meaning of these corresponding colors as she sang. Later in the worship set, she was led to an interpretation: the blue and green and the orb-shaped light represented the world. For further proof of divine inspiration, she pointed to the song titles and phrases she had scrawled all over her conference program. Most of them, she told me animatedly, elaborated the same theme: that God was ruler over all the earth. She interpreted this as a message that she needed to hear in the midst of the lack of control she felt sometimes over her daily life and of reports of violence in Britain and elsewhere in the world: that all things were under God's sovereign control and, despite apparent chaos and uncertainty, everything was working according to God's ultimate plan. Through her powerful experience that evening, Sharon was convinced that God had spoken to her and felt she needed to share the message with her congregation. She planned to discuss the theme with her pastor and told me that her revelatory experience would strongly inform what songs she chose for her church when she returned home.

In a densely textured multimedia environment, worshipers like Sharon are given many elements to sift through when seeking to interpret God's speaking to them. Within the densely textured multimedia environment of an audio-visual worship experience, the involvement of a greater variety of communicative media offers worshipers many more ways to personally make sense of and interpret God's voice. Digital audiovisual technologies juxtapose sung and projected lyrics, visuals, and music, and these elements can be used individually or in combination as catalysts for spiritual reflection. Deeply felt spiritual interpretations like Sharon's find coherence in elements that may or may not be designed to be coherent. In designing a powerful worship experience, then, producers must create a multimedia environment that is easy to personalize, enabling individuals to deepen their relationship with God through communicating their love for God and interpreting God speaking to them. Worshipers must be able to interpret the meanings from visual, aural, and tactile sources as consistent with shared tenets of evangelical faith and elements of practice. Beyond that, worship producers are free to emphasize their own meanings and to reinforce the signature emphases of the event or even the worship brand as a whole.

In his work on multimedia relationships, Nick Cook (1998a) identified three potential relationships between multiple media in a particular instance: conformance, complementation, and contest. Conformance occurs when forms of media correspond directly to one another or when one is subservient to the others. Complementation refers to media forms that serve different roles but reinforce the same overall set of themes or interpretations. And when two or more forms of

media are in contest, they “[vie] for the same terrain, each attempting to impose its characteristics on the other” (103). Worship producers try to avoid contest, but instances vary in whether conformance or complementation is valued and promoted. Worship-technology workshops at conferences for worship leaders and literature often seek to teach people the meanings of their technologies and how to harmonize or conform these to a particular set of beliefs. At the beginning of the digital revolution in the mid-2000s, there was a focus on choosing fonts and background images that advanced the meaning of the text. The power of digitally projected words to complement—and, arguably, to nuance, enhance, alter, or subvert—how worshipers interpret sung texts is something that professional creators of visual resources for churches have considered.

Digital words themselves are, like images, capable of serving an iconic function. In an article from a 2004 issue of *Worship Technologies Magazine Online*, church media expert Phil Bates gives examples of how still and moving background images can (and by implication, should) conform with and complement the song lyrics:

When the lyrics say “You are my Rock,” the editor should be prepared with mountains, rock formations or some other representation of something steadfast or permanent. An image of flowers can send a conflicting message and undermine the song’s purpose. When the lyrics say “I will rise like an eagle . . .” there should be aerials, or cloud footage on hand. On other phrases that have a more subtle content like “I look up to you. . .,” I often show a camera tiltup to the sun. (Bates 2005)

But Bates’s concern with conformance doesn’t stop at text. He is also concerned with linking the image to the song’s *musical* elements, giving suggestions for backgrounds that match the songs’ tempo, texture, and dynamics. Bates goes on to tell his readers how to create conformance between visuals and music:

Some songs have a large contrast between the verses and the chorus. Songs like All Of My Days and Need You Here by Hillsong get very big during the chorus. To support this change, I often use brighter imagery or abstract imagery with elements that are rising or bursting out from the center like kaleidoscopes. (2005)

Throughout the 2000s, as professionally created worship media became more sophisticated, many worship videos and projection for live worship events stopped relying exclusively on still nature images and began to showcase elaborate, moving texts. While this change may seem to suggest a resurgent iconoclasm, a closer look at these word videos shows that the digital words themselves function much as background images do in creating a platform for affective experience. Like images, these digitally projected, dynamic words afford a new set of possibilities within the evangelical worship experience.

Examining closely a lyric video from a professionally produced worship video well illustrates the ways that digitally projected words are used for aesthetic effects in ways similar to images. In 2002, Integrity Media launched iWorship, a DVD product line juxtaposing professional recordings of popular worship songs with evocative imagery, promising “a total worship experience . . . especially designed to enhance the worshiper’s experience through breathtaking visuals.”¹⁰ At the beginning, most of the visuals used within iWorship’s song videos were nature photos; however, by the late 2000s, some of the videos relied solely on the artistic treatment of the words overtop abstract backgrounds. *iWorship Volume O* (2009) claims to use “the most advanced audiovisual presentation” to “bring worship to life” in settings including both personal and congregational worship. This volume begins with a word video for “Hosanna,” a worship song made that was popular by Australia’s Hillsong United and that went on to become one of the twenty-five most frequently sung worship songs in the United States from 2011 through 2013. As the song starts, before any words appear on the screen, the worshiper is invited into an immersive three-dimensional visual space. Three juxtaposed, looped layers create the perception of depth in the visual field of the video: there is a top layer of gently rotating scrollwork, a middle-range backdrop of points of light rising slowly like bubbles, and an abstractly patterned background of rust-orange and soft yellow sunset hues coming in and out of focus and providing a visual endpoint. Shifts in the orientation of the scrollwork and abstract background underscore both musical and structural changes; these layers both rotate ninety degrees counterclockwise at the middle of each verse and then right themselves to demarcate the song’s chorus.

The verse lyrics are presented in a thin-weighted outline serif font that seems calculated to be unobtrusive; the spaces within the letters reveal the shifting background images behind them, making the lyric’s layer blend in with the others within the space. The lyrics appear in chunks of a few words each, and there are generally fewer than five words on the screen at any one time. Differences in the size or placement of the font—sometimes subtle, sometimes more pronounced—give added emphasis to words that one might not expect to be highlighted. The first verse ends with the moving text foregrounding the musically underemphasized word “SING” in large capital letters, while in the second verse, the word “REVIVAL” gets similar treatment. The words of the song’s minimalist chorus receive the most elaborate treatment:

Hosanna hosanna
 Hosanna in the highest
 Hosanna hosanna
 Hosanna in the highest¹¹

In the video, each iteration of “hosanna” is treated as an independent word image: from the abstract background, the inky black text slowly erupts from the middle of the word outward to its edges, shimmering like ripples in oily water as it expands. Each hosanna rises slowly up the screen as it expands outward and then disappears again as it is replaced by the next word or phrase.

The song’s textural and dynamic climax occurs during the instrumental interlude and bridge that follow the second chorus. Here, just as instrumental texture thickens, three more visual layers are added to the abstract background: a moving starfield that gives the viewers the sense that they are traveling quickly, and two different layers of fast-moving clouds that move obliquely to the starfield. In the penultimate chorus, the texture suddenly thins to the solo voice and keyboard and the visual dimensions are stripped down to match. On the final chorus, all of the visual layers present at the beginning return (including one of the bridge’s added cloud layers), and the song ends on a more visually and musical dynamic note than it began.

The “Hosanna” lyric video shows how digitally projected words can function much like images, communicating on levels that include but extend beyond semantic meaning. While evangelicals might view this lyric video and others like it as simply “expressing the text,” obvious interpretive decisions are interlaced throughout: font size, type, color, shape, and movement are all materials the video creators have chosen, both to convey which words and ideas are significant and to create a general atmosphere for contemplating them. Presentational media forms like those in this lyric video communicate through juxtaposed visual elements even without explicit use of the nature images or icons. The shifting, changing visual patterns accompanying dynamic, moving words provide a wealth of visual materials for a worshiper watching the video in a posture of devotion to interpret as spiritual messages.

FROM CHURCH ONLINE TO VEVO CHURCH: THE AUDIOVISUAL WORSHIP EXPERIENCE AS PORTABLE PRACTICE

Audiovisual worship media builds on the success of worship music recordings and extends their reach and potency. Digital audiovisual technologies have further extended the ability of the individual to choose when and where to worship and have intensified the experience. With the advent of media products like iWorship DVDs, the worship experience can be recreated wherever there is a screen and the capacity for producing—or often simply for reproducing—high-quality pop music. iWorship DVDs, intended for both congregational viewing and home use, were harbingers of the possibilities of audiovisual media in creating continuity between corporate worship and private devotion. Drawing from media theorist Jonathan Steuer (1992) and his work

on how virtual reality establishes a sense of presence, Deb Lubken argues that audiovisual resources for private devotional practice like iWorship are more effective at establishing a sense of divine presence because they are more affective: they “engage multiple senses (sensory breadth) through high quality channels (sensory depth) and evoke a greater sense of presence than single channel media or media with poor quality auditory or visual components” (2005, 15).

The Christian media industry promoted audio and video recordings as a personal worship experience that could be had anywhere, at anytime. Anna Nekola (2013) has argued that sound recordings established this foundation. By analyzing advertisements in evangelical magazines and Internet media, Nekola demonstrates how, beginning in the mid-1990s, the US worship music industry began to market musical recordings not just as tools for congregational worship, “but also as products for Christian consumers . . . to relive or even recreate the experience of worship outside of church (117).” Worship music producers promised their products would “transform any profane or secular space into a sacred ‘sanctuary’ and transform the listener spiritually by transporting him or her into the presence of God” (117). “Not only do these advertisements promise to transform one’s everyday life into worship, they also reinforce the discourse that worship is an ‘experience’ that should ‘overwhelm’ the listener with feeling” (127–128). The worship experience is an excellent example of what Thomas Csordas calls a “portable practice,” that is, a religious practice that travels easily and successfully into new contexts (Csordas 2009, 4–5). Csordas defines portable practices as religious rituals that are easily learned, that are not perceived to be linked to a specific cultural context, and that can be performed without commitment to a particular ideology or set of institutions (4).

The popularity and ease of new interactive social media forms in the first decade of the twenty-first century, forms that involved the democratization both of tools for creating worship videos and enabled new modes of participation in “live” events, blurred this line even further. The pervasive use of digital audiovisual media in worship, as well as the ability of Web 2.0 to provide resources and a platform for experience, enables churches to blur lines between “live” worship and immersive, “virtual” experiences even further. Large ministries and worship brands design creative ways to engage their followers online. By the end of the 2000s, worship conferences like Passion and Hillsong had begun live-streaming some of their events. Hillsong has both a dedicated website channel featuring prerecorded video of its worship events and teaching (<http://www.hillsong.com/channel>) and a website for live-streamed church services and events (<http://www.hillsong.com/watch>) (Figure 5.4). The Passion Conference has made extensive use of simulcasting within its annual live events, as well as livestreaming. In January 2018, the three-day Passion Conference, also made available on live stream, drew an estimated

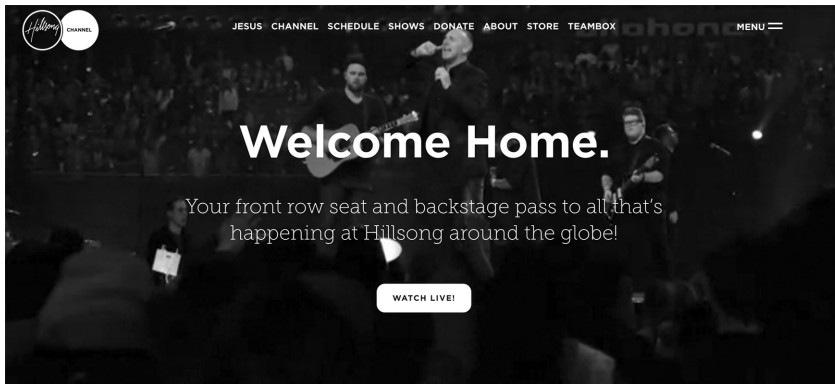


Figure 5.4: Hillsong channel home page (2017).
Screenshot by the author.

32,000 participants to four locations simultaneously (three sports arenas in Atlanta and one in Washington, D.C.), where attendees watched speakers and sang along with worship bands present onstage at their location, as well as the bands live-streamed from the other venues. In these ways, live-streaming technologies blur online and offline online venues and create new ways for individuals to participate with these global brands and produce the desire to join in the live worship experience.

Digital audiovisual media and screen culture of evangelical worship have created a feedback loop between online and offline, private and collective devotional practices. For churches that do not have the financial or human resources (e.g., highly skilled musicians, state-of-the art audio and visual technology, or a large gathering space) to produce the ideal worship experience, there are now audiovisual materials for building worship experiences in their local gatherings, ranging from free promotional materials to paid content. Many of the amateur YouTube worship-video creators I spoke with make their videos in the first instance for use in public worship and post them online as a free resource for other small congregations (see Ingalls 2016 for further discussion). And the Christian media industry now provides free resources like official lyric videos intended for congregational use. Steven Bradley, a friend and research consultant who leads worship at a small Methodist church in a Louisville suburb, coined the memorable description for this phenomenon: “VEVO church.”¹²

When Steve and I spoke a few months later about the phenomenon, he told me he had coined the designation VEVO church to describe those churches which rely on prerecorded audiovisual materials to accompany their congregational singing. In his experience traveling in and out of area churches as a piano tuner, he has found that an increasing number of small Baptist and Methodist churches transitioned to using videos available for purchase or downloaded for

free off celebrity worship leaders' YouTube VEVO sites to supplement—and in a few instances, to replace entirely—church musicians. In Steve's assessment, the VEVO church phenomenon was not created simply by a lack of musical or personnel resources; it was also a growing sense within these small churches that they could not measure up to the new musical standard. Steve tells about a conversation he'd had recently after his church's evening service with Carl, an older man in the congregation. With nostalgia in his voice, the man recollected gospel singing nights in the rural Methodist church where he grew up. The piano was never tuned, but everyone sang loudly and didn't much care; "of course, we would never be able to get away with that today," he mused. Steve, citing the pervasive use of electronic keyboards and the volume of music available online, agreed with Carl's assessment: "In today's society, doing the best you can [as a small church] just may not be good enough." Steve's observations about VEVO churches suggest the growing pervasiveness and power of several worship music brands. The next section details their interlocked promotional strategies and charts the extent of their influence.

NETWORKED INDIVIDUALS, BRANDED COMMUNITIES: CORPORATE™ WORSHIP IN CONGREGATIONAL NETWORKS

Networked congregations center around the production of audiovisual worship experiences for diffuse evangelical audiences, produced by portable technologies and mediated by screens large and small. Previous discussions in this chapter highlighted the agency of individual evangelical users in selecting and using these resources for their own spiritual and creative ends. While acknowledging the personal agency that these democratized digital technologies enable, however, it is equally important to recognize the increasing power of the Christian commercial music and media industries to structure individual choices and expectations. The tightening control of several influential worship music and media brands was evident to me when, in early 2017, I returned to survey the same field of fifty amateur-created videos on YouTube five years after of my initial study in 2012 (see Ingalls 2016). Going in, I wondered: would a YouTube search still reveal preponderance of amateur worship music videos with high view counts, or would the professionally created "official" videos from well-known worship music brands have supplanted them? My search by song title for worship music videos conducted in 2017 turned up far more official videos than amateur-created ones. The worship music videos from YouTube's early days, those personal expressions of devotion often layered with idiosyncratic interpretations of songs and lyrics, have given way to polished audiovisual products broadcast centrally

to promote the events and recordings of international worship brands. In part, the eclipse of amateur worship videos by professional audiovisual media producers is a symptom of a transition in YouTube's platform. José van Dijk (2009) notes that YouTube's user interface has gradually moved from "homecasting" amateur videos to broadcasting professionally generated content. YouTube "prioritizes television features over social networking" (114) as its algorithms increasingly "shepherd" users toward "fewer choices . . . and TV-like channels" (131).

Megachurch music ministries, in collaboration with the Christian media and recording industries, have capitalized on this platform transition, flooding the online marketplace with the products that enable and produce networked congregations. The process is usually cyclical: these worship brands have risen to prominence precisely because they have taken full advantage of social media outlets, thus creating their own dominion that extends across both physical and virtual space. From an institutional perspective, these worship brands can be considered successful congregational networks; in other words, by means of deploying the most current communications media, they have created a large, diffuse network of congregants—whether avid church attenders, annual conference-goers, or occasional concert attendees—who feel connected to others in the network and have become stakeholders in the brand.

To identify how the worship experience has served as the basis for these evangelical media empires arising since the turn of the millennium, this section examines aspects of the online presence of three global brands that are each widely recognized in the contemporary North American context. Passion, Hillsong, and Bethel are three transnational worship brands based in Atlanta, Sydney, and Redding (California), respectively, and can also be understood as gigantic and densely networked congregations. Each of these branded empires combines many if not most of the modes of congregating that this book has discussed. Hillsong and Bethel are multisite churches consisting of multiple local gatherings for worship in different cities, and both put on influential conferences (now with many sessions live-streamed) that draw tens of thousands of attendees from across the world each year. Passion began as a conference—one that, in signature fashion, invites area churches to gather with the conference crowd in large outdoor public space on the final night and form a public congregation—and expanded from there to worship-leader concert tours. In 2009, Passion's founder, Louie Giglio, and celebrity worship leaders started a "local" church congregation in Atlanta, a site that was averaging 2,000 attendees weekly services a mere one year after its founding.¹³ All three host large and well-known conferences, and their worship leaders and bands are well-known recording artists who regularly tour nationally and internationally.

Social media has brought about a new era of evangelical broadcasting marked by media convergence and saturation. The ability to broadcast church

services is no longer limited to the highest bidder for the limited spectrum of television airwaves; now any church or ministry with a sufficient technological infrastructure can webcast. Individual worshipers can partake of services at the church of their choice in a wide variety of formats, including events streamed in real time, “full service re-airs,”¹⁴ or archived video recordings. And worship media content is available in a variety of sizes to fit all schedules, ranging from individual songs to entire “worship experiences.” Each of these networked worship brands makes full use of the various capacities of online media forms to connect with worshipers and promote their brand. In the online marketplace, worship music from widely known artists, along with celebrity pastors’ sermons, is packaged and sold or used as “free” promotional material for other paid media content.

On its website, the Sydney location of the multi-campus megachurch Hillsong provides free access to a live stream of its Sunday morning services and posts a prerecorded video of the service the following week. While this content is freely available, Hillsong generates revenue from its annual conference and musical recordings from its various ministries geared to different age demographics. Tanya Riches has dubbed Hillsong’s standardized music production calendar their “liturgical calendar” (Riches 2010, 146), organized around the twin poles of two annual live musical albums. Other church networks like Bethel monetize their weekly worship experiences in addition to their musical recordings. On the homepage of Bethel Church.tv, the streaming site for the Redding, California-based multisite megachurch, the tagline “fueling personal revival” is superimposed on a series of rotating images, depicting worship (Figure 5.5), preaching, and scenes from church members’ daily lives. Serving over one million viewers per month, Bethel offers viewers a range of media packages with four levels of access, from a free subscription to one message per week to an all-access “season pass” that includes weekend services and all Bethel conferences—over twenty-five hours of original content per month (Figure 5.6).¹⁵

Passion has demonstrated similar ingenuity in using social media to create a devoted congregational network. The year 2010 was pivotal for Passion’s audiovisual media marketing; that year, Passion began offering selected audiovisual content for free on its newly inaugurated VEVO channel, live-streaming promotional “taster” events, and packaging its conference media content. By February 2018, Passion’s VEVO channel had over 250,000 subscribers, and its ninety-two videos had amassed nearly 100 million views.¹⁶ Like Hillsong and Bethel, Passion has also made use of live-streamed events to give viewers a taste of the Passion “experience.” At the invitation of a promotional email, I “attended” one of these online events from my couch on a Monday evening in September 2010. This two-and-a-half-hour live-streamed event gave viewers a taste of the Passion “experience”: the evening was structured like a typical session at Passion (a forty-minute opening worship set led by Chris Tomlin

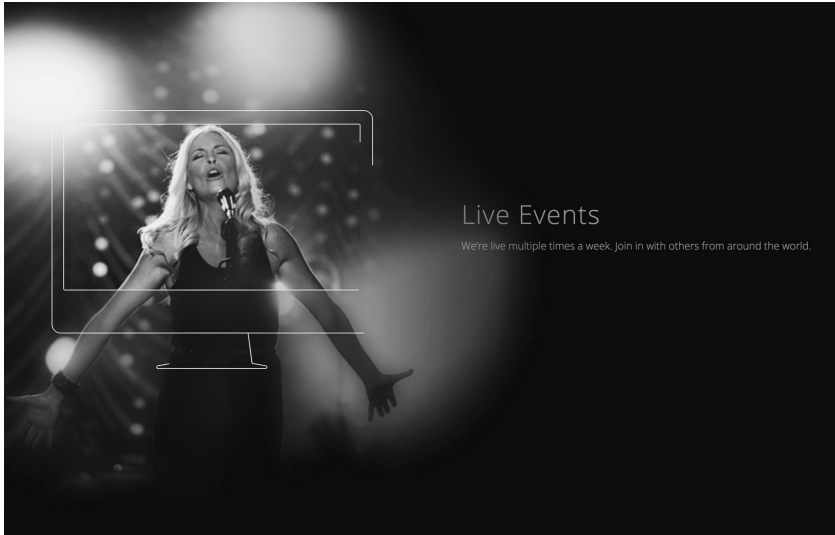


Figure 5.5: Bethel.tv channel home page (2017).
Screenshot by the author.

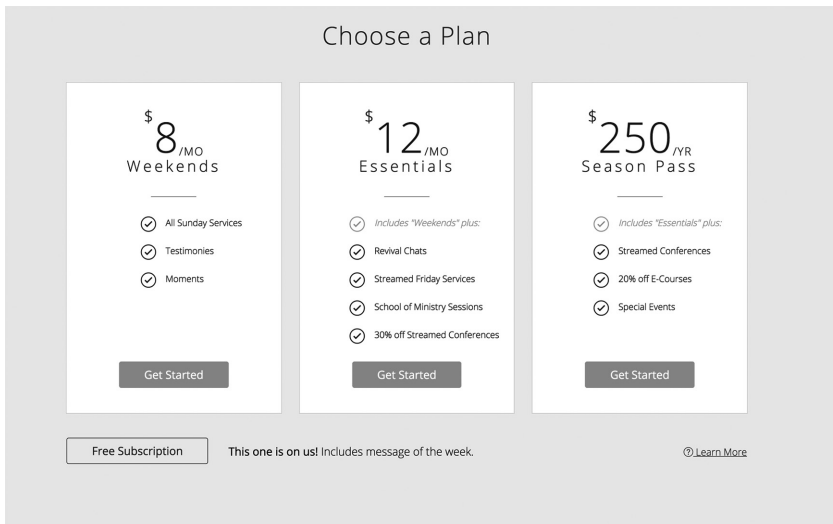


Figure 5.6: Bethel.tv home page bottom with subscription options (2017).
Screenshot by the author.

and band, prayer aloud in small groups, a biblical message delivered by Louie Giglio, and closing song set), though it also included a heavy dose of advertising for upcoming Passion conferences, tours, and recordings.

Also beginning in 2010, the Passion conference began selling Digital All Access passes that progressively release videos of talks and worship-song

performances from the conference along with behind-the-scenes stories. I purchased a pass after attending the January 2013 conference (Figure 5.7). Every few days for several weeks, I received an email notification that Passion had released a new talk or song video from the conference. The “grand finale” of the digital content release was the debut of *Let the Future Begin*, the live worship album recorded at the conference, in March 2013.

Passion’s Digital All Access passes not only enable worshipers who attended the conference to remember and relive their experience, but they also extend a sense of belonging to former attendees beyond their college years. Passion’s online store contains this product review from 2016 All Access Pass purchaser Christopher:

For those of us who are no longer 20 (or even close), getting the all access pass from the most recent Passion is the next best thing to being young again lol! The messages are shared with all members of my family to watch and of course, the new CD is filled with some of the strongest songs of any Passion release to date. It is beautiful to see Jesus being lifted up by the younger generation and the access pass is always a great value. I do hope Passion continues to do all access passes, so that hopefully my daughter in 2018 will be able to remember her first trip to Passion in this way. Thank you friends at Passion! :)¹⁷

Significantly, in 2013, Passion’s integrated strategy propelled Chris Tomlin’s album *God’s Great Dance Floor* to the number-one spot on the *Billboard* top 200 charts—only the fourth Christian album ever to attain *Billboard*’s top spot—in the second week of January 2013. Of the 73,000 recordings sold that week, an estimated 40 percent came from prerelease sales at Atlanta’s Passion Church and Passion Conference preorders (Caulfield 2013). (One of these prerelease purchases was mine. At the end of the 2013 Passion Conference, when purchasing

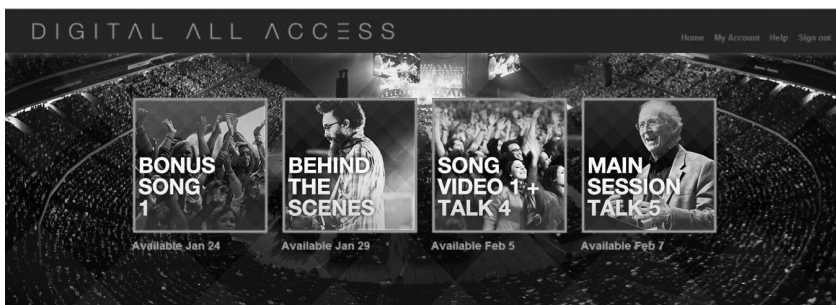


Figure 5.7: Passion Digital All Access Pass (2013).
Screenshot by the author.

a Digital All Access Pass, I recall taking advantage of the substantial discount that was extended to conference-goers who preordered the Tomlin album.)

In each of these branded online worship experiences, it is difficult to see where evangelical institutions end and media industries begin. Worship on the small screen allows influential ministries and worship leaders to broadcast their messages and songs far and wide and, in doing so, to build an even larger base of constituents. As Tom Wagner has shown in his work on how music and social media fit into Hillsong's branding practices, this multi-pronged promotional strategy is remarkably effective because it gives individual worshippers' a strong sense of agency even as it uses their active and enthusiastic participation to spread its message and products (T. Wagner 2014a, 2014b). Through Hillsong's "two-way" social media marketing campaigns, participants are "afforded a real, immediate experience of God through its participants' own agency" (2014b, 35). Worship brands like Hillsong and Passion have mobilized social media to create powerful congregational networks in which evangelical worshippers are nodes. These participatory consumers form interconnected links in increasingly diffuse and widespread networks by participating with the brand on social media as well as promoting it in their offline relationships and in the process enlisting others.

CONCLUSION: NETWORKED CONGREGATIONS AND SHIFTING MODES OF EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY AND AUTHORITY

The rise of the networked congregation that promulgates the multimedia worship experience carries several important implications for evangelical sociality, that is, what it means and feels like to be part of a Christian community and what belonging looks and sounds like. Among individual worshippers, networked congregations encourage a sense of belonging that is often diffuse. On the one hand, these developments appear to augment the agency of individual worshippers: the worshiper can choose from a plethora of audiovisual worship materials—from interactive worship music recordings to live-streamed conferences to prerecorded full church services—and engage with them wherever and whenever he or she wishes. These audiovisual media resources have made it easy for individuals to participate in several types of congregations simultaneously where they are connected to a constant stream of musical resources for personal devotion. In this new kind of religious networked sociality, individuals can choose the networks with which they want to be affiliated and their level of commitment to these networks. For instance, one can regularly attend a satellite church of a multisite congregation on Sundays; travel annually to conferences like Passion and maintain a sense of connection throughout the year via live-streamed events,

concert tours, and podcasts; view on occasion the weekly gathering of a megachurch like Hillsong or Bethel; and view worship videos on YouTube of amateur worship-video creators as well as “official” videos from powerful worship brands. These various networked congregations can overlap, synergize, or even contradict.

On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, the ascendancy of individual choice over congregational networks plays into the hands of large corporations and powerful media industries, concentrating cultural power and financial capital in the hands of a shrinking few, a consolidation that in turn limits the options available on the online marketplace for worship media. In her study of user agency on social media, José van Dijck concludes that “instead of bringing down the reigning professional leagues, [user-generated content] actually boosts the power of media moguls, enhancing their system of star ratings and upward mobility” (2009, 53). In her study of “amateur-to-amateur” (A2A) music pedagogy on YouTube, Kiri Miller similarly observes that “A2A discourse flourishes in connection with practices that involve canons, codified techniques, acknowledged master practitioners, and instruments that shape practitioners’ experiences. These established structures give rise to shared knowledge and visceral experiences that in turn build a scaffold for meaningful online discourse” (2012, 218). In other words, online technologies that enable greater individual control of musical learning can destabilize certain hierarchies, remove cultural intermediaries, and provide space for experimentation, all the while reinforcing and extending the domain of the most powerful players in the commercial marketplace.

Because evangelical worshipers who desire powerful worship experiences are armed with increased awareness of the various networked congregations in which these regularly take place, there is pressure on congregations of all sizes to conform to expectations set by a limited set of powerful players in the evangelical media industry. As this chapter demonstrated, expectations of the worship experience produced during times of congregational singing increasingly rely upon high-tech audiovisual technologies that require access to a certain set of resources to execute successfully. Congregational music-making, particularly within smaller congregations, often seems subpar in comparison to the powerful musical experiences on offer at the click of a mouse or swipe of a screen. Where the desire for an audiovisual worship experience is not being or cannot be met in local churches, individuals have an increasing array of options for having this felt need meet elsewhere. They actively seek out worship media—both recorded audiovisual resources and live conferences or concert tours—to get what one young man at a Nashville worship concert described to me as his “worship fix.” Others resort to finding a sense of belonging in online congregations built around YouTube videos or live-streamed services from well-known churches. Some affiliate with multiple worship brands—more than once over the course of fieldwork, I heard

someone knowledgeable about current trends in worship music self-describe as a “worship junkie.”

The language of addiction (“worship fix,” “worship junkie”) evidences the overwhelming success of the major worship brands in not just responding to felt needs, but also actively producing desire. In his work on the series of transformations collectively known as globalization, Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes of the formative role of global-communications media in creating desire across geographical and cultural space for the same objects (and, by extension, experiences):

The integration of the market [for cheap consumer goods], the speed of communications, and the oligopolies in media and entertainment contribute to projecting the same image of the good life all over the world. Prompted by global media, more human beings than ever before share similar lists of the products they need to consume and the objects they need to possess in order to achieve individual satisfaction. In that sense we are truly witnessing for the first time, especially among the youth, a global production of desire. (2007, 60)

In parallel fashion, successful worship brands, though multi-pronged networked strategies, have come to define the worship experience—a cornerstone of the “good life” for devoted evangelicals—leaving their audiences hungry for more. The worship experience, visceral proof of divine connection, is the lynchpin in the affective economics of the worship media industry. Henry Jenkins has described the way global brands create and exploit emotional capital; he uses Saatchi and Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts’s term “lovemark” to describe the way successful media brands “command the love as well as the respect of consumers” (Jenkins 2006, 72). Likewise, major players in the worship media industry have saturated the market through brand extension, in which experiences are not “contained within a single media platform, but extend[s] across as many media as possible” (69). The constant connection that social media allows unites worshipers through a range of experiences that encompass and infiltrate all five modes of congregating that this book has discussed. Being part of these networked congregations is changing the way evangelicals understand and experience congregational worship by combining and conflating different spaces and creating synergy across mediated and live performances.

As evangelicalism has entered the digital age, its congregational worship has become a prime example of media convergence as described by Henry Jenkins: a place “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (2006, 2). Worshipers exhibit similar “migratory behavior” to the late capitalist consumers that Jenkins describes, “going almost anywhere in search of the

kinds of entertainment experiences”—here we could substitute “worship experiences”—“they want” (2). However democratic these moves may be, the fact remains that the power to define and circulate these affective experiences are being concentrated in the hand of a few global worship music brands, highly successful and pervasive congregational networks that influence the balance of power within and among evangelical individuals, institutions, and commercial industries. The book’s conclusion examines further the implications of the creation of a global “mainstream” model of music, worship, and congregating; probes contemporary evangelical reactions to it; and suggests potential future directions that tension between these sources of authority may lead.

NOTES

1. Other writers from Christian and Jewish communities have used this term but with slightly different resonances. To date, it has mainly been used in educational materials written to help existing congregations navigate new digital technologies. Andrea Useem’s 2009 booklet *The Networked Congregation: Embracing the Spirit of Experimentation*, published by the Alban Institute provides an accessible overview of technological changes in the 2000s decade (particularly the advent of Web 2.0) in order to help congregations adapt to the new possibilities of digital and social media technologies. Similarly, Barry Camson and Debra Brosan (2013) define Jewish synagogues and groups as “networked congregations” by the extent to which they have adopted networked practices of sociability, such as non-hierarchical and voluntaristic organization, fluid membership, and use of new technologies to advance their goals.
2. According to the 2011 CCLI License Holder Survey, 50 percent of the same churches polled reported that they also used hymnals. This statistic suggests that many churches are supplementing rather than replacing their hymnals wholesale with computer projection (2012b).
3. Popular worship presentation software packages include ProPresenter, EasyWorship, and MediaShout. For an overview of some of these programs, see Lauren Hunter’s “Worship Software Guide: Options for Every Church from Small to Mega,” accessed July 26, 2016, available at Church Tech Today, <http://churchtechtoday.com/2015/10/01/worship-software-guide-options-for-every-church-from-small-to-mega>.
4. Many of these magazines are now produced exclusively online, though many back issues of the print articles are available in the online archives. See <http://www.twfm.com> and <https://www.churchproduction.com>.
5. In this article, Thornton and Evans 2015 analyze the online discourse surrounding a selected YouTube video sample to describe the characteristics of the Christian community formed around online song videos.
6. In carving out the field for my study, I narrowed my video search to the five most frequently sung worship songs in the United States, according to Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) Top 25 Worship Songs for the August 2011 Royalty Payout Period (CCLI 2011)). I then searched for these songs on YouTube, selecting the top ten amateur-created worship videos (filtering the

search results by “most relevant”) related to each of the five songs for analysis. These fifty videos became both analytical material and field-research sites: in addition to aural and visual analyses, I conducted interviews with these videos’ creators and waded through thousands of public remarks on song comment pages.

7. These remarks are each taken from the comments section of *rosinkrans17*, “Our God—Chris Tomlin (And if Our God Is for Us)” posted November 17, 2010, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdFzB4MQgEA>.
8. Though my field interlocutors readily described the reasons they used images from nature, they rarely mentioned or reflected on other types of images so prevalent within worship videos. Their reticence or inability to articulate the purposes of other categories of images suggests an ongoing tension in how evangelicals understand the power and appropriateness of images in worship.
9. This research was conducted immediately before the buyout and eventual dissolution of Eastbourne’s Kingsway’s Music by US publisher David C. Cook. From the early 1980s to 2014, Eastbourne was the center of commercial evangelical-worship music production in the United Kingdom. Eastbourne hosted the headquarters of Kingsway Music, then the largest UK recording and publishing company (see Ward 2005 for a detailed history of Kingsway and evangelical worship music in the United Kingdom more generally). The Mission: Worship Conference, then the largest UK worship music-related conference, met annually in Eastbourne’s convention center complex. It regularly featured celebrity worship leaders from the United Kingdom and United States and sometimes further afield (Brazil, South Africa, New Zealand, etc.).
10. Lubken 2005 provides a content analysis of the first four iWorship DVDs, and Ingalls 2016 discusses how this product line has expanded into products designed for use in congregational settings.
11. HOSANNA (Fraser). Brooke Fraser Ligertwood. ©2007 Hillsong Music Publishing (APRA) (adm. in the US and Canada at CapitolCMGPublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.
12. VEVO, a joint venture between Google, Universal Music Group, and Sony Music Group (two of the three record company “majors” at the time of this writing), hosts videos and syndicates them to a variety of websites, including YouTube.
13. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research keeps an online Database of Megachurches in the USA. The entry for the Passion City Church in the database, last updated in 2010, asserts that the church had an average weekly attendance of 2,000. Accessed May 2, 2017, <http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>.
14. This is the term that Gateway Church, a multi-campus megachurch based in Dallas, TX, gave live-streamed reruns of its worship services, accessed July 2, 2016, <http://gatewaypeople.com/watch>.
15. The number of subscribers was publicized on a two-minute promotional video describing subscription options, accessed July 18, 2016, can be found on the Bethel Church website <https://www.bethel.tv/home>.
16. Passion’s VEVO channel, accessed May 2, 2017, can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/PassionVEVO>.
17. Christopher’s five-star review from February 24, 2016, entitled “ENCOURAGING” and accessed July 17, 2016, can be found on the comment stream, at <http://passionresources.com/products/passion-2016-digital-all-access>.