Whose Worship? An Examination of Women's Gendered Experiences in the Contemporary Worship Music Industry

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Abstract

For Evangelical Christians in North America, the contemporary worship music industry is the primary source of music for radio play, private devotion, and Sunday morning worship services (Ingalls 2018). As the industry has developed, it has become increasingly difficult for women to pursue musical leadership (Loepp Thiessen 2022). This dissertation examines women's gendered experiences in the contemporary worship music ecosystem. Though they face spiritualized limitations, women in the industry contribute through a range of both public facing and concealed roles. Through 22 qualitative interviews with women songwriters, worship leaders, and industry professionals, I examine the factors that dictate their experiences both of limitation and of finding empowerment. The concept of "gendered stages" (McCusker 2017) is used to organize the different facets of women's experiences: setting the stage (Chapter 3) by exploring their leadership in the early days of the industry; "on stage" (Chapter 4) as worship leaders, instrumentalists, or background vocalists, "off stage" (Chapter 5) as songwriters, producers, or audio/visual supports; and when they have been monitored on stage (Chapter 6) for their gender and sexuality, sometimes resulting in exclusion from the industry. I present case studies of women in each of these stages, interrogating how Evangelical values intertwine with women's careers and personal lives. Ultimately, this project builds upon literature which interrogates questions of agency and empowerment in conservative religious contexts (Avishai 2008, Burke 2012), and explores how women in the Christian music industry thrive in spaces that present limitations.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

"I have seen the Lord, I will speak of Him,
And nobody could talk me out of it.
I have seen the Lord and my Lord's seen me,
oh, He said my name and told me:
'Go and speak of what you've seen.'"

Chorus of "A Woman" by Ellie Holcomb, Ann VosKamp, and Sarah MacIntosh from the Faithful Project's album *Go and Speak* (2021)

1.1 Introduction

Kari Jobe stands in the middle of a darkened stage, the spotlight focused on her. As the music starts, her lips move in silent prayer. Jobe is singing her hit anthem "Forever," a song that has been covered by numerous other artists, played on radio stations around the world, and has been sung from the stages of the largest megachurches.[1] In front of her is an audience of thousands of worshippers who take their cues from her. When Jobe prays, they pray. As she raises her arms, they too lift their hands in worship. When her voice goes hushed, they will fall away. She is a model worshiper.

Jobe is surrounded by musicians: four guitarists, a pianist, several string instrument players, a drummer – all are men, and all are white. A woman stands at the back of the stage

[1] Kari Jobe, "Kari Jobe - Forever (Live)," uploaded February 18, 2024, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFra1mnIVE.

singing backup vocals. Jobe is wearing a high-necked tunic shirt and black pants – she has been praised for the example of modesty she sets for young girls. While the men around her prioritize playing their instruments, Jobe takes up center stage as a vessel for God's presence, closing her eyes and extemporizing expressions of praise. Part way through the song, she steps back as a man comes on stage to deliver a message through spoken word. When he is finished, Jobe leads the gathered community in the rest of the song. She does not teach with words, but her presence as a worship leader is commanding. Her movements and vocalizations have curated a worship experience so powerful that thousands come to worship with her. The worship video captures this momentum.[2]

The scene depicted above is one that may be familiar to North American Evangelical worshippers: a worship leader on stage surrounded by instrumentalists with the audience below. Sometimes, the worship leaders on stage are women – Kari Jobe is an example of one of many women who embody this role. The role of worship leader is more restricted for women than it is for their male counterparts, however: there are expectations and rules for women that clearly dictate what they can and cannot do, all of which are grounded in facets of Evangelical theology. For example, they may be expected to represent the balance between competent leader and submissive follower; to collaborate with men only in the presence of a group lest they become a temptation; and to dress in a way that is culturally appealing yet modest. The congregation, including girls and women, is led – and influenced – by these leaders, both through their worshiping presence and more broadly through Evangelical culture.

[2] I reference Kari Jobe's performances in several places throughout this dissertation, though I did not interview her. All commentary and analysis are from my own research and investigation and draw from already published interview materials.

Women who are worship leaders are not the only ones in the industry who experience limitations. My 2022 data-driven study of the songwriters behind the most popular contemporary worship songs between 1988 and 2018 indicates that women are vastly underrepresented on the charts, while collaborations between men dominate. More critically, the study found that women's involvement in songwriting declined with the establishment of an established contemporary worship industry. Overall, I found that 30.4% of songwriters on the first Christian Copyright Licensing International List in 1988 were women, whereas in 2018 only 4% of songwriters were solo women.[3] Evidently, as the industry has changed, so too has the experience of women.

Expectations placed on how women should fulfill roles in the Christian music industry find their roots in the socially and theologically conservative ideologies of Evangelical communities. Widely held beliefs around gender promote clear binaries: men are public, authoritative leaders, while women are private, submissive followers. This public/private gendered narrative has created a culture in which men work outside of the home, providing both financially and spiritually for their families, while women are expected to perform a complimentary role, caring for children and spiritually submitting to the authority of their husbands.[4] This emphasis on public labour is echoed in contemporary worship music scholarship. Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan have suggested that, as of the early 2000s, the persona of a songwriter/worship leader within the industry became dominantly that of a

[3] Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Boy's Club: A Gender Based Analysis of the CCLI Lists from 1988–2018," *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* 6 (2022): 79. See page 165 for a graph that highlights this progression.

[4] Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 111.

celebrity. This role is often maintained through work outside of the home and the exertion of authority, two practices that are limiting for Evangelical women.[5]

While the ideals that promote clear public/private binaries may be exacerbated in the socially conservative context of Evangelicalism, this is also an issue in other musical contexts. In 1998, Mavis Bayton wrote the following about the popular music industry:

> Traditionally, women have been positioned as consumers and fans, and in supportive roles (wife, mother, girlfriend) rather than as active producers of music: musicians. When they have been on stage, on TV, on record, it has nearly always been as singers. They have sometimes written their own lyrics, rarely their own music, and there are very few women playing instruments. Currently, women's lives are accompanied by a male soundtrack. This has important implications, for popular music permeates modern life and helps to make us the people we are, both reflecting existing gender differences and also actively helping to construct them.[6]

Like the popular music industry described by Bayton, the Christian music industry both *reflects* and *constructs* gender differences. This dissertation explores how this widespread phenomenon manifests in white, Evangelical music industry spaces. Scholars have studied contemporary worship music's history, theology, practice, and industry, but none have performed in depth analysis of women's experiences within the industry. Their experiences of responding to religious and industry structures, of collaborating with men and other women, of finding musical agency throughout time, and of building and maintaining careers in Evangelical spaces remain unexamined.

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[5] Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," *Religion and American Culture* 24, no. 2 (2014): 197.

[6] Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1998), vii.

Contemporary worship music can be defined as "a global Christian congregational song repertory modeled on mainstream Western popular music styles."[7] In addition to musical markers, the popular music influence is also evident in the way a robust industry supports and maintains contemporary worship repertoire and practices. Because this is the first project to examine women's experiences in this religious and industry context, there is significant ground to cover. This project is based on interviews with 22 songwriters, worship leaders, and industry executives in the industry, whose involvement spanned from the first years of the industry in the 1960s to today. Foundational to this project is an exploration of the factors that women identify as limiting them in their work, ranging from social and religious protocols like the Billy Graham Rule, to guiding values like abstinence before marriage, to experiential factors like the work of being a mother while pursuing a career in the industry. Ultimately, this project considers how women are both held back by these factors but also how they exhibit agency through their decisions to stay in the industry and pursue a career in this limiting context.

1.2 Positionality and Approach

I approach this topic as both an insider and outsider to the Evangelical contemporary worship ecosystem. I am an insider because I grew up singing contemporary worship music in church and listening to Christian radio in the car. I vividly remember buying my first CD – a Rebecca St. James album from our local Christian bookstore. The first concert I attended with friends was performed by the Christian band Switchfoot when we were in high school. I chose a repertoire of contemporary worship songs to be sung at my baptism as a 16-year-old. My youth group went to

[7] Monique M. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

Christian youth conferences where dynamic Christian speakers invited us to give our hearts to Jesus and refrain from having sex before marriage. In so many ways, I am part of the same Christian fabric as my interviewees.

I am an outsider because I am not Evangelical or part of a conservative Christian community. My ethnic and religious family heritage is Russian Mennonite: my grandparents were born into the turmoil of religious discrimination during World War II in what is today known as Ukraine. As victims of Joseph Stalin's ethnic purges against German descendants in the 1930s, my recent ancestors clung to their faith and their culture through their strong tradition of four-part *a capella* singing. As a child growing up among Mennonites in Southern Ontario, I was formed by private music lessons, singing in community choirs, and learning to sing harmony at church. Much of my music formation has been in Mennonite institutions, learning the traditions of my family heritage while working to expand the definition of "Mennonite music" to better represent the diversity of Mennonites around the world today.[8] While there are a range of Mennonite perspectives on topics that are frequently discussed in Evangelicalism – such as women's leadership and LGBTQ+ relationships, I currently am part of a progressive Mennonite community that affirms women and LGBTQ+ people in all aspects of church life and leadership. I am an outsider to many of the ideological commitments my interviewees identify in the Christian music industry, even though I know what it is like to be formed by them.

Although I run in different circles than my interviewees, I too am a songwriter, worship leader, and church musician. Like many of my interviewees, I recognize the ways that I, too, operate in a system that limits women's involvement. Sarah Kathleen Johnson has suggested that

[8] Mennonite here refers to a progressive religious denomination with unique theological beliefs (like adult baptism and pacifism), but which is very comparable to other mainline denominations. There are few outstanding similarities between my denomination and the traditional "Mennonite" image that many assume, which is largely made up of Amish and other conservative Mennonite communities.

Mennonite worship has become a form of undervalued "pink collar" labour,[9] and my work with Katie Graber has explored the systems that limit the circulation of Mennonite women's compositions.[10] In exploring women's musical experiences in conservative religious settings, I take seriously my own involvement in systems that – despite best efforts – do not afford women full egalitarian participation. Recognizing my own complacency in systems that limit people grants me more understanding and compassion to my interviewees who express similar experiences.

Questions of representation in worship music have been part of my work since before this project began. From 2016–2020 I served on the Mennonite Worship and Song Committee, which was a bi-national group assembled to prepare the *Voices Together* hymnal, a new worship book for Mennonite communities in North America. While the book would primarily be comprised of traditional hymns, we were intentional about wanting to also include contemporary worship music among a range of other kinds of music. My two areas of specific contribution to the collection were the promotion and curation of contemporary worship music, and analysis and advocacy for women text writers, composers, and songwriters. It was in conducting this committee work that I first engaged an overlap between these two areas: it became highly apparent early on that while women were underrepresented overall in the congregational song, they seemed to be especially underrepresented in contemporary worship music.

In the summer of 2019, parallel to this hymnal committee work, I received a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to support work during the

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[9] Sarah Kathleen Johnson, "The Problem of Mennonite Worship Leadership Becoming 'Women's Work,'" *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 23, no. 1 (2022): 28.

[10] Katie Graber and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Publishing Privileges the Published: An Analysis of Gender, Class, and Race in the Hymnological Feedback Loop," *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 14, no. 10 (2023): 6.

second year of my Master of Music degree. Dr. Jada Watson graciously agreed to work with me on a directed reading course, which at the time we assumed would be a data-driven analysis of women composers in piano curricula. But plans change, and it increasingly seemed that data on women songwriters within the contemporary worship industry was needed. Ultimately, I discovered that women songwriters have become increasingly underrepresented in the industry, a decline that correlates with the establishment of a commercial industry and the rise of collaborative songwriting.[11] The findings of that study set the groundwork for what would become this dissertation topic.

1.3 Key Terminology Supporting this Project

There are several terms that are important to define for this study. While most of these terms have agreed upon definitions among Evangelicals, they may have different meanings in secular spaces or may be unfamiliar to non-Evangelical readers.

Worship refers to the act of gathering for connection with God, often through singing and prayer. While worship can happen privately, the word most commonly refers to the act of gathering in community, such as Sunday morning church services. Increasingly the word "worship" has become synonymous with "liturgy" in academic circles, and "singing" with worship in Evangelical circles. Throughout this dissertation, worship will refer to components of a weekly congregational gathering, such as singing, prayer, and fellowship, or the act of private devotion to God through prayer and singing or listening to music.

[11] Loepp Thiessen, "Boy's Club: A Gender Based Analysis of the CCLI Lists from 1988–2018," 80.

Translated from Greek as "the work of the people," the word **liturgy** most commonly refers to the set of actions that make up a public worship service. For example, in Catholic contexts this is the order of the mass including prayer, confession, etc. While Evangelicals tend not to use the word, liturgical studies emerge as an area of scholarly research. Feminist liturgical studies are one example of this, with the field exploring feminist expressions of worship. Here, liturgy will be predominantly used to refer to the academic field of inquiry.

For the purposes of this dissertation, **praise and worship** can be viewed as an alternate way of referring to contemporary worship music. Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong have examined the distinct origins of contemporary worship and praise and worship as two distinct yet parallel movements, both of which have influenced contemporary worship music as it is understood today.[12] Other words that are sometimes used as synonyms are "praise choruses" and "contemporary praise and worship."

In Evangelical contexts, **worship leaders** are vocalists who guide the congregation in worship by acting as the central performer, leading the song through vocal and physical gesture and offering spoken or sung transitions between songs. By contrast, a pastor or preacher is the individual who offers a sermon, which is a spoken reflection. Unlike other traditions such as Catholicism – which features priests singing or chanting in worship – Evangelical pastors typically do not lead music (though some megachurches are blurring these boundaries). Worship leaders may be paid or unpaid, and may be celebrities or not, often depending on the size of the church.

[12] Lester Ruth and Swee Hong Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship* (Baker Publishing Group, 2021).

Megachurches are defined as Protestant churches with an average attendance of 2,000 participants or more over the course of weekend worship. In this dissertation, megachurches are examined as one of the primary sources of contemporary worship music. Increasingly, there is discussion of the "Big Four" megachurches that produce CWM: Bethel, Hillsong, Passion, and Elevation.[13] While nearly all white Evangelical megachurches feature CWM, only some write their own music.

Throughout this dissertation, I describe this broader context as the **contemporary worship ecosystem** to address the ways that definitions of this broader industry have evolved over the past 50 years. Leah Payne has tracked the decline of CCM (Contemporary Christian Music),[14] which has historically been its own industry but is increasingly being subsumed under the umbrella of contemporary worship music. CCM was primarily intended for listening and radio airplay, whereas contemporary worship music was intended to be sung in a congregational worship service. In recent years the distinction between these two categories has become blurry, with contemporary worship music increasingly being played in private devotion and Christian radio, as well as being sung in worship. Similarly, while Ruth and Lim describe the historic context of Praise and Worship and Contemporary Worship as distinct streams, today they are most widely experienced as one larger river.[15] Describing the context for this dissertation as an ecosystem allows for an imagining of the ways that these terms all work together to create a broader contemporary worship context, one that has evolved and grows through distinct layers

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[13] Worship Leader Research Team, "(Almost) 100% of the Top 25 Worship Songs Are Associated with Just a Handful of Megachurches.," *Worship Leader Research* (blog), March 30, 2023, https://worshipleaderresearch.com/100-of-the-top-25-worship-songs-are-associated-with-just-a-handful-of-megachurches/.

[14] Leah Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You: A History of Contemporary Christian Music*, Oxford Scholarship Online (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), 170.

[15] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 181.

and manifestations of different forms. The terms highlighted in this section explore just some of the different components of the contemporary worship ecosystem as we understand it today.

1.4 Industry Context

1.4.1 History of the Industry

Contemporary worship music history is defined by a series of individuals, institutions, and churches that have worked together to create the industry as we understand it today. An examination of megachurches is one way to understand both the history of the industry and how it functions today. As megachurches rose in prominence throughout the second half of the 20th century, they became sites for innovation and exploration. For the past 60 years they have initiated musical developments that have become commonplace in smaller churches and have used their power and broad representation to influence both large- and small-scale movements.

The history of CWM and the history of megachurch influence on CWM converged in Costa Mesa, California in the 1960s, when pastor Chuck Smith found himself at the helm of a rapidly growing congregation that began to experiment with the music used in corporate worship. Calvary Chapel, the church that Smith pastored, found themselves with thousands of former hippies attending services, renewed in their freedom from former addictions and convicted by Evangelical values.[16] A group of young musicians (several of whom are highlighted in Chapter 3) began to lead worship for the community in a style that was influenced by the rock and roll music of the era. The new music offered intimate lyrics, sung in a repetitive style. This music was part of the attraction for people to come to Calvary Chapel, and it became highly

[16] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship,* 106.

sought after. By 1971, leaders at Calvary Chapel began Maranatha! Music, a non-profit record label to share the music that was emerging from their congregation. Ruth and Lim write:

> The degree of impact these companies would have was little imagined at their beginnings, especially in the case of Maranatha! Music. The arrival of Jesus People at Calvary Chapel had brought about the emergence of much new music sung by talented artists. Concerned about providing his musicians with adequate financial support given the uncertainties of congregational giving, Smith led the congregation to organize Maranatha! Corporation in December 1970 to facilitate making recordings that the artists could sell as they traveled to perform. The company was soon releasing albums recorded by various musicians in the church, including the widely popular *Everlastin' Living Jesus Music Concert* in 1971.[17]

Calvary Chapel's record label represents the beginning of an industry to disseminate CWM, and throughout the 1970s the business side of the new music began to materialize.

In the 1980s, more megachurches emerged and capitalized on the new kind of music to bring about increased membership and investment. Preachers became televangelists, and the worship of megachurches was broadcast to people around the world. To remain on the cutting edge of musical development, many megachurches sought out songwriters to craft music specifically for their congregation. Pastors found songwriters and worship leaders who shared their theological convictions, and who could be used to amplify their message.[18] As Bowler and Reagan note, "By the 1990s, this preacher-singer combination had become the gold standard of megachurch growth."[19]

With the increased commercialization of the industry throughout the 1980s, the desire emerged to sing songs written by songwriters at other megachurches. Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) was born in 1988 as a way for blanket permission to be given to

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[17] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 66.

[18] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 193.

[19] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 193

congregations to sing songs found in the database.[20] They began to publish Top 25 lists of songs that received the most royalty payouts, and these lists became a foundational way that worship leaders stayed up to date on the most current songs, representing a highly competitive way to rank emerging music. By the 1990s, megachurches began their own publishing houses to help administer this copyright, meaning that they could take a portion of the funds administered by CCLI.

With the rise of worship celebrities came the opportunity for these famed worship leaders to tour to other churches and communities, spreading the message of their church and popularizing the music they wrote. Even those who had not historically been in the "church music" side of the industry began making inroads. Artists like Michael W. Smith and Third Day released worship albums that reached congregations in addition to at-home listeners. Bowler and Reagan note that "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."[21] The celebrity worship artist was a solidly formed persona by the early 2000s, with churches eagerly pursuing this model.

Even though Calvary Chapel's influence diminished with the emergence of other worship-oriented institutions, California continued to be a prominent site for CWM innovation. In 1999, the music group Jesus Culture emerged from the megachurch Bethel Church in Redding, California. In 2001, Bethel Music was founded by Brian Johnson, the son of Bethel Church's pastor. Both communities have steadily held influence in megachurch worship for over twenty years, frequently releasing albums and hosting conferences. Their influence is paralleled

[20] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 201.

[21] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 204.

by Hillsong Music in Australia, which releases music as Hillsong Music, Hillsong United, and Hillsong Young and Free, the latter which is a youth-oriented band that seeks to emulate youth culture in church spaces. Hillsong has grown to the extent that they have multiple church sites around the world. Passion Church, which hosts the famed songwriter and leader Chris Tomlin, is based out of Atlanta. One of their primary outputs is an annual conference that boasts some of the biggest names in CWM and is intended to minister to college students. Elevation Church was founded in 2006 by pastor Steven Furtick in North Carolina and has also grown to provide some of the most chart-topping contemporary worship songs. Hillsong, Bethel, Jesus Culture, Elevation, and Passion are some of the most influential entities in CWM today, all releasing music as highly commercialized and widely influential megachurches.

In addition to megachurches, certain other parachurch organizations have been foundational in the development of CWM. While the major North American megachurches are in Charlotte, NC; Atlanta, GA; and Redding, CA; a group of publishers and labels, like Integrity Music and Capitol Christian Music Group, are based alongside other music industry hubs in Nashville. These organizations employ staff songwriters who offer a significant voice and whose output ranks highly on charts like the CCLI Top 100 (making it likely to be sung by influential megachurches). These publishers and labels host writing camps, set up songwriting sessions, and manage artists' careers. Those who are not based out of megachurches tend to be based in Nashville, capitalizing on the strong Christian music network there. As the industry has grown, these other groups play an increasingly significant role.

Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) is another parachurch organization that has had a profound impact on the development of the industry. It is not tied to any specific megachurch yet commands the industry through copyright clearance and promotion of top songs.

The organization – originally known as Starpraise Ministries – emerged in the 1980s when it was clear that the new and widely sung contemporary worship songs were not covered effectively under copyright.[22] Since 1988, they have published lists of the most frequently reported songs for copyright over a 6-month period. The list recently changed, and as of fall 2024 the list is now updated weekly. As the team at Worship Leader Research recently wrote, "CCLI's top song lists have functioned as the closest thing to a 'Billboard chart' for contemporary worship music."[23] These lists have become a metric of the most-sung songs, with the top songs holding coveted spots.

The industry as we see it today has always been closely intertwined with specific institutions, and especially with megachurches that keep the industry afloat. While their influence has ebbed and flowed over the past 60 years, they are the basis of today's industry. Overwhelmingly, however, the megachurches and institutions that are intertwined with the contemporary worship music explored here represent white celebrities in predominantly white congregations who produce music that is listened to by primarily white audiences. This homogenous context will be explored further in this next section.

1.4.2 Gender and Race in the Christian Music Industry

This dissertation is about women's experiences in the Christian music industry broadly, and especially within contemporary worship spaces. It tells the stories of those who have made it to the top of the industry ladder: artists and leaders with record deals, publishers, international

[22] "About CCLI [US]," CCLI®, accessed February 15, 2025, https://ccli.com/us/en/about-ccli.

[23] Worship Leader Research Team, "The CCLI Top 100 Changed ...And Nobody Is Talking About It.," *Worship Leader Research* (blog), February 5, 2025, https://worshipleaderresearch.com/the-ccli-top-100-changed-and-nobody-is-talking-about-it/.

tours, award winning albums. Because it is focusing on the industry, the dissertation is also primarily telling the stories of highly successful people, nearly all of whom are white. A blog post on WorshipFuel by CCLI articulates the question directly, asking "Why are there no Black Gospel songs on the CCLI Top 100?"[24] Before proceeding further in the dissertation, it's important to consider the racial context of the contemporary worship industry within the broader Christian music landscape, drawing attention to some of the factors that have led to such a homogenous industry context.

The Christian music industry (broadly speaking) has long been segregated into Black and white sectors, representing a North American church that has largely been racially segregated for its entire existence. Still today, the "vast majority of church goers report that their congregations are mostly monoracial."[25] Representing this "monoracial" church culture, Christian music is generally seen as having two categories: Gospel music (predominantly produced by Black artists) and contemporary Christian music (predominantly produced by white artists).[26] Since the mid 2000s, Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) and Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) have been increasingly amalgamating, yet this racial divide has continued despite changes in the genres. Leah Payne has written about the decline of CCM and the rise of worship music, and notes that while secular radio succeeded in amplifying Black artists in the early 2000s, CCM in

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[24] CCLI, "Yes, We Went There…," *WorshipFuel by CCLI* (blog), January 5, 2018, https://www.worshipfuel.com/equip/yes-we-went-there/.

[25] "Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval: Findings from the 2022 Health of Congregations Survey" (PRRI, May 16, 2023), https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PRRI-May-2023-Congregation.pdf, 21.

[26] Omotayo O. Banjo and Kesha Morant Williams, "A House Divided? Christian Music in Black and White," *Journal of Media and Religion* 10, no. 3 (July 29, 2011): 115–116.

the United States "failed to adapt to the country's diversifying listening tastes"[27] and continued to amplify primarily white artists.

The history of racial segregation in the industry is evident before the gospel/worship division of CCM, however. Many suggest that Black gospel music grew out of the Black Pentecostal church in the United States in the 1890s.[28] It was formed on the foundation of other types of African American music, including spirituals. Banjo and Morant Williams write: "Early themes in spirituals, sorrow songs, jubilees, and camp meeting songs, all of which are encompassed in early gospel music, expressed dependence on the sacred world and reward for suffering in heaven, after death."[29] Gospel music found its roots in a story of oppression, survival, and hope through faith. These influences have continued up until the present and were foundational in establishing gospel music as a genre of Christian music throughout the late 1900s.[30]

Contemporary worship music also finds its roots in Pentecostal communities. It is often credited as emerging out of the Jesus People movement in 1960s California, but Ruth and Lim trace CWM back further to the theology of Canadian Pentecostal minister Reg Layzell in 1946.[31] While there are earlier influences on Contemporary Praise and Worship Music (as Ruth and Lim call it), the movement spread like wildfire in the 1960s and 70s. There is no significant scholarship that highlights how white the movement was in its origins, but the existence of some counterexamples helps us understand this. Ruth and Lim write about the music ministry of

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[27] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 157.

[28] Banjo and Williams, "A House Divided?" 116.

[29] Banjo and Williams, "A House Divided?" 116.

[30] Banjo and Williams, "A House Divided?" 117.

[31] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship,* 10.

Jonathan Maracle, a Canadian Indigenous worship leader who writes in a praise and worship style, as one example of the ways that the movement has found resonance across different cultural traditions.[32] While it is globally influential today and Christians around the world worship in a contemporary worship style, in North America the contemporary worship industry is still largely connected with its white roots.

Both gospel and contemporary Christian music (including the merger with contemporary worship music) continue to be, like most congregations, racially segregated with only a few examples of crossover. Banjo and Morant Williams note that:

> Although both gospel and CCM enjoy market success, there are obvious differences predicated on racial demographics. Christian music has been subjugated to the fragmentation common to industry practices in which gospel Christian music is predominantly populated by and marketed to African American audiences while contemporary Christian music is mostly populated and marketed to mainstream or White American audiences.[33]

The division between the two groups is not merely accidental, it is perpetuated by industry structures and marketing emphases. This racial divide is particularly striking given that reconciliation is foundational to Christianity, [34] something expressed both through a concern to reconcile people to God and for individuals to be reconciled to each other through forgiveness and service. Though few, some initiatives have been taken to reconcile the disparate realms of Christian reconciliation and racial segregation in the music industry. Milmon F. Harrison highlights a movement to end segregation in the industry started by the members of DC Talk, a white Christian band.[35] In 1997, they founded an organization called ERACE, which stands for

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[32] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship,* 121.

[33] Banjo and Williams, "A House Divided?" 118.

[34] Banjo and Williams, "A House Divided?" 118.

[35] Milmon F. Harrison, "'ERACE-Ing' the Color Line: Racial Reconciliation in the Christian Music Industry," *Journal of Media and Religion* 4, no. 1 (2005): 39.

Eliminating Racism And Creating Equality. The organization aimed to increase communication across groups that have been historically divided. TobyMac, the lead singer of DC Talk, has been an advocate for racial reconciliation in the industry and has collaborated closely with Kirk Franklin, a Black gospel artist who cares about these same issues. Despite their best efforts, though, the industry has not always received these initiatives well. In the past, Franklin has referenced race inequality and police brutality in his GMA Dove Award acceptance speeches, and most recently boycotted the Dove Awards because his comments had been cut from the public broadcast on numerous occasions.[36] His decision to speak out against this inequality represents a commitment to diversity within the industry. In describing his boycott of the Dove Awards, Franklin said he would not attend the ceremony "until tangible plans are put in place to protect and champion diversity, especially where people of color have contributed their gifts, talents, and finances to help build the viability of these institutions."[37] Franklin has since accepted nominations for Dove Awards after receiving a formal apology from the president of the Gospel Music Association, but there continues to be significant tension around racial reconciliation in the industry.

In recent years, the biggest disruption to the status quo pattern of segregated industries has come from the group Maverick City Music, an intentionally diverse music ensemble based out of Atlanta, Georgia. The group was born out of a desire to see diversity in the Christian music scene, and for women and people of colour to be included there needed to be a significant level of intentionality. Naomi Raine, one of their main singers, said:

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[36] Jack Jenkins, "Kirk Franklin to Boycott Dove Awards, Says Comments about Race Were Cut from Speech," *Religion News Service*, October 28, 2019, https://religionnews.com/2019/10/28/kirk-franklin-to-boycott-dove-awards-says-comments-about-race-were-cut-from-speech/.

[37] Jenkins, "Kirk Franklin to Boycott Dove Awards."

> We get together and write music and it's dope. Tony [founder] always says that he had been in a bunch of different groups but there were never really many black people, never really many women. And then even in the groups that he was in it was almost like people were struggling to feel like they could be real and write from a place of real passion. That was his motivating factor in bringing us together.[38]

Raine herself has noticed the ways that there is gatekeeping around who is in or out of the industry based on their musical sound. She says:

> What people don't realize that even the gospel community there is a distinction made between the way you sing. Whether you sing gospel enough or if you have enough grit or growl in your voice. I have more of a pure, straight tone kind of voice. And then it's like, OK, well you sound like you belong like in the CCM world. There's a lot of that. But when we came on with Maverick, it was just us worshiping. We could be ourselves.[39]

For Raine, it was not only the white Christian industry that gatekept, but sonic markers of the gospel genre also clearly delineated who might be in or out. Maverick City Music intentionally tries to move beyond these divisions. They have clearly hit a point of resonance in the industry, since they have found massive success across numerous genres and formats. They have won numerous Dove Awards, Billboard Awards, and several Grammys.[40]

But even for Maverick City Music, the inclusion of women of colour has proven to be a challenge. The membership of their group is fluid, but women are less evident in their music than men. While their cover photos often suggest that women are well represented, female artists tend not to be as well-known as their male counterparts. Naomi Raine is their best-known female singer, and often is the only woman seen singing in a lead role with her male colleagues. The smaller number of women in Maverick City Music – and lack of women of colour in the

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[38] Relevant Staff, "How Maverick City Music Is Breaking the Worship Music Mold," RELEVANT, May 26, 2020, https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/music/how-maverick-city-music-is-breaking-the-worship-music-mold/.

[39] Relevant Staff, "How Maverick City Music Is Breaking the Worship Music Mold."

[40] See, for example: "Maverick City Music | Artist | GRAMMY.Com," accessed December 12, 2024, https://grammy.com/artists/Maverick-City-Music/38621.

Christian music industry at large – is representative of systemic issues in the industry culture that make it difficult for anyone who is not a white man to succeed, and the barriers are highest for women of colour.

In her critical work on how systems of oppression coalesce in music industries and markets to further limit women, people of colour, and other marginalized individuals, Jada Watson notes how this segregation can be perceived as "natural" by audiences, instead of being attributed clear systems of domination. She writes:

> Audiences might presume, then, that the racial segregation of the industry is a natural process based on the interest and talent of Black and white artists and not a socially and politically constructed line that marks the boundaries of where Black artists are permitted to go. They may also assume that only a handful of women are making high-enough quality music to receive airplay on their trusted stations and chart on Billboard. In this way, mechanisms of chart curation have shaped the public's perception of who is contributing to certain markets, constantly renegotiating, reaffirming, and reinscribing the color line and the white supremacist patriarchal values that define the market.[41]

Like the country music context Watson is describing, this segregation has been maintained in the Christian music industry through charts and awards that keep Black and white artists in separate spheres. Despite any perceived "naturalness," it is the result of intentional and ongoing decisions by industry gatekeepers.

This dissertation explores structural barriers to women's involvement in the industry, but it does so through the stories of white women who negotiate systemic, institutional, and interpersonal discrimination. The barriers of women of colour will be different than the ones we see presented here. Although I reached out to female artists affiliated with Maverick City Music and other women of colour in the industry, I did not receive any responses from them. Thus, this

[41] Jada Watson, "The Market," in *Sound Judgement: The Science and Practice of Valuing Music Performance*, ed. George Waddell and Aaron Williamon (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2025), 18.

project does not tell the stories of women of colour who have found their way in the industry, nor does it explore how women of colour are thriving outside of the mainstream industry. These are vital stories, but right now are not mine to tell. So, while this dissertation does not focus on experiences of racism and marginalization because of race through the lived experiences of interviewees, it will examine the structural issues that keep white men at the top of the power structure. It will unearth the ways white supremacy and white heterosexual patriarchy keep the industry working in a way that upholds the white, male status quo.

1.5 Literature Review

1.5.1 What is Contemporary Worship Music?

In conversations I have been in around church music from a practitioner perspective, tensions often arise over what exactly we are referring to when we discuss CWM. Because there is no centralized source for output and no specific denominational affiliation, it is hard to discern what belongs within the bounds of CWM and what does not. Does CWM include folk-style offshoots? What about old hymns with an added chorus? In their words, Ruth and Lim describe the musical features of contemporary worship as using musical styles from current types of popular music, featuring extended times of uninterrupted congregational singing, and oriented around a centrality of the musicians in the liturgical space and in the leadership of the service.[42] A guiding parameter for this project was the Christian Copyright Licensing International lists, which provide a list of the contemporary worship songs that are most frequently sung in worship during a six month period. If songs, artists, and churches were represented on that list, I generally

[42] Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 3.

considered them to be part of the industry (though I recognize that this is an imperfect system with many exceptions).

Since the contemporary worship industry is not governed by one denomination or tradition, it is challenging to discuss the religious affiliation of those involved in broad terms. Ingalls describes the realities that nondenominational and Pentecostal churches are often thought of as representative of communities invested in CWM, but that this music is essential in a wider range of communities.[43] Since Ingalls' book was released, Sarah Kathleen Johnson and I have also argued that contemporary worship music should be thought of as an ecumenical liturgical movement, one that finds resonance beyond Evangelical circles (including in my own Mennonite tradition).[44] However, when discussing the communities that *produce* most of the CWM we encounter today, Ingalls' description of Evangelicals as the primary source is still accurate. She writes: "Though there is no one designation capable of holding these disparate religious communities together, I put forward the term "evangelical Christianity" as the one best suited to this task, while acknowledging that it is a complex and contested designation."[45] I pick up on Ingalls' use of Evangelicalism, and use it as a broad category that captures the range of communities that participate in CWM, especially the ones that are involved in producing it.

While it cannot easily be defined in sweeping terms, Katie Gaddini describes Evangelicalism as "a conservative form of Christianity that promotes conversion, full life

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[43] Monique M. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018),12.

[44] Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Contemporary Worship Music as an Ecumenical Liturgical Movement," *Worship* 97 (2023): 204–29.

[45] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 12.

transformation, and a biblically based lifestyle."[46] Ingalls helpfully recognizes that defining Evangelicalism is a complex task. She writes:

> Trying to define what individuals or groups are currently considered (or consider themselves) "Evangelical" in the United States can be like trying to hit a moving target. Demographic shifts as well as changes in how individuals choose to self-identify are continuing to influence how this group is represented and how it understands itself.[47]

Defining the core is messy, and I recognize that there are those in the Christian music industry who would not self-identify as Evangelical. However, for the purposes of capturing the broadest range of Christians who are part of the core of contemporary worship music, "Evangelicals" is a helpful term.

Literature on contemporary worship music and its surrounding communities is relatively new. In academic circles, Ingalls has indicated that scholars ignored contemporary worship music (CWM) until the mid-2000s when there emerged significant interest in the movement.[48] A robust body of scholarship on CWM is still becoming established as the field is still in its early stages, which is one of the reasons there is so little on gender in the industry. In exploring gendered experiences in the CWM industry, this project also draws on relevant literature on the history of CWM, prominent megachurches, ways songs have meaning, and the industry.

Foundational in establishing the early field and developing its **history** is the work of historians, including Ruth and Lim. Their 2017 history, *Lovin' on Jesus,* was highly regarded for its ability to represent the origins of CWM in North America while also interrogating how it has been adopted globally.[49] Their most recent book, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,*

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[46] Katie Gaddini, *The Struggle to Stay: Why Single Evangelical Women Are Leaving the Church* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), xvii.

[47] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 13.

[48] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 10.

[49] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*.

offers an in-depth examination of the origins of the movement, dispelling the myth that CWM was exclusively born out of The Jesus People movement in 1960s California, and further proposing that two distinct yet intertwined movements – Praise and Worship, and Contemporary Worship – have unique histories, both with roots tracing back to the mid-twentieth century.[50] Ruth and Lim's history lays a solid foundation of the history of the industry through the 1940s to the 1990s. Their work sets a strong theological foundation through which to consider how contemporary worship music's leaders view their mission and calling and explores the biblical underpinnings of the genre.[51] Ruth and Lim have also mentored a broader group of emerging historians who have also contributed to our understanding of CWM history. For example, Adam Perez has contributed research on the role of different instruments in contemporary worship leadership in past decades.[52] He suggests that although the guitar is of vital importance, the keyboard was also a significant musical influence in early CWM.

A significant body of research on contemporary worship music has also emerged around **megachurches**, which is important since most CWM emerges in connection to megachurch communities. Bridging historical work and examination of megachurches, the previously mentioned article by Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan examines how megachurches that preach the prosperity gospel have become integral sources of CWM growth.[53] They examine the origins of the genre through to the development of an industry, tracing how megachurches have impacted

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[50] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*.

[51] Other work compiled by Lester Ruth on the history of CWM includes: Lester Ruth, ed., *Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020); Lester Ruth, ed., *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020).

[52] Adam Perez, "Beyond the Guitar: The Keyboard as a Lens into the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship," *The Hymn* 70, no. 2 (2019): 18–26.

[53] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 186–230. Some of this work is also echoed in Bowler's monograph *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*. Princeton: University Press, 2019.

the emergence of CWM as it is seen today. Bowler and Reagan's examination of the industry over the turn of the century provides a framework through which to consider the rise of songwriters as celebrities in the industry. Also significant for research on megachurches is a 2018 collection edited by Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, which provides an in-depth examination of the Australian megachurch Hillsong, which is one of the most influential institutions in the development and dissemination of CWM.[54] In this book, Tanya Riches notes that while women are limited in their roles in some contexts at Hillsong, the sisterhood that they have formed together is a powerful tool for transformation and meaning making.[55] Academic work on megachurches provides insight into the power structures, congregational experience, and how worship music enlivens community life.

A more thorough understanding of how megachurches function in the industry today can be found in the work of Worship Leader Research, a collective of scholars and practitioners exploring trends around the creation and reception of contemporary worship music. In their first academic article, the authors track the rise of megachurch bands over solo artists throughout the 2010s, highlighting the way that contemporary worship music is increasingly intertwined with specific congregations, like the "big four" megachurches mentioned previously.[56] One of the scholars on the Worship Leader Research Team, Shannan Baker, explores why certain contemporary worship songs become popular in her dissertation. Baker ultimately found that no

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[54] Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, eds., *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me Out Upon the Waters*, Christianity and Renewal - Interdisciplinary Studies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Tom Wagner has also expanded on the Hillsong movement in a monograph: *Music, Branding, and Consumer Culture in Church: Hillsong in Focus*, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[55] Tanya Riches, "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key," in *You Call Me Out Upon the Waters: The Hillsong Movement Examined*, ed. Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, Christianity and Renewal - Interdisciplinary Studies (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 86.

[56] Adam Perez et al., "'Do It Again': Chart-Topping Worship Songs and the Churches Behind Them," *Liturgy (Washington)* 38, no. 4 (2023): 33.

element of the lyrics, music, or market contributed fully to whether a song ultimately became a #1 song but found significant musical changes in the repertoire throughout the 2010s.[57]

Though my own dissertation does not examine the theology of CWM lyrics in a significant way, a wealth of recent research on **how songs convey meaning** has shaped the academic dialogue. In many cases, this has involved analyses of the Christian Copyright Licensing International Top 100 lists. One example of this kind of work is Matthew Sigler's article examining the Top 25 list for changes in worship. He explores the limitations of this methodology, and calls for engagement with CWM on the local level in addition to using the Top 25 lists.[58] Similarly, Daniel Thornton's recent book *Meaning-Making in the Contemporary Congregational Song Genre* explores the meaning that songs themselves have, rather than focusing on their context of reception.[59] He draws on conversations with those involved in the industry as well as analysis of the top CCLI lists from numerous regions to discern the various ways songs convey meaning.

One of the first projects to explore meaning for top CCLI songs is also one of the first academic collections on CWM, *The Message in the Music* edited by Robert Woods and Brian Walrath.[60] This edited collection features essays by prominent theologians and musicologists who offer insight into the top CWM songs: authors were provided with the seventy-seven most frequently sung worship songs for consideration. The contributors undertook significant textual

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[57] Shannan Katherine Baker, "The Mystery, Music, and Markets of Contemporary Worship Songs: An Interdisciplinary Comparison of the CCLI Top 25 and Number-One Songs from 2010 -2020" (PhD Thesis, Waco, TX, Baylor University, 2022), 282.

[58] R. Matthew Sigler, "Not Your Mother's Contemporary Worship: Exploring CCLI's 'Top 25' List for Changes in Evangelical Contemporary Worship," *Worship* 87, no. 5 (2013): 462.

[59] Daniel Thornton, *Meaning-Making in the Contemporary Congregational Song Genre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[60] Robert Woods and Brian Walrath, eds., *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdom Press, 2007).

analysis, examining how themes such as the Trinity and social justice were represented in top songs. The collection offers a unique snapshot in time and was significant for marking a new field of research. It is also the first in a succession of research projects that has been devoted to examining the CCLI Top 25 lists and other similar charts.

Most important for this project in *The Message in the Music* is an essay by Jenell Williams Paris which reads contemporary worship songs through the lens of intimacy and romance, suggesting that the congregation is often portrayed as the doting and helpless female, while God is the authoritative and distant man. She ultimately calls for healthier portrayals of love in these very intimate songs.[61] In a recent essay, I built upon Williams Paris' argument by exploring an emerging phenomenon where songwriters combine intimate language with aggressive language for God, such as describing God's love as reckless or jealous. I suggest that contemporary worship songwriters should care for language of consent when using this heavily intimate language in a context with as many power imbalances as the church.[62]

Perhaps the most relevant to this project is work that has begun to emerge on the **industry** behind the Christian music industry. Andrew Mall's book *God Rock Inc: The Business of Niche Music* helpfully sets a precedent for viewing the Christian music industry as a market system in a capitalist culture. Mall unpacks the way this market-oriented perspective is uncomfortable for Evangelicals who believe that "capitalism itself is antithetical to ministry."[63]

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[61] Jenell Williams Paris, "'I Could Sing of Your Love Forever': American Romance in Contemporary Worship," in *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*, ed. Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 54.

[62] Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "'Reckless Love': Sexual Violence, Gendered Interpretations, and Intimate and Aggressive Language in Contemporary Worship Music," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 40, no. 2 (2024): 18.

[63] Andrew Mall, *God Rock, Inc.: The Business of Niche Music* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), 63.

This emphasis on profitability emerged after the grassroots days of the Jesus People and other early leaders in the industry who were oriented towards ministry. It was solidified when publishing companies like EMI, BMG, and Sony bought up smaller labels and became clear investors in the industry. Mall writes:

> This increased focus on profitability at the major Christian record labels both settled and complicated earlier discourses on the appropriate goals of Christian music. In one sense, it clarified the position of the largest Christian labels: for CCMG, Provident, and Word, Christian music largely existed as a commodity sold to Christian consumers: what Christian music is for is making money.[64]

Mall's contribution in this case is vitally important because it clarifies the often-overlooked reality that in addition to being oriented towards ministry, the industry is part of a capitalist structure that is intended to bring in profit. Mall continues: "Questions about the market's aesthetic boundaries, evangelistic mission, target audience, ways of measuring success, and so on become easier to answer when we understand that its principal goal is to minimize expenses and maximize revenues."[65] Approaching a topic like this with an understanding of the many layers of incentive towards success is vital.

Nathan Myrick has also explored the role of celebrity in this newly established industry. He describes celebrity as a reality for 21st century Americans: it is neither good nor bad, but is part of the fabric of our culture.[66] He writes: "The convergence of this triad of 1) media lifestyle marketing of an ecclesial practice, 2) personal religious identification in and through the possession of the objects this marketing strategy produced, and 3) the authenticating effect of

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[64] Mall, *God Rock, Inc.,* 85.

[65] Mall, *God Rock, Inc.,* 85.

[66] Nathan Myrick, "Double Authenticity: Celebrity, Consumption, and the Christian Worship Music Industry," *The Hymn* 69, no. 2 (2018): 21.

"celebrity" on religious music consumerism resulted in a unique, but not unprecedented, model of music ministry."[67] Myrick calls this the "Celebrity model," and it is still in effect today.

Despite a recent increase in academic literature on contemporary worship music, the experiences of women in the industry remain largely unexamined. Kate Bowler's 2019 book *The Preacher's Wife* includes a chapter on women as "the talent" in megachurches, focusing on women's roles as singers, actors, storytellers, or dancers. She tells the stories of women like Jennifer Knapp who were scrutinized by the industry as women in the spotlight,[68] and highlights how talented women could find another place for church leadership through the role of megachurch worship leader.[69] Her chapter sets an important historical context, and this dissertation picks up where she left off by exploring the experiences of women in the industry today. Building on histories of the industry and close examinations of how it functions today, this dissertation fills an important gap by allowing women to speak for themselves about their experiences in the contemporary worship ecosystem. It incorporates questions of theology, church culture, and musical meanings, to consider how these dynamics impact women, layering questions of gender onto the existing narrative about Christian music.

1.5.2 What is Evangelical Womanhood?

When second wave feminism emerged in the 1960s, the values it stood for threatened the core of Evangelical beliefs around gender roles. Feminism called for the equality of men and women, while Evangelicalism promoted viewing men as the head of the house, with women as

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[67] Myrick, "Double Authenticity," 22.

[68] Kate Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton: University Press, 2019), 143.

[69] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, 145.

subordinate. In response to the widespread adoption of feminism, Evangelical authorities began to buckle down on their definitions of gender roles, promoting belief in complementarianism.[70] Leaders like Elisabeth Elliott and James Dobson contended that, according to biblical teaching, men and women were created for different, complementary roles: men were made to be dominant and ruling, both in the workplace and in the home, while women were meant to be self-sacrificing, self-denying, and subordinate.[71] Biblical manhood expected leadership, respect, wildness, and sexual drive, whereas biblical womanhood presumed following, responding, domesticity, and emotional drive.[72] Under a "complementarian" framework upheld by scripture, the teachings of second wave feminism held no sway. This complementarianism provided an appealing "path to certainty and orderliness" in a world that, influenced by hippies, feminists, and activists, seemed increasingly chaotic.[73] In the decades following the birth of this movement, many Evangelicals have continued to uphold complementarian beliefs, with men and women living into contrasting roles. For our purposes, Evangelical womanhood is relatively synonymous with biblical womanhood and traditional biblical gender roles.

Today, precise interpretations of Evangelical womanhood vary depending on the community context. In general, Evangelical beliefs around gender are characterized by a dependence on traditional readings of the Bible for guidelines on how women should or should not behave, which roles they can reasonably inhabit, and how they are to exist in relation to their husbands and families. This reflects a larger Evangelical emphasis on scripture as infallible. The

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[70] Alison Murray, "Building Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: White American Evangelical Complementarian Theology, 1970-2010," (PhD Thesis, Toronto, ON, University of Toronto, 2021), ii.

[71] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021), 65.

[72] Murray, "Building Biblical Manhood and Womanhood," 73.

[73] Murray, "Building Biblical Manhood and Womanhood," iii.

values of biblical manhood and biblical womanhood in particular have explicitly foregrounded the authority of the Bible. Notably, of course, even the notion of biblical womanhood is based on readings of the Bible informed by social context, which are not objectively inerrant.[74] While academics have written about this movement, public figures are at the helm of the church's debate on biblical womanhood. For example, an organization started by John Piper, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, emerged as a response to the feminist movement and has fought for complementarianism in churches for over 30 years.[75] They have influenced churches by advocating for biblical roles for both men and women.

In the past 50 years significant research has emerged that explores the ways that biblical womanhood values impact Evangelical women's experiences. In her book on fundamentalism and gender, Margaret Lamberts Bendroth examines the years leading up to the reinforcement of complementarianism in the 1960s. She contends that the administration of complementarian values did not exclusively arise in response to feminist movements in the 1960s but had been encouraged by fundamentalists in the decades prior. Anxiety around women's rights and roles had spurred the birth of fundamentalism and its binaural gender roles at the end of the 19th century.[76] Her work ultimately suggests that the groundwork was previously laid for a resurgence of complementarian values.

The work of Sally K. Gallagher also offers insight into how some Evangelical women distance their beliefs from those of feminists, without necessarily fighting them. Since a rigid complementarian framework was enforced in response to feminism, Gallagher's 2004 work

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[74] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 178.

[75] Murray, "Building Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: White American Evangelical Complementarian Theology, 1970-2010," 52.

[76] Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

examines how Protestants (including Evangelicals) engage and react to feminist principles. She found that while most Evangelicals do consider feminism to go against their beliefs and values, only a small group has engaged in any sort of fight against feminism.[77] The beliefs of Evangelical women were thus informed by a reaction against feminist principles, but they didn't necessarily engage this opposition in everyday life. Further, while a handful of conservative Evangelical leaders used highly derogatory language to describe feminists and their ideals, many Evangelicals see some positive outcomes of the feminist movement, such as a heightened awareness of sexual abuse.

Understanding who Evangelical women are involves engaging the nuances and oppositions that are present within any subculture. Increasingly, it seems that the divide between identities of complementarian, egalitarian, and a range of other Evangelical perspectives on gender, are not as stark as they used to be. In her 2016 book, Michelle Lee-Barnewall identifies a growing sense that neither perspective – complementarian nor egalitarian – is quite adequate for today's church. She proposes a way forward that does not involve returning to the biblical texts to determine who is "correct," but rather reimagines the issue itself alternatively through a new viewpoint. While much of the debate has been around what women can or cannot do, Lee-Barnewall cites the Apostle Paul, noting the importance of forming questions effectively.[78] Rather than ask "yes" or "no" questions about women's roles, questions should be formed that compel in depth conversation and spur more complex answers. Reframing questions would allow women to live into more nuanced identities, beyond simply complementarian or egalitarian.

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[77] Sally K. Gallagher, "Where Are the Antifeminist Evangelicals? Evangelical Identity, Subcultural Location, and Attitudes toward Feminism," *Gender & Society* 18, no. 4 (2004): 460.

[78] Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 11.

Also prompting more nuanced understandings of women's roles, Beth Allison Barr's 2021 book stirred significant controversy in both academic and public spheres. A professor and medieval historian at Baylor University, Barr argues that the concept of biblical womanhood as an extension of complementarianism is not biblically based so much as it has been socially constructed throughout history.[79] She draws on her own family story to enliven her point, sharing how her and her husband left their church after several decades after becoming convinced that complementarian roles were not where God was calling the church. Her book is an important testimony to how women's gender beliefs evolve throughout their lives.

Certain demographics are particularly impacted by the heteronormative life plan that is put forth by Evangelicals according to their gender values. Katie Gaddini's 2019 article engages the experiences of single women, whose identities are excluded by complementarian teachings. Rather than leaving the community like many would assume, the women that Griffiths interviewed decided to remain a part of the church, despite its exclusionary practices.[80] She identifies that one of the key emotions that single Evangelical women feel in their congregations is anger at being marginalized by virtue of not fulfilling their complementarian task of serving a family. Gaddini argues that the main reason women stay is because there is hope that things may change for them, that one day single women may be a valued part of Evangelical communities.

Several publications have examined the specific roles that these Evangelical women assume, from professors to business managers to celebrities. Bowler examines how Evangelical women assume powerful celebrity roles despite being limited in their authority. The wives of major Evangelical pastors perform an essential role in the life of a community, as they enact the

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[79] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 10, 32.

[80] Gaddini, "Between Pain and Hope," 414.

quintessential inspirational woman who supports her husband, maintains her own spiritual life, supports community efforts, and bears heirs to the megachurch throne.[81] She identifies two key forces that inform the public lives of these women: complementarianism that limits their roles, and industries that sustain them.[82] While Evangelical pastor's wives find success in these industries as preachers, homemakers, musicians, counselors, and beauty icons, there is also a unique expectation that women are fulfilling their household duties along their professional one. As Bowler notes, audiences cared that Evangelical women celebrities were filling their husband's underwear drawers when no one cared if Oprah was.[83] In order to increase their relatability to female audiences, Bowler suggests that they needed to find the fine line between inspirational and realistic. She writes:

> They must be hard-working but not competitive, polished but not fussy, wholesome but not perfect. And as famous women, they must do what all famous women do and pretend to be average, subject to the acid test of 'relatability.' Their stories should be peppered with mishaps—they broke the eggs bagging their own groceries, put their shirts on inside-out, and ruined their children's Halloween costumes.[84]

Evangelical women celebrities can't let the authority of their fame prevent them from still submitting to "biblical" relational roles, and they worked hard to make sure it was clear that they still functioned as homemakers.

The unique role these women celebrities fill is further expounded upon by Gaddini in her 2021 article, which examines the social media bios of Evangelical women celebrities. Serving as summaries of their identities, Gaddini found that women tend to put "wife" and "mother" first in

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[81] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife,* 1.

[82] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife,* 5.

[83] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife,* 13.

[84] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife,* 13.

these bios. Even when women are successful as models, actors, writers, or a number of other professions, evidence of their normative life course is placed at the fore, further marginalizing the single women that Gaddini has written about previously. These microcelebrities have become even more widely popularized with the rise of social media, and her popularity also serves to increase the "normative force."[85]

Regarding women's formal leadership roles, the status quo for many Evangelical organizations is for men to run church organizations, with women supporting their partners by organizing the house. Unlike facets of secular life where entire fields and organizations are striving to overcome low numbers of women in formal leadership, Evangelicals are uniquely exempt from this since they view gender roles as God ordained.[86] Leanne Dzubinski's research examines what happens when women are promoted to these leadership positions, defying the expectations for their gender. Following interviews with twelve leaders, Dzubinski first concluded that these Evangelical organizations self-enforce patriarchal systems, which women in leadership cannot resist and do not perceive the need to, based on their identity as women of faith. Second, similar to how the celebrities observed by Gaddini and Bowler personalized their careers by foregrounding their identity as a wife and mother, the female Evangelical leaders that Dzubinski spoke with personalized their careers by assuming that the limitations and critique they faced was a result of their own personal shortcomings, not the failure of the system. [87] In all of these cases, women's personal and private limitations come to define their careers.

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[85] Katie Christine Gaddini, "'Wife, Mommy, Pastor and Friend': The Rise of Female Evangelical Microcelebrities," *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 12, no. 9 (2021): 7.

[86] Leanne M. Dzubinski, *Playing by the Rules: How Women Lead in Evangelical Mission Organizations*, American Society of Missiology Monograph Series; Vol. 52 (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 13.

[87] Dzubinski, *Playing by the Rules,* 137.

This dissertation connects women's experiences of existence in conservative religious contexts and their professional goals and affiliations in a music industry space. While there is research on the experience of women as musicians, women working in Evangelical spaces, and women navigating conservative religious ideologies, this dissertation brings them together through an emphasis on women's experiences of working in the same religious space that limits their opportunities and authority. It allows women to speak for themselves about the experience of career limitations and religious constraints, offering a fresh perspective on how women find agency as working professionals and musicians.

1.6 Objectives and Research Questions

The goal of this dissertation is to examine how women negotiate restrictive industry structures in a range of roles within the contemporary worship ecosystem. I consider how they exhibit agency despite being excluded from full, egalitarian positions of authority. In this project, I trace how Evangelical theological beliefs dictate the ways that industry structures are formed, which in turn effect the interpersonal experiences of women in the industry. Despite these limitations, women exhibit agency at all levels, working to change the overarching theological viewpoints, industry structures, or social outcomes. To understand women's experiences in this environment, I draw on interviews with 22 women who work in the industry as songwriters, artists, producers, worship leaders, and industry executives. Through semi-structured interviews I work to identify the layered theological and socio-cultural reasons for the limitations put on women in the industry. The following questions guide my work:

- How has the institutional enforcement of Evangelical theology informed women's identities as songwriters and worship leaders?

- In what ways has the establishment of the industry around the turn of the century impacted women's roles within the contemporary worship movement?
- How do women exhibit agency despite not being afforded full leadership opportunities?

These questions enable me to provide a deep investigation of the experiences of women in the contemporary worship ecosystem and the Christian music industry more broadly. I will ultimately propose that women exhibit agency through their decision to participate in the industry and through their capacity to make meaningful changes, whether large or small.

Chapter 2. Theory and Method

"We wait for light, we wait for rain,
Behold the life born out of pain.
Eyes to the dawn, we're not afraid,
We do not labor in vain."

Chorus of "We Do Not Labor in Vain" by Taylor Leonhardt, Trillia Newbell & Janice Gaines
from the Faithful Project's album *Go and Speak* (2021)

This project is deeply interdisciplinary, something that is reflected in both my theory and my method. Religious studies, feminist theology, popular music, ethnomusicology, and liturgical studies are all key areas of influence for this project. I draw on qualitative interviews as my primary methodology, and in my treatment of the interviews am heavily influenced both by feminist ethnomusicologists and sociologists of religion. By using theories of women's agency in conservative religious spaces I am also employing religious studies scholarship. My dissertation draws on popular music studies throughout and is influenced by methodological and theoretical approaches around contemporary worship music, which is a sub-genre of popular music and influenced by popular music studies. This chapter provides context on both my research methodology and theoretical framing and concludes with chapter summaries for the remainder of the dissertation.

2.1 Theoretical Framing

This project is approached through several existing theoretical frameworks. First, the experience of white women in the industry can be approached from the perspective critical whiteness studies, which explains how and why white women have continued to outnumber and overpower women of colour in the industry, and how white women's status has continued to reinforce white men as the most authoritative. Critical whiteness studies offer us a way to describe the power that white men wield in the industry. Second, theories around women's agency in religious institutions capture the nuance of women who both feel the need to resist restrictive environments but also feel empowered in these limited spaces. Connected to my exploration of feminist ethnomusicology as a method that allows women's perspectives to stand in their own right, theories around agency respect women's unique experiences. Third, writing on celebrity personas captures the reality that forces of popularity, media, industry, and audience are all working both behind the scenes and in plain light to command how women experience the industry and are perceived by the fans who support their work. Together, these theories help to make sense of the industry as we perceive it today.

2.1.1 Whiteness

The question of agency is wasted if we do not consider who is and is not allowed to exhibit agency in any given context. In this case, critical whiteness studies offer a way to explore who is included and excluded based on race. It considers the way that whiteness has been overlooked as an aspect of racial identity, and how whiteness inherently produces white privilege. As described by Anoop Nyak, critical whiteness studies are underpinned by three core beliefs:

1. Whiteness is a modern invention; it has changed over time and place.
2. Whiteness is a social norm and has become chained to an index of unspoken privileges.
3. The bonds of whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity.[1]

The goal of critical whiteness studies is to limit the harm that is done by whiteness, not removing white people or whiteness from society altogether. Critical whiteness studies offer a lens by which to consider how the white women of the contemporary worship movement may perpetuate the harmful ideologies of whiteness through their performances on stage and public personas.

Evangelicals represent an overwhelmingly white subsect of Christians but have not prioritized exploring how race and racism influence their political ideologies, religious views, and spiritual expression.[2] White women, in particular, have benefitted from gender and race ideologies that allow them to justify their experiences of leadership. Burke and McDowell conducted qualitative video analysis of sessions of Christian women's conference called IF:Gathering. They found that white women who spoke at the conference downplayed their leadership roles, suggesting instead that God was in control. This is characteristic of Evangelical women in leadership, as was discussed in the introductory overview of Evangelical womanhood. Burke and McDowell further suggest that this emphasis on God's control ultimately exemplifies a color-blind racist ideology. They write:

> When IF speakers assert that 'God is in control of my life and therefore I can lead,' they ignore the structural conditions that privilege whiteness and assert that an all-loving God, not a white-dominated religious institution, is the one making decisions about who leads.[3]

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[1] Anoop Nayak, "Critical Whiteness Studies," *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 2 (2007): 738.

[2] Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 86-88.

[3] Kelsy Burke and Amy McDowell, "White Women Who Lead: God, Girlfriends, and Diversity Projects in a National Evangelical Ministry," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity (Thousand Oaks, Calif.)* 7, no. 1 (2021): 4.

This emphasis ignores the privilege embedded in their leadership positions and overlooks the way that their race allows them to occupy certain leadership positions.

Burke and McDowell further suggest that the ways white women merge their racial and gender ideologies not only justifies their own leadership, but it also serves to maintain the structures that elevate the voices of white people. They write:

> The IF:Gathering is an example of how racial and gender ideologies blend together to preserve 'inequality regimes' (Acker 2006) in ways that serve the interests of white women while protecting the structure of the white male-dominated religious traditions of which it is a part.[4]

The women that Burke and McDowell study have found ways to empower through a racial and gender order that "does not threaten the authority of white Christian men."[5] The authors suggest that this occurs in three ways: First, women distance themselves from credit by expressing obedience to God and reinforcing women's leadership through "small acts."[6] Second, these small acts extend to white women befriending or reaching out to women of colour as an act of "goodwill," while continuing to prioritize white women's voices in leadership. Third, women advocate for their own leadership especially among other women and children, particularly those with dramatic needs in faraway places. Together, this creates a gender and racial ideology that is comfortable for their religious frame, one which expects that women do not lead men.[7]

Many of the women in this dissertation resemble Burke and McDowell's research subjects. They find themselves in a religious environment where men's leadership is presumed to be the most competent and ordained, and yet they find alternative ways to exert leadership. They

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[4] Burke and McDowell, "White Women Who Lead," 5.

[5] Burke and McDowell, "White Women Who Lead," 11.

[6] Burke and McDowell, "White Women Who Lead," 11-12.

[7] Burke and McDowell, "White Women Who Lead," 12.

may recognize the importance of engaging race in their context and aspire to work with women of colour yet are confined by the expectation that their work will uphold the leadership of white men as the most authoritative. This limits them in their capacity to make meaningful change, and their gender and racial ideologies are restricted by their own "colour blind" outlook. The women featured in this dissertation also vary in their perspective of how race impacts the industry, with some easily identifying concerns with how homogenous it is and others less inclined to recognize this as a deficit. Like many social issues, their responses to questions of race are not uniform. Regardless of their personal perspective, it is true that they participate in an industry that has kept white men at the top level of authority.

This dynamic of white women reinforcing the leadership of white men is not unique to Christian music. Marissa Moss has written about this in the context of the country music industry, where white women are similarly made to be the minority. She describes the widely held rule that women should not be played back-to-back on country rule, or the more extreme "one woman an hour rule."[8] With this structure in place that severely limits women's voices and puts them in the minority, women are not in positions to fight larger power structures and institutional limitations. Moss spoke with Tressie McMillan Cottom, who compares white artists to a collective:

> If you think about white artists and white women artists as a collective, not necessarily a union, but a collective, their position in the labor market is both so fragile, and so conditioned on what male country stars allow them to have, that they become accommodationist. And therefore, we're never going to form an alliance with Black country stars.[9]

[8] Marissa R. Moss, *Her Country: How the Women of Country Music Became the Success They Were Never Supposed to Be* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2022), 15.

[9] Moss, *Her Country,* 15.

Women's precarious positions in both the country music industry and the Christian music industry, which share the same restrictions on women's radio playability, means that white women are too consumed trying to maintain their own limited position to fight for Black women and other women of colour. Moss concludes: "Keep the white women oppressed, who in turn oppress the Black women: everybody wins (if everybody is the straight white male establishment)."[10] Like in country music, white men in the industry "win" when Black women are oppressed.

White women in the Christian music industry further work with the religious stereotypes and ideologies that limit them to personas that are perceived to be pure and innocent. They are expected to uphold values of whiteness even in their stage personas. Richard Dyer writes about the Victorian era-influenced notion of white women as glowing, innocent angels. Of the limits of this viewpoint he notes that "It accorded white women a position of moral superiority and required deference to their needs, yet it was also a trap of moral obligation and unreal moral demands."[11] He notes that while the image had more sway historically, even today this perception can be seen when analyzing visual images of heterosexual couples: men are typically seen wearing darker clothing while women wear lighter or brighter clothing, more white flesh is generally visible on women, and women's faces are generally better lit.[12] These characteristics are seen in the Evangelical couples who lead worship together: there are stark differences in how men and women are portrayed on stage, with women still enacting the glowing, angelic role. This will be explored further in Chapter 4.

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[10] Moss, *Her Country*, 15.

[11] Richard Dyer, *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition.*, 2nd ed. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 130.

[12] Dyer, *White,* 132-134.

When white women assume the glowing, angelic role, it is harmful to women of colour, and particularly Black women. Lisa Allen highlights that in response to the pure, chaste, innocent identity of white women in Christian settings, Black women were easily assigned the role of "Jezebel" as contrast. With Evangelical white women rigidly embodying this glowing, angelic, persona, Black women were required to carefully scrutinize their public appearance so as not to appear in stark contrast to the "purity" of white women. On the ever-present influence of this on how Black women conduct themselves in church contexts, she writes:

> This legacy lives on in the twenty-first-century church in the form of lap cloths, appropriate dress size, color, length and neckline, hair color and length, shoe heel height, foundation undergarments, nail length and color, lipstick shade, makeup application, jewelry, vocal tone, decibel of laughter and speaking voice, walking stride, perceived chastity in singleness and submission in marriage, well-behaved children, and deference to male clergy and church leaders, even by female clergy.[13]

Black women in worship leadership must be exceedingly cautious so as not to contrast the "glow" of white women. This is one example of the detrimental impacts of whiteness on Christian worship. Critical whiteness studies can be used to understand how whiteness permeates expressions of race and gender for Evangelical worship leaders. In this dissertation, it provides a broader context for considering how performances of whiteness are damaging on multiple levels.

Like other institutional structures, there are power dynamics that dictate how the structures are maintained, evolve, and impact those involved. This challenge is not unique to the Christian music industry, and is shared across many industry spaces, including country music. Jada Watson has used Patricia Hill Collins' framework of the matrix of domination to explore some of the unique cultural dynamics that dictate how industry domains are constructed and maintained, because "it is impossible to separate art (in any form) from the socio-cultural and

[13] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness,* 191.

political context in which it was created."[14] Collins' original framework considers the ways that systems of oppression such as race, gender, class, ability, orientation are structured, and how they impact those who are positioned within them. It emerges from a Black feminist lineage that unearths the specific ways that Black women – and others at the intersections of distinct forms of oppression – are disadvantaged.

An intersectional framework, the matrix of domination provides a critical lens for considering privilege and authority, noting how structural forces of oppression intersect and are organized.[15] The four domains that Hill Collins proposes are structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. These are flexible categories: Collins notes that "Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression."[16] Watson adapts these domains to music industry spaces, noting the ways this illuminates how historic decisions in music industries "have been upheld and maintained through everyday practices in the industry (labels, radio, charts), are reinforced through discourse and recognition systems, and impact artists in the industry."[17] She names the interconnectedness of art and the socio-cultural and political contexts from which it emerges, inviting a broader recognition of how these external forces shape cultural spaces.[18]

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[14] Jada Watson, "The Market," in George Waddell and Aaron Williamon (eds.) *Sound Judgement: The Science and Practice of Valuing Music Performance* (Oxford University Press, [forthcoming 2025]), 2.

[15] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Perspectives on Gender (New York: Routledge, 1990), 18.

[16] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 18.

[17] Jada Watson, "A Double-Edged Sword: Industry Data and the Construction of Music Industry Narratives," in *Whose Country Music?: Genre, Identity, and Belonging in Twenty-First-Century Country Music Culture*, ed. Jada Watson and Paula J. Bishop (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 57.

[18] Watson, "The Market," 2.

Collins' *structural domain* describes the large-scale social institutions that have relied on various forms of segregation.[19] In the music industry context, Watson identifies these as the systems that surround industry spaces, including white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, etc.[20] Within Christian music, these same oppressive forces are at work but may have the added layer of being spiritualized – they may be resisted under a framework of religious freedom or spiritual expression. This structural domination is expressed through both formal and informal policies, codes, and conventions employed by publishers and labels, including the ways charts are named and described.[21] The *disciplinary domain* consists of the tools that are used to enact both these larger structures and more specific policies, such as the practice of segregating music awards along racial lines, with distinct gospel and CCM awards.

The *cultural domain* (what Collins originally termed the hegemonic domain, but later renamed) is the space through which oppressive ideas and stereotypes are perpetuated through communication, storytelling, community cultures, and media.[22] On the cultural domain, Watson writes: "These structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains (each themselves oppressive systems) are connected through media and culture, which circulates ideas and ideologies, normalizing rhetoric by perpetuating established narratives and undermining the seriousness of discrimination embedded in their structures."[23] The censorship of Kirk Franklin's acceptance speech, as mentioned earlier, could be an example of the communicative perpetuation of oppressive ideas in Christian music. Finally, Watson imagines all these domains together to push

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[19] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 277.

[20] Watson, "A Double-Edged Sword: Industry Data and the Construction of Music Industry Narratives," 59.

[21] Watson, "The Market," 2.

[22] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 284.

[23] Watson, "A Double-Edged Sword: Industry Data and the Construction of Music Industry Narratives," 57.

down on the *interpersonal domain*, which represents individual experiences of oppression in society. In Christian music, we could see how the culmination of these forms of domination might coalesce to exclude women of colour from industry spaces.[24] Together, these layers work to continue to keep white men at the center of the industry, with white women, men of colour, and especially women of colour left at the margins.

2.1.2 Structural Agency

Dynamics such as whiteness, agency, and celebrity are all factors in larger power systems. This dissertation provides context on these large-scale systems which reinforce the obstacles that women face. I propose that there are three steps to the social impacts felt by women in the industry, and one primary way they manage this. The first and most immovable informing facet or form of power is *theological beliefs***,** such as the belief that preaching and primary church leadership is a God-ordained role for men, procreation is a commandment from God and highly valued, wives should submit to their husband's leadership, or that sex is reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. These theological beliefs are often based in Bible verses, with a more conservative interpretation leading to more conservative beliefs. In turn, these theological beliefs lead to *structural systems* which are closely based on values such as the Billy Graham Rule or abstinence before marriage policies. These structures are in place to ensure that it's possible for theological values to be prioritized and are set in motion as large-scale systems that work to maintain order on sensitive topics.

With these large structures in place to maintain theological beliefs, we see *social outcomes* imposed on those who are most affected by the structures. While a value like

[24] Watson, "The Market," 3.

abstinence before marriage doesn't inherently mean that women can't work in the Christian music industry, the social outcomes that are a byproduct of the rule may have this result. Women are expected to speak only about certain topics, such as abstinence, and are expected to conform to strict behaviour guidelines, such as wearing modest clothing. These social limitations are sneaky: often Evangelical structures don't explicitly forbid women from assuming leadership roles, but the social limitations that are byproducts of their structures make it nearly impossible for women to do this without repercussions.

The recourse that women have against this larger order is their own sense of *agency*, which also impacts their social outcomes. While the factors of theological beliefs and structural systems are imposed upon women and difficult to change from outside of the system, women's own sense of agency is completely within their control. For some, agency could be their own empowerment to resist the system and push for ground-up change. For others, agency is their choice to participate in the system, regardless of rules that may limit them.

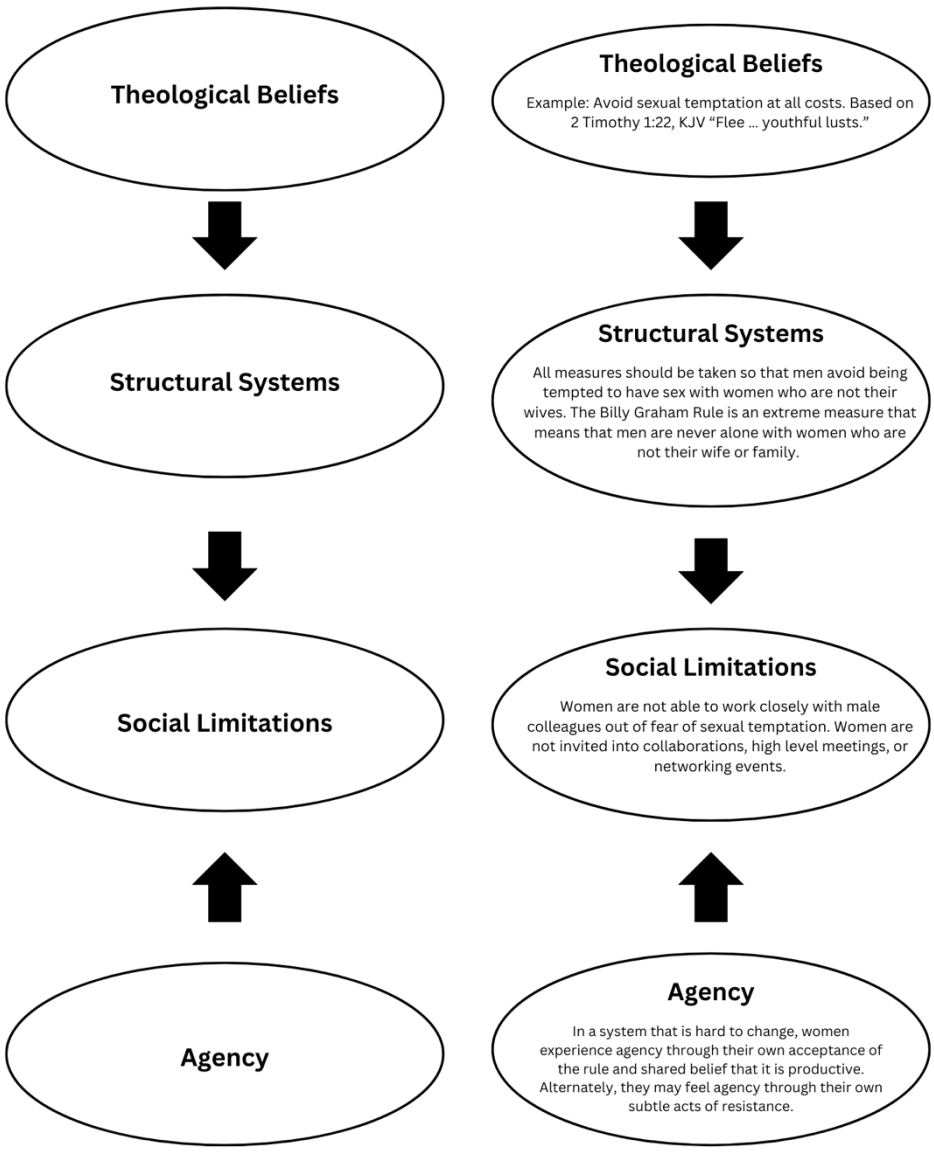

Figure 2.1 Map of Structural Agency and the Billy Graham Rule

Figure 2.1, above, highlights this progression in the context of the Billy Graham Rule. In the Christian music industry, it presents an example of how theological beliefs ultimately have social impacts. This rule will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5, but we can use it as a model of this process here. The Billy Graham Rule can be traced back to theological beliefs

around sexual purity which emerge from a particular interpretation of Bible verses. 2 Timothy 1:22 was used as inspiration for the rule, which reads "Flee… youthful lusts."[25] This scripture verse became foundational for beliefs about God and the Christian community. Under the premise of fleeing youthful lusts, Billy Graham and his colleagues avoided being alone with women they were not married or related to, creating a structure for upholding their theological beliefs. When using the Billy Graham Rule, men most easily worked with each other rather than risk the harm of experiencing lust towards a woman who was not their wife. In some cases, this rule was formal and implemented by church leadership, in other cases the structure was more informal and contributed more to the overall ethos of the group. With the Billy Graham Rule as a formative structure, the social outcome is that women end up not being welcomed as equals, are viewed as threats, and then are not invited into professional spaces. This is one of many structures that women must work within, and which has specific social outcomes. Some will work at changing these structures by exploring their theological underpinnings, and others will find agency even in existing in systems that are limited. As women express their sense of agency, they may do so by pushing back against the many layers of system that oppress them, from theological beliefs to social outcomes.

2.1.3 Women's Agency in Conservative Religions

"Why are women, many of them well educated and middle class, becoming increasingly attracted to and supportive of religious groups that seem designed to perpetuate their

[25] Billy Graham, What's 'the Billy Graham Rule'?," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, July 23, 2019, https://billygraham.org/story/the-modesto-manifesto-a-declaration-of-biblical-integrity/.

subordination?"[26] asks Kelly Chong in her ethnographic exploration of women's involvement in South Korean evangelicalism. Her question is one that scholars have been asking for decades and captures a kind of tension around how women can seemingly exist in both "progressive" and "conservative" spaces. At the heart of Chong's question is a concern around agency: why do religious women choose to exist in spaces that seemingly restrict their freedom? Similarly, Kelsey Burke notes that "agency for women who participate in gender-traditional religions seems to defy the prevailing notion of what agency is."[27] For this project, Lois McNay's definition of agency is helpful: it is "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities."[28] How can we conceptualize of agency for women in these systems that limit their opportunity and mobility within them?

Responses from scholars to this type of question have developed over the years, and Burke has helpfully summarized academic approaches to the question of women's agency in religious spaces, including exploration of ways these approaches may be limited. Her categories are summarized as follows:

1. Resistance approach: Women challenge and resist religious doctrine, making their opposition publicly known and advocating for egalitarian change. This approach limits compliant women, who feel comfortable with the structure.
2. Empowerment approach: Women feel empowered by their religion and experience it positively. This approach also limits compliant women and assumes that women universally desire to feel empowered.

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[26] Kelly H. Chong, "Negotiating Patriarchy: South Korean Evangelical Women and the Politics of Gender," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 6 (2006): 697.

[27] Kelsy C. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 129.

[28] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 10, as cited in Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions," 122.

3. Instrumental approach: Women may experience positive outcomes from their participation in religion. This approach is limited because it primarily cares for religious actions with non-religious outcomes.
4. Compliant approach: Women may be compliant but do not passively accept religious doctrine. The danger of this approach is that it can weaken definitions of agency to include any action or perspective.[29]

Burke concludes by offering a warning that the compliant agency approach may dilute the concept of agency too far. She writes:

> Yet this expanded definition, if left unchecked, may incorporate all actions taken by religious women, thereby rendering the definition of agency as useless… with an analytical gaze focused on 'proving' the agency of religious women, scholars may lose sight of the ways institutions linked to gender-traditionalism, including church and state, shape what actions are possible and what actions are impossible.[30]

This dissertation is concerned with the ways that institutions themselves impact women's actions and is still concerned with the goal of revealing ways that women face limitations, even if they have agency.[31]

Several sources from past decades shed light on questions of Evangelical women's agency. Marie Griffith's 1997 book examines women's experiences as part of the Aglow fellowship, which at the time was the largest interdenominational women's mission organization in the United States. During Aglow meetups, women shared experiences of their lives with their partners and encouraged each other to follow the path of submission. From as early as the 1970s, testimonies arose of how unhappy women found joy in their marriages when they learned to

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[29] Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions," 124.

[30] Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions," 129.

[31] Elaine J. Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). 5.

submit both to God and to their husbands. Women's individual spiritualities and beliefs were informed by this practice. Griffiths notes that "...submission works as a valuable tool for containing husbands and thereby regulating the home, and may be subtly modified or subverted, so that the women retain a kind of mediated agency through their reliance on the omnipotent God."[32] This theme frequently emerges throughout the literature on evangelical women: what may appear to be limiting is negotiated and transformed to provide women with agency.

Lori Beaman expands on discussion of how Evangelical women maintain agency and authority, despite the limitations of expectations for them to submit to their husbands. Beaman highlights the significance of mutuality in the lives of evangelical women, noting that women expect that their husbands will hold up their "end of the bargain" just as the women do. Further, the women interviewed by Beaman express frustration with how submission has been understood. They perceive it not to be a rigid structure by which men lord authority over women, but rather in a way that "emphasizes equality, mutuality, and partnership in their marital relations."[33] Beaman's work explores how women perceive their experiences of submission by allowing them to speak for themselves.

These are two examples of scholarship that explore agency in religious movements, but there is a larger scholarly context that Orit Avishai has described as occurring in three phases with distinct responses. The first response she calls "Comply, but…", has been proposed by some scholars to suggest that women participate in conservative religions to empower themselves against other structural forces in their lives, such as patriarchal family structures and

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[32] R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 183.

[33] Lori G. Beaman, *Shared Beliefs, Different Lives: Women's Identities in Evangelical Context* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 1999), 63.

harsh labour markets.[34] The second response Avishai describes as "noncompliance." This body of scholarship suggests that women do not "blindly" adhere to religious structures but rather subvert the religion's rules through partial compliance. Avishai gives as an example Sally Gallagher's finding that while Evangelical women may technically have endorsed the view of male headship, in practicality they are largely egalitarian with regards to family labour.[35] The third approach Avishai observes she calls the "doormats" argument, in which women use their religious affiliation to further extra-religious ends, such as improving their economic or political opportunities. In this case, "agency is located in the strategic use and navigation of religious traditions and practices to meet the demands of contemporary life."[36] As an example, Avishai cites Carolyn Chen who notes that Taiwanese women who converted to Buddhism or Christianity after moving to the United States used their religion to navigate patriarchal family systems.[37] In the context of Avishai's research with Jewish women who practice *Niddah* – a ritual of purity around menstrual cycles – Avishai finds each of these frames to inadequately address her interviewee's experiences and perspectives.

Avishai instead proposes a "doing religion" theory which suggests that women in conservative religious structures find agency simply by choosing to participate in the religious institution. She writes:

> I argue that doing religion is a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity—not only a purposeful or strategic action. I further suggest that even when viewed as a

[34] Orit Avishai, "'Doing Religion' In A Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency," *Gender & Society* 22, no. 4 (2008): 411.

[35] Avishai, "'Doing Religion' In A Secular World," 411. Citing Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

[36] Avishai, "'Doing Religion' In A Secular World," 411.

[37] Avishai, "'Doing Religion' In A Secular World," 411. Citing Carolyn Chen, "A Self of One's Own: Taiwanese Immigrant Women and Religious Conversion," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 3 (2005): 336–57.

> strategic undertaking, religion may be done in the pursuit of religious goals—in this case, the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular Other.[38]

Avishai suggests that "doing religion" allows women to perform agency through docility, and that participation in a religious structure is an adequate expression of agency without ulterior means.

Avishai's argument is built in part on Saba Mahmood's book on women's agency in Islam, where she originally suggested that agency can be expressed through docility. Mahmood proposes that the lens of progressive politics has limited expressions of agency that do not fall under existing dichotomies. She asserts:

> I will argue that the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance. In order to grasp these modes of action indebted to other reasons and histories, I will suggest that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.[39]

For Mahmood, agency cannot be solely reflected in progressive aims but can also be expressed in nuances that go deeper than a dichotomy between subordination and subversion.

Building on Mahmood's work, Avishai concludes that:

> Women's participation in conservative religions is paradoxical only from the perspective of the observer, who is unwilling to register forms of agency that embrace religiosity for the sake of religiosity. To see agency, one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing. It suffices to note how members of conservative religions 'do'—observe, perform—religion, wherever that might lead.[40]

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[38] Avishai, "'Doing Religion' In A Secular World,'" 413.

[39] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14.

[40] Avishai, "'Doing Religion' In A Secular World,'" 429.

This framing requires a detaching of agency from the concept of autonomy – women can exhibit agency by choosing to exist in a space with limitations, even one that does not give them full autonomy. What is more valuable than critiquing women's choice to exist in these spaces is an exploration of how the spaces themselves may limit or restrict women. In her own work, Burke explains that her "research does not attempt to find actions that challenge structural or cultural constraints, these accounts of agency are especially equipped to show how agency exists *within* cultural and structural limitations, not outside them."[41] This dissertation assumes that women find agency despite their choice to exist within cultural and structural limitations.

Avishai's conceptualization of "doing religion" as a form of agency is essential for this project as it helps to explain the ways that women in the contemporary worship ecosystem continue to exist in a structure that oppresses them in unquestionable ways. Questions of agency in music and worship have also been explored elsewhere. Blanche Lacoste has written about the role of agency in musical worship for the predominantly female immigrant population to Italy, where these newcomers use their home country's musical tradition to develop agency. The sung Italian mass programs are struggling, and migrant women from Ukraine or Georgia are needed to maintain the structures. By singing in these contexts, they "dominate the entire place of worship, physically and sonically."[42] Lacoste's research subjects find empowerment through their unexpected musical leadership in a male dominated space.

[41] Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions," 129.

[42] Blanche Lacoste, "God Has a Woman's Voice. Liturgical Music and Agency of Eastern European Migrant Women in Rome," in *Women's Leadership in Music*, vol. 63 (Germany: transcript Verlag, 2023), 118.

2.1.4 Celebrity Persona

The concept of celebrity is integral to this study of women's roles in the contemporary worship industry because it captures the reality that my interviewees are not "regular" worship leaders or musicians, they exist in a more managed and power-laden celebrity context. This dynamic is relatively new: one of the most significant developments in the history of contemporary worship music was the birth of a celebrity culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[43] Celebrity status has simultaneously been eagerly embraced and celebrated by worship leaders with large platforms and influence, and resisted because of the way it draws attention to the worship leader instead of God, with artists like those from Hillsong Church both avoiding and reinforcing the way the media defines them as "celebrity rock artists."[44] Celebrity studies offers a lens through which to understand how Christian worship artists present themselves on stage, behind the scenes, and through social media.

The relatively new field of celebrity studies considers the actions of those who have been "celebritised," both on and offline, particularly considering their influence on fans, the media, and others that cement their public identity. The field "epitomises the continued importance of the aim to defamiliarize the everyday, and to make apparent the cultural politics and power relations which sit at the centre of the 'taken for granted' (which has long since structured the foundations of media, television and cultural studies)."[45] In the context of the church, understanding the familiar power structures of celebrities and the cultural politics that they carry is an integral part of understanding Christianity's contemporary landscape.

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[43] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 204.

[44] Riches and Wagner, *The Hillsong Movement Examined*, 10.

[45] Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, "A Journal in Celebrity Studies," *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 3.

Pete Ward's 2019 *Celebrity Worship* specifically examines the phenomenon of Evangelical celebrities, noting that widespread marketing has become foundational to the growth and success of the megachurch, an aim that is achieved through active social media presence. He writes:

> The process of celebrification within churches comes about as communities have sought to use media to spread their message. Using media in this way inevitably requires a human presence, to both facilitate communication, but also to generate an emotional connection. These individuals, who feature in evangelical culture, are transformed by the action of the media and as a result they are 'celebritised.'[46]

Ward succinctly summarizes how the celebritisation of leaders within church cultures serves to benefit the community by using media to help spread the message. For megachurches that also feature significant music publishing outreaches, this celebritisation is a major asset.

Evangelical women celebrities must constantly negotiate maintaining a relatable, vulnerable persona on social media while commanding audiences and maintaining authority on stage. Even when they have been successful as musicians, entrepreneurs, motivational speakers, etc., as previously mentioned, Gaddini found that they still place their most relatable identity, that of "mother and wife" earliest in their social media bios.[47] For women who are Evangelical worship celebrities, they must navigate acting as confident, empowered worship leaders during Sunday worship while also being relatable as wives and mothers during the week. To better understand how these contrasting identities inform women's stage presence, we can turn to Philip Auslander's framework for understanding persona.

Auslander considers the persona of an artist to be "the version of the musician designed for public performance, i.e. the identity a musician presents to audiences."[48] Persona is the

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[46] Pete Ward, *Celebrity Worship* (London: Routledge, 2019), 139.

[47] Gaddini, "'Wife, Mommy, Pastor and Friend,'" 757.

[48] Philip Auslander, "Framing Personae in Music Videos," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*, ed. Lori A. Burns and Stan Hawkins (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2019), 91.

identity performed by the musician when they are publicly visible. In the context of a performance of a particular genre of music, a performer can create a persona that embodies what is expected of the genre or can use that persona to critique the genre's norms.[49] For this dissertation, artists that embody both expected and disruptive personas will be examined. However, beyond just examining stage presence, exploration of persona can be expanded further to allow for consideration of the performance as a whole: Auslander notes that "Musical performance, as a liminal practice, acquires social or political meaning through its conformity or resistance to social and cultural norms."[50] Part of examining the persona of worship artists is understanding how the artist relates to their social and cultural context, and considering how they engage that context through performance. Since persona can be communicated both on stage and off stage (through interviews, social media, etc.),[51] this dissertation will examine how Evangelical women find ways to communicate their various identities as wives, mothers, songwriters, worship leaders, celebrities, and entrepreneurs, among roles, as part of their persona throughout their careers.

Overall, my theoretical framework emphasises how women navigate restrictions placed upon them by institutions such as whiteness and celebrity culture. It considers the governing beliefs, structures, and interpersonal dynamics that dictate their everyday lived experiences and examines how they find agency despite these limitations. While their expressions of agency might not match popular expectations of how women are assumed to want to live, the framework of agency does allow for an understanding of empowerment outside of egalitarian spaces. Like

[49] Philip Auslander, "Framing Personae in Music Videos," 94.

[50] Philip Auslander, "Framing Personae in Music Videos," 94.

[51] Philip Auslander, "Framing Personae in Music Videos," 96.

many religious women who have gone before them, the women featured in this project are able to pursue careers and relationships that feel empowering to them, despite many restrictions.

2.2 Research Methodology

Qualitative interviews with women in the Christian music industry are the primary research methodology employed in this dissertation. Although firsthand accounts of women's experiences in the CWM industry are documented in some popular press materials, in general, public accounts of their perspectives and stories are limited. I conducted interviews with 22 women whose involvement in the industry has ranged from the first days of the industry at Calvary Chapel in the 1960s through to the present day. My interviewees have been worship leaders, industry executives, songwriters, and often a combination of numerous roles at once. In some cases, I have supplemented my understanding of their stories with their biographies, memoirs, music videos, or other press interview they have done. As part of this project, I also conducted fieldwork at three contemporary worship concerts across Canada and the United States. These are referenced at various points throughout the dissertation. At each concert, I took notes on the event as it was happening either on my phone or in a notebook, along with pictures and videos. I completed fieldnotes following the event with my reflections on what I observed. This was not my primary methodology but offered ways to view the dynamics interviewees described in action.

In his book on Christian music, Andrew Mall suggests that Christian music is best understood through its visible priorities. He writes: "Niche markets—including Christian music as well as other genres, styles, and cultures—are best understood not through their formal elements but rather through their priorities and objectives, as articulated and enacted by the *individuals and institutions* that operate within those markets to produce, distribute, mediate, and

consume the music itself."[52] Mall advocates for an ethnomusicological approach to the study of music industries, and especially invites research on Christian music. In fact, he goes so far as to observe a self-perpetuating cycle in the discipline of ethnomusicology where only certain topics are considered to be suitable, and suggests that "one way to break this cycle is to set aside our personal tastes to research (and support and welcome research on) topics that are relatively unpopular in our academic disciplines, such as Christian music."[53] Even if contemporary expressions of Christian music are not the most popular research area within music disciplines, the field reveals how music functions in our cultural context. This dissertation builds on the invitation to consider the individuals and institutions that are operating within the market of Christian music.

In drawing on qualitative interviews and fieldwork conducted at concerts, this project uses ethnography, which is "the systematic description of the culture, or some aspect of the culture, of a social group."[54] Understanding, rather than evaluating, is a core value of this kind of research.[55] As Jeff Todd Titon notes in his overview of ethnography in congregational song, it is important that the researcher engages in "describing and understanding the group's ideas and behavior on its own terms before coming to any interpretative conclusions that might not be available to the social group or that differ from the way the members of the social group

[52] Mall, *God Rock, Inc.,* 66. Italics added.

[53] Mall, *God Rock, Inc.,* 23.

[54] Jeff Todd Titon, "Ethnography in the Study of Congregational Song," in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Mall, Monique Marie Ingalls, and Jeffers Engelhardt, Congregational Music Studies Series (Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge, 2021), 64.

[55] Mary E. McGann, *A Precious Fountain: Music in the Worship of an African American Catholic Community*, Virgil Michel Series (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2004), xx.

understand it."[56] While ethnographers can engage in critique and questioning, their primary goal is to unveil how the community understands themselves.

2.2.1 Feminist Ethnomusicology and Ethnography

The tension between wanting to *evaluate* communities versus *understand* them is ongoing for qualitative researchers.[57] Many scholars recognize that it is unethical for them – as educated, likely middle upper-class scholars – to immerse themselves in another community and then to pass judgement or provide authoritative interpretation. My goal was to conduct qualitative interviews without assigning myself as an expert or authority on my interviewee's experiences. Like Ellen Koskoff discovered for herself and describes in her 2014 book on feminist ethnomusicological research, researchers must seek to *understand* the belief systems of the women they interview, instead of trying to change them.[58] In the case of research with women in conservative religious contexts – as Koskoff conducts – having a feminist academic interpret their responses in a way places them in line with a feminist lineage to which they do not ascribe can be violating. But just as a feminist critique violates the interviewees' voices, the ethnographic presentation, Koskoff posits, violates the researcher's own feminist voice. Koskoff negotiates this tension in her own research, where she specifically explores her interactions with

[56] Todd Titon, "Ethnography in the Study of Congregational Song," 65.

[57] I use qualitative and ethnographic as somewhat interchangeable when describing my methodology. While they have historically been differentiated, in recent years some have used "qualitative research" as a synonym for "ethnography" to distance the discipline from the term "ethno," which correlates with the antiquated idea that it is predominantly white researchers studying different ethnicities.

[58] Ellen Koskoff, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, New Perspectives on Gender in Music (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 5.

one of her interviewees, named Miriam, who is part of the Lubavitcher Jewish community. She writes:

> Perhaps being a feminist ethnomusicologist is a contradiction in terms, but being both a feminist and an ethnomusicologist (among many other identities) simultaneously is not. As an ethnomusicologist, I am interested in understanding the whole of the Lubavitcher musical world, not for the purpose of comparing it to any other, or in undermining or critiquing it, but to understand it on its own terms. As a feminist, I am interested in what Miriam has to say about her own world and in maintaining the integrity of her words and her position in my writing, and, in a broader political way, in impressing on my colleagues that Miriam's words should be heard, if only to expose the underlying gender and class inequalities inherent not in Miriam's world, but in my world of work and family.[59]

Koskoff can claim as feminist the act of maintaining integrity in women's words, not over- or misinterpreting them. Her feminist action continues also in her desire for her interviewee's words to be heard by others who need to be challenged by them.

This thread is echoed in the work of Elaine Lawless, who also conducted ethnographic work with women in more socially conservative religious communities than her, specifically ordained mainline women clergy. In her writing, Lawless identifies that she does not presume to know better than the women she interviews, that she deeply respects their beliefs and values, and that she does not intend to change them or their beliefs. She also clearly names that she is pursuing this research with "the goal of making the reader cognizant of what I continue to recognize as blatant discrimination against women in religious institutions in this country and elsewhere."[60] Lawless developed a method called "reciprocal ethnography" to integrate her interviewees in her own interpretation process. This approach "foregrounds dialogue," bringing interviewee's experiences and interpretations as part of the process. Lawless writes: "The

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[59] Koskoff, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology,* 141.

[60] Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women,* 5.

approach is inherently feminist because it insists on a denial of hierarchical constructs that place the scholar at some apex of knowledge and understanding and her "subjects" in some inferior, less knowledgeable position."[61] By not assuming that she has some unique insight as an academic, she seeks to validate her interviewee's perspectives as essential. While I do not use Lawless' method of reciprocal ethnography in this dissertation, her care for not misinterpreting her interviewee's perspectives is a guiding value. Her emphasis on recognizing discrimination is also shared – this project similarly seeks to critique large power structures that keep women's roles limited. Lawless' perspective is complementary to that of Beaman, who similarly writes: "While we want to celebrate women's agency, we must also be cautious about obscuring systemic disadvantages that persist even in the face of individual and group agency." This is a difficult balance.[62]

2.2.2 Interviews with Celebrities

Ethnomusicologists have historically not conducted fieldwork with celebrity artists, despite an emphasis on fieldwork with music makers. In the context of his work conducting fieldwork with MusikMafia, David Pruett extends the invitation for ethnomusicologists to conduct fieldwork around popular music. He describes his own experience of discussing his work with Kid Rock, a singer and rapper. Of Kid Rock's response to Pruett's work as a musicologist, he writes:

> … he was displeased with the fact that many people had written about his music without regard for his input or opinion. I explained to him that ethnomusicologists have much to contribute to popular music research because our discipline has traditionally emphasized

[61] Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, 5.

[62] Beaman, *Shared Beliefs, Different Lives,* 14.

> fieldwork among people who create and experience the music. He thanked me for my interest in *him*.[63]

It is irresponsible for scholars to assume that artists are not interested in discussing their music, and in many cases – like my own – we might find that they are happy to share their experiences.

Each of the women I interviewed finds themselves somewhere on the spectrum of celebrity, whether they are a household name in Christian circles or simply have a large social media following. This adds a unique layer to the qualitative research, and treads relatively new territory in the field of celebrity studies where research methodologies have often been limited to textual analysis, related to celebrity portrayal in mainstream media.[64] In his 2015 article, Olivier Driessens suggests qualitative interviews an alternate possibility to expand research possibilities within celebrity studies. He proposes that:

> Focusing on the agents, meaning both celebrities and celebrity industry employees, might considerably improve our understanding of the genesis of celebrity. It can also give us insight into the ways celebrities experience and evaluate their fame and celebrity status, manage their privacy boundaries, negotiate with managers and the celebrity industry, and deal with fans and the media.[65]

Driessens cites the difficulty of celebrities as a population as one possible reason for this lack of qualitative research, noting that they are inherently difficult to access and are often inundated with media requests.

Driessens also articulates that while qualitative interviews with celebrities are an important research direction to pursue, there are significant roadblocks that may emerge. First, he

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[63] Pruett also notes that Kid Rock seemed to equate "musicologist" with "music journalist." David B. Pruett, "When the Tribe Goes Triple Platinum: A Case Study Toward an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music in the U.S," *Ethnomusicology* 55, no. 1 (2011): 8.

[64] Olivier Driessens, "Expanding Celebrity Studies' Research Agenda: Theoretical Opportunities and Methodological Challenges in Interviewing Celebrities," *Celebrity Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 193.

[65] Driessens, "Expanding Celebrity Studies' Research Agenda," 192.

names the issue of gaining access to celebrities for qualitative interviews. He cites that celebrities tend to be over-interviewed, and thus may have low stamina to be interviewed by academic researchers who likely cannot offer an increase in media visibility or public attention.[66] A second difficulty when gaining access to celebrities is that of gatekeepers, who come in the form of agents or managers with boundaries on who can have access to the celebrity. While one solution is to ensure that invitations for interviews are appealing to managers, Driessens also suggests that finding methods to contact celebrities directly can be fruitful, such as messaging them on social media or asking journalists for their cell phone numbers.[67]

Another challenge is what Driessens calls "getting beyond the sound bite." He suggests that "the question here is how to avoid receiving superficial and prefabricated responses by celebrities and instead record genuine answers."[68] Celebrities who are accustomed to interviews that extract sound bites may find it unintuitive to offer more long form, in depth responses to questions. This issue can also raise questions about what answers given by celebrities are "genuine" or "real," with considerations around which of the celebrity's personas are represented in the interview. It can be difficult to discern whether something is true dependent on which persona it reflects on (personal, public, etc). Driessens suggests comparing what interviewees share in interviews with what is publicly known about them and choosing interview settings where the interviewee does not need to be publicly perceived as a celebrity (i.e. meeting at home instead of in a restaurant) and thus may feel free to be more authentic.[69]

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[66] Driessens, "Expanding Celebrity Studies' Research Agenda," 198.

[67] Driessens, "Expanding Celebrity Studies' Research Agenda," 200.

[68] Driessens, "Expanding Celebrity Studies' Research Agenda," 201.

[69] Driessens, "Expanding Celebrity Studies' Research Agenda," 201-202.

2.2.3 The Interview Process

While I was drawn to an ethnographic approach that involved observing women worship leaders and songwriters in their home environment, the factor of celebrity meant that this was an almost impossible task. Songwriting happens behind closed doors, and worship leaders are not generally openly accessible to the public beyond their leadership during worship services (especially if they are at large megachurches). While I couldn't observe songwriters during songwriting sessions or worship leaders during rehearsals, I was able to interview these celebrities during a contained time block online. This afforded me the opportunity to hear from participants in the industry, even without being immersed in their surroundings. The following section describes the process of these online interviews.

2.2.3.1 Securing Interviews

I received my certificate of ethics approval from the University of Ottawa in November 2022 and began reaching out to potential interviewees shortly thereafter. As I was seeking interviewees, I set clear parameters around the kind of people I was hoping to interview. Because I had already identified celebrity as a key theme in the interviews, it was important to me that my interviewees either worked with high level labels and publishers, or they had significant traction and following as artists themselves. It would have been easier to find interviewees had I not required them to be well established in the Christian music industry, and interviews might have come much more readily if I was open to interviewing lesser-known songwriters and worship leaders. However, the work that it took to find interviewees paid off because of the rich insights they were able to offer into the industry and how it works.

I reached interviewees in a range of different ways, some of which were more successful than others.

- **Direct contact**: In a small handful of cases, my connections in congregational song meant that I already knew how to reach a potential interviewee and could send an email or message to them.
- **Colleague connections**: In other cases, I was connected to someone who had a personal connection and could reach out. Overall, personal connections made for vastly more successful invitations.
- **Contact through agents**: For many higher-profile artists, the best way to reach them was through their agents or managers. I found that agents and managers generally were responsive to my emails at first but sometimes stopped responding before I heard if the artist was interested.
- **Instagram direct messages:** I sent vastly more Instagram messages than I received responses to, but especially for more emerging artists who did not yet have an agent or manager, this proved to be an effective strategy.
- **Snowball effect**: At the end of most of my interviews I asked participants if they had ideas of others who I should interview for this project. This often led to interviewees themselves sending personal invitations to others, which also had a relatively high success rate.

This combination of approaches allowed me to successfully secure interviews with the individuals represented here. I conducted 26 interviews, though four of them were with individuals whose stories fell ultimately beyond the scope of this project. For that reason, I draw here upon 22 interviews. Out of my 22 interviewees, each of them was white except for one individual who has Indigenous heritage, though this was not the primary focus of our conversation. Interviews were conducted over a 13-month period between January 2023 and

March 2024. I concluded my interview phase once I was no longer finding active leads for new interviewees and found that my interviewees were generally sharing similar reflections.

2.2.3.2 Live Discussions

I chose semi-structured interviews for these interviews as they allowed interviewees to guide the conversation in a direction that was meaningful for them. While I went into this project with some assumptions about what kind of topics women may be interested in addressing, a fully structured set of research questions would have closed off some important conversational directions. I pursued what Gilman and Fenn describe as an "interviewee-driven interview," where the interviewer approaches the interview with some ideas of what they want to learn about and the kinds of questions they want to ask, while then asking open ended questions.[70] This kind of questioning ("how" instead of "do you"), as Aberbach and Rockman note, offers interviewees the opportunity to conceptualize their responses using their own frameworks, a value that is particularly important for "elites" or celebrities who "do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions."[71] Interestingly, I also noticed that some of my more high-profile interviewees were very adept at answering the question they *wanted* to answer, rather than the one I actually asked. While this inevitably happens with interviewers who are not celebrities, too, I found that very open-ended questions were most comfortable for my interviewees.

With interviewee-driven interviews, the interviewer's primary objective is to listen, rather than making sure that certain questions are answered. Following the lead of the interviewee

[70] Lisa Gilman and John Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019), 147.

[71] Joel D. Aberbach and Bert A. Rockman, "Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews," *PS, Political Science & Politics* 35, no. 4 (2002): 674.

allows them to share what they find to be most relevant, rather than what the interviewer assumes is most relevant. When fieldworkers arrive at an interview with specific pre-established questions and little room for direction from the interviewee, the interviewers may leave knowing only more about their own interests than those of the interviewee. Alternately, the listening strategy found in interviewee-driven conversations "also allows for more sharing of power in the communication than some other types of interviews because the interviewee has the opportunity to shape the conversation by initiating topics, determining foci, or asking the interviewer questions."[72] Since an interrogation of my power as the researcher and an emphasis on respecting the authentic perspectives of interviewees was a core value for this dissertation, open-ended and listening-oriented interviews were a natural fit.

Interestingly, I found that despite my best efforts for the interviews to have a conversational tone, the nature of interviewees as micro-celebrities meant that I found they were accustomed to interviews being one-sided and not conversational. I consistently told interviewees that they could revoke or change things that they said, and in one case, an interviewee responded by assuring me that that wouldn't need to happen since she was media trained. My interviewees generally spoke clearly and articulately, without the need to go back and change their answers. Because they were comfortable with the interview format, it was most often natural for them to answer questions rather than engage in a back-and-forth style of conversation.

My interviews were generally scheduled approximately two weeks before the interview date. Most of my interviews were scheduled via email, sometimes directly with artists and sometimes through managers or agents. On one occasion the interview was scheduled via

[72] Gilman and Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork,* 147.

Facebook messenger. Once a time was confirmed I sent the interviewees the consent form, which provided a small summary of the project. On one occasion an interviewee asked to see the questions before the interview, and in this case, I sent several general example questions in advance. In general, however, the questions were not given ahead of time.

After some greetings and small talk, I always began my interviews by going over the consent form with the interviewee. They had usually been sent the form in advance but summarizing it allowed me to expand on certain areas or stop for any questions they had. As part of this process, I asked interviewees whether they wanted to be represented anonymously during the dissertation. Some were completely fine to have their names used, others felt strongly that they needed to be anonymous. I assured interviewees that this decision could be changed after the fact, and that they could always request to see the interview transcript or request to revoke anything they said. To date, no one has requested to see the transcript, and only one person has revoked part of a story she told. I then obtained verbal consent from the interviewees for the results of the interview to be used for the project and for the meeting to be recorded. One somewhat messy aspect of this consent process was that I needed their permission to record the Zoom call and needed to record their consent – I began recording by letting them know that they can always request the recording to be paused or stopped. After consent was obtained, I began with my interview questions.

Interviewees were first asked a similar set of questions. Because of the large number of interviews, ongoing narrowing of the project's focus, and the semi-structured nature of the conversations, my interview questions evolved. Gilman and Fenn suggest preparing 20-25 questions for a roughly one hour interview, which I consistently did, though I hoped that our conversation would develop such that I didn't need to ask every question and the conversation

could flow more freely.[73] In most cases, I found that we naturally touched on most of the themes in the questions I had prepared, whether each question was formally asked or not.

The opening questions included some of the following:

- How did you get into the contemporary worship music industry?
- What different roles do you notice women play in the CWM industry? Are there certain roles they are particularly well represented in?
- What support systems and networks are in place for women's advancement?
- What has your experience been as a woman in the contemporary worship music industry, with regards to limitations or advantages?
- How has the industry evolved over the past several years or decades?
- Has the rise of technology in the industry impacted women's participation? If so, how?
- What about the rise of a celebrity culture?
- Does your faith influence your perspective on women's roles in the industry?

Following these questions, I often turned to questions I had prepared that touched on more specific aspects of the interviewee's life, such as questions related to their voice or instrument, collaborators, or specific songs they were connected to. As my interviews went on and I became more confident, I also sometimes opened with the prompt "tell me what it's like to be a woman in the contemporary worship industry." See Appendix A for my complete interview protocol.

At the end of interviews – most of which were roughly one hour in length – I asked most participants if they would be open to having a follow up conversation, and everyone I asked said they were open to it. I also asked if there was anyone else they thought I should talk to, which was often a way for me to ask if they could introduce me to any other prospective interviewees.

[73] Gilman and Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, 152.

Some interviewees were very keen to make introductions and quickly sent follow up notes. One interviewee was very hesitant to make connections, which I attribute to a desire for anonymity.

2.2.3.3 Preparing the Transcript

Following the interviews I created a transcript of our conversations. The process of creating a transcript is inherently subjective because it is always an interpretation: it is simply a *representation* of what occurred, not the actual occurrence. There are a multitude of ways that discrepancies can appear between a transcription and the actual event, including different representations of tone, false starts and short utterances that can seem normal spoken but appear unnatural when written, and engagement with nonverbal cues like laughter or sighs.[74] Maclean et al. suggest that there may be times when indicating conversational fillers in transcription may be important, but when using grounded theory the accuracy of information must be prioritized, and non-verbal communications can be hard to capture and may not contribute to the overall comprehension of the conversation.[75] I generally did not focus my energy on non-verbal aspects of the conversation, and largely left out non-verbal cues unless they seemed particularly meaningful.

Since my interviews were recorded over Zoom, I was able to receive an audio file directly downloaded from Zoom. At first, I also used the Zoom audio transcript feature to get a rough transcription. In general, these transcripts required a lot of finessing and clean up before they were ready for coding. Gilman and Fenn estimate that it can take between six and fifteen hours to transcribe a one-hour interview – this number was lowered for me due to the Zoom

[74] Gilman and Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, 204.

[75] Lynne M. MacLean, Mechthild Meyer, and Alma Estable, "Improving Accuracy of Transcripts in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Health Research* 14, no. 1 (2004): 116.

transcript feature, but it was still took time and care to prepare the transcripts.[76] Part way through my interview stage, I also began subscribing to Otter AI, which is an AI transcription software. This made for a much easier transcription process overall, although it still took two to three hours to transcribe one hour of interview.

2.2.3.4 Coding and Analysis

Once I had an interview transcript, I began to analyze it for emerging themes. Qualitative researchers can use a range of approaches when analyzing their data with the goal of producing new theory. While grounded theory is a very common approach – allowing theory to emerge from the data as it is analyzed– the abductive approach proposed by Timmermans and Tavory proved more complimentary for this project in the end. The authors promote abductive theory to recognize the large theoretical background that most researchers bring with them to a project, something that is often intentionally overlooked in grounded theory.[77] They propose that the abductive theory approach works by looking for outliers. It "rests on the cultivation of anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories and through systematic methodological analysis."[78] The sociological theories that inform a project are thus welcomed as part of the theory that emerges from the project. The theories we have been exposed to inform how we view a project, in addition to factors like our positionalities and past experiences. Timmermans and Tavory note that "We may see through gendered and racialized eyes, but we also see through the theoretical lenses of the

[76] Gilman and Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, 202.

[77] Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis," *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 3 (2012): 169.

[78] Timmermans and Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research," 169.

training we went through, the theories we read, the political allegiances we may have fostered."[79] These are all welcomed as part of the theorizing process.

In abductive analysis, having familiarity with a range of theories and theoretical approaches is recommended, and it is essential that the researcher is comfortable with theoretical comparison points. The researcher's job is to compare their data against existing theory (and theories), and to note when it resonates. The researcher can identify when findings are unusual or puzzling because they are robustly familiar with the theoretical literature that came before: "Unanticipated and surprising observations are strategic in the sense that they depend on a theoretically sensitized observer who recognizes their potential relevance."[80] Previous theory is foundational for observing what emerges.

The shift from grounded theory to an abductive approach was in part made because I found myself comparing the interview transcripts to themes that I was noticing in the literature I read, especially as I became more immersed in research on women in conservative religions, including the work of scholars such as Avishai, Mahmood, and Burke. I intuitively found myself wanting to take seriously this body of theory before determining where my research diverged, so a switch to an abductive approach seemed appropriate. Writing on women's agency became significant for my project and was increasingly a lens through which I viewed my work.[81]

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[79] Timmermans and Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research," 173.

[80] Timmermans and Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research," 173.

[81] It could be debated whether my original proposal for grounded theory analysis was in fact abductive in nature. As Silver and Lewins note, grounded theory is broadly used even if researchers don't strictly adhere to the rules of it. Christina Silver and Ann Lewins, *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide*, 2nd edition. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014), 164. Similarly, Foley notes the usefulness of semi-structured interviews for grounded theory, writing: "Semi-structured interviews are more suitable for a grounded theory study when the researcher has identified, albeit tentatively, some domains that have already situated the inquiry which interviewing can then begin to expand upon." See: Geraldine Foley et al., "Interviewing as a Vehicle for Theoretical Sampling in Grounded Theory," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (January 1, 2021), 2. The expectation that researchers might come in with some pre-existing ideas reflects a more abductive approach. Regardless of whether my approach was truly grounded or abductive, I aspired to let the interviewees speak for

In qualitative research, coding is a process of analysis done to organize data and detect patterns in it.[82] Due to the large volume of interview transcripts I was working with, I coded my interviews using NVivo. The first step in analyzing my data was an "open coding" process which involved reviewing all notes from the fieldwork to determine what is the most significant. Since I used NVivo for my project, the open coding was done by suggesting themes related to my interview transcripts in the application. These themes are large and overarching emerging from the researcher's impressions of the set of data, not each individual sentence or line of the data.[83] This step is to be done consistently throughout the research process, not waiting until all the data has been acquired. By coding and analyzing the data as the researcher continues to acquire data, they can determine which themes are emerging and can consider how new data supports or contrasts those themes. As new codes were added to the data, I would revisit previously coded interviews to add new codes and find new points of resonance with more recent conversations.

The nature of coding throughout the interview process is that subsequent interviews can be informed by themes that emerge from earlier interviews. Bluff notes that "In reality most grounded theory interviews become semi-structured because, as the key issues emerge, there is a need to focus on these to facilitate development of the theory. Issues that lack relevance to the emerging theory are not pursued."[84] In my process, questions evolved based on how interviewees responded in conversation. My codes ultimately became a way for me to track prominent themes, with some as broad as "authority" and others more specific, such as "motherhood." I referred

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themselves through the interviews, allowing themes to arise both through their discourse and through back-and-forth dialogue with the related theory.

[82] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 174.

[83] Gilman and Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, 212.

[84] Rosalind Bluff, "Grounded Theory: The Methodology," in *Qualitative Research in Health Care* (London: Open University Press, 2005), 152.

back to these codes when I was writing the chapters to determine which themes were prominent for my interviewees. As is typical with an abductive approach, I integrated my theoretical sources in dialogue with interviewees and increasingly focused questions on areas of resonance or tension with existing theoretical research, which will be explored in the next section.

In her book on ethnography as a pastoral practice, Mary Clark Moschella compares the ethnographic account to an impressionist painting rather than to a scientific treatise. She affirms that these accounts and explanations should be rigorous in their construction but notes that – like an impressionist painting – the richness is in the artist's insight and ability to express themselves. The viewer knows that the painting is not the subject matter itself. She concludes: "Similarly, an ethnographic narrative may be a beautiful and telling representation of the social life of a group, yet it always remains a construction, a story about the author's experience of the group, and not the group's shared social life itself."[85] I appreciate Moschella's framing as a strong reminder that this ethnographic account is only one of many ways of interpreting the data I encountered.

2.2.3.5 Feedback Process

For this project, I sent chapter sections that featured particular interviewees to them for their review. I invited their feedback to make sure that they felt comfortable with the way they are represented, specifically since any qualitative work requires significant interpretation from the primary researcher. I gave interviewees approximately 10 days to send back feedback and ultimately received requests for wording changes or the removal of particular sections from eight

[85] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 29.

interviewees and received no engagement from four interviewees. No interviewees requested to become anonymous if they hadn't previously requested it, and no one revoked their participation.

To do justice to interviewee's stories, I drew on Coralie McCormack's storying stories approach as a complementary methodological addition. Rather than reduce interview passages to codes and then recombine them across stories, people, and contexts, this method mirrors action research by forming collaborations with participants to constructs narratives through a process of formulation, retelling, and evaluation into a "complete interpretive story." These interpretive stories "deeply explore social contexts," as Emily Ford notes, "and involve close work with interviewees," creating space for detailed individual portraits of experience that highlight complexity of life in a way that traditional interview cannot achieve.[86] The large number of in depth stories presented in this project are an effort to do justice to individual stories, treating them with care and the level of detail they deserve. In turn, interviewees also were able to offer feedback on the way their story was described, opening another opportunity for dialogue. Ultimately, this project was designed to offer women a space to safely share their stories in a way that feels empowering for them, rather than restrictive in the way that so many of the industry and religious structures around them are. This feedback process allowed them to speak into the writing of this project, keeping their voices at the center.

2.3 Chapter Summaries

Throughout this dissertation, the concept of "the stage" is used to help organize various facets of the contemporary worship industry. This framing is inspired by Kristine M. McCusker's analysis

[86] Emily Ford, "Tell Me Your Story: Narrative Inquiry in LIS Research," *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 2 (2020): 240.

of "gendered stages" as articulated in her 2017 article on gendered stages in country music. McCusker considers how on-and-off stage relationships influence each other, and how these collide to construct gendered stages that may exclude under the guise of maintaining authenticity. When this authenticity is upheld as the ultimate goal it guards against attempts to trouble the defined roles.[87] In the contemporary worship context, authenticity is deeply intertwined with an emphasis on connection with God through worship as the only goal. If "authentic" worship is occurring, gender and racial imbalances become secondary concerns. In resistance to this emphasis, this dissertation exposes the imbalances on these gendered stages. Divided into four main analytic chapters, each section of this dissertation investigates a different component of the industry, together which paint a picture of how the industry operates.

The beginning of each chapter includes song lyrics from the Faithful Project's first album, *Go and Speak* (2021), used to foreground themes from the chapter and to highlight resonance between these themes and women's artistic expression within the industry. The Faithful Project was recently initiated by Integrity Music to amplify women's voices in the industry, and they released their first album in 2021.[88] Their songs intentionally integrate the stories of women from the Bible, allowing theological considerations around women's participation in the industry to be woven together with their musical output. Emerging out of an initiative that promotes women's participation in the industry, these quoted lyrics speak into the challenges women face in Christian music.

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[87] Kristine McCusker, "Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and the Performance of Gender" in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 355.

[88] For more on the Faithful Project, see: Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, "'Faithful' Project Offers Sacred Space for Christian Women to Create," *Christianity Today*, April 30, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/04/faithful-project-integrity-music-book-women-compassion/.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation, “Setting the Stage,” tells the stories of three women who were prominent as songwriters and worship leaders in the early days of contemporary worship: Karen Lafferty, Debby Kerner Rettino, and Marsha Stevens-Pino. Using interviews with women from the early days of Calvary Chapel, it builds upon the work of recent contemporary worship historians to integrate the accounts of women in the contemporary worship industry over the past 60 years. It traces how women’s involvement changed with the “industrialization” of CWM, highlighting how women had more potential for authority when the movement was still in the grassroots stage. Through conversations with women who had prominent careers in the industry, this chapter addresses previously unexamined factors in women's experiences in the industry, including women's ordination, complementarian gender roles, LTBTQ+ inclusion, and gendered spiritual authority.

Chapter 4, “On Stage,” provides a case study of one of Christian music’s most prominent couples, Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes, through a music video analysis of their hit song “The Blessing.” Through consideration of their use of instruments, vocalizations, and gestures, we can see how authority in worship is established and maintained, how this differs across genders, and the ways it reflects biblical manhood and womanhood. Complementing this analysis is commentary from my interviewees, who offer their own reflections on how they perceive their liturgical authority especially when it is restricted or limited. Ultimately, we see how women are often relegated to positions where they carry heavy emotional and spiritual labour, while men are valued on stage more for their musical output.

Chapter 5, “Off Stage,” explores the behind-the-scenes dynamics that dictate women’s involvement in songwriting and industry spaces that are not as publicly visible. The chapter begins by providing context for guiding factors such as family values, the Billy Graham Rule,

and gig economy. By telling the stories of three women in a range of roles – including producing, songwriting, and mothering – we see common themes that define women's less visible leadership. Ultimately, specific obstacles are named: disregard for maternal experiences, little room for women as producers, the need to resist the Billy Graham Rule, and the financial costs of bringing women on board in a male-dominated environment.

Chapter 6, "Surveilling the Stage," considers the dangers of accountability as an Evangelical value, providing examples of how Christian accountability has limited women's roles in the industry. Context is given for Evangelical perspectives on modesty, abstinence, and LGBTQ+ relationships, which are often cause for surveillance and accountability in Evangelical spaces. The chapter tells the stories of two women in the industry who both were "kicked off the stage" for reasons related to their perspectives and experiences of gender and sexuality. Their stories are supplemented with similar narratives from interviewees who describe restrictions on their voices and limitations on what they can wear. Ultimately, the chapter suggests that the culture of surveilling women needs to change for women to thrive in the industry.

The conclusion of the dissertation returns to the framework of structural agency, charting how women work to make changes at each structural level. They do this through mentorship for interpersonal change, through pushing for representation at a structural level, and by broadening the theological viewpoints that govern their communities. The conclusion ends by exploring next steps for research in this area.

Chapter 3. Setting the Stage: Women's Musical Leadership at Calvary Chapel

"I will run and tell the story,
oh, the Word did not stay buried but it is alive!
Spirit's setting tongues on fire.
Oh, the heaven's singing 'glory, glory, glory!'
Trees are clapping, clapping, clapping
Rocks are shouting, shouting, shouting
And then there's me, a woman."

Bridge of "A Woman" by Ellie Holcomb, Ann VosKamp, and Sarah MacIntosh from the Faithful Project's album *Go and Speak* (2021)

To set the stage for the development of women's involvement in contemporary worship music, we need to look back hundreds of years. To do it justice, we need to go further back than we can go here. Contemporary worship music is deeply based around biblical values,[1] so the narratives of gender and leadership in the Bible help set the stage for how women use their voices in Christian spaces. The stories of women sacred musicians throughout the early centuries of the church, like Kassia – a Byzantine hymn writer from the ninth century – help us understand a lineage of women expressing their spirituality through music even when the larger system

[1] Lester Ruth, "Confessions of a Liturgical Historian: A Journey of Rethinking the Bible's Importance When Discussing Worship; or, What I Am Now Learning from Pentecostals and Evangelicals," *Liturgy (Washington)* 36, no. 3 (2021): 50.

restricted their voices.[2] Female hymn writers from the 18th and 19th centuries demonstrate how church music became a domain accessible to women, one where they could express their heartfelt devotion in ways that were often gender coded even when they weren't invited into leadership in more formal church music spaces.[3] Even within the history of contemporary worship, women's roles have evolved and are influenced by the work of those in adjacent professions, like Pentecostal women preachers and grassroots folk musicians. This chapter will not do justice to each of these histories and realities. I do hope, however, that it will highlight some of the prominent stories of women's influence in the early days of CWM.

Lester Ruth and Swee Hong Lim have done significant work tracing the origins of CWM through what they describe as two distinct historic "rivers." The Praise and Worship river emerged from Pentecostal worship with origins as early as 1945 and was based around the belief that God inhabits the praises of God's people. The Contemporary Worship river was motivated by the desire for relatability and accessibility in worship, as well as the desire for church growth, and can be traced as far back as an emphasis on evangelizing in the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century. [4] Eventually these two streams converged in the contemporary worship movement we know today, which is sometimes referred to as the Contemporary Praise and Worship movement. Ruth and Lim have brilliantly helped readers to unpack the history of this movement in ways that complicate its origins.

In contrast to Ruth and Lim's narrative, the music of the Jesus People – a movement of hippie Christians that grew exponentially in California in the late 1960s – has most often been

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[2] For more on Kassia, see: Andrew Mellas, "Kassia," in *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 141–68.

[3] June Hadden Hobbs, *I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent: The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture. (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 27.

[4] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 311-312.

credited as the origin for this movement. That common history is oversimplified, and thanks to Ruth and Lim's work we know that the history goes back further to religious movements as early as the 19th century.[5] However, for this chapter, the music of the Jesus People at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa will form the foundation. Ruth and Lim write that when the Jesus People movement comes on the scene, it is as "one current among many…. A tributary flowing into an existing river whose multiple currents were already providing strong momentum forward."[6] The river that Ruth and Lim describe includes movements like those of early Pentecostal worshippers, which already set the stage for contemporary worship music. Our examination of the Jesus People and early contemporary worship music is in the context of this larger history.

Histories that describe the music of the Jesus People abound, yet chronicles of this revolutionary musical moment continue to center the stories of men: Chuck Smith, Lonnie Frisbee, Chuck Girard, Greg Laurie, and Larry Norman.[7] If you were to watch movies on the movement or read descriptions of it, you would assume that these men established the industry as we know it, with almost no input from women. Certainly, their influence is significant, but we miss out on the stories of women who also shaped this genre in undeniable ways. In these accounts, we have not heard about Debby Kerner Rettino, the first woman to be ordained by Calvary Chapel, or Marsha Stevens-Pino, who wrote the first contemporary Christian song. Not only are their stories overlooked, but by bypassing their experiences we also miss out on the opportunity to understand how gendered teachings and beliefs deeply shaped the movement.

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[5] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 184.

[6] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 98.

[7] Examples of previous histories of this time include Terrill Marshall, *The Jesus Music: A Visual Story of Redemption as Told by Those Who Lived It* (K-LOVE, 2021), Lester Ruth and Swee Hong Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship* (Baker Publishing Group, 2021).

At the risk of perpetuating an oversimplified history, this chapter is devoted to understanding the stories of women who were prominent in the early days of the Jesus People Movement at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, and who contributed to the establishment of Jesus Music as a form in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Jesus People movement, though not representative of the entire story, captures an important moment in the development of contemporary worship music, one that advances our understanding of issues at play in the industry ecosystem today. While their stories only represent part of the development of contemporary worship music, they lay an important foundation for understanding the restrictions and opportunities afforded to women today. After encountering these three distinct stories, Ruth and Lim's list of four main contributions of Calvary Chapel to CWM will be examined to consider how women contributed to this advancement. To better contextualize their narratives, we first set the stage for their ministries at Calvary Chapel.

The stories that follow are largely constructed based on semi-structured interviews with each of the women featured. Marsha and Karen both have written memoirs, so some passages have been drawn from those collections. I present these stories as a way of providing a history of the early days of the Jesus People Music, and to highlight the significance of each individual woman's ministry. They help to lay the groundwork for an understanding of how women's resilience has been required due to the limitations of such systems throughout the history of contemporary worship, and they reveal ways that the institutionalization of the industry was damaging for women.

3.1 Meeting Calvary Chapel and the Jesus Music

3.1.1 Introducing Calvary Chapel

If you had been a teenager in Costa Mesa, California in the late 1960s, you would have heard rumblings about a new kind of music. This music was folk based, simple, guitar-led, and incredibly catchy. It had young people from across California flocking to venues to check it out, and it was spreading like wildfire. Within the span of a few months dozens of new ensembles formed, and their songs were sung in coffeehouses, around fires at the beach, and in bars. Unlike other folk songs of the day, however, these songs stood out because of one big difference: they were Christian. Emerging from a humble church named Calvary Chapel flowed a stream of new music that was simple, based on Bible verses, and incredibly popular. This new genre, quickly known as the "Jesus Music," was becoming beloved by a whole generation of hippies who found themselves looking for something new, a different kind of "trip" than they had found before. And unlike the stuffy, traditional hymns that most churches sang, this Christian music was considered cool by those who were drawn to it. The Jesus People music set the precedent that "Rock could be Christian *and* popular,"[8] or as one magazine said, it was "Baptized rock and roll."[9]

Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa began in 1961 as a small Pentecostal church which met in a mobile home park. Chuck Smith Sr. arrived in 1965 as their pastor, having come from Foursquare churches, a denomination begun by female pastor Aimee Semple McPherson. Under Smith's leadership the congregation rapidly grew. Chuck Smith and Lonnie Frisbee's 1968

[8] Marshall, *The Jesus Music,* 17.

[9] Michael Hamilton, "The Triumph of the Praise Songs: How Guitars Beat out the Organ in the Worship Wars," *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999, 19.

meeting signaled the beginning of a new era for Calvary Chapel.[10] Frisbee and his wife moved in with Chuck Smith's family, and through Chuck and Lonnie's shared ministry, they began ministering to many hippies. They opened the first of many Christian communes just a few months later. These ministries had a wide impact on the community, "The houses, the concerts, and the weeknight Bible studies were the first outlets for new songs to be sung, new instruments to be played, new soloists to express their art, and new bands to perform."[11]

While most of these popular ministries didn't impact the more traditional Sunday morning worship, Jesus People poured into every offering of Calvary Chapel, drawn by the warm welcome and rich teachings. Short, scriptural songs written in a folk style became foundational for Sunday evening services, planting the seeds for the development of a new way of singing and worshiping. Offspring churches were quickly sprouting from the "mother church" in Costa Mesa, with new worship ensembles guiding much of the growth. Key figures like John Wimber were prominent in this expansion, with the influential Vineyard movement emerging from one of these Calvary Chapel offshoots. [12] Ruth and Lim describe the music of this time:

> There was variety in the music of whoever planted the new church. Sometimes the planters themselves were the original musicians, usually leading with a single acoustic guitar. Sometimes the singing would be a capella. In other cases, it might be to recordings. The music arose organically from within the congregations as it had in Costa Mesa's communal houses and Bible studies, although it is fair to grant that much of the music had pop, folk, or rock connections since the musicians did too. In addition, many of the new pastors wanted popular forms of music since many of them came out of the evening Bible studies at Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa…. Simply put, what happened in the new Calvary Chapels was a move of the liturgical activities of Costa Mesa's midweek Bible studies to Sunday morning, using the best musical resources available.[13]

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[10] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 106.

[11] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 107.

[12] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 108.

[13] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 108-109.

Calvary Chapel's impact was growing, and the musicians were at the helm of this influence. The folk/rock style of music caught on like wildfire among a generation of young, searching hippies, who could easily access the simple lyrics and melodies. To capture this energy and help to raise financial support, lead pastor Chuck Smith initiated the beginning of Maranatha! Music in 1970, a corporation which would facilitate recordings and help to circulate the music more widely.[14] The musicians affiliated with Maranatha! Music would take their songs and their message around the world, helping to further spread the growing interest in this new kind of music.

3.1.2 Jesus Music and Its Impact

The impact of these early days of Jesus Music at Calvary Chapel can still be seen in the way the industry exists today. Indeed, without the contributions of pastors and musicians at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, the industry would look radically different. Ruth and Lim outline four contributions of this group:

1. *Instruments:* Unlike prior movements in the history of Praise and Worship, worship leaders and musicians at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa led with a guitar. The musicians tended to draw on their own pop culture knowledge and the common folk influence in popular music.[15] Today, we still see the legacy of guitar players as the most prominent instrumentalists in the musical output of the industry.
2. *Intimacy:* Early adopters focused on intimacy both with God and with each other as a way of participating in true worship.[16] This is closely reflected in the song lyrics popular

[14] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 113.

[15] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 104-105.

[16] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 105.

at the time, such as "I Love You Lord" and "Father, I Adore You." Today, contemporary worship continues to rely upon intimate language for God even as it has evolved to reflect the popular language of the time.

3. *Informality:* In response to the large number of hippies with no church background, Calvary Chapel emphasized informality both in dress and behavior.[17] This was particularly developed in the evening services, where the music reflected a more laidback folk style. Churches that use contemporary worship continue to value a relaxed atmosphere, often advertising that they are "church for people who don't like church," resisting the image of a highly strung and formal environment.
4. *Industry:* The establishment of Maranatha! Music signaled the beginning of an industry for the emerging Christian music scene, offering a way to record, publish, distribute, and monetize the songs that were increasingly popular.[18] While the industry has evolved significantly over the past 60 years, many current structures are built upon the foundation laid by Calvary Chapel's Maranatha! Music.

Since the stories of men have dominated retellings of the Jesus People and their music, the ways women have influenced these advancements – and conversely how these advancements have impacted women – has remained largely unexamined. The following stories reveal the ways gender played a role in Calvary Chapel and the development of CWM.

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[17] Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 105.

[18] Ruth and Lim note that the impact of this industry is so significant that it may be why some people have identified Calvary Chapel and the Jesus People to be the origins of contemporary worship music. Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship,* 105-106.

3.2 Framing Priest and Prophet Leadership

The types of leadership that women in the contemporary worship industry can perform have evolved, and the stories of women in the early days of the movement reveal these changes. While the women I interviewed shared about harsh obstacles and limitations they had to overcome, they also expressed a sense of freedom to exist in the industry as they would choose. They were able to play guitars, have their songs widely sung, lead worship both formally and informally, and pursue ordination. Much of this would be challenging for women in the industry today.

This is not the only time that a movement has become more institutionalized as it has become restrictive of women. Max Weber's framework for distinct kinds of religious leaders is illuminating here, and much scholarship about women's leadership as movements become institutionalized is based on Weber's writing. Weber proposes two types of leaders: there are *prophets,* who exert their influence through charisma and personal revelation and there are *priests,* who have authority by virtue of their commitment to their religion.[19] Weber describes how these ideals impact women, which is summarized by Lisa Stephenson in her article on gendered Pentecostal authority. She writes:

> Weber also claims that among the religion of the disprivileged classes there is a tendency to allot equality to prophetic women during the developing phases because pneumatic manifestations of charisma are valued among the religious community during this time. However, as the community becomes more routinized and regimented a reaction takes place against these types of manifestations, and, thus, against prophetic women.[20]

[19] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Beacon Series in the Sociology of Politics and Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 113-114.

[20] Lisa P. Stephenson, "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men: Women's Religious Authority in North American Pentecostalism," *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 2, no. 3 (2011): 411.

Weber suggests that charismatic, prophetic contributions from women are welcomed before the movement becomes institutionalized. It is thus easier for women to exert their influence while the movement is still in the grassroots phase.

The impacts of this regimentation have been studied by Charles Barfoot and Gerald Sheppard, who map Weber's hypothesis onto the history of women's leadership in the Pentecostal movement in the 20th century. They describe the ways women were in authoritative roles throughout the first phase of Pentecostalism (from 1901 to 1920), including as founders of denominations and by being "baptized by the holy spirit," or speaking in tongues.[21] Barfoot and Sheppard describe this as "prophetic Pentecostalism," and suggest that this equality declined as the movement became more established. They note that "as routinization and regimentation of community relationships set in, reactions did occur against the movement's prophesying daughters."[22] This signalled a moved towards "priestly Pentecostalism," which the authors describe as occurring from 1920 to the present (though note that this article was written in 1980). Ordination became a formalized process, and it became increasingly difficult for women to become ordained. As Barfoot and Sheppard note, "In addition to being 'called,' one now had to be 'proven.'"[23] The institutionalization and regulation of Pentecostalism proved to be detrimental to women who were increasingly forced out of the movement.

Stephenson builds on Barfoot and Sheppard's work by suggesting that the priestly and prophetic functions were not separate time periods but have always been distinctives in Pentecostalism that at times have co-existed. She uses the categories of "ministering authority"

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[21] Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard, "Prophetic vs. Priestly Religion: The Changing Role of Women Clergy in Classical Pentecostal Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 22, no. 1 (1980): 2.

[22] Barfoot and Sheppard, "Prophetic vs. Priestly Religion," 4.

[23] Barfoot and Sheppard, "Prophetic vs. Priestly Religion," 11.

(defined by preaching, teaching, and evangelizing) and "ruling authority" (acting as elders, church officials, or denominational leaders) to differentiate between the types of authority that leaders in the movement have had. She describes the way women were limited from the priestly role:

> These prophetic functions were legitimated because of the power of the Spirit, which—as Barfoot and Sheppard note—was confirmed through the means of calling and charisma. However, when it came to functioning in priestly roles that were understood to possess ruling authority (e.g., elders, church officials, denominational leaders), women were excluded on the basis of their sex. Legitimation for this type of authority required more than just an experience of Spirit baptism; one must also be male.[24]

For women in the Pentecostal church, the door to spiritual leadership and authority has always been open, but when that became distinct from a kind of "ruling authority" associated with governance, women became excluded.

The priest and prophet roles are extremely relevant in a contemporary worship context, and precedent has already been set for how the priest/prophet characteristics can be found in the worship leader role. Nelson Cowan adds the role of "lay person" to this distinction, and summarizes these three roles:

> Worship leaders are laypeople insofar as they belong to a community—both the concrete, contextual community and the broader imagined community of Evangelicals. Worship leaders are prophets insofar as they are bearers of charisma whose presentation of self and performance has an effect on the gathered assembly. Worship leaders are priests because the worship leader makes important liturgical structuring decisions and mediates content like musical dynamics, lyrical curation and dissemination, and transitional elements.[25]

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[24] Stephenson, "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men," 414.

[25] Nelson Cowan, "Lay-Prophet-Priest: The Not-So-Fledgling 'Office' of the Worship Leader," *Liturgy (Washington)* 32, no. 1 (2017): 25.

Citing Weber's description, Cowan names the fine balance of being a worship leader with a "prophetic" edge since authenticity is desired by the congregation, and charisma can be considered suspicious.[26] He highlights the ways that worship leaders are models for the congregation, empowering others to be expressive in their own ways. For their "priestly" function, Cowan notes the formative impact of what is sung in a service and highlights how influential the worship leader's choices are here.

As these stories unfold in the following pages, the explanation of priestly vs prophetic authority will help to explain the evolution of women's leadership from freer to more restricted. Like women in Pentecostalism experienced, the emergence of an institution created a series of boundaries that could easily be upheld to restrict women from becoming involved. The women here found creative ways to circumvent these challenges, like women have often done throughout history.

3.3 The Early Women of Calvary Chapel

The stories presented in this section – of Debby Kerner Rettino, Karen Lafferty, and Marsha Stevens-Pino – not only add new layers to the official story of Jesus Music that has been told, but they also destabilize the history that excluded them. As Anderson et al. suggest, "When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the 'truths' of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories."[27] The lack of acknowledgement of women's experiences in official accounts of the Jesus Music has

[26] Cowan, "Lay-Prophet-Priest," 27.

[27] Kathryn Anderson et al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 104.

established and advocated for a neutrality around gender which does not exist. The stories presented here highlight the immense way that women's experiences in the industry were shaped by specific expectations on their roles and output as women. Throughout this chapter I use long quotes from the interviews to allow their stories to be told in their own voice. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes from each interviewee are taken directly from interview transcripts.

3.3.1 Debby Kerner Rettino: The First Woman Ordained

When Debby was a teenager, she watched *The Sound of Music* for the first time and was immediately drawn to it. Debby was born into a family of show business fanatics. Her dad was a movie producer, working on titles like *Citizen Kane*. Her mom was a musical theatre star, featuring in the original *South Pacific* on Broadway. What Debby did not inherit from her family, however, were the Christian beliefs that came to define her life's work. She was raised in a Jewish family, and it was only in high school that she discovered Christianity. Her first encounters with Christianity were infrequent, but each time she felt drawn to it. After watching *The Sound of Music*, she felt enchanted by the life of the nuns. She says, "Every night, when the first star came out, I prayed about being able to go live in a convent for a year to just see what the lifestyle would be like. And I never missed a night."[28]

When she was in high school, her dream came true. Her dad had to travel for work, so he sent Debby and her sister to a convent in Italy, where they stayed for a year. The seeds that were planted at that convent would flourish into a career of music ministry:

> At the beginning of it, they found out I played guitar. And it was right after Vatican II. This is *the* important piece right here that led up to how that played into me winding up in

[28] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

> worship leadership. Because the nuns asked me if I would play guitar for the masses that we had on Sundays for the boarders. They said, 'Would you play guitar for our folk masses?' because these were new, folk masses were new. And they chose music that was based on the songs, but had a folk style, which was perfect for me, because I'm really a folk singer. And then they put that together as the model for going forward for music to relate to the music of the people, but it related to us as young women, young girls, and also super related to me. And that music touched my heart.[29]

Debby officially converted to Christianity later in high school, after a presentation at school from the group Teens for Christ. After the event, alone in her room, Debby said: "Okay, Jesus, this is it. If you're real, if you're really the Son of God and the Messiah, I want you to come into my life, and I want you to be my savior right now." After her conversion, Debby says she was so excited that she "couldn't shut up." She began school as a music major at the University of California at Riverside and found herself leading worship at Campus Crusade for Christ gatherings, and eventually as a solo artist at churches.

Part way through Debby's undergraduate degree, she found herself at the heart of the burgeoning Jesus People Movement. One evening, she attended an evening service at All Saints Episcopal Church, and the community had invited Lonnie Frisbee to come speak as a youth leader. Lonnie would go on to become one of the most formative figures in the Jesus People Movement, but this was still early in his career. That night, Debby's friend who was supposed to do music, Dennis, didn't show up.

> And Lonnie looked out at the congregation and says, 'Is there anybody here for music?' And this guy stood up, and he said, 'Well, Dennis isn't here. But Debby is and she'll sing.' And I looked at him – who the heck are you? – you know? (Laughs). That's what I thought. And I said, 'Well, I'll sing if somebody has a guitar.' Somebody jumps up and goes, 'I've got one in my car,' goes out and gets the guitar and brings it in. And Lonnie, looks at me, you know, says, come on up, and I get – sit next to him on the stage. And I

[29] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023. Italics reflect spoken emphasis.

> start singing. And I think I'm saying like, 'I'm sure it doesn't sound good having not sung a note yet today.'[30]

As we sat on Zoom together in July 2023, Debby began to sing, just like she had that day in 1970. "Come walk with me in the spirit. Come and walk by my side. Walk with me in the spirit we'll let God be guide. Praise his name, day and night, praise His name, night and day..."[31] When the song finished, Debby says that Lonnie "literally fell off his chair… And he just laughed, and he just was like, 'Wow.'"[32] Later that night, the duo reconnected at an after party, where Lonnie made a life-changing invitation, saying: "You have to come to Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, you have to come. I want you to come on Wednesday night, and I want you to be helping me with worship. I want you to be the worship leader."[33]

Between that night and only a few months later, the Jesus People Movement exploded. Groups like Children of the Day and Love Song came onto the scene, and they produced the first Maranatha Music album, *The Everlasting Living Jesus Rock Concert*, which Debby describes as the first contemporary Christian music album. Debby and Lonnie continued to minister, working together as Calvary Chapel grew. Lonnie became the backbone of the Wednesday night Bible studies that Calvary Chapel offered, which attracted thousands of attendees and where Debby led music. While Lonnie reached the young people through these Bible studies, the church's lead pastor, Chuck Smith, guided the larger church. Like Lonnie, he also took an interest in Debby.

> Chuck came from that tradition of strong women. His sister was a pastor in the Foursquare church, and Chuck recognized in me, that anointing. He would stand backstage and listen to me sing. He goes 'Debby that was so anointed…' He would pull

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[30] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[31] You can hear a recording of Debby singing this song in 1972: Debby Kerner Rettino, "Debby Kerner - Come Walk With Me In The Spirit," uploaded on Dec 4, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUWscYyZ7SQ.

[32] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[33] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

> me up out of the audience or congregation, and say, 'Debby has a new song. She's gonna come sing it for us.' I didn't know that was coming. And so, I just go up and do it. And then he walked down the aisle. And he took my hand, he said, 'I want you to come with me. I want you to greet people at the door with me.' That's huge. That's huge.[34]

Debby went on to describe Smith's impact on her:

> He trained me. Chuck Smith trained me in ministry. He trained me in counseling, he trained me in running and managing volunteers. He would talk to me about personal things that you know, trouble with his kids or whatever, you know. And I wasn't much older if any at all than his kids. But he saw me as a co-laborer in the Gospel.[35]

After several years of ministry, Debby began to feel a call to ordination. Ordination is a Christian ritual that sets apart individuals as ministers. Many traditions ordain women, and many do not.[36] As Debby considered ordination, she suspected that Chuck Smith might be comfortable with women's ordination as he came from the FourSquare church, which was begun by Aimee Semple McPherson, a woman pastor.

> I had a point in time at which I knew that Jesus called me to ministry. But this was a specific time when I felt like I had a vision that Jesus laid his hands on my head and said, 'I'm ordaining you to the ministry of the gospel.' I didn't know what that meant… The next day, I was at Calvary Chapel sitting outside on a planter. And the associate pastor, the guy second in charge to Chuck Smith walks up to me, his name was Romaine. And he sat down next to me, and he says, 'I guess we got to start talking about getting you ordained.' And I went, 'Wow.' You know, 'Why?' And he said, 'Ordination is a ratification of what God has already done.'[37]

From Romaine's perspective, Debby was already living out the call of God in her life, and ordination would be a formal identification that she was answering the call of ministry.

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[34] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[35] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[36] For more on women's ordination, see: Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[37] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

While oftentimes ordination involves a formal service of blessing, for Debby the ordination happened in a business meeting, which she didn't attend. Her ordination papers were signed by Chuck Smith and John Wimber, who would go on to be two of the most influential Christian leaders of the 20th century.[38] Though understated at the time, the significance of Debby's ordination cannot be overstated. Her ordination card contained all male language and pronouns, and Debby was the first woman to be ordained by Calvary Chapel.

As she continued to live into her calling as a music minister, Debby found herself increasingly isolated as a woman in music ministry. She says, "There weren't that many girls involved in Maranatha Music. I never had any doubt about myself, because I was walking in my calling. And that's the real quote there. As I walked in my calling, God had called me to do this. I said, 'Yes.' And I never really worried about how things were going to happen."[39] Her ordination and sense of call empowered her to challenge the status quo both in music and in ministry. She found herself singing on albums, continuing to do concerts, and collaborating with other artists.

Debby eventually married Ernie, and the duo became known for doing music ministry together as a couple. They had a particularly influential ministry with children, starting Psalty the Singing Songbook.[40] After twenty years at Calvary Chapel, the couple moved to the Saddleback Valley, and began attending Saddleback Church, a highly regarded and quickly growing megachurch begun by Rick Warren. They soon began leading worship together as a couple. One day, Debby received a call from Saddleback's regular worship leader, looking for help.

> And he said, 'Is Ernie there?' And I said, 'Ernie's not here.' He was out. We were working with Billy Graham at the time doing these children's outreaches…. He said he

[38] For more on Smith and Wimber's impact on the movement, see: Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 106-112.

[39] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[40] Debby and Ernie's website highlights their Psalty ministry: https://www.psalty.com/.

> wanted Ernie to come and lead worship that weekend, because he had to be out of town. And I said, 'Well, Ernie is not here. He's on a crusade with Billy Graham this week. But I could come and I could lead worship.' Because I was a worship leader. At Calvary Chapel that just wasn't a problem. And [the worship leader] said back to me, 'You – that won't work out.' And I said, 'Why?' And he goes, 'We don't have women worship leaders.' And I went, 'Are you kidding? This is a joke?' And he said, 'No, it's just the way it is.' I said, 'Why?' He says 'It's just the way it is. We can't have a woman leading worship alone on the stage.' I went, 'Okay.'[41]

Despite this closed door, Debby's calling kept her grounded:

> And an interesting thing happened to me. Because I felt like God had opened the door and called us to go to that church. Calvary Chapel was too far away without a freeway. And we were living out close to and still are living in this foothill community that's at the base of Saddleback Mountain. Not really the base, we're like halfway up. And it's hard to get around or at least was then. And I said, 'Well, God's called me here. So, if God doesn't need me to be a worship leader right now, I don't have to be a worship leader. I can do other things.' And I just said, 'I'll do whatever.'[42]

When Debby faced closed doors because of her gender, she met the hurdle with grace and compassion. She says: "My perception of myself is not wrapped up in whether I'm a female worship leader or not. Just so much bigger than that. You know. I know I'm called by God. Boom. Drop the mic, you know. And that can look like many different things."

Eventually Debby would become the Director of Worship Leadership at Saddleback Church, a title given to her since as a woman she could not be the Pastor of Worship Leadership. This title, though it came with a certain level of authority, did not recognize the ministry that Debby had been ordained to do. I asked Debby what it felt like to be a director instead of a pastor:

> I didn't give a rip. I was ordained! God ordained me, Jesus laid his hands on my head. That's all it took for me. To have it ratified by the church Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa was, that was wonderful. But it was a business meeting. They didn't even have a service

[41] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[42] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

> for me. To me the ordination happened when Jesus in my vision appeared to me in gold, just gold light. It was a figure of a person, and he literally laid his hands on my head. And all he said, is 'I'm ordaining you to the ministry of the gospel,' which for me, has been a broad experience, you know…. whether I am the official worship leader is not the issue. It's who am I to Jesus. What's my calling that God has given me?[43]

Her time at Saddleback was not the only time that Debby's credentials as a music minister and worship leader were questioned. As her career continued to unfold, her peers would not continue to view her ordination the way they had in the past. In 1991, John Piper and Wayne Grudem published *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood,* the book that would become known as one of the origins of complementarian theology, especially restricting perspectives on women in ministry.[44] Their book had far-reaching implications, including on Chuck Smith and John Wimber, the men who had signed Debby's ordination papers. Because of the promotion of complementarian roles, readers like these started to question whether women should be in ordained ministry.

Shortly after the book's publication, Debby discovered that both Chuck and John had revoked their perspective on women in ministry. In 1994, John Wimber – the more progressive of the two – wrote in an article in *Vineyard Reflections:* "I believe God has established a gender-based eldership of the church. I endorse the traditional (and what I consider the scriptural) view of a unique leadership role for men in marriage, family, and in the church… Consequently I personally do not favor ordaining women as elders in the local church."[45] Although she had been ordained by them, no more women at Calvary Chapel would become ordained. Debby says,

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[43] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[44] John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991).

[45] As cited in "Vineyard Restricts Elders to Men," *CBMW News*, August 1995. Originally published as "Vineyard Restricts Elders to Men," *Vineyard Reflections,* March/April 1994.

"And so I hadn't told anybody else at Calvary about it, because I didn't want to ruffle the waters. There were plenty of people that knew, who had been part of the process. But somehow or other Chuck and John both switched."[46]

Years later, Debby found herself speaking to a room full of young women who were interested in ministry, addressing this shift in mentality and its implications on women.

> I'll tell you the truth. I think there will be a time when Calvary will ordain women. But I don't think it's soon. And if this means a lot to you, I suggest you change denominations and go find a church that will ordain you. Because if you feel you need that to do your ministry, to do what God's called you to do, go do it. Because it's not a God thing, this is a customs thing. It's something that has happened over and over and over again through history. And I mean, going back to the early church, over and over and over and over again. And it comes down to women, power, authority, who handles the money, how it's spent, how the guys feel when they walk in the room, a lot of ego involved with it. And there's plenty of anointed men out there that deserve to be ordained, you know, and should be ordained. And that's fine. I'm comfortable with male pastors. But it's also possible for women to be pastors.[47]

Debby's career is a testament to the resilience of women, the way that women rise above the clamouring of customs and traditions that question their right to ordained ministry. For her, it's not the religious rules that surround her that provide empowerment, but the power of God's call on her life. As she says, "Men can try to keep me from it, but the authority that's given to me by the Holy Spirit, anointing me, and Jesus literally calling me out and saying, 'This is it girl, this is where you're called to be.'"[48]

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[46] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[47] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[48] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

3.3.2 Karen Lafferty: An Early CWM Songwriter

In the late 1960s, Karen Lafferty was working as a musician in bars in New Mexico. She'd had a Baptist upbringing and strong enough moral compass, but as she writes in her book, despite attending church she found herself insecure and unsatisfied with the life she was living. Her shifts as an entertainer in a steak bar were not fulfilling her in the way she desired. When her close friend Rhonda came to visit, everything changed. Rhonda had recently become involved with Campus Crusades for Christ and her spiritual fervour was infectious. Throughout their time together, Rhonda's enthusiasm for her faith began to wear off on Karen. As Karen writes in her autobiography:

> I began to see and believe that God had a plan for my life for the first time. I prayed. I didn't just want to wear the name 'Christian,' I wanted to be a genuine follower of Jesus wherever I was. I was tired of playing games and being a hypocrite–I wanted to become the person God intended me to be.[49]

With a firm change of heart, Rhonda's influence had a lasting impact:

> After Rhonda left, I started reading the Bible daily, and it came alive to me! Even my thinking about what my work in the bar should look like underwent a life-changing shift. I began receiving the guidance I so desperately needed through the Word of God. I had taken a big step forward. Campus Crusade was about to become the next important milestone in my life. It would help me discover what it meant to walk daily with Christ, teaching me how to share my faith and launching me in a new direction.[50]

Karen began to use her bar entertainment to minister to the people there, reaching people where she was. Inspired by Rhonda's example, Karen went to California to audition for Campus Crusades for Christ, but she didn't get accepted.

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[49] Karen Lafferty and Becky Hefty, *Seek Ye First: The Karen Lafferty Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Credo House Publishers, 2022), 49.

[50] Lafferty and Hefty, *Seek Ye First,* 49.

> They said, 'Well, could you come on staff right away?' And I said, 'I don't think so. Because I want to go back to New Mexico. And there's this little steakhouse bar that I've entertained in the past few, I want to sing in the bar one more summer, because I had a following. I wanted to tell those people I got right with the Lord.' So, it was very sincere, but 'Hmm, she wants to go sing in a bar…' So, I thought, okay, if I can't be in a ministry, I'm going to go to California and I'm just going to be salt and light in the entertainment world. But this little country bumpkin from New Mexico going to California, Haight-Ashbury and drugs, sex and rock and roll with hippies, I was scared to death of California. So, I just said God if there's any Christians in California, you know, lead me to them.[51]

Karen quickly connected with the Christians she had prayed for.

When Karen arrived in California, she moved in with her aunt and uncle, who happened to live in Costa Mesa, California. "And so, I get there on a Saturday and I say to my cousins, I said, you guys go to church anywhere? And they said, 'Yeah, we got saved at this place called Calvary Chapel, just five minutes from here.'" Karen soon became involved at Calvary Chapel and found that it offered a space to quench her spiritual thirst. As an accomplished musician, she quickly became involved with their music ministry and was added to the list of on-call musicians.[52]

> I wanted to minister, you know, but I did lead people to the Lord when I was there. But I remember the very night I just thought, God, I've got to do this. I've got to go into the ministry. And we didn't have very many examples. There was a few musicians going full time. But I called my mom up and I said, 'Mom, I'm going into the ministry' and such, she's a Christian, she'll be so excited. But she said, 'Oh, so you're on salary with the church now?' I said, 'Well, no, they call it living by faith, but I'll teach some guitar lessons, and you know, sometimes when I sing places they'll give me offerings.' And she was silent, and she said, 'Did you remember I'm the cosigner on that that loan for your car?' I said, 'Well, Mom, I believe where God guides God provides.'[53]

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[51] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

[52] Lafferty and Hefty, *Seek Ye First: The Karen Lafferty Story*, 60.

[53] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

Despite renting a sparse and small apartment with little guaranteed income, Karen found herself content in a community of committed Christians with a passion for spreading the gospel. Many of the people in the audience of Calvary Chapel in the early days had difficult pasts, and few had much training or context for the Bible. Music became one way to minister to those people, and Karen offered a song that would have a lasting impact on the church, "Seek Ye First," based on Matthew 6:33. She described the composition process to me:

> We were starting to do a lot of Scripture songs in those days. There were so many hippies, and people coming to the Lord that didn't have any kind of Bible background, they needed to remember scripture. So, we would put the scripture to music. So, I thought, that is such a great verse, and I don't know any music to it, you know, so I just did it, very simple. And I've put on my little cassette recorder, and being a music major, I had to put a little contrapuntal part, and a little hallelujah thing, you know. And so, I taught it at church the next week, and everybody remembered it, because it was so easy. And we started finding other verses that fit with it, you know, like, 'Man shall not live by bread alone,' or 'Ask and it shall be given.' So, we put other verses and it all worked. And that was when we did make the decision around then, 'Hey, let's make a praise album, and put them all on one record.' And so that's what we did. And so that's how it got written.[54]

"Seek Ye First" has gone on to become one of the most popular Christian songs and is still sung in churches around the world today.[55] Karen continued to be involved in Maranatha Music, the music ensemble initiated by Chuck Smith in 1971 as an extension of the music ministry of Calvary Chapel. Through Maranatha Music, Karen worked with musicians like Jimmy and Carol Owens and the artists from Second Chapter of Acts.

Throughout the early days of Calvary Chapel, Karen noticed that it was men who were in the most prominent leadership positions. She said to me:

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[54] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

[55] You can listen to a recording of the song from the 1974 Maranatha Music album here: Maranatha Singers, "Seek Ye First - Maranatha Singers 1974," uploaded on March 9, 2011, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqw4YN9DL7A.

> You know, structurally the way the finances and the development was working, I mean, there were the main guys… Now they had right hand women, you know, as secretaries who were doing things and there were always men and women, you know, in the teams that were happening. But again, the main producers and all that kind of stuff, were always men. Lots of women musicians, though. But I can't think of any women that were in levels of authority in the industry part of it, in the business part of it... I mean, we were all just a team working together, and I find that we as women, of course, we would be asked to, you know, sing for women's retreat, something like that… But it was still men that were kind of running the main show. And we weren't threatened by that because they saw us as musicians.[56]

Karen was featured on Maranatha! Music albums as they came out, often playing guitar and oboe, and was excited to have one of her songs featured on the Maranatha III album.

As her career unfolded, Karen continued to do ministry as a single woman, which presented certain difficulties. She felt most empowered and comfortable in ministry when she had male leaders who oversaw her work, but while most women operated under the guidance of their husbands, she could not do that. She said to me:

> I have found through the years a couple of things kind of just to set the stage, that I am most comfortable in ministry and being released into ministry, when I do have men in authority over me. And I think that, you know, being a single woman, I've always had to look towards that rather than towards a husband. And I do believe that, you know, that marriages work out best when they the husband recognizes the giftings of the woman and releases them into that.[57]

For Karen, this authority wasn't experienced as a limitation but rather offered her freedom to express herself safely under a model of accountability. She described to me an experience in Romania where the pastor's authority provided her with justification and protection.

> They could be really strict, you know, very fundamental in their beliefs…. We were doing an outdoor concert we'd been brought in by a church. And it was outdoor, and it was summertime. And so, it was a place where people went on vacations and things. So, we were there… I asked the pastor ahead of time, I said, 'Pastor, are you okay with us

[56] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

[57] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

> women wearing slacks?' And he said, 'Oh, yeah, you know, we're all casual out here, that's fine.' And so, I got his permission beforehand. And, of course, then I'm doing the concert, and I'm sharing and other women in our group are sharing.[58]

Despite Karen's confidence, a man approached her at the end of the concert, chastising her for the decision:

> And he started saying, 'Who do you think you are? As a woman wearing slacks? You know, preaching the word of God when, you know, you don't even know your place, you know, in Christianity.' And so I said, 'You know, why don't you and I talk afterwards.' So anyway, I did, of course, everybody was around talking. But I said, 'I want you to know that even before I got up here, here's the pastor, he's over me, he's my authority in this situation. And he said, it was fine for me to speak, and for me to wear what I'm wearing.' And, you know, this man, he wouldn't even look me in the eyes, you know, he was rather embarrassed.[59]

This was one example for Karen of how working under the authority of a male pastor offered her agency and increased the sense of overall accountability in a positive way.

Karen continued to be involved with Calvary Chapel throughout her career, and in 2017, experienced a call to ordination. She had been in Santa Fe since the late 1990s and noticed that there were certain privileges she didn't have access to without ordination, such as doing crisis ministry, visiting prisons, or receiving tax benefits. Karen consulted with women like Debby, who expressed that ordination was an extension of what God was already doing, and that she had been called in this way for 40 years. Karen then spoke to her pastor about the possibility:

> At the time, I was leading worship at a Calvary Chapel in Las Vegas, New Mexico…. And I said, 'What would you think about this church ordaining me?' And actually, he got a little bit of flack from some of his board of elders there. He said, you know, 'Karen isn't asking, 'Can I start a church over here somewhere,' we all recognize that she is a music minister, she has led the schools and Youth With A Mission.' And so he prayed about it, and they talked about it. And they all agreed that they would do it. And even though they did have some hard discussion, he said, 'It's really not being ordained to be a

[58] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

[59] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

> pastor over others. It's just recognizing that she has already been in full time ministry for 40 years, and we're just recognizing what the Lord has already been doing in her life.' So, it was a real honor, and all of those elders, even the ones that had questions about me, really prayed and encouraged me and they still support me as a missionary. It was humbling, it was honoring. I just felt it was the right thing to do at that point in my life.[60]

Almost 50 years after Debby's ordination, Calvary Chapel's perspective on women in ministry came nearly full circle with Karen's ordination. From affirming women's ordination, to rejecting it, to affirming it again, their stance once again empowered women in ordained ministry. For Karen, a career in ministry was defined by a deep commitment to her calling and to the leadership in her life which commands her ministry. It is clarified by the quiet consistency with which she has lived out her mission of sharing her faith through her music.

3.3.3 Marsha Stevens-Pino: Setting the Stage as an Artist

Marsha's early years had been painfully difficult. Her father was a pastor who had sexually abused her, as well as other young girls in the congregation. Her mother was an alcoholic who worked as a choir director at church. Though ministry ran in her family, so too did deep pain. When Marsha encountered Calvary Chapel at the age of 16, it offered her a source of comfort and solace. As she writes in her memoir, "The pastor, Chuck Smith, gave a Bible study. He talked about Jesus standing at the door of one's heart and knocking. He called Jesus a 'gentleman, who would not come in without being invited.' The idea of someone with boundaries sounded good to me."[61] During that service, Marsha prayed to be accepted into God's fold, and at an event afterwards prayed the sinner's prayer, giving her heart to God. Her new

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[60] Author interview with Karen Lafferty, Feb. 1, 2024.

[61] Marsha Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died: The Amazing Story About How One Song Brought Healing to Millions and Birthed Contemporary Christian Music* (Canyonwalker Press, 2016), 50.

faith gave her a sense of compassion towards her parents and infused her with unprecedented joy at school.

Marsha continued to attend Calvary Chapel, absorbing the messaging of safety and love. She wrote in her memoir:

> That was the really basic message at Calvary Chapel back then. You can't do this wrong. There isn't a wrong way to pray. If you don't believe all that you should, the Holy Spirit will teach you what you need to know. If you're doing something that isn't pleasing to God, God will find a way to tell you. Read the Bible for yourself and ask Jesus to shed light on it for you. God knows your address, your name, your heart, as no one else ever can.[62]

The teachings spoke to teenage Marsha, and she tried to find ways to spread the message to her friends. She was a talented guitarist and singer, so one evening began to experiment with writing a song that expressed her newfound faith. She listened to a Peter, Paul, and Mary record, and wrote down how many syllables were in each line, how many lines were in each section, and which lines rhymed. She didn't have a journal with her, so scrawled some lyrics on the back of a piece of junk mail.

> I got my guitar and I started to strum and write. It was a little hard because I was adhering strictly to the rhythm structure that I'd written down, but I was so sure of what I wanted to say. When I got to the chorus I knew with a deep peace that those words would be the answer to every question for the rest of my life…. When I was done, I sang it through twice. Then I decided I still might forget how it went, so I hauled out our big Wollensak reel-to-reel tape player… I managed to remember the song long enough to get all of that set up, and I recorded *For Those Tears I Died.*[63]

Marsha had sung a song at Calvary Chapel on her first ever visit there – "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen. It had a reference to Jesus in verse 2, so she thought that would be appropriate. However, Lonnie Frisbee stood up after her performance and explained that the song did not

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[62] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died,* 58-59.

[63] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died*, 59-60.

accurately represent the Bible's teachings. Now that Marsha had "For Those Tears I Died" to share, she was worried that she may have gotten some of the teachings wrong in her newfound faith. To her delight, the song went over better than she could have anticipated:

> I brought in my guitar, introduced my kid sister again, since the group had grown so much in just a few weeks. Together, we sang my song. And it was more than I hoped for… When we finished Pastor Chuck had tears in his eyes. Others were crying openly. People were mostly just silent for a few seconds. Then Lonnie stood up and said, 'That's from the book of Revelation, chapter 21, verse 6.' I was overjoyed. I was only halfway through Matthew and God had told me something from the very end of the book![64]

"For Those Tears I Died" became a fast favourite, and Marsha became passionately involved with music at Calvary Chapel, leading alongside women like Debby and Karen.

> There seemed to me to be an equal number of male and female musicians…. I didn't sense any difference, in fact, sometimes – and again, this could be a sort of a reverse discrimination – but sometimes Chuck really wanted just my sister and I to sing, so he'd say 'just the girls sing,' and literally we were girls. We were thirteen and sixteen, so that was legit. [Laughs]. But he'd say just the girls sing, because he just thought we had such pretty voices… I never had any feeling that we weren't treated as equals.[65]

The experience of singing just as "girls" felt comfortable to Marsha, who only in hindsight identifies it as a type of "reverse discrimination."

Marsha says that Chuck would often ask her, Debby, or Karen, to share what a song meant to them. This was something Chuck did somewhat frequently, asking people to share how God was moving in their life: "When he asked people to share about what God was doing in their lives, there didn't seem to be any discrimination in who he picked to stand up and share. And we didn't really go up to a pulpit. We were all sitting around on the floor, you know. So, somebody

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[64] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died*, 64.

[65] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

stood up and just shouted from there."[66] The informal environment at Calvary Chapel evidently contributed to a feeling of equality.

While it often felt like an equal playing field in practice, Marsha did notice some of Chuck's teachings around gender that she struggled to reconcile with.

> In the early days, I mean Chuck said a couple of things that I just found appalling. Like – and I've heard this trope other places – 'Men give love to get sex. Women give sex to get love.' And I thought, well that's super creepy. So, I went and talked to Lonnie about it and go 'Is that really true? Do you think that?' And Lonnie is like, 'You know, Chuck's a little old school. It's not in the Bible, I don't really think that's true.' But that was certainly a part of Chuck showing. He was definitely complementarian. And I mean, I just thought that was such a creepy thing to say, you know? [Laughs].[67]

Despite being complementarian, Chuck's teachings were also more nuanced than some at the time.

> I wasn't really thinking about submission, and Chuck did always talk about how the Scripture that's quoted about 'Wives this submit to your husbands as unto the Lord' goes right on to say, 'In fact, all of you submit yourselves to one another.' So, he was definitely complementarian, but especially when it came to scripture, he would have had at least a Scriptural background or footing for what he believed was right.[68]

Even though Chuck's teachings indicated that men should also submit, the makeup of Calvary Chapel sent a clear message about gendered roles. Marsha noted that there were no women on the board of directors and there were no women pastors. Women could serve on the women's board and could only preach to other women and children.

Marsha's involvement with Calvary Chapel continued, and she began "thinking I'd probably marry one of the guys in the group, because that would be the most expedient thing to

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[66] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

[67] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

[68] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

do, so that I could keep on singing and touring."[69] In 1971 Marsha married Russ Stevens, a fellow Calvary Chapel musician, and together with their friend Pete Jacobs and Marsha's sister Wendy, they began the group Children of the Day. Their group found significant success in the Christian music scene, arguably working as the first Christian music ensemble from the Jesus People Movement. In 1970, the group decided to record an album, which was difficult because no record labels were interested in Jesus Music yet. They got a $1,000 loan from "Papa Chuck" (Chuck Smith) and recorded the album at a studio in Hollywood.[70] As their success grew, their financial arrangements continued to reflect the more conservative ideology of Calvary Chapel.

> The men were considered the heads of the house and the family and women were to be submissive in all areas, including financial arrangements. Only the men in our group were paid. Wendy was still single and was paid separately but Pete and Russ were paid twice as much as Wendy was; Pete to cover his wife Hanneke and Russ to cover me.[71]

With countless shows in churches, performances at Calvary Chapel, and recordings, the ensemble reached a new high with an invitation to perform on the Kathryn Kuhlman show in 1971. Together, the ensemble performed "For Those Tears I Died" to a live audience. During an instrumental interlude before verse 3, Marsha shared a short testimony:

> You know, when I was thinking about becoming a Christian, I'd always thought that the Christian life would be so dull and so boring and just trying to go around and be good all the time. And as everybody here I know will testify, in the two years that I've been a Christian, the Lord's just picked us up and ripped off with us. And we just got back from a trip all over the world, for the Lord just took us. And we got to tell so many people about his love and all of the things he had to share. You know people all over the world are hungry just like we are in America. And it was so great to know that the Christian life is so exciting and so well planned by someone far greater than we are.[72]

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[69] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

[70] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died*, 83.

[71] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died*, 134.

[72] You can watch Marsha performing here: Children of the Day, "*For Those Tears I Died - Children of the Day*," uploaded on April 23, 2007, YouTube Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np8GJGZ3Vv8. , 2:46 – 3:31.

She offered a moving reflection on the power of becoming Christian, sharing her testimony to inspire the audience. Reflecting on it later, Marsha identifies the way that her testimony as a young, married woman may have been uncomfortable for some.

> That was so funny because I mean, I'm a Jabber Jaws. And I like drama. So, if I'm gonna introduce something I got the punchline lined up for you, you know what I mean. Even though it just sounds like I'm just talking, I know where I'm headed with that, so that I can make you think or point out the best line in the song, or whatever. And if you look at the thing on Kathryn Kuhlman, I mean I was very young and green. [Imitating high, sweet voice] 'God just took up took off with us all around the world.' But I know one time somebody talked to Russ and said, 'You know your wife is talking, your wife talked more than you did. She shouldn't be talking so much.' And completely dead, pan, my husband said, 'I told her to.' [Laughs]. So, we did have a little bit of that attitude towards the discrimination that we could see.[73]

As their life on the road continued with two small children of their own, their marriage began to struggle. After consulting with a counsellor who refused to speak to Marsha and directed all counsel to Russ, as well as receiving advice from Chuck Smith, Marsha and Russ separated. As this was happening, Marsha was accepting her sexuality. She acknowledged that she was lesbian and embraced that she had feelings for her friend Winky.

Marsha and Russ's divorce was highly tumultuous, not only because of the church's teachings on divorce, but also because of the added layer of same sex attraction, which was forbidden by the church. In the process of their divorce, the civil judge ruled that neither Marsha nor Russ could speak about homosexuality with their children. Further to this, Marsha was shocked to discover that the music she had written before her marriage was now considered to be jointly owned, so Russ now received credit for "For Those Tears I Died." What was perhaps the most challenging, though, were the ramifications of pay arrangement that was active through

[73] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

their time with Children of the Day. “Even though Russ and I both worked for the same band for the same number of years I had no record of being paid (due to the 'biblical' policy of my husband receiving my pay). The judge declared I had ‘never worked outside the home,’ so I must find a job.”[74]

Through the difficulty of the divorce, Marsha continued to discern the Bible’s teachings on same sex attraction and became involved in Christian LGBTQ+ advocacy groups. “This was and is my calling in life and, no matter what else was going on, Jesus was my anchor, and I knew so many people living without Him. I would often joke I wrote Contemporary Christian Music for the gay and Lesbian community. It’s a narrow field, but it’s wide open!”[75] In 1986, Marsha formed Born Again Lesbian Musicians (BALM), an organization that continues to empower LGBTQ+ Christian artists in their music ministry.[76] Despite consistent disrespect and disdain from within the Christian community, Marsha’s ministry has been shaped by her deep sense of belonging as a child of God, something that helps her rise above the clamour of disapproving voices. Today, she speaks with grace and gratitude about the community that has hurt her. “Sometimes I’m surprised because people think that it’s so great of me not to be upset about things, but you have to remember that these were the people who introduced me to Jesus… So, I can disagree with them, but I don’t feel, I don’t know. I’m not overcoming a lot of pain.”[77]

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[74] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died*, 193.

[75] Stevens-Pino, *For Those Tears I Died*, 230.

[76] For more on Marsha’s ministry, see: “Home,” Born Again Lesbian Musicians, accessed July 3, 2024, https://balmministries.net/home.

[77] Author interview with Marsha Stevens-Pino, June 15, 2023.

3.4 Prophetic Leadership in a Grassroots Movement

Debby, Karen, and Marsha share experiences of deep belonging and life-changing ministry in the context of their times at Calvary Chapel. They each arrived at the church in the early days of the Jesus People Movement, and as young women were empowered to share their musical gifts as ministry. This opened doors for them to be featured on early Maranatha! Music albums, to go on concert tours, to lead worship at churches, and to continue to write songs. They also experienced limitation, confined to some roles over others. It is vital to tell these stories to help women currently in the industry gain context for barriers they might face. As Ambrose and Payne note, "Gender history can give women leaders specific ideas about how to thrive, and at the same time it serves as a cautionary tale that women in ministry have always faced particular gendered challenges." [78] Indeed, women in the contemporary worship industry have always faced challenges, and sharing their stories helps provide a roadmap for how women have historically navigated these barriers.

The stories we encountered in this chapter align with Barfoot and Sheppard's observation that as movements become more formalized, it becomes more difficult for women to be in positions of formal authority. The Jesus People, and subsequently the music emerging from that community, began as a small, local, grassroots initiative that had global impacts. The music production was small scale: recall how Marsha asked Pastor Chuck for a loan to record an album, or how she wrote her first song in her bedroom on the floor. As time went on and a small industry began to form, it became more difficult for women to be involved. Recall how Debby was ordained at Calvary Chapel in its early days, but this was later revoked as the Jesus People

[78] Linda M. Ambrose and Leah Payne, "Reflections on the Potential of Gender Theory for North American Pentecostal History," *Pneuma* 36, no. 1 (2014): 63.

movement became more established. Women's leadership became more difficult as the movement shifted from an emphasis on prophetic leadership to priestly leadership.

Another example of this shift comes from the way women have used the guitar in the industry. Each of the women highlighted here played guitar, something that is exceedingly unusual for women in the industry today (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4).[79] In the early days of contemporary worship, the guitar was of paramount importance. As Adam Perez notes, "The image of the guitar functions not simply as an emblem to represent CPW [Contemporary Praise and Worship]. It has also become an icon for understanding the reality of CPW."[80] For women in the early days of Calvary Chapel, the guitar was a tool that afforded them flexibility and versatility in their leadership. In the hippie and folk-inspired era of early Christian music, the guitar allowed women to lead worship at the beach, in people's homes, or in a range of churches. Women helped to establish the guitar as a tool for this popular form of worship, and their ability to play it meant that it wasn't a barrier to their leadership. Debby sent me several photos of her and Lonnie leading worship together, and in each of them she is holding the guitar while Lonnie stands and sings without an instrument. This is the inverse of what we see most commonly today in the industry, with men holding guitars and women offering their voices. The grassroots nature of the movement meant that there were fewer formal structures in place to limit women's authority, and their use of the guitar was not policed.

The informality of the movement in its grassroots stage had significant – and positive – impacts on women. The informal environment of improvised folk songs shared in impromptu ways meant that women could easily contribute without needing to be in dedicated teaching or

[79] For more on this, see: Joshua Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015" (PhD. Diss, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015).

[80] Perez, "Beyond the Guitar," 19.

leadership roles. Larry Eskridge notes that the Jesus People were immensely casual in their attire, an attitude that extended to their worship practices:

> The young enthusiasts were given to plopping down on the floor cross-legged and sprawling out as space would allow. Used to the informal coziness of Bible studies and prayer groups in communal houses and private homes, circles and face-to-face arrangements were often preferred where the size of the gathering, acoustics, and logistics allowed.[81]

This "informal coziness" is captured in the way that Debby was first invited to play at Calvary Chapel when another worship leader didn't show up, or Marsha's experience of writing "For Those Tears I Died" alone in her bedroom. The lack of dedicated structures for worship leadership and songwriting meant a lack of enforced rules on the ways women could participate. This informal, hippie-inspired setting allowed women to pull out their guitars, share songs that they had just written, and participate fully.

With the beginning of a new industry came opportunities for monetization, including revenue from concerts, song copyrights, and recordings. This was accompanied by expectations for tours, song releases, and concerts. By the 2000s, the worship music industry was driven by the desire for worship celebrities.[82] While the laidback hippie atmosphere of the 1960s and 70s lent itself to supporting women who had children while on the road, this has become increasingly more difficult for women in the industry. The demands of Evangelical gendered beliefs and larger family beliefs of the time meant that women were expected to be home raising children, not working as celebrities on the road. Recall Marsha's description of the way that her husband Russ received payment on behalf of both of them, collaborator Pete received the same amount as

[81] Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family the Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90.

[82] Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 204.

Russ to cover his wife (who was not in the band), but Marsha's sister Wendy received only half of the pay and Marsha received none. In a context where women were largely not expected to work outside of the home, they became superfluous to a music industry. The work of the music industry became paid labour, and thus quickly became irrelevant for women.

The impacts of the gendered roles that dominated in the past are evident in the industry today. My interviewees have shared stories of being asked if they plan to have kids before they are given record deals, since it would mean they can't tour. They notice that they are paid less than their male counterparts. Songwriting has been professionalized at the same time as conservative values around household leadership have been strengthened, leaving men to do the paid labour of songwriting while women stay home with children. Whereas women in the 1960s and 70s wrote songs from the comfort of their own homes on their own schedules, today, songwriting more closely resembles the work of a 9-5 job, and one where women will always be outnumbered by men due to the formal systems that have been designed to keep them marginalized.

From its earliest days as a movement, women have been expected to be overcomers, who are resilient in the face of an institution that restricts them. Unfortunately, this resistance has become commonplace and even normalized in the industry. Robin James notes how resilience creates a self-perpetuating cycle where women need to overcome, and then their overcoming is rewarded. She writes:

> Resilience discourse thus follows a very specific logic: first, damage is incited and made manifest; second, that damage is spectacularly overcome, and that overcoming is broadcast and/or shared, so that; third, the person who has overcome is rewarded with increased human capital, status, and other forms of recognition and recompense, because:

> finally, and most importantly, this individual's own resilience boosts society's resilience.[83]

As James notes, this resilience has come to be rewarded and expected. The spectacular nature of the overcoming, as she describes, leaves the system set up for those down the road to need to overcome the same barriers. Ultimately, she proposes that "resilience discourse normalizes the sexist, racist damage traditional white supremacist patriarchy inflicts on white women and people of color as the ultimately innocuous damage that they are individually responsible for overcoming."[84] Without questioning the source and systems behind the need for resilience, it becomes assumed and expected, and little will change for those who come next. Women in the industry today are still recognized as displaying resilience without adequate acknowledgement of the ways the system mandates this flexibility, but sharing these earlier stories helps to contextualize this problematic cycle.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the stories of Debby, Karen, and Marsha as women formed in the early days of contemporary worship music, and who had a significant impact on the music we encounter today. What is perhaps the most striking about the stories of Debby, Karen, and Marsha, are the radically different ways that they experienced the gendered narratives around them. Debby experienced rejection at not being able to be a woman in leadership but found her true sense of comfort in the ways that she is called by God, noting that the ultimate authority over her ministry comes from God. Karen feels empowered by having men in authority over her,

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[83] Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 7.

[84] James, *Resilience & Melancholy,* 7.

finding herself comfortable knowing that she is under their leadership. Marsha was betrayed by a system that privileged the leadership of straight white men and has worked to provide healing and opportunity for those who are still excluded. What these women have in common is their deep and abiding faith. In the face of prejudice and limitation, each woman returns to her sense of calling. She is empowered not by systems and structures, but by her own discipline of listening to God's voice and following God's call.

As this dissertation progresses, stories will be presented of women who operate in similar restrictive structures as the women of Calvary Chapel, but who continue to exhibit agency through their choice to listen to God's voice and answer the call. Debby, Karen, and Marsha are models of how women have negotiated systems that hold them to specific roles, either through acceptance, perseverance, or resistance. Themes from their narratives will be reflected in the stories of women in the industry today, who continue to be told that they cannot teach or preach, who are underpaid for their labour, or who are left out of roles that might suit them. More importantly, their legacy lives on when we see women finding creative solutions to problems, speaking up when they have been told to keep quiet, valuing the voice of God over the voice of male leaders, and finding ways to commit to their families, communities, and their calls.

Chapter 4. On Stage: Gendered Performances of Authority

"I could never speak it,
But I didn't quit when they called me 'heretic.'
They said I was too dangerous
So, I stood with all the women at a distance.

But once my name crossed His lips,
How could I keep quiet?
He is not ashamed to be
Seen with me beside Him."

Verse one of "A Woman" by Ellie Holcomb, Ann VosKamp, and Sarah MacIntosh
from the Faithful Project's album *Go and Speak* (2021)

4.1 Performance of Gender at a Worship Concert

Near the end of my dissertation fieldwork, I attended a local Christian concert where the headliner was a well-known older male worship leader, Paul Baloche. I had sung his songs in church for my whole life and knew him as a prominent figure in the industry, if a little bit past his prime. He was performing with a younger woman, Sarah Kroger. I had encountered her on social media during my fieldwork but had not yet sung her songs. Baloche took center stage throughout the evening: jamming on his guitar with his group of all male instrumentalists, singing the melody for most of the songs, leading prayers, and doing short, ad-libbed sermons.

Despite Baloche's upfront leadership, my eyes were drawn to Kroger during the concert, intrigued by the way she responded to Baloche's leadership. At the end of the first song, Kroger

was the first to begin clapping to signal its finish – something she kept doing for the remainder of the concert. She modeled singing harmony, an option for those of us in the audience who found Balcohe's tenor range unmatchable. Following Kroger's gestures, many in the audience raised their arms or closed their eyes. At times, Kroger modeled letting Baloche sing on his own; she would close her eyes and stand in silence, inviting us to do the same. As Baloche continued his unprepared, off-script narrative, Kroger would turn to face him, nodding and smiling. She was appropriate and engaging in every way, supporting his leadership by representing an emotionally responsive reaction. At various points, Baloche would do something clearly improvised, like transition to a song that he had referenced in his previous comments. He frequently asked his instrumentalists to show off and improvise. An emphasis of the evening was their ability to be flexible and think on their feet. These improvisatory scenarios often left Kroger out, since as a vocalist she could not join in and rather modeled how the audience was supposed to engage with it: smile, sway, laugh.

Throughout the 2-hour concert, Sarah spoke only once and took up a small amount of space. My fieldnotes describe one particular interaction in detail:

> *At one point, Paul invites Sarah to lead something, saying: "Sarah, why don't you lead us in a song." Sarah is prepared for this, and says "If you'll let me, I'd just like to say something." Sarah then continues to speak, inviting us to consider the history of the songs we were singing, and to sing them like it was the first time. She encourages us to imagine joining our voices with the many Christians who have sung these songs before us. Her narrative invites us to be better worshipers, helping us worship with more intention. This is different than when Paul "preached" at us many times. Whereas her words help us worship more deeply, Paul claimed his words as preaching: "Wow, I'm really preaching a lot here." Sarah leads a familiar hymn and Paul moves to the back of the stage to let her lead. We finish singing the hymn* a capella*. It is a beautiful moment with minimal music, just the echoing of our voices in the space. Sarah has set up a reflective atmosphere, and those around me are clearly immersed in this contemplative space. At this point, Paul comes back to the center to pray and speak. Sarah has beautifully set up a reflective space into which Paul shares his message.*

The dynamics of this concert are common on contemporary worship stages: men offer liturgical leadership using their guitars and a more authoritative tone, while women offer more responsive, emotional responses through their voice and expression. With specific gendered roles frequently enacted, worship can become a space where certain actions become "pink collar," designated as women's work.[1] This chapter explores the gendered labour performed on contemporary worship stages by analysing how gesture, voice, and instruments contribute to performances of authority. Through an exploration of the principles of biblical manhood and womanhood, women and men's distinct roles on contemporary worship stages are charted as representations of these pervasive gender values. This is then applied to an analysis of worship power-couple Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes performing "The Blessing," a viral worship song from 2020. Ultimately, we see how gestures, instruments, and vocalization place Cody in the liturgically authoritative role, while Kari carries the emotional labour in the spiritual authoritative role.

4.2 Contextualizing Women's Leadership

To better understand what happens on contemporary worship stages, it is important to first consider the context in which women's leadership is formed. While women's performances on Christian music stages resembles those on secular music stages in some regards, the spiritualized component of their performance context adds a new and under-examined dimension. Examining popular narratives about women worship leaders offers a necessary backdrop for considering the authority of biblical gender roles and unpacking how women perceive these structural limitations.

[1] For more on this, see: Sarah Kathleen Johnson, "The Problem of Mennonite Worship Leadership Becoming 'Women's Work,'" 28.

4.3 Prominence of Women Worship Leaders

Throughout my dissertation research, when I have answered the inevitable "so what do you research?" question at dinner parties or conferences, I have often been greeted with the response "That's great, there are so many women worship leaders!" I interpret this as a subtle suggestion that my job must be easy: there are many women who work as worship leaders in the industry to celebrate. The people who respond to my research are picturing some of the many women who are prominent as worship leaders today: Jenn Johnson, Christy Nockels, Brooke Ligertwood, Kari Jobe, or countless others. It is true that these women are at the fore of the industry and contribute in countless ways, and I do not intend to diminish their significance. However, it is not accurate to say that *most* of the most popular worship leaders are women. I offer one reference point here.

I analyzed the top 25 songs on the CCLI Top 100 list during spring 2024, the period while I was writing this chapter. I searched for the most watched YouTube video from the primary artist for each of the songs on the list and noted whether the lead was a woman or a man. Since one of the songs was "How Great Thou Art" – which was written in 1949 and is thus from a dramatically different context – I used 24 of the songs on the list. Of the top 24 songs, nineteen of them had a man as the primary worship leader, and 5 of them had a woman as the primary leader. Of the songs led by women, three of them had Brooke Ligertwood as the primary leader, who is from Australia and thus from a different social, geographic, and political context. Of the nineteen men who were the primary leaders, thirteen of them led from guitar. In total, roughly 80% of the top congregational songs at this time were led by men, and more than 50% by men with guitars. Women are not well represented as worship leaders, and for them to make up a

more significant portion of our worship leadership they should represent far more than 20% of top leaders.

Joshua Busman corroborates this finding in his research in his fieldwork at the Passion conferences, noticing an underrepresentation of women worship leaders overall. He takes this observation further, however, noticing the tempos of the songs each gender sang. He specifically found that on all the Passion albums released between 2006 and 2014, eleven of the 91 songs were sung by women. Of these eleven songs, ten were below 70 BPM. Women overwhelmingly sang slower, more reflective songs.[2] Acknowledging that women are confined to specific on-stage roles in limited ways, it becomes important to interrogate *why* that is the case and *how* women express themselves in this restrictive environment.

Perhaps the number of women worship leaders appears to be larger in our shared imagination because of the way these women worship leaders disrupt our unacknowledged expectation for men to be in this position. When we are used to seeing men on the worship stage, women's presence is unexpected and notable. Sara Ahmed describes this in the context of the dominance of white men as a collective body or an institution, where those who are not white men stand out against the crowd. She writes: "When a body lines up, or is in line, you might only see one set of lines, or maybe you don't see any; when things appear as they should, the right way up, they recede. When a body does not line up, things appear queer or wonky."[3] In the case of women in the contemporary worship world, they stand out because they are "wonky" against the backdrop of predominantly white men.

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[2] Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion," 192.

[3] Sara Ahmed, "White Men," *Feministkilljoys* (blog), November 4, 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/11/04/white-men/.

Beth, an industry executive in the Christian music industry, describes the history of this imbalance:

> I think when you look at leadership in the Church as a whole and how male dominant it is, I think that gives you a big part of your answer of why church music has become so male-driven. Because, I think for so long females have even been trained that we can't really hear spiritual narratives from anything outside of a male voice, because women aren't allowed to speak up on those things, right? And so, the American Church kind of set this like precedent of like, speak when spoken to, and women aren't allowed on stage. They can do these roles, but they can't do these roles, and I think that when it comes to like these spiritual messages, or these, you know, almost sermons in a way, but in song form, it's like we've been trained to want to hear those from men, because there's so much tension of like, well, is it appropriate for a woman to say that? You know. Or is she allowed to say that? And I think that's changing. But I think it's taken a long time to get here.[4]

For Beth, the church's structure has limited women's authority, relegating them to specific and less authoritative roles. The women we see as worship leaders are noteworthy because of the way they disrupt this expectation. Even if they are not represented in equal numbers, they loom larger in our imagination because of the significant way they resist the status quo of the system.

4.3.1 Biblical Gender Roles

To understand how women both present their femininity on stage and conceive of their gendered roles, it is important to first explore the narratives of biblical womanhood that pervade Evangelical ideologies. Narratives of biblical gender roles that pervade Evangelical ideologies form a set of beliefs that have deeply formed Christians for decades. These influence the ways both men and women can sing, move, and play on stage. In her book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth,* Beth Allison Barr traces

[4] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

biblical passages and historical developments that contributed to the Evangelical perspective on "biblical womanhood." She peels back the layers on complementarianism, defining it as "the theological view that women are divinely created as helpers and men are divinely created as leaders."[5] Though this term is commonplace in Evangelical circles today, it is relatively recent in origin, having been originally suggested by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in 1988[6] and expounded upon in a 1991 book by Wayne Grudem and John Piper.[7] It grew out of the desire to resist movements towards Evangelical feminism, and was eagerly received by Evangelical leaders like Owen Strachan who endorsed it as an updated term for patriarchy.[8]

Under a complementation framework, women enact roles that align with biblical womanhood, and men enact roles that align with biblical manhood. As Barr has summarized: "Women surrender, help, and respond while husbands provide, protect, and initiate. A biblical woman is a submissive woman."[9] Although more precise definitions of the distinct roles are rarely attempted by complementation leaders, Allison Murray offers a list of common gendered traits that define the two roles, as described in Table 4.1.[10] The traits of biblical manhood emphasize leadership, authority, and intellect, while the features of biblical womanhood instead draw on submission, following, and emotions. Women are expected to care for the details while men think big picture, to submit to men's authority, to feel more than they think, and to adopt a nurturing role more than an authoritative role. These biblical gender roles are performed on stage

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[5] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 5.

[6] For more on this history, see: Denny Burk, "What's in a Name? The Meaning and Origin of 'Complementarianism," *CBMW* (blog), August 1, 2019, https://cbmw.org/2019/08/01/whats-in-a-name/.

[7] Piper and Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.*

[8] Owen Strachan, "Of 'Dad Moms' and 'Man Fails': An Essay on Men and Awesomeness," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 17 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 25.

[9] Barr's paraphrase of Elisabeth Elliott, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood,* 2.

[10] Murray, "Building Biblical Manhood and Womanhood," 73.

in contemporary worship settings. Recalling the opening vignette of Paul Baloche and Sarah Kroger, these characteristics can be mapped onto the distinct roles that they fulfilled. Kroger enacted a more submissive, emotional role, while Baloche was authoritative and directing. These directives inform the on-stage scenarios encountered here.

Table 4.1 Traits of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, according to Alison Murray (2021)

Biblical Manhood	**Biblical Womanhood**
Leads	Follows
Initiates	Responds
Thinks	Feels
Directs	Nurtures
Has Macrovision	Has Microvision
Driven sexually	Driven emotionally
Authoritative	Submissive
Provides	Oversees
Desires Respect	Desires Love
Wild	Domestic

4.3.2 Women's Reflections on Stage Presence

The songwriters, worship leaders, and industry executives I spoke to for this project had varied perspectives on women's roles on stage. While most of my interviewees did not identify biblical gender roles as prescriptive for their gendered performances, they often identified feeling impositions that delineated how they should lead as Christian women. They recognized that there was significant concern over what was acceptable for them on stage. Kate Bowler suggests this sense of acceptability is often formed from a young age, recalling her experience that

"evangelical girls learn the limits of their own spiritual authority as an accounting of small details, little moments of encouragement or discouragement that nudge them toward a sense of being acceptable."[11] For many of my interviewees, they can recall comments or frameworks that gave them a sense of what would be considered acceptable on stage.

Darlene Zschech, one of the most accomplished worship leaders in the history of the industry, learned to distill the narratives of being "less" as part of a lifelong process. Through decades of ministry experience, she was able to discern when the feedback she received emerged because her leadership threatened the status quo. She says:

> What I worked out later… [is that] my passion kind of rattled the status quo of the expression around me. And so out of some of the people around me, mostly male, who I guess it made them feel uncomfortable, were the leaders coming and saying 'you need to be less than' because otherwise you're going to make people uncomfortable.' [Laughs]. Now I go, 'No, that was just making you feel uncomfortable.' [Laughs again]. But you know, when you when you're young, and you're trying to be respectful…. I love people. I want to honor people in the room. But at some point, you've got to go, is this honor? Or is this me just kind of bowing to the first raised voice against who I am? You kind of got to work that out along the way.[12]

Darlene identified that being a young person who was new to the industry meant that it was harder to discern how to respond to external voices that try to prescribe how you should be moving, leading, singing. For her, decades of experience have given her the ability to better understand that these impositions don't need to always be followed.

Lauren DeLeary, a young woman who was half of a Christian rock duo with her sister, describes feeling a strong sense of restriction in her stage persona. While she was not in a

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[11] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife,* ix.

[12] Author interview with Darlene Zschech, July 11, 2023.

specifically worship space, her music sets ended in an altar call and featured many of the same distinctives as worship sets. She describes the impositions on her physical expression:

> Well, we couldn't move. It was so crazy because my sister and I have so much energy and like, we're like little rockers. Like, honestly, we just like, we vibe, we have a good time. We're jumping up and down. We're like, 'Let's go!' We're getting a crowd going, that is who we are. We love that. And there were times we would look at each other and we'd be like, 'Is this the place? Is this the location? Or is this the crowd?' Towards the end we could tell when we shouldn't like move. Like, we shouldn't like dance around with our like instruments or shouldn't, like, jump up and down and shouldn't like move. So that's just one huge example where the guys were like, they could do that all day long. No one batted an eye. They were like, 'Oh, they're sick, like love that like they're so energetic, so fun.' Where it's like with us, it was like yeah, it was like weird. It was weird. Like, again, it was like us being sexualized.[13]

Lauren ultimately identified the restrictions placed on her as an act of sexualization, falling within Evangelical concerns about women's bodies being a source of temptation for men. The restrictions placed upon her stage presence were one way that she was made responsible for men's experience.

Baily Hager, an emerging producer, songwriter, and worship leader in Nashville, described a friend who began being more exuberant in her worship leadership style, and was told to "tone it down." She continued: "I know girls who have just been shut down, and like anytime they are about to say something to like shepherd the room or pastor them, the pastor will like come up because it's like, nope, you don't do that."[14] Baily interprets this limitation as restrictive, borne out of insecurity and men's desire for control. When we spoke about this, she referenced the story of King David in the Bible, who talks about becoming "undignified," suggesting that this is something we should be able to embrace in worship, with women expressing more freedom.

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[13] Author interview with Lauren DeLeary, June 28, 2023.

[14] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

Baily concluded that she could understand why the narratives are the way they are, but she doesn't believe they are right.

For Baily, Darlene, and Lauren, the feedback they encountered about women "being less" on stage did not align with their personal convictions about leadership. While the culture around them was encouraging them to be more docile, submissive, emotional, they found empowerment by being passionate, vibrant, and energetic.

4.4 Framing Gendered Labour

Interrogations of women's embodied labour help us to understand the impacts of biblical gender roles on women in the industry. Recognizing that women absorb strong messages about how they exist on stage, these frameworks flesh out the factors that dictate *what* women do on stage, as well as *why* they do it. These include embodied practices from Lisa Weaver Swartz, emotional labour from sociologist Arlie Russel and expanded upon in worship by Sarah Kathleen Johnson, and liturgical versus spiritual authority from Dorothy Mendez, Tanya Riches, and Andrew Davies. Together, these theories offer a foundation from which to explain the nuances of women's worship leadership, capturing the gendered and spiritualized forces that drive their performance practices.

4.4.1 Embodied Practices

In her book on gender and power in Evangelical spaces, Lisa Weaver Swartz articulates that "community rituals and gendered individual scripts powerfully reflect—and shape—deep beliefs

about God and the gendered nature of reality."[15] She proposes the term *embodied practices* to describe the physicality of practices that "situate belief in the physical body and in the material world."[16] Weaver Swartz develops this term based on Martin Riesebrodt's conceptualization of religion as discursive practice, which considers the "words, stories, and metaphors human actors use to communicate about and to superhuman powers serve as vehicles of religious knowledge and mechanisms for its perpetuation and adaptation."[17] The term *embodied practices* emphasises the physicality and materiality of these practices to consider how participants are formed to and by their communities gendered frameworks. In other words, this framework suggests that what happens on a worship stage powerfully reflects and predicts a community's relationship to gender roles.

While not explicitly identifying the framework of embodied practices, my interviewees understand that both community and individual practices on stage have distinct and powerful impacts on worship. Andrea Hunter, a songwriter, says:

> I think it would really be good if women and men in worship considered all of the messages that they send, the signals they send, not just by the words that they're singing, which are very important, but by the way that they're singing them, the way they're holding the guitar, the clothing they wear, movements, bodily posture, and facial expressions.[18]

Andrea recognizes that the embodied practices of artists have meaning, that they deeply reflect and shape a community's rituals and values. These messages are significant enough that they warrant careful consideration and critique.

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[15] Lisa Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings: How Evangelicals Do Gender and Practice Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 12.

[16] Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings,* 12.

[17] Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceiling,* 12; Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[18] Author interview with Andrea Hunter, May 17, 2023.

Kristine McCusker identifies how the work of unveiling gendered embodied practices has been avoided in the past under the guise of authenticity. When worship experiences are presumed to be authentic, there is a reduced need to examine why and how embodied practices develop the way they do. McCusker describes this phenomenon in country music (a genre with similar socio-cultural constraints): "By claiming the performances to be genuine, traditional, and unchanging in repeated performances, it has fended off some attempts to 'trouble,' or expose, the instability of its contingently gendered stages."[19] Suggesting that gender roles are strictly authentic or genuine works to deflect any critique that these embodied practices are in fact formed by external influences or have a formational impact on their communities.

4.4.2 Performing Emotional Labour

In examining women's roles on stage in a Christian context, it quickly becomes apparent that the expectation for women to be feeling, emotive, and expressive extends to their on-stage work. Biblical womanhood is not the only framework that prescribes this caring work to women; sociologists also help us understand that in broader society women are often expected to absorb this "emotional labor." Arlie Russel Hochschild proposed this term in her 1983 book, saying:

> This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others-in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.[20]

[19] McCusker, "Gendered Stages," 355.

[20] Arlie Russel Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1983), 7.

For Russel Hochschild, emotional labour produces comfort and can have benefits in creating a positive experience for those who receive it. It can also, however, have a personal toll on the person who is required to perform this role. Russel Hochschild suggests that women bear the brunt of this labour more than men, crediting them with being the ones who have traditionally managed feelings in private life.[21] Watson and Ward summarize this personal investment, noting "the ability to elicit appropriate emotional responses from others requires a performance in which your own emotions are managed."[22] This has clear implications for worship: when women lead worship on stage, there is an expectation for them to perform emotions in ways that are relevant to the congregation, and which will invite the appropriate response from the congregation.

Sarah Kathleen Johnson further expands on the ways that women's worship leadership may be tied into expectations of emotional labour. Johnson cites a gender analysis of the recent Mennonite hymnal *Voices Together,* noting that while women are underrepresented as text and tune writers, they are overrepresented as authors of spoken prayers and other worship resources. Johnson suggests that this spoken worship leadership is undervalued in a Mennonite context and thus has become a form of "women's work," which is characterized by both concealed and emotional labour. She summarizes Russel Hochschild's argument, suggesting "The emotional labor of worship leadership consists of inducing or suppressing one's own emotions to tend to the emotional needs of the community and respond to events that occur during worship."[23] While in the case of Mennonite worship Johnson suggests that worship leaders tend to "get out of the

[21] Russel Hochschild, *The Managed Heart,* 11.

[22] Allan Watson and Jenna Ward, "Creating the Right 'Vibe': Emotional Labour and Musical Performance in the Recording Studio," *Environment and Planning. A* 45, no. 12 (2013): 2905.

[23] Johnson, "The Problem of Mennonite Worship Leadership Becoming 'Women's Work," 28.

way" or suppress their emotions, this emotional labour is differently expressed in a contemporary worship context, where women worship leaders are expected to produce emotion that inspires and invites participation from the congregation.

Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, a journalist who regularly covers contemporary worship music and who herself has worked as a worship leader, described in an interview with me the way that women's leadership is often used for more emotionally intimate songs, inviting them to perform this gendered emotional labour. She says:

> If you even watch performances that women give, you know, eyes closed, sort of this kind of signaling of this intimate, looking inside, relationship with God… This love song, ballad type of song that we draw on so much, that comes with certain like emotional baggage, it comes with like associations of romance and things that women are just socialized into expressing more freely and carrying the emotional weight of that. I definitely have observed that there are these moments where we're supposed to sort of look inward and experience intimacy with God, the female voice often gets used to facilitate that.[24]

Kelsey observes that the nature of women's vocal performances more readily aligns with the role of expressing intimacy with God, requiring them to facilitate this emotional labour.

4.4.3 Liturgical vs. Spiritual Authority

The labour and practices enacted by women on stage are directly tied into structures of power. Worship experiences are consistently formed by power relationships that manifest both visibly and invisibly, intentionally and unintentionally. Johnson and Wymer write that "Liturgy is necessarily political: it emerges from and shapes power-laden human relationships with material and spiritual implications for society, ecclesial institutions, and communities of faith, as well as

[24] Author interview with Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, June 7, 2023.

the individuals who comprise them."[25] Within liturgical experiences, then, there are certain individuals who possess liturgical authority, while others do not. Mendez, Riches, and Davies consider liturgical authority to be placed upon the worship team when it doesn't rest on the preacher or pastor.[26] They suggest that this liturgical authority is dominated by men, and specifically by the man who holds the guitar and the power to direct the worship experience most powerfully. Mendez et al propose this framework by telling the story of Tia Lola, a Pentecostal woman who claimed spiritual authority in her ministry:

> Even though ecclesial and social structures may seek to place boundaries on the liturgical authority of women like Tia Loli, their spiritual authority often and persistently contests this hierarchy…. We are specifically arguing that spiritual authority a) is different from liturgical authority; b) comes from (among other things) a woman's commitment to her calling; c) can be as impactful as liturgical authority; and d) can open doors for liturgical opportunities even in churches and cultures where these would otherwise not be allowed.[27]

Spiritual authority can be empowering expression of authority, and one which allows for the development of women's leadership, even as an alternative to the widely regarded liturgical authority.

In the contemporary worship context, women similarly experience limitations on the kinds of liturgical authority they can exert and may find themselves drawing upon spiritual authority in its place. Abby, a worship leader and songwriter based in Nashville, describes her experience of being held back from the place of highest liturgical authority on the worship team, and attributes this to the fact that she is a woman and doesn't play guitar. She says:

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[25] Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer, *Worship and Power: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions*, Worship and Witness (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2023), 5.

[26] Dorothy Mendez, Tanya Riches, and Andrew Davies, "Spiritual, but Authoritative?: Pentecostal Women and Liturgical Authority," in *Worship and Power: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions*, ed. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer, Worship and Witness (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2023), 167.

[27] Mendez et al., "Spiritual, but Authoritative?: Pentecostal Women and Liturgical Authority," 167.

> I was allowed to sing background vocals, but I was not allowed to be a worship leader. Two things were always brought up about why I was not allowed to be a worship leader. The first thing was that I did not play guitar. They said that it was uncomfortable for someone to be leading it without an instrument. And I was always so curious about that, because I was like, we always have a band. It's not like it's just me and an instrument, like ever. It's always like a lot of people. But another thing was – I didn't find this out until later. But all of my male counterparts got paid. And I never did. And I led there for years. And I just always thought we were all doing it as a volunteer thing, but I was the only one who did it. But it was because I was not a worship leader. Because of the freaking guitar. Because I do not play guitar.[28]

Abby's inability to play guitar precluded her from the position of liturgical authority that comes from being the worship leader, a position that is set aside for male instrumentalists. She identifies that the masculine coded nature of the position and the ability to play guitar go hand in hand. The requirement of being able to play the guitar is an easy guise for being able to exclude women from the role.

Jennifer Knapp had a similar experience of exclusion, even though she played guitar. She identifies that audiences were concerned that she would think that the guitar gave her license to show liturgical authority:

> If somebody's upset with me, it's that they would be kind of somewhat cautioning me, like the guitar does not give you license, even though we asked you to come into this church and to be on the stage and we will allow you to sing a song, don't talk in between your songs. Don't express anything that comes remotely near preaching. So, there are these kinds of weird little in-between nuances. The irony is like some spaces I wouldn't be allowed to be in if I didn't have the guitar. And yet, when I wear the guitar, I'm kind of stepping into a man's space. They want to see me be a woman.[29]

As Jennifer strayed dangerously close to liturgical authority, audiences responded by seeking to know which male authority in her life gave her permission to exist the way she did. She says:

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[28] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), January 23, 2024.

[29] Author interview with Jennifer Knapp, June 30, 2023.

> There was an expectation that I would have male oversight. People were asking me what male authority was in my life to give me access to the spaces that I was doing. Often, they were like, 'Okay, well, who's the pastor that you talk to every day,' assuming that that pastor would be male. As a single woman, [people] were definitely concerned that I had a male figure, preferably married, in my life to guide me.[30]

Her proximity to liturgical authority was made more manageable when others knew that she was overseen by someone who had authorized liturgical authority. With women often excluded from liturgical authority, it should not be a surprise that they often use their spiritual authority to subversively channel liturgical power.

4.5 Case study: "The Blessing"

On-stage performances offer a critical venue for understanding the ways that spiritual and liturgical authority play out in contemporary worship. Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes are an ideal case study for this topic as they routinely lead worship together as a couple and are widely considered to be some of the most popular figures in the industry. Jobe began worship leading at a young age, and describes it as follows:

> I grew up singing because my parents were involved in music ministry in the Baptist church. We traveled a lot when I was a little girl, but when I was ten we started going to a non-denominational, charismatic, Spirit-filled church. We would have these nights of worship that lasted for hours, and they cultivated something deep in my heart for the presence of God and pouring our lives out in worship to him. Not just knowing who he was, but letting him deeper into our hearts and experiencing his manifest presence. So that changed my life, and I just knew I had a calling. I'd hear these prophetic words or I'd hear people say, *you have a gift,* and I knew because I was just so impacted by the presence of God that I wanted to do that to help people.[31]

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[30] Author interview with Jennifer Knapp, June 30, 2023

[31] Alison J. Althoff, "Kari Jobe on Worship and Women's Ministry," *Today's Christian Woman*, 2013, https://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2013/april/kari-jobe-on-worship-and-womens-ministry.html. Italics original.

Jobe has become one of the top players in the field, receiving nominations for three Grammy awards, winning multiple Dove awards, and achieving two RIAA Gold Certified Singles.[32] In an interview in 2013, she was asked whether she desired to be married. She responded:

> Years ago I thought I'd get married and do ministry as a married woman, and I specifically remember the Lord saying, *I haven't said that for you. I just want you to walk through the doors I have for you, and I'll work that out when it's time.* I'm so glad I obeyed his voice in that, because I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today if I would've just waited around for what I thought my life would look like. God had a different plan in mind.[33]

Not long after giving that interview, however, Jobe married Cody Carnes, who she met when they both worked with Gateway Church. Indeed, they have developed their ministry as a couple, and Jobe now does ministry as a married woman. Carnes and Jobe have two children, Canyon and Kingston, who were born in 2015 and 2019. Since giving birth, she's described feeling a more maternal instinct in her worship leading.[34]

In the relationship between Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes, Jobe had more power and influence early in her career and is now sharing this platform with her husband. Carnes only officially signed with a publisher in 2017, while Jobe had been prominent on the CWM scene for almost a decade by the time of his signing. While Jobe boasts 1.31 million YouTube followers (as of February 2024), Carnes has only 252,000 followers. Jobe may be the source of their combined success, but this does not translate to on-stage leadership where Carnes enacts a more liturgically authoritative role.

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[32] Opry, "Cody Carnes & Kari Jobe | Opry," accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.opry.com/artists/cody-carnes-kari-jobe.

[33] Althoff, "Kari Jobe on Worship and Women's Ministry." Italics in original.

[34] "Kari Jobe," *Capitol Christian Music Group* (blog), accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.capitolcmglabelgroup.com/artist/kari-jobe-0/.

Their song "The Blessing" was released on March 6, 2020, and became a sort of COVID-19 anthem for many. Virtual choir covers of the song abounded in the early months of the pandemic, and Jobe and Carnes even released a merch line specifically with the song lyrics. The components of instruments, gesture, and vocalization in "The Blessing" help to track differences in authority.

4.5.1 Description of "The Blessing"

The video for "The Blessing" opens with Jobe, Carnes, and a stage full of instrumentalists and singers.[35] While the two of them are clearly the central characters, a large choir fills in the back of the stage, several backup singers stand around them, and a full band provides instrumental support. With soft piano padding the background, Jobe introduces the song first (Figure 4.1). She describes the songwriting process with their co-writers, how they gathered together to "go in after the presence of God and try to pen lyric and melody...." She continues, helping the congregation prepare to worship: "This is a blessing over you, and your family, and your children. So just receive this this morning, just put your hands out in front of you, turn your heart to a place of just receiving the blessing of heaven, from God himself over you this morning."

[35] *The Blessing with Kari Jobe & Cody Carnes | Live From Elevation Ballantyne | Elevation Worship*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp6aygmvzM4.

Figure 4.1 Jobe Introduces "The Blessing" (0:04)

At this point, Jobe steps back to her place behind her husband [00:46-00:52]. As the piano sets up the verse, Carnes stands with his arms fully outstretched to his sides. When he begins to sing, his arms move to rest on his guitar, though he doesn't play. He sings: "The Lord bless you, and keep you. Make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you..." (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Carnes singing verse 1 (01:30)

Carnes leads the congregation through the first verse, chorus, and second verse, and Jobe harmonizes, beginning on the first chorus [2:11]. After the second chorus, the energy shifts as the band lays the musical foundation for the bridge. Jobe softly extemporizes vocals in the background, offering a sonic foundation for the spiritual intensity that is coming [4:05]. While Carnes has not played his guitar up until this point, he begins playing as the bridge begins. In the moments before the words of the bridge come in, Jobe steps forward in front of Carnes, and sings: “May his favour be upon you, and a thousand generations. And your family, and your children, and their children, and their children...” [4:17].

Immediately the choir in the background responds to her words. Several choir members can be seen bending over or kneeling, signs of the way the bridge is moving them. The camera pans to a young woman in the audience who is wiping tears from her face [4:43]. As Jobe jumps the octave to repeat the bridge, Cody is seen not singing but smiling, almost laughing. He

watches what is happening around him, strumming and singing on and off throughout (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 Carnes laughing while Jobe leads (05:02)

As Carnes smiles, however, Jobe does not. The spiritual intensity that she is facilitating is physically demanding. She paces the stage, a pained expression on her face. Her arms move in circles, inviting the congregation to sing with her and build with her. The band begins to accent every beat in the buildup to the chorus, and Carnes is seen pacing and clapping on the beat and pumping his fist in the air. When the bridge is almost finished, he calls out “Amen, Amen,” signalling the return of the chorus [5:52].

Figure 4.4 Jobe singing "yeah" at the end of the bridge (5:50)

In the final moments before the bridge leads into the chorus, Jobe bends over to sing "yeah," making her body small as she channels the momentum in the room (Figure 4.4). Jobe's smile comes on the chorus, when the weight of the bridge has passed and she smoothly transitions back from melody to harmony, passing the metaphorical baton back to Carnes.[36]

In line with contemporary worship songs that feature many iterations of refrains and bridges, "The Blessing" is not done after the first bridge and chorus. While Jobe indeed sings harmony on the chorus after the first bridge [05:55], she returns to melody when the second bridge begins. At this point, Jobe has been physically exerting herself for more than six minutes, and the physical demands of the performance are evident. At one point, she bends over and stretches her arm out, her voice briefly cutting out as she catches her breath (Figure 4.5).

[36] Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes, "The Blessing with Kari Jobe & Cody Carnes | Live From Elevation Ballantyne | Elevation Worship," uploaded on March 6, 2020, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp6aygmvzM4.

Figure 4.5 Jobe stretches out towards the congregation and catches her breath (6:46)

The leadership continues to oscillate between Jobe and Carnes through the remainder of the iterations of verse and chorus, with Jobe generally the primary focus on the bridge, and Carnes stepping up for leadership on the chorus (though on the final chorus we see Jobe sing the melody). Around 07:50 Elevation's pastor Steven Furtick come on stage and joins Jobe and Carnes in leadership. He extemporizes phrases like "Come on, have another blessing." As Jobe continues to exert herself, jumping, moving her arms, closing her eyes, Steven Furtick walks slowly around the stage, keeping his eyes open. He has the appearance of being emotionally and physically immovable, solid and strong. He occasionally sings and extemporizes, though he is significantly more physically and emotionally restrained.

As the song finishes, the musicians clear the stage for Furtick to preach. The congregation and musicians are heard singing the "Amen refrain" informally one more time [09:15]. Carnes is seen standing up, nodding his head, while Jobe bends over, clutching her heart [09:24]. At 10:01,

Furtick is heard singing the bridge in a subdued manner. When he extemporizes, it is by shouting "May the favour." His voice is gruff, low, and aggressive. Jobe joins him, again singing the melody of the bridge. Furtick quickly stops singing, and is seen instead pacing, looking out over the congregation, pumping his fist, or jumping (Figure 4.6). By the end of the song, a podium has been placed in the center and the stage has been set for Furtick to preach.

Figure 4.6 Steven Furtick pumping his fist behind the podium (11:38).

4.5.2 Performing Gender in "The Blessing"

Gendered differences in performance pervade Jobe and Carnes' performance of "The Blessing." They use their bodies differently, relying on a different range of physical gestures to express themselves. They vocalize in different ways and at different times. The lack of a guitar for Jobe and the reliance on one for Carnes signals different relationships to musical authority. The following discussion considers the ways that Carnes and Jobe perform gender in the video.

4.5.2.1 Extemporaneous Vocalization

Whether one was watching the video or just listening to the audio for this piece, differences in the ways that Jobe and Carnes perform gender would be evident just by hearing their vocalizations. In the video for "The Blessing," as in many of their other songs, we can observe significant differences both in *how* and *when* Jobe and Carnes use their voices. A first and primary difference comes in relation to the bridge of the song. The above description of Carnes singing the verse and chorus of a song while Jobe comes in for the bridge is part of an established pattern by the duo. Carnes often begins the songs at the mic but then passes the leadership over to his partner for the bridge.

The bridge of a contemporary worship song is the most musically impactful – it is often repeated many times, starts smaller and builds both in volume and intensity, and may sometimes have an octave jump to add to this development.[37] Among contemporary worship practitioners, the bridge of the song is considered not only the most musically varied and significant, it is also the peak of the spiritual intensity of the song. Busman describes the bridge of one song he encountered during his fieldwork, when the band curated a significant volume increase and a switch from rhythmic pounding to a floating feeling. He writes: "The moment of musical climax elicits a huge reaction from the gathered congregation, who move from singing to shouting along with the lyrics as they fervently press their hands towards heaven."[38] This response from the congregation has come to be expected; the bridge represents the moment of peak spiritual intensity and connection.

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[37] Baker, "The Mystery, Music, and Markets of Contemporary Worship Songs," 188.

[38] Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion," 115.

When Jobe steps in to lead the bridge in "The Blessing," she takes on the emotional labour of facilitating this spiritual encounter, something she models through her own vulnerability. While Carnes laughs and strums his guitar, Jobe carries the responsibility of leading the congregation's worship at the most emotionally, physically, and spiritually intense point of the song. The extemporizations that set up the bridge help to characterize this spiritual capacity: Busman describes these as "ecstatic utterances," which riff on song lyrics that usually describe God's power or providence. He notes that male worship leaders are less likely to perform these utterances, and he characterizes them as an example of women being vessels for the Holy Spirit instead of musicians in their own rite.[39] The extemporized vocalizations that Jobe offers during the setup to the bridge offer a glimpse into the type of spiritual labour that she performs, labour that is responsive, feeling, sensing.

In addition to women's vocalizations being focused on spiritually significant moments, the very nature of their vocalization can signal also their emotional investment. I saw Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes live at Carnegie Hall in February 2024, and was delighted that their music director and keyboardist, a woman named Jessica Stropko, was performing with them. She was the only woman instrumentalist from their band, though there were other women performing as part of the orchestra. I was struck that of all the band members, Jessica was the only one who regularly sang along during the concert. The male instrumentalists contentedly played their instruments, but Jessica adopted a more spiritualized role by singing – and visually worshipping – while she played. Her vocalization placed her in a category of someone who was not just there on her musical merits, she also enacted the role of a responsive worshipper.

[39] Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion," 193.

4.5.2.2 Expressive Gestures

Since this performance of "The Blessing" features intense exertion and expression, Jobe and Carnes' physical gestures offer another window into gendered differences in the performance. Within the range of worship movements used on stage, Jobe expresses a full range of gestures: arms outstretched, hands around the microphone, bending over singing, running across the stage, eyes closed, eyes open and staring into the distance, arm making a circular gesture, arm right in front of her, hand on heart. At times she appears out of breath, at one point she stops singing for a word to catch a breath. The performance is physically demanding for her. Carnes' gestures are more limited: when he is not playing guitar, his arms may be resting on his guitar, a first may be pumping the air, he may be clapping, or his arms may be fully outstretched above his head. At one point he is seen making a circular gesture. While he sometimes laughs and smiles, he does not physically exert himself to the same level as Jobe.

In some moments of intensity, Jobe paces the entire stage, going from side to side to reach the breadth of the audience. In other moments of heightened spirituality, Jobe makes herself smaller, with her head bowed, eyes closed, hand on heart. This is a sign of intimacy and deep spiritual reflection. This more reflective position is one that we almost never see men assume. On the rarer occasion that Carnes expresses himself physically, he does so by making himself bigger, putting his arms out directly to his side and taking up a significant amount of space. Carnes' gestures seem more reminiscent of a rockstar: finger pointing up, clapping, arms straight out, while Jobe's reflect the worshipful stance that the audience is to enact. When Furtick enters the scene, his actions resemble those of Carnes: fist pumping, looking out over the congregation, pacing.

Jobe's gestures represent a significant level of reactivity and responsiveness: she physically expresses the energy in the room through a range of motions that fluctuate depending on the musical and spiritual intensity. The physical energy that Jobe channels in her leading falls in line with the practice of physical expression in praise and worship. Althouse and Wilkinson observe that music helps to cultivate embodied experiences in charismatic worship, and that "participants engage in kinesthetic movements of swaying, hand raising, dancing, jumping, bodily jerks, and flag waving to express their emotional jubilance. Others will lie on the floor, sometimes shaking and jerking, crying, or laughing."[40] These physical expressions are evidence of the spiritual power of the experience of worshipers. In the case of Jobe's extreme physical exertion and expression, and in the context of charismatic worship, we see that she enacts a more spiritualized role than her husband, who is more physically restrained.

4.5.2.3 Authoritative Instruments

The absence of the guitar for Jobe offers one final reference point for gendered performance. While Jobe's musical contribution of vocalization and extemporization is exceedingly vulnerable and spiritually formative, Carnes' musical contribution of guitar playing is less exposed. Carnes is rarely seen without a guitar, and Jobe is never seen with one. What is particularly peculiar is the way in which Carnes consistently goes back and forth between playing guitar and not. At the absolute highest volume level of the song, during one of the final choruses, Carnes removes his hands from the guitar and the sound level does not change at all. We might wonder whether Carnes' guitar is in fact not even plugged in but is rather symbolic.

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[40] Peter Althouse and Michael Wilkinson, "Musical Bodies in the Charismatic Renewal: The Case of Catch the Fire and Soaking Prayer," in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique Marie Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 30.

In a YouTube interview with Gateway Worship Training, Carnes explained his guitar-playing approach and philosophy. Early in the interview, he lightheartedly alluded to social function of the guitar for his on-stage presence:

> Interviewer: What's your general approach to this instrument?
> Cody Carnes: Acoustic is a very valuable instrument in the band setting. And it's not just a security blanket.
> Interviewer: Not *just,* but it is. To make you feel comfortable, so you don't feel awkward.
> Cody Carnes: Not *just,* but it does do that.[41]

In the context of Jobe's spiritual vulnerability and leadership, Carnes' reliance on the guitar allows him to refrain from being too vulnerable.

Similarly, Busman describes this reliance on the guitar as a "distancing mechanism":

> Visually and physically, the guitar seemed to function as a technological distancing mechanism to keep the male worship leaders from appearing out of control during the more emotional 'worship' songs. As long as they were holding their guitars or maybe lightly playing along, they maintained a certain kind of mastery over the emotional musical experience that was unfolding.[42]

A prime example of the guitar as a technological distancing mechanism can be found in the music video for "Gratitude," a song by Brandon Lake.[43] The video is set in what looks like an abandoned church or ruins, and Brandon is the only figure in the video. The piece is slow and expressive, unusual for a solo performance from a man in the genre. He is seen putting his hand on his heart, closing his eyes, raising his arms. He plays guitar for the first 55 seconds of the video but then stops playing it for four minutes – for most of the song – before picking it up

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[41] *Acoustic Guitar: A Conversation with Cody Carnes [Gateway Worship Training]*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEWIqqs6Lbo, 1:17.

[42] Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion," 195-196.

[43] *Gratitude (Chosen Performance) - Brandon Lake*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQdfs5S6jyA.

again in the last minute. During most of the song, Brandon is seen roaming the ruins singing and expressing himself while carrying his guitar on his back. He doesn't play the guitar, but it reminds the audience of his musical expertise, giving him license to perform a more emotional song while retaining an authoritative stance.

This use of the guitar resonates with Busman's findings in his own fieldwork at the Passion conference. He found that over the course of several days, no women or person of colour ever picked up an instrument in worship, and no male worship leader ever made it through a worship session without picking up the guitar.[44] Contextualizing reliance on the guitar, Busman draws on Lucy Green, who writes:

> Within patriarchy, man is constructed as being in control of nature through the harnessing of technology, [with] woman as a part of the nature that man controls…The sight and sound of the woman singing therefore affirms the correctness of the fact of what is absent: the unsuitability of any serious and lasting connection between woman and instrument, woman and technology.[45]

The function of the guitar as a tool for power and control is not unique to contemporary worship contexts, and its role here aligns with the way guitars are often used across genres. Scholars have suggested that the dominance and manipulation of the guitar by men is a tool for the "construction and maintenance of socially constructed gender identities and roles."[46] In other words, the guitar offers men a mechanism to manipulate the musical environment such that they remain in control, while women are required to be responsive to their leadership. Carnes' guitar serves as a visual marker of his dominance and control, while Jobe's work as the primary vocalist in the bridge places her as a more emotional, responsive leader.

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[44] Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion," 195.

[45] Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28–29.

[46] Rebecca McSwain, "The Power of the Electric Guitar," *Popular Music and Society* 19, no. 4 (1995): 35.

For women to enact this more authoritative role with the guitar is in direct defiance of Evangelical gender roles. Jennifer Knapp describes feeling a distinct awareness of the ways that, as a woman guitarist, she was operating in a man's world:

> If I didn't take on the submissive kinds of roles, wearing a dress, singing quieter music, playing a piano or letting somebody else play for me, or singing to tracks, those were often things that people were …. troubled [by]. I was definitely in a man's world… Even though like outside in the mainstream world, you've seen women with guitars for years and years, yes, it's male dominated. But in the CCM side of it, you now have this layer of submissiveness that you're actually really defined just by being an instrumentalist and driving your own work.[47]

Jennifer identified that the physicality of playing guitar was uncomfortable for her audiences to see in a woman. Playing guitar required endurance and a sort of aggression to keep the momentum up, and she says that church people were not used to seeing that from women. In response to this, she received consistent feedback that she should not be doing what she's doing as a female guitar player. Jennifer says that every day she received roughly one passive comment about her playing guitar, and approximately once a week someone would express serious concern that she was playing guitar as a woman. When we spoke, she gave me several examples of comments: "It's a shame, you have to have that guitar on today. You look like a man from a distance. You know, you're such a pretty lady, it's so crazy that you sweat this much today, do you need a fan? Or how come you never sit down?"[48] These comments communicated that in the context of Evangelical Christian beliefs, Jennifer was doing something she shouldn't be doing. Beyond blatant misogyny and sexism, they cement the deeply gendered beliefs that her audience held about women's labour and performance.

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[47] Author interview with Jennifer Knapp, June 30, 2023.

[48] Author interview with Jennifer Knapp, June 30, 2023.

4.6 Oversight and Relational Authority

Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes' performance of "The Blessing" is encapsulates the gendered dynamics that dictate women's on-stage performances. It is evident that the contrasts in gestures, instruments, and vocalizations for Kari and Cody represent distinct gendered differences in authority. While in many ways their leadership resonates with what Mendez et al describe as "spiritual" vs "liturgical" authority, it is perhaps a contradiction to imply that Kari's deeply worshipful leadership is somehow not liturgical. The descriptors of spiritual vs. liturgical authority are an additional dichotomous frame that can be added to the previously discussed framework of "prophet" vs "priest" leadership, or "visible" vs "concealed" labour, but they are taken one step further here.

Instead of describing Kari and Cody's actions as "spiritual" vs "liturgical," it may be more helpful to conceptualize of two types of liturgical leadership. First, *oversight authority* is based on a formal position, includes coordination and leadership of large-scale liturgical features, and which is generally distanced from emotional, personal encounter. This type of leadership often falls to men. By contrast, *relational authority* is less formal and is more concerned with the spiritual and emotional encounter between the worship leader, congregation, and God than it is with the larger structures. This labour is more likely to be done by women. Both types of leadership are essential, the problem only comes when they become too attached to one particular gender.

Following Mendez et al.'s description of gendered versus spiritual authority, we notice distinct ways that Kari and Cody align with these opposing roles. Mendez et al. first note that spiritual authority is *different from liturgical authority*. If we view Cody's oversight authority as intertwined with his musical direction setting on guitar and his more emotionally and physically

distanced stance as an overseer, Kari's relational authority is distinct in the way it channels her own spiritual connection with God, something that is deeply personal and up-close.

Second, spiritual authority *comes from (among other things) a woman's commitment to her calling*. Recall Jobe's words: "I just knew I had a calling. I'd hear these prophetic words or I'd hear people say, *you have a gift,* and I knew because I was just so impacted by the presence of God that I wanted to do that to help people."[49] Jobe felt God's call on her life to be a worship leader, and her commitment to this calling has given her license to express her own connection with God, as well as to help others find this connection, even when the broader religious culture she is in might restrict her to certain roles. Relational authority is not ordained by a broader institution, just like the "prophet" leadership previously discussed.

Third, Mendez et al describe that spiritual authority *can be as impactful as liturgical authority.* Anyone who is watching the video of "The Blessing" will notice how directly Jobe's physical, spiritual, and emotional expression directly impacts those who are in the room. The congregation responds to her vulnerability, offering gestures towards connection with God which are inspired by her own. This analysis would be inadequate if it suggested that Jobe's leadership was not formative; her spiritual authority indeed is highly influential and impactful. Her relational authority deeply impacts the congregation.

Finally, spiritual authority *can open doors for liturgical opportunities even in churches and cultures where these would otherwise not be allowed.* Despite a widespread Evangelical discomfort with women in visible leadership, Jobe shows up on stage with conviction and a level of authority that is hard to resist. She prays over her audiences, speaks words of scripture, and instructs them in how to worship. Even though she doesn't hold a guitar and doesn't singing the

[49] Althoff, "Kari Jobe on Worship and Women's Ministry." Italics in original.

melody for most of the song, Jobe's deep spiritual expression opens doors for her to also assert power and influence. The relationship that she builds through her leadership – with God and with the congregation – are influential and long lasting.

While this spiritual or relational authority does not grant women egalitarian opportunity, it does represent an outlet available to them for spiritual expression. Jobe is free to express her spiritual convictions in an enthusiastic and responsive way. Elaine Lawless writes of Evangelical women:

> Not only do women attend these churches, but they participate in the services in greater numbers and with more intensity, because this religious arena is approved as a forum for free participation in emotional religious response and ecstasy. Because historically women in this country have not had many such forums available to them, it is understandable that where their participation is condoned they take full advantage of the opportunity to speak and to perform.[50]

Women like Jobe benefit from a space where women's emotional religious response and ecstasy are not just permitted but are encouraged and validated.

It is not only women who are excluded from this position of oversight authority and who find their roles instead centring on relational and spiritual connection. This conversation on gendered expression takes on an even more critical layer in the context of recent movements around racial reconciliation within the industry, where we see this extended to Black men. One example is presented here to capture this nuance. Maverick City Music is an intentionally diverse music ensemble that set out to bridge the gap between Black gospel and white contemporary worship music. One of the most successful collaborations they have done is for the song "Firm Foundation (He Won't)," which was released in January 2022 and which features Cody Carnes

[50] Lawless, Elaine J. *God's Peculiar People: Women's Voices & Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988, xi.

and Chandler Moore, a Black worship singer with Maverick City Music.[51] Like in the video for "The Blessing," Carnes is the first to sing in "Firm Foundation (He Won't)", does very limited extemporizations, primarily sings the melody, and turns the leadership over to his partner for the bridge of the song. He relies on his guitar as a technological distancing mechanism, strumming on and off while limiting the use of his hands for further expression. By contrast, Moore adopts the more expressive role that we saw Jobe embody, singing frequent extemporizations, harmonizing, using a large range of gestures, and taking the lead on the spiritual authority of the bridge.

Moore emerges from a predominantly Black gospel context, and we can place his music ministry in line with a lineage where the music minister enacts a subservient position, not only emphasizing their submission to God through their spiritual and interior disposition, but also representing an opposing gender expression to the aggressive masculinity of the presumed male preacher. [52] As Jones notes of this Black gospel context, "… pastors are supposed to be virile and music ministers are supposed to be 'soft.'"[53] Jones suggests that men have been socialized to emphasize performing their interior disposition in order to circumvent anxieties that are associated with Black bodies.[54]

When we place these two artists in the context of their performance of "Firm Foundation (He Won't)," we see how Moore's ecstatic utterances and frequent extemporizations place him in a position of performing spiritual submission, emphasizing his interior disposition. By

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[51] Maverick City Music, "Firm Foundation (He Won't) [Feat. Chandler Moore & Cody Carnes] | Maverick City Music | TRIBL", uploaded on Jan. 3, 2022, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOP4s8fOEm0&ab_channel=TRIBL.

[52] Alisha Lola Jones, *Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 32.

[53] Jones, *Flaming?,* 26.

[54] Jones, *Flaming?,* 32.

contrast, Carnes uses his guitar as a distancing mechanism, limiting his emotional responsiveness and placing him in the authoritative role with more oversight. Moore and Carnes' performances highlight that it is hegemonic white masculinity that limits women and people of colour. The video makes apparent that the dynamics of white masculine authority and emotional distancing are prevalent not only in collaborations of white men and women, but also in interracial collaborations of men. Regardless of who the collaborator is, white masculinity will be spiritualized in a way that places white, male, guitar playing worship leaders in a more liturgically authoritative role than all other collaborators.

The question remains: why are (white) male worship leaders so resistant to embody this spiritually intimate role? The emotional, spiritual, and physical reactivity of women and men of colour in the contrast to the distance and authority of white men is taken to *yet* a deeper layer when we add in the layer of God being perceived as masculine, represented almost unanimously this way in Evangelical theologies and reflected in the song lyrics of contemporary worship music. In the context of churches that widely are not same-sex affirming, the performance of a male singer to a male God is dangerously close to a visual representation of same-sex desire: "For believers who subscribe to a heteropatriarchal social structure, a man singing to a male God—a God whose Spirit is described as indwelling or entering into the believer, no less—is an aural and visual distraction when they consider possible queer meaning."[55] White men like Cody Carnes are notably less emotional, physical, and responsive on stage, distancing themselves from any narrative that would place them in a romantic position.

Jenell Williams Paris similarly charts romantic roles onto the lyrics of contemporary worship songs, using the American romance narrative to read lyrics coding the audience's voice

[55] Jones, *Flaming?,* 5.

as feminine, and God's voice as masculine. She notes of popular contemporary worship songs that "the climax of lyrics is the enjoyment of personal intimacy between God and humans, mimicking the American romantic ideal of total fulfillment found between lovers."[56] Recalling that the bridge is the climax of contemporary worship songs, it follows that this section is most delegated to women in order to avoid the white male expressing sentiment reminiscent of same-sex desire.

While it may seem unrealistic to imagine that that homophobia could govern on stage performances to this extent, recent online discourse corroborates the way rumours of same-sex attraction could dictate how male worship leaders operate. The Instagram account "Unhinged Christian Memes," has shared videos recently that jokingly suggest that two of contemporary worship music's biggest male singers are romantically involved. In one recent video, for example, they shared a video of a man with his arm around a woman on the couch, with his hand outstretched to hold another man's hand in such a way that the woman couldn't see. The caption was "Brandon Lake and Phil Wickham watching the Eagles game."[57] Even though these are jokes, they represent the speculative audiences to whom Wickham and Lake perform. With this content floating around online, it is not surprising that male worship leaders resist intimate postures in worship.

Male worshipers in the congregation are also aware of the optics of expressing intimate love to a male God. Keith Drury has argued that the trend in visual art to portray Jesus as heroic and manly has implications for romantic lyrics in worship songs, "because 'singing love songs to Jesus' when we are picturing a very manly person instead of a distant Godlike painting has

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[56] Jenell Williams Paris, "'I Could Sing of Your Love Forever,'" 49.

[57] Unhinged Christian Memes, @unhingedchristianmemes, "also not gay," September 8, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_pIMEIsyo8/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

greater sensual overtones."[58] Drury conducted interviews with 45 male young adults between the ages of eighteen and 26 years old to interrogate how these individuals interpreted song lyrics with romantic or erotic overtones, and was surprised to discover that one-third of his informants reacted positively to the lyrics. About one-quarter of them, however, expressed concern. One said: "Some of these songs make me sound like I want to make out with Jesus and that thought is revolting to me."[59]

With sexual overtones at least contributing to – if not governing – our perception of contemporary worship song lyrics, and in the context of a religious movement that has largely rejected same-sex attraction, we can see why male worship leaders like Cody Carnes may be hesitant to show emotional expression or spiritual intimacy in the form of relational connection. This more submissive, responsive posture is adopted more freely by women worship leaders like Kari Jobe, who do not encounter the added layer of same-sex desire in their performance, or Black men like Chandler Moore who operate in a framework where this kind of expression is more commonplace. Coupled with calls for biblical manhood and womanhood, and the roles that accompany those callings, these on-stage personas begin to make sense.

4.7 Conclusion

Women's emotional and responsive on-stage personas tied to broader Evangelical discourse on gender roles, which emphasize women's submission and subordination. Using Kari Jobes and Cody Carnes' performance of "The Blessing," and viewing this through the lens of embodied

[58] Keith Drury, "I'm Desperate For You: Male Perception of Romantic Lyrics in Contemporary Worship Music," in *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship*, ed. Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdom Press, 2007), 57.

[59] Drury, "I'm Desperate For You: Male Perception of Romantic Lyrics in Contemporary Worship Music," 63.

practices, emotional labour, and spiritual authority, a clearer picture of the values that inform women's on-stage personas has been developed. These embodied practices have been layered onto Evangelical beliefs around same-sex attraction and the larger coding of worship as an intimate space, further uncovering why men have resisted assuming the more intimate and expressive role. Despite these limitations, it is also clear that women are still able find empowerment on gendered stages.

My intention is not to question the experience of individuals for whom these biblical gender roles are meaningful, whether white women and men or people of colour. In some cases, women in the industry identify more closely with the call to be responsive and emotional, such as Sarah, who we encountered in the opening vignette. Sarah doesn't identify external forces as driving her more subtle, emotional leadership style, but sees these guidelines as an extension of her spirituality. She says:

> As a female worship leader, I try to lead from what I know. In my experience, women are innately more emotional, emotive, empathetic. When I lead worship, I try to feel the room I'm in, sense the energy of the crowd, what they might be experiencing or feeling in that moment. I know a lot of female worship leaders who lead from a similar place. Of course men do this too, but you could say perhaps that women are built for it. I think it's a picture of the body of Christ and how each of us was built with different gifting, sensitivities, etc.[60]

In Sarah's case, her enactment of a more responsive, feminine perspective does not feel like an imposition. When she embodies the qualities more traditionally associated with biblical womanhood it is out of her own personal convictions, and her own identification with the way that those represent her gender. In some cases, women's emotional and expressive performances can be interpreted as signs of empowerment.

[60] Author interview with Sarah Kroger, January 11, 2024.

In the broader context of limited roles for women – particularly in religious spheres – the worship stage can be viewed as a supportive space for women to express spiritual intensity. For some, aligning with these biblical gender roles is empowering, and for others, it feels like a restriction. By understanding the embodied practices that emerge from these roles, we can better make space for those who want to reimagine what their worship leadership can look like. This research can act as a call for worship leaders to consider the messages communicated by on stage performances. After further reflection, some leaders might feel that the gendered narratives they develop through their embodied practices indeed are reflective of their theology. Others may want to propose changes to the ways that gender is performed in their worshipping communities. My hope is that by understanding the system that commands Christian understandings of gender roles, we can begin to offer women more freedom to pursue leadership expressions that feel empowering to them.

Chapter 5. Off Stage: Governing Values "Behind the Scenes"

"Don't let my heart grow cold or despise the wait,
This is not unkindness; this is not disgrace.
I am not passed over in my suffering,
You hold my broken heart and my broken dreams."

Excerpt from "The Detour" by Savannah Locke, Sarah Kroger, Tamar Chipp
from the Faithful Project's album *Go and Speak* (2021)

5.1 Understanding Gendered Work Environments

A songwriter sits at her computer, collaboratively writing a song online instead of in person to avoid being alone with a man she isn't married to. An industry executive has to invite a male colleague along to a business meeting with a male artist so that she's not meeting one-on-one with a man. A woman's husband shows up uninvited to a songwriting session to avoid having an unmarried man and woman working alone together. These scenarios describe the impacts of an Evangelical principle known as the "Billy Graham Rule," which stipulates that a man should never be alone in a room with a woman who is not his wife. The Billy Graham Rule has been implemented by Evangelicals for decades to prevent men from becoming tempted to cheat on their wives and intends to protect both parties from sexual sin. Unfortunately, this rule has also meant that women have become excluded from both professional and personal spaces by virtue of their capacity to cause a man to "stumble." For those in the contemporary worship industry, a

commitment to this rule has sometimes meant that men and women cannot meet in person to collaborate. In general, it also means that the easiest way for men to collaborate on worship songs is through partnerships with other men. Women find themselves restricted in their options for collaboration, set back by a rule that limits how they can work with their colleagues.

The Billy Graham Rule is only one of several factors governing women's experiences behind the scenes of the contemporary worship industry. Equally influential are Evangelical perspectives on family values and women's roles as homemakers, unspoken expectations for men to be in church leadership, and the commercialization of the industry such that songwriting and producing are full time jobs. This chapter explores "behind the scenes" values and rules that impact women's work in the contemporary worship industry. How have expectations of Evangelical gender roles impacted women's influence on Christian worship? How do formal or informal rules around gender and sexuality dictate how women can be involved? How do women in the industry view these conventions?

I approach this topic against the backdrop of my 2022 study, where I conducted a data-driven analysis of the Christian Copyright Licensing International Top 25 lists. As previously mentioned, my analysis of 30 years of CCLI chart history from 1988 to 2018 revealed that the number of women songwriters – already underrepresented on the charts – declined over that period from 30.4% in 1988 down to 4% in 2018. While this was surprising, what was perhaps more unexpected was the significant increase in collaborative songwriting partnerships over the course of this period. This is mapped in Figure 5.1, which reveals not just the decline in solo-written songs (overall, and for women, specifically), but also the increase in collaborations that emerge in the early 2000s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their underrepresentation as solo songwriters, the Figure reveals that women are vastly underrepresented in these collaborations.

Just 8.2% of collaborators in 2018 were women, as indicated in light purple as compared with men in collaborations, which are indicated in light grey. Ultimately, Figure 5.1 shows that the rise in collaborations through the last fifteen years of this study period coincided with a decrease in the participation of women as co-writers of songs charting on CCLI.[1]

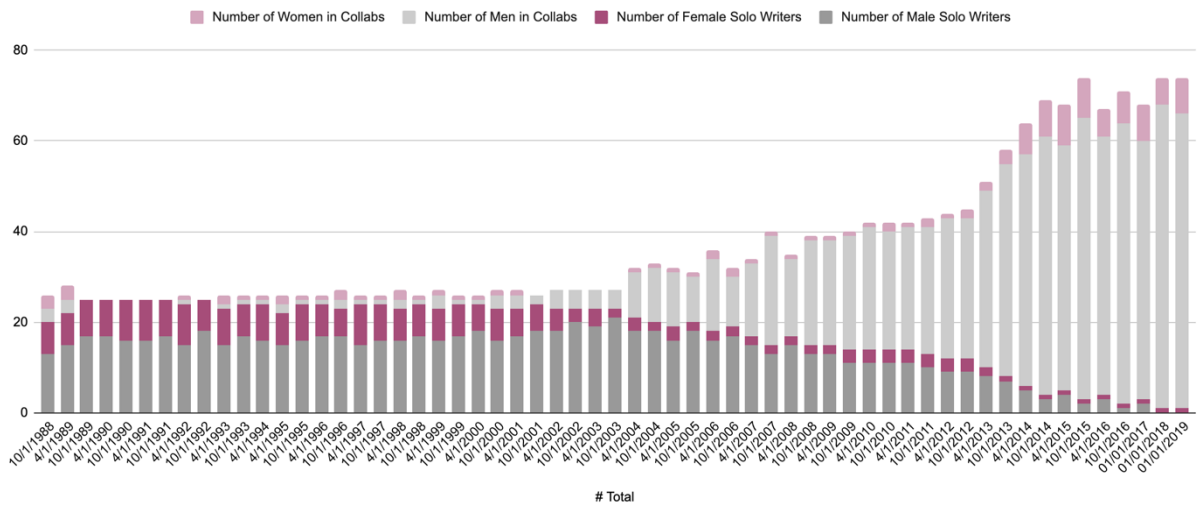

Figure 5.1 Gender in Collaborations on the CCLI Top 25 Over Time

I finished my 2022 study with some reflections on why women may be underrepresented in collaborations, but a robust examination of the dynamics of this phenomenon was beyond the scope of my study. I now pick up on this problem for my dissertation and have been using qualitative methods to examine the "behind the scenes" experiences of women who operate in writing rooms, recording studios, and executive meetings. This chapter opens with an exploration of Evangelical perspectives on the family, considering women's obligations and roles both inside and outside of the home. Three stories are shared, which capture some of the

[1] Loepp Thiessen, "Boy's Club: A Gender Based Analysis of the CCLI Lists from 1988–2018," 78. Figure by Anneli Loepp Thiessen, licensed under CC BY 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0).

challenges of women's work "off stage": first, we encounter Abby (pseudonym), a songwriter who noticed a double standard around men and women's success throughout her early career. Second, we meet Baily Hager, a songwriter/producer who is charting new territory for women's roles in the industry. Finally, Laura Story's experience is shared, touching on themes of motherhood while songwriting. Building on the stories of Abby, Baily, and Laura, several themes are exposed which pervade women's work in the industry. Drawing in other interviews with women in the industry, I delineate four themes that impact how they can participate off stage: 1) exclusion from the production space, 2) an ignorance of their experiences of motherhood, 3) the Billy Graham Rule, and 4) financial structures that support male dominated spaces.

5.2 Governing Values for Women's Work

While Evangelical values are not necessarily uniform across all Evangelical communities, there are significant values around family, work, parenthood, finances, and marriage that have been pervasive in recent decades. What is hard to capture about these values is the range of ways in which they are formed, shared, and implemented. In some contexts, following the Billy Graham Rule was mandated by the church and formally required for all staff. In other cases, like at a publisher that is not affiliated with one particular church or denomination, there may be a culture of following the Billy Graham Rule, but it is not formally implemented. This is the case for many of the staff songwriters I interviewed, who described rules and values as something being "in the water" but not necessarily formally implemented. This section considers how some of these values and subsequent structures impact women in the contemporary worship industry.

5.2.1 Family Obligations and "Normative Life Course

It is hard to overstate the importance of "family values" for the American Evangelicals who make up the contemporary worship industry. The nuclear family is an emblem that represents Evangelical political views. These views include the defense of heterosexual marriage (and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights), advocacy for the pro-life movement, and traditional gender roles in the home (with women often responsible for housework and day-to-day family life). This emphasis on the nuclear family also impacts the ways Evangelicals view God, with a high value on fatherhood (either divine or in a family) governing political and religious beliefs and leading to a staunch support of traditional gender roles.[2] Relationships of authority and submission – reflective of humans' relationships with God – dictate the hierarchy of relationships that make up the Evangelical family, or as Bjork-James calls it, the "divine institution."[3] In response to second wave feminism and progressive political movements, defending the "patriarchal faith" became a way for Evangelicals to defend their faith in a changing world.[4]

With a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles for Evangelicals comes a clear expectation for women to follow what they deem a "normative" life path. This is painful for women who do not – or cannot – conform to expectations for heterosexual marriage and raising children. Katie Gaddini has explored the way this causes pain for Evangelical women who are unmarried, highlighting how their single status has led to feelings of marginalization.[5] The

[2] Sophie Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution: White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 94.

[3] Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution,* 4.

[4] Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution*, 5.

[5] Gaddini, "Between Pain and Hope," 416.

expectation for women to conform to Evangelical expectations of marriage and family has become even stronger with the rise of online platforms. Gaddini writes:

> Through social media, the figure of the ideal Christian woman has become visibilized like never before; she's multiplied and proliferated, making her nearly inescapable, and increasing the normative force. In other words, the integrity of the ideal has withstood the profusion, and the lines of normativity are now more strongly enforced.[6]

With the rise of social media, this life path is keenly delineated and promoted. Like other Evangelical Christian women, the "microcelebrities" that feature in this chapter are expected to follow this path: get married, have babies, raise them at home while the husband earns the money. However, many Evangelical women also pursue, find, and thrive in jobs outside of the home. In some cases, this produces a feeling of unsettledness for women who are walking a fine line. Katelyn Beaty notes that for these women, "Professional work is something to justify, to others and to themselves. Something to couch in expectation or to downplay. Something that is good–up to a point."[7] For Evangelical women, working outside of the home is not a straightforward task, although many women find ways to do it. Evangelical women must negotiate their own desire or sense of calling to work outside the home with the expectation of their faith tradition for a primary emphasis on family life.

5.2.2 The Billy Graham Rule

The Billy Graham Rule goes back to the mid-20th century. Early in his career, when he already experiencing the impacts of wealth and fame, Graham gathered a group of colleagues to discuss major issues faced by evangelists in what were called the Modesto meetings. In addition to

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[6] Gaddini, "'Wife, Mommy, Pastor and Friend,'" 7.

[7] Katelyn Beaty, *A Woman's Place: A Christian Vision for Your Calling in the Office, the Home, and the World* (Simon and Schuster, 2016), 3.

considerations of publicity, money, and disconnect from the local church, they discussed sexual immorality. On the topic of what has come to be known as the "Billy Graham Rule," Graham writes:

> We all knew of evangelists who had fallen into immorality while separated from their families by travel. We pledged among ourselves to avoid any situation that would have even the appearance of compromise or suspicion. From that day on, I did not travel, meet or eat alone with a woman other than my wife.[8]

This rule has been widely adopted beyond just those in Graham's inner circle. Graham has been looked up to and even idolized by countless Evangelicals, and thus his rule about sexual immorality has been widely followed, including by high profile political leaders like former US Vice President Mike Pence. It's critical to note that Graham's perspective on the issues of publicity and money have not been nearly as widely circulated.

The difficulty with the Billy Graham Rule is that while it may have been effective for Graham himself when he established it in 1948, it emerged in response to his specific context as an evangelist in the mid-1900s and does not translate effectively in the present day. The rule and its associations have had a very specific impact on women's involvement in the church. Courtney Powell writes:

> For Graham, this was a wise policy—one that protected him for decades. Many Christians saw so much sense in it that they too adopted it for their workplaces and ministries. But this sometimes leads to unintended consequences—women who aren't mentored at work, counseled at church, or known by their pastor. Women can end up pushed to the side, feeling inferior and somehow dangerous.[9]

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[8] Billy Graham, "What's 'the Billy Graham Rule'?," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, July 23, 2019, https://billygraham.org/story/the-modesto-manifesto-a-declaration-of-biblical-integrity/.

[9] Courtney Powell, "How Can I Think About the Billy Graham Rule?," The Gospel Coalition, March 5, 2021, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/billy-graham-rule/.

In the case of the Christian music industry, the Billy Graham Rule has meant that women songwriters are not invited into collaborations because often it would require that male songwriters would be alone with a woman who is not related to them. Even if a man is not directly alone with a woman but is part of a smaller group – as is often the case in songwriting environments – the Billy Graham Rule has positioned women as threats, and this messaging carries over into small group environments where women are still perceived to be a danger to the man's morality.

The Billy Graham rule operates behind the scenes, with unspoken negotiations dictating who is in the room. It governs collaborative environments even when it is not named as a shared value. Interestingly, however, it neither works effectively, nor does it adequately address the perceived problem. As Ron Dixon notes of the Billy Graham Rule, "It hasn't proven to be a fail-safe answer to the sexual tensions embedded in the context of mixed-gender ministry partnerships."[10] Most people in the church can likely think of instances of abuse and harm that even a system like the Billy Graham Rule didn't prevent.

5.2.3 Two-Person Careers

With the many complexities of working outside of the home for Evangelical women – including the impacts of the Billy Graham Rule – it should not be a surprise that many of them first foray into this work through collaborations with their partners. Leanne Dzubinski studied Evangelical women in leadership positions and found that almost all the women in her study began their careers in a support role to their husbands, as part of what she calls a "two-person career

[10] Ron Dixon, "The Billy Graham Rule's Unintended Consequences," *Outreach Magazine*, October 13, 2021, https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/books/christian-living-books/69362-the-billy-graham-rules-unintended-consequences.html.

structure."[11] We see this in the Christian music industry, too, where collaborations between husbands and wives overwhelmingly dominate male-female collaborations. My 2022 study revealed the prevalence of husband/wife collaborations on the Top 25 CCLI charts, suggesting that this type of collaboration is another mechanism used to allow women to enter the collaborative songwriting space.

As shown in Table 5.1, eight of the eleven collaborations between one man and one woman were between husband/wife duos.[12] In the case of each song writing pair, either each collaborator appeared in the Top 25 the same number of times, or the man appeared more frequently for a higher number of songs. This kind of collaboration could act in one of two ways: it could be an entry point for women who are aspiring to work professionally in the songwriting space, or more realistically, it may limit them to only work with their husbands, not allowing them to collaborate with others or work independently. Though it can be empowering and allow women to find new opportunities, it also limits them by setting the precedent that their most effective work should be done in collaborations with their husbands, a barrier that is amplified for women whose husbands do not work in the industry or have transferrable skills in this area. For Evangelicals, high value is placed on women primarily working in the family home. This means that it may be rarer for women to foray into songwriting spaces, and their best option may be collaboration with their husbands. In practice, women are limited to song write with their husbands instead of working independently or collaborating with others to whom they aren't married.

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[11] Dzubinski, *Playing by the Rules*, 83.

[12] Loepp Thiessen, "Boy's Club: A Gender Based Analysis of the CCLI Lists from 1988–2018," 78. Figure by Anneli Loepp Thiessen, licensed under CC BY 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0).

Table 5.1 Husband/Wife Collaborations on the CCLI Top 25

Song Title	Year	Songwriter #1	Songs	Songwriter #2	Songs	Family?
"There's Something About That Name"	1970	Bill Gaither	2	Gloria Gaither	2	Yes
"Because He Lives"	1971	Bill Gaither	2	Gloria Gaither	2	Yes
"Let There Be Glory and Honour and Praises"	1978	James Greenelsh	1	Elizabeth Greenelsh	1	Yes
"When I Look Into Your Holiness"	1981	Wayne Perrin	1	Cathy Perrin	1	Yes
"Great is the Lord"	1982	Michael W. Smith	2	Deborah Smith	1	Yes
"Blessed Be Your Name"	2002	Matt Redman	7	Beth Redman	1	Yes
"Indescribeable"	2004	Jesse Reeves	6	Laura Story	1	No
"Glory to God Forever"	2009	Steve Fee	1	Vicki Beeching	1	No
"Holy Spirit"	2011	Bryan Torwalt	1	Katie Torwalt	1	Yes
"How He Loves"	2015	John Mark McMillan	2	Sarah McMillan	1	Yes
"What a Beautiful Name"	2016	Ben Fielding	5	Brooke Ligertwood	2	No

5.2.4 Women and Gig Economy

An additional barrier to women's ability to work outside the home comes from the realities of the kinds of work that is being done in the Christian music industry. In many respects, the work that my interviewees are required to do is "gig work," a form of labour that is not stable, requires constant networking, and does not align with a 9-to-5 schedule. While some of my interviewees were employed as staff songwriters at major publishers, this is not a salaried position. There is disagreement in the literature on whether gig economy is ultimately beneficial to women, with some arguing that gig economy is appealing for the way that it offers flexibility with quick

payment and short-term opportunities.[13] However, others articulate the numerous ways that gig economy does not serve women. Gill highlights the double-edged sword of features like "flexibility," noting that flexible employment often requires women to work long and inconsistent hours to meet the demands of a job.[14] Similarly, the informality of a gig can be a barrier to women since gig economy is based on "who you know, not what you know," and women are thus required to attempt to break into established networks of men.[15]

The gig economy that we see in the Christian music industry can be viewed as the result of neoliberalism, which led to the privatization of many public organizations and the dominance of unregulated corporations. Under a neoliberal capitalist framework, short-term contracts with no benefits prevail. In the music industry, songwriters need to write dozens of songs to get a "hit," and writing quickly and efficiently is hailed as the top priority. Timothy Taylor describes the way this impacts the workday:

> Neoliberal capitalism in the cultural industries, as a result of the spread and dominance of digital technologies, has created a work environment in which everything can be done faster, which, instead of shortening the longer workday, has meant instead that as soon as the task-that-once-took-longer is accomplished, workers move on to the next task. And portable computers and broadband Internet connections have meant that it is much easier to take work home, or to work remotely with someone in a different time zone where the working day has not concluded.[16]

Taylor highlights the reality that technology has increased expectations on workers, with work more easily spilling over into personal time.

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[13] John T. Fleming et al., *Ultimate Gig* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 133-134.

[14] Rosalind Gill, "Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? Exploring Gender in Project-Based New Media Work in Euro," *Information, Communication & Society* 5, no. 1 (2002): 83.

[15] Gill, "Cool, Creative and Egalitarian?" 82.

[16] Timothy Dean Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology: Big Issues in Music (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 140.

In her work on women's experiences as producers in the music industry, Adele Fournet explores the ramifications of this neoliberal capitalist gig environment for women. She cites the disappearance of federally funded supports in gig spaces (such as maternity leave, welfare, etc.) and the subsequent need for the nuclear family unit to carry this support. She writes "in the gig economy, self-employed individuals rely on themselves and/or their family units to cover all the costs of living and reproducing."[17] Clare Duffin identifies similar challenges in her writing on women's work in music industries, citing the mental load of decision making for mothers as detrimental to their capacity to thrive in portfolio careers: "Put simply, the physical and mental pressures attached to mothering appear not to be best catered for in the modern music industries for independent workers."[18] Especially in Evangelical family spaces, where women are overwhelmingly expected to carry the costs of living and reproducing, the neoliberal capitalist Christian music environment limits their capacity to contribute to gig economy.

As will be demonstrated, my interviewees articulate ways that the dynamics of gig economy impact their work in the industry. When combined with the high emphasis on family and collaboration only in the context marriage, an environment is created that is hostile to women's full participation.

5.3 Women Negotiating Career Expectations: Three Case Studies

The women I interviewed offered countless examples of the ways these governing values impacted their industry. To illuminate the dynamics surrounding their experience, the following

[17] Adele Fournet, "Women Music Producers: Sonic Innovation from the Periphery of a Male-Dominated Industry" (PhD Thesis, Toronto, ON, University of Toronto, 2019), 103.

[18] Clare K. Duffin, "Women in the Music Industries: The Art of Juggling," in *The Cambridge Companion to Women in Music since 1900*, ed. Laura Hamer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 267.

section provides three in-depth case studies, which are fleshed out as more complete stories. Abby, Baily, and Laura introduce us to ways that these dynamics have affected women. Following their stories, several themes are described with corroborating input from other interviewees.

5.3.1 Abby's Story of Navigating Double Standards

When Abby was twenty years old, she unexpectedly found herself in the biggest publishing rooms in Christian music. She had just released her first ever EP but previously had no real connections to the music industry. She recorded the collection with friends and a few producers she had connected with, and was shocked at how well it did. Almost immediately, she began to be contacted by professionals in the industry, though she felt unprepared:

> So, I within a week had met with the president of Capitol, the president of Integrity, the president of Providence, and I was just a dummy. Like, my parents didn't even come with me to these meetings. Like I was so young. And I just went in blind, like, no idea whatsoever.[19]

The meetings went well enough for Abby to put on a sold-out showcase performance with her music, but she says that "everything just sort of fell apart after that." It was painful for her, and she carried on her life without aspirations of a career in music. In hindsight she sees it as grace, saying "I did not need to have a career when I was 21."[20]

A few years later, Abby was approached by a record label about attending a writer's retreat. She was open to the new opportunity, but quickly discovered that it was not the type of environment she wanted to be in.

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[19] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[20] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

> So I go to this retreat, and I was like, I started realizing that there was a system at play. And if you did not play by the rules, like you were never going to make it… And I cannot like fake, manipulate things. Like, I am very much like a purist in that way, where it's like I want you to know that when I'm with you, it's me fully with integrity. And I'm not at all saying people don't have integrity if they can play the game. But for me to remain full of integrity, I cannot manipulate the system, like it just makes me feel so gross inside…. I saw, like, how they were dividing up songwriting rooms, and how they were testing people out and stuff, I was just like, this feels like The Hunger Games. Like it's just so bizarre. And for me, like music was always sort of just this like natural like, I genuinely just like love leading worship, like, I don't know, it's just this gift in me, I think. And like the system part of it felt like a pressure cooker. And that's when I told like my husband, I was like, I never want to do something like that again. It was horrible.[21]

The industry culture was starkly unappealing for Abby, allowing her to be content in the decision to walk away from that environment.

Abby continued to release music on her own after returning home. While she wasn't backed by a label, her records still made their way to some of the biggest playlists on Spotify. Drawn to her success, record labels approached her again, this time looking for a slightly different set of traits:

> And again, the record labels came back and they were like, 'What are you wanting to do?' … But then this is where the talk of kids started coming up. So multiple record label executives and A&R [Artists and Repertoire] asked me, like, 'Do you want to do this? Or do you think you're gonna want to start having kids soon?' I was like, 'I'm 26, or 27. Like, I don't know! I'm not sure.' And so that's when though I think my lack of clarity around that was probably a repellent in a lot of ways. And so like, once again, it was like a wave that came and then a wave that like went away again. And I think again, I was like, okay, like I think I'm just gonna kind of stay out of this.[22]

Abby stayed out of the industry for a while longer, but started to suspiciously notice the traction her male peers were gaining:

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[21] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[22] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

> But this is when I started seeing all of my male peers who I had started with just start to skyrocket. Like, all of a sudden, like, they're all getting, like number one hits, and like they're all doing this thing. And that's when I started thinking like, what am I doing wrong here? Because, like, I don't know, like, I just started to really like wonder like, what do I not have that they have? And at that point, I thought it was a skill issue. Where I was like, 'Maybe I'm just like not as good of a songwriter and maybe I'm not as good as a singer or an artist or whatever.' And now I think I would look back and say like, no, like it's so many factors.[23]

Abby is quick to identify that many of the factors holding her back are not faced by her male counterparts:

> But some factors are like, oh, like your male counterparts were asked to come on tours, because the men who were headlining the tours didn't want women opening up for them because they didn't want to be alone with women. So, like, even subtle things like that where like men were just immediately given opportunities, I think under the name of like, purity or whatever, but like opportunities that I never would have had. Or like, a lot of men wouldn't write just alone with me. So, it's like, I'm always even to this day, I am still always being brought in as a third. Whereas a lot of men are writing like just by themselves.[24]

Without explicitly naming it, Abby easily identifies the ways that structures like the Billy Graham rule impacted her songwriting experience.

With eyes opened to the harsh reality of the industry, Abby began to make sense of why her career had unfolded the way it did, recognizing that "this is all a cluster." She continued:

> So, to this day, like I still have like my own thing. I still songwrite, like with [names a fellow songwriter], and I still do songwriting stuff like through [names label], this like worship label. But it's like only on like women projects, like I am not on any male projects at all. And it's not because I don't even know these people…[25]

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[23] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[24] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[25] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

Abby went on to name her connections to many of the largest figures in the industry. They are close friends, she has been to their homes, they follow each other on social media, or they have mutual friends. But as she says, "… there's always going to be a barrier for me. So, like, relationally, I would say I'm very much part of the fold. But like, career wise, there's just a huge barrier."[26]

Abby raises the important question of how women's success is intertwined with the financial implications of including women and gave me an example of the way men are privileged because of financial concerns. She told me about watching a prominent Christian band on tour, from her vantage point as a friend of the lead singer. This band is composed of men, with the occasional participation of a band member's wife joining them on stage as an instrumentalist. Abby says that all their openers are men, and describes why:

> Because to bring women out on tours requires more – like it requires an extra bus sometimes. It requires flexibility with kids…. bringing out an opener is a liability. And it requires a lot of like money. And it's a risk. And to bring out a woman when you're used to having all men is like a huge, you would have to go out of your way to want to bring a woman as an opener…. But there is like a barrier because it's not enough for one person to care about women, your whole system has to care about including women because it requires more money. Like to get additional resources and buses, etc. And like extra hotel rooms, because [the lead singer] is not going to change in a hotel room with a random female opener, and he shouldn't… with touring, like I would never ever be invited to be an opener for that. Because it just costs too much. Versus like imagine like just like a bro, like a 19-year-old bro worship leader, like who will like lay in the back of like a van and not care. You know what I mean?[27]

Abby clearly names the ways that tours and performances are simplified when men are the primary workers, with the financial considerations acting as a significant incentive for keeping

[26] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[27] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

this structure. She is in part identifying the impacts of the Billy Graham Rule, which she expanded upon more:

> I personally do not think it's a big deal to write with men alone. Like, I think it's just silly. Because the only people who are going to be disenfranchised by that are women at the end of the day. As you can tell. Because no female co-writes are on the Top 100. And I have also been privy to situations, this has not happened to me since I was young, like it did happen to me twice when I was in my early 20s, but not in the last ten years, where women have been put in rough situations. Like sexually tense situations, in those environments. And so, I do think that there's also something there like, just like, women being objectified, and there not being a lot of protection around that.[28]

Naming this raises a tension for Abby, though:

> But I don't, I almost like hesitate to even share that because it's like, then I know if that becomes a thing, then that reduces the likelihood of women being invited into those rooms even more, even though it's men's fault, you know. But like, I had this friend who was doing her first record with a male producer, who was like a very big male producer in Nashville. And she called me and kind of explained like something that he had said and a way he had touched her. And I was like, never go alone again, like period. Like, it was like, it had crossed lines that should never be crossed. But, once again, do you see how it's like, that's frustrating to me, because women then will be disenfranchised if that's brought attention to, but there is also something to be said about women being objectified in writer's rooms.[29]

Abby recognizes that naming the need for women to be protected makes it more likely that they will be excluded from writing rooms. As with bringing people on tour, she recognizes that there are financial and social factors that impact how women are involved.

Abby finds herself frustrated by the system that excludes women for financial reasons but recognizes that people high in the industry are caught up in a system that prioritizes money and power. She says:

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[28] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[29] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

> I am not going to dehumanize Jason Ingram, and I am not going to dehumanize Brandon Lake or Phil Wickham or whatever. Because like, because power is a tempting drug. And money. Like I mean, if you go inside these people's houses, like they have little empires built up, that they have to maintain, and keep going. And how does that keep going? By them continuing to fuel number one hits. And so, I see why like once you kind of get going, you have to then maintain it. And historically integrating women into that does not keep the train rolling.[30]

For Abby, her own career and the careers of women around her have been impacted by the ways power is wielded by men in the industry. She recognizes the financial concerns that govern decisions not to include women, and names the ways that rules like the Billy Graham Rule have left her out of writing rooms. While she doesn't want to dehumanize the men at the center of the contemporary worship ecosystem, she laments that there aren't more opportunities for women.

5.3.2 Baily's Story of Emerging as a Producer

Baily Hager was nine years old when she wrote her first song. At thirteen she started writing more seriously, and says she fell in love with it. Her first two songs were worship songs. At one point, her worship pastor surprised her by teaching the band and choir on a week when Baily was leading. She says: "And so like I led my first original worship song in a church of like a thousand people."[31] Baily radiates excitement as she tells me about her early days of songwriting, this story is clearly one of hope. She continues:

> I love remembering that because it reminds me of like, oh, God, like had this plan for my life before. So, whenever I feel discouraged, or I'm like, am I really supposed to be doing this? Am I really supposed to be writing songs for the church? Like I remember that moment because I had nothing to do with that. And so that's like how I started…[32]

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[30] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), Jan. 23, 2024.

[31] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[32] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

Baily's story in the industry begins when she started university for music business but ended up switching to a worship school in Missouri where she stayed for over four years. Her time there had a big impact on how she wrote songs:

> And that's where I fell in love with co-writing. I had really never co-written. I had only written like by myself, but I knew that I like wanted to, and when I started doing it as part of school, I absolutely like fell in love with it. It made me come alive. And that's the only way I can use to describe it.[33]

Baily continued to take songwriting seriously, participating in numerous songwriting camps, including in Nashville. She describes how she eventually came to move there:

> And in 2017 I came back for a songwriting camp in Nashville and I, when I was here I was like, I think I'm supposed to move here like, my friends in Kansas City like we would write, but it was more like a hobby, and I realized I don't want to just do this as a hobby like, I want to do this all the time, like for real.[34]

Baily moved in 2017 but recognized that setting up her career in this competitive field in a new city would be hard work. She had heard not to expect anything to happen in Nashville, and knew it was called the "city of broken dreams."

> And I actually like was prepared even like as a female like just, you know, there's these… There's these things that it happens, and it's tough and it's hard and be ready to hear the word no, all the time. And so I was like I'm just coming, because I think I'm supposed to be here, and I'm just gonna write with anybody who'll write with me. I'm gonna put my head down. And I decided like I'm going to like produce music in my room more than ever before, like I'm just gonna put my head down and work. And not expecting anything.[35]

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[33] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[34] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[35] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

Shortly after she moved, however, Baily got a call from a friend from one of her songwriting camps. He had recently recorded an album with Integrity Music, and they were looking for two more songs. He asked her:

> 'Would you help us write the last two songs?' I was like, 'Yes.' So, I wrote the last two songs for that album, and ended up signing single song publishing deals with Integrity Music like within my first few months of living in Nashville. And just really crazy.[36]

These kinds of invitations solidified Baily's transition into the contemporary worship industry in Nashville, putting her in the same networks as many of the most influential figures.

In October 2021, Baily went to a songwriting camp hosted by Bethel Music, one of the largest groups in the contemporary worship world. She applied without much expectation of getting in and was delighted when she was accepted. Baily ended up having a profound songwriting experience with two other songwriters during an evening session. They had already written two songs that day and were feeling exhausted. She says: "So, we just started talking, and we ended up writing a song from the scripture in Matthew that come to me all you are weary and burdened I'll give you rest. And we ended up writing this song from God's perspective to us, of saying, come to me."[37]

Baily shared with the group about a segment of a podcast that really inspired her where "Jesus is telling this guy, like everything, all, every negative thing that you're carrying is mine, and it belongs to me, and I want it back. Like it's not yours."[38] This idea became foundational for the song: "And we flipped the bridge, and, like made the bridge from our perspective, saying, I wasn't made to carry anything that's heavy. It doesn't belong to me. It doesn't belong to me."

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[36] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[37] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[38] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

This message had a profound impact on the songwriters, who were immediately moved by the message. Baily says "We were all crying together, like it was ministering to us."[39]

On the final day of the camp during a song share, Baily's group had the opportunity to lead the song for the rest of the camp:

> … We're sharing this song getting a great response, and then we get to the bridge where we're saying, I wasn't made to carry anything that's heavy, and people started just standing up, and just like yelling. They were like, whoa! And so, everybody started setting up, and they just started worshipping. And then we started, after that we started like praying over each other and prophesying over each other. It was like the song just like allowed something really powerful and beautiful to happen. And so, the publishers with Bethel they were like, we bless this song in the name of Jesus, that it would go out into all the world… And so that kind of put me on their radar. And I continued a relationship with them.[40]

That songwrite, and the accompanying recognition from Bethel, encouraged and inspired Baily as she pursued next steps.

The week after the camp ended, Baily met up with another publisher she met at the camp. One of the components of the camp had been a feedback session with a panel of representatives from the biggest Christian music publishers. She describes her feeling of naivety at the beginning of that process:

> And at this point I didn't really know anything about publishing. Like I had signed with Integrity with my team, but, like we were kind of like far removed. I knew that they could like set up writes for you, but I didn't know that they like signed people, like I did know they signed people, but it just was not on my radar at all, and I didn't really know, like a lot of people don't even know what publishing is, to be honest. They only know being signed as an artist. And I didn't even know what it really meant to be signed as a songwriter.[41]

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[39] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[40] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[41] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

At the panel, Baily was inspired by a young woman named Lindsey who was representing Capitol CMG. When they met the week after the camp, Lindsey expressed interest in finding ways to support Baily, including possibly getting her involved in their Women Who Worship initiative. Baily and Lindsey continued to talk, eventually exploring whether Baily could be signed to Capitol CMG. She described to me exploring this process with them, and especially considering whether she could be a producer/writer:

> And just like meeting them getting to know them, they told me their stories, they asked me about me. And she said, 'like would you want to sign as a writer, or as a producer writer?' She's like, 'Because you don't have to sign as a producer/writer but there's a need for it.' And I'm going to be honest with you, I was like, 'Yeah, I don't know about that.' In my head I was thinking, 'No, absolutely not, that's too much pressure. I'm not fast enough, like producer writers in the writes they're fast. They're like, you know, and I just like that's too much pressure.'[42]

She continued:

> I've been in writes with producer writers, and I was like, I can't do that. Like that's just where I was, honestly. And yeah. So, all of that long story short through like prayer and the Lord challenging me, and just all that I knew Capital was the right choice for me and I ended up signing in October. And, almost, actually within the week of the year that I met Lindsay. So, it was like almost a year to the day that I signed that I even met Lindsay, and like did the practicum. So, it was literally a full circle moment. And just really crazy the Lord's like intentionality.[43]

Baily did end up signing as a producer writer and takes seriously that she is the first to do this work in many spaces.

As she leans into this new role, Baily recognizes that she is breaking ground and drawing attention. She says:

> I had a lot, I still have a lot of eyes on me now. Like there are people like from other labels that wanted to just take me out to coffee just because they were like you're a

[42] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[43] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

> producer like, tell me about that. And like they look at me like they're just like in awe. It's so funny like it's actually hilarious. It's been like I'll be honest, there's been some challenges and whatever but I've it's also been super like encouraging. But yeah, I'm the first signed female producer at Capital. I think I'm like the first signed female producer pretty much in the Christian music industry.[44]

She recognizes that a lack of women producers isn't a problem specific to the Christian music industry, but it is extreme there:

> I think it's like 4% of the music industry in general is female, but in the Christian music industry it's even less than that, and like it's female producers in the Christian music space there's basically like – I'm not going to say there are none, because I know there are girls out there messing with their computers, and they're just afraid to say anything. So, I'm not gonna say there are none, because I feel like that's like just wrong. I feel wrong about that. I know they're out there. We just don't know about them. I think they're afraid, and I feel like there's not really people to like look to where they know that they can do this.[45]

For Baily, working with Capitol as one of the largest publishers allows her to pave a path for other women and girls to see themselves in production: "And it's one of the reasons why I said yes to Capital, because I knew if I do this, I'm going to be the first. It's going to put me in the fore. Like people are going to be able, younger girls will be able to look at me and say like we can do it, too."[46]

Baily thinks of herself as the first woman producer in the Christian music industry, though she names a few notable exceptions. She sees her role in the industry as fulfilling a need, one that publishers have been recognizing:

> I've started to see inklings of like change. Obviously, like, my publishers, they actually told me they had been praying for a female producer like they wanted to see more variety

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[44] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[45] University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative is one source that provides data on this. Most recently, they reported that women producers increased from 3.5% in 2022 to 6.5% in 2023. See Dr. Stacy L Smith et al., "Inclusion in the Recording Studio?" (USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, January 2024), https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inclusion-recording-studio-20240130.pdf.

[46] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

> and like on their on their roster. And so, they were like 'you are an answer to prayer, like we have been praying for a female producer,' and I was like…. [makes a mind blown action with her hand].[47]

For Baily, fulfilling this role is part of the desire to be a role model for the next generation of women and girls who are interested in producing. She's confident that the lack of women in the production space isn't because women aren't interested in this work, but rather because they haven't been encouraged to make their interest known. Baily's desire to change this system is part of what propelled her to pursue this career.

But for Baily, pursuing a career in production has not come without challenges. Because of her gender and her age, she constantly feels a need to prove herself to her male counterparts: "I've been in sessions, where I'm talking and I'm saying something, or I'm suggesting something, and because I'm a female they don't think that I'm at the same caliber." She goes into more detail about what it's like to witness this dynamic:

> Like, when I come into a room, and I'm like, 'Oh, well, what if you did this in the production?' Like if I'm not the producer in the room, I'm a writer. I'm like, 'Oh, what if we tried this? And what if we did this?' I've had experiences where it was like, they just ignored what I said. They didn't even like acknowledge that I even spoke. But if I were a dude, and he was like, 'Oh, man, what if you like did this on the drums when you turn this up?' They'd be like 'Oh, yeah, yeah, man like yes, bro, like absolutely,' you know. And so, it's just different. I don't know. I don't know why. It's not, you know, fair, but I just keep doing it.[48]

This dynamic is tiring for women like Baily. She says, "It makes me want to be more quiet."[49]

At one point, feedback on Baily's conduct in a session made its way back to her publisher, who informed Baily of it. She didn't share the comment with me, but it was powerful

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[47] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[48] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[49] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

enough to make Baily wonder whether she should stop sharing her ideas and raising her voice. In response to this negative feedback, Baily uses her strong sense of spiritual conviction to fight these thoughts, which she attributes to the enemy. She describes how she felt:

> It made me think, 'Oh, maybe I should just be more quiet. Maybe I shouldn't share my ideas. Maybe I should just let the guys do it.' You know, like, that's the temptation. And it's like no like, the enemy just wants to silence us in, you know, in general, like everybody, because he knows how powerful our voice is. And he would love nothing more than to like, shut me up and shut down my creativity and shut down my ideas. And for me to think that my ideas are lesser than. And that's just like not true.[50]

By blaming this behaviour on the "enemy" (or the devil), Baily is using the same spiritual framework that might limit her as a woman to argue for her own empowerment. Despite the ways that these spiritual frameworks can limit women, Baily is using the language of her faith to advocate for women like her.

Baily realizes that her existence as a producer/writer is formative for many reasons. She describes the feeling of not realizing that women can be in the production space, despite her own desire to pursue production:

> Well, first of all, it's kind of like, when there's nobody to look to that you know that you can do it. Like I had a friend tell me she was like 'I wanted to do this twenty years ago, but I didn't know it was even possible, because I'd never seen a woman do it.' So it was like, I didn't know that was even like a choice for me. It was just like, oh, I want to do this inside but you're like I don't see anybody like me doing this. …. Most of the music industry just in general is male, and so even fewer, you know, opportunities for like production but I think that's just one that there's not a lot of representation. So, the girls don't know that they can.[51]

As Baily articulates, women need to see other women at the end of the path to know that they, too, can reach the goal.

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[50] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

[51] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

5.3.3 Laura's Story of Writing as a Mother

Laura Story grew up in a Southern Baptist Church – one that she loved – and where she would eventually participate in the music ministry. She was a string bass player and would play in the orchestra, in addition to singing in the choir. When she went off to college, she had only ever played her string bass in classical contexts, but soon found that it opened other doors for her:

> So, there were all these coffee shop, like, Americana kind of bands, and one of them was missing a bass player one night and said, 'Hey, bring your upright.' And they were like, 'You want to play at this coffee shop on campus?' And I thought, this is by far the coolest thing I've ever been asked to do. And that's how I started kind of in Christian music.[52]

Laura toured with the band on and off for about five years, playing youth and college retreats. She was the bass player and background vocalist, eventually starting to write some of the music.

When Laura arrived at Perimeter Church in Atlanta, Georgia, it was a collision of worlds, combining a more popular music idiom with church worship. This was a new experience for her, especially as a woman:

> I'd always felt comfortable as a woman part of a worship team, like for retreat or something. Or even as a worship songwriter, I've always felt very accepted as a woman. But I wasn't sure how that worked with church, with these predominant – the role models I had had growing up as the music ministers had always been male. They'd always been male. They'd always been choir directors who had worn suits and ties. And so it wasn't that I felt excluded from that, as much as it just wasn't even something that I aspired to do. So, when I came into Perimeter, I became a worship leader and was leading with a band on Sunday mornings.[53]

As Laura's career has evolved, she has gained international reputation as both a worship leader but also a songwriter and Christian artist. Her songs have won Grammys, Billboard Music

[52] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[53] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

Awards and Dove Awards, and have been heard on Christian radio by people across North America. She notices distinct differences in her experience as a woman in the church space, and in the artist space.

Perimeter church is part of the Presbyterian Church of America, which as Laura says with a laugh, "is not known for, like, having all of these roles that women are welcome to fill."[54] She describes the way her leadership there has evolved:

> So, when I started at Perimeter, there weren't a ton of other churches in our denomination who were utilizing women as worship leaders. And we weren't outside of the bounds of the denomination, it just, there just weren't a lot of people doing that. And so that was sweet that our church did and still does. Probably the biggest kind of new role that I have served on the executive leadership team at our church for a little over two years now. And that – there are very few churches that are nomination that have women serving on their executive leadership team. And part of my role on the leadership team is I'm over worship, which so I have ordained teaching elders, you know, I haven't – one of the guys that reports to me as an ordained teaching elder and that's a really different thing in the PCA to have a woman you know, in authority over – even though it's really me just serving in the capacity that the church has asked.[55]

Laura contrasts this context with her experience in what she calls "CCM" – the contemporary Christian music industry. While she felt empowered at her church, she recognizes that women's voices have not always been welcome on Christian radio:

> Well for a while there with radio, they weren't playing females. And that was interesting. So, if you even, with your research, kind of look looking back over the years and seeing like, you know, number one songs or whatever, I don't even know how you would search it. But you'll see that out of the top 10 songs in a given year, I would guess only two or three of them have been female. And that actually has swung back over the years and so that's been nice… I would guess that a lot of the reason why is because so many worship bands have or worship leaders have kind of infiltrated radio, you know, in a which there's pros and cons to that. But since again, that traditionally male roles as worship leaders,

[54] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[55] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

> there just will be more, they'll just be more of them writing songs, recording songs, being signed to labels.[56]

Laura easily connects the authority of the worship leader role with the popularity of male Christian artists, connecting barriers to worship leadership with barriers to women's roles in the larger industry.

Laura also views the general lack of women in the industry as having theological roots. She views the task of songwriting to be deeply based in questions about who God is and hopes that more women might be able to be trained to do this work with education and solid theological backing. She says:

> One thing, I think women need to be – yeah, I'm just gonna go out there and say it. Women need to be honored as theologians also. So, first of all, if we're wanting our worship music to truly be rich resources for our church, the people writing them need to be theologians. And when I say theologian, I don't mean like, you know, teaching at a seminary, even though that would be great! I mean, students of the word. Like, I went to a seminary that not a lot of women went to. And it was like, 'Why are you going to seminary? Like you're not going to be a, you're not trying to be a preacher or anything?' Because it was a, this was our denominational seminary. And, again, great, I mean, great people there. So many great people there. But there was this sense of that training, it was predominantly for men. And so just, yeah, an acceptance and I'd say acceptance, but also a championing of women to be theologians. A higher bar there.[57]

However, the problem does not just lie in needing to train more women for this work. Laura suggests that men also have a role in empowering change in the industry. She says:

> I'd say secondly, oh, my gosh, I'm just going all out there. Men need to recognize that if they're going to write for the church, okay? Statistics show the church is at least 50% women, if not more, okay? So, if they're writing to an audience that is, maybe let's say over half women, it is advantageous to them to have a woman participating in that write. I'm not saying that that needs to be the case every time. But I do think that they need to, they just need to consider things, things like that because the point isn't, hey, let's write a great song. The point is, let's write a song that facilitates God's people worshiping well.

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[56] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[57] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

> So, it would be helpful to have a woman in the room. And not just any woman, honestly, it doesn't need to just be like, 'Oh, we should include a woman.' It needs to be a woman who actually, again, a theologian.[58]

Laura is addressing the unique theological voice that women bring to collaborative songwriting environments. Women have unique perspectives, experiences, thoughts, and emotions that impact the way songs would be written and shared. If their voices are not present in the songs that the church is singing, then the church is missing out on the opportunity to connect with most of the people who attend. She expands on this:

> When I was in a write the other day, and it was two girls and a guy. And she came up with just a, there was a beautiful line. It was a beautiful line about, I can't remember, something about like the Lord, you know, holding us like, you know, like, it was some sort of like really sweet line. And the guy in the write said, 'Hey, I think that's beautiful. But I'll go ahead and tell you, the men in my church are not going to sing that.' And that was, which it wasn't offensive, it's like, okay, well, then let's maybe find something that both genders can sing and feel and feel like that expresses their feeling towards God. You know, in some of those instances, those guys really, they need to sing it anyway, because it's in the Bible.[59]

Laura is hesitant to overgeneralize the perspective that women bring to songwriting environments, but she does see that they offer a different gift. She articulates that in many cases, they can be more emotionally in tune:

> But so, kind of turned to what do women offer. That perspective of, you know, it's hard to answer this without generalizing, because, you know, I know some guys that are more emotionally intuitive than I am. But often times, that is what the women bring, is kind of this – I'll say the – so again, I'm very careful. Not in every situation, but often the women can be a little more emotionally in tune. And so, when I've been in situations where men have written a song that's incredibly doctrinally sound. And I'll ask the question, 'Oh, yeah, there's nothing you're saying that's untrue. Melody's great. But will people long to sing this? Will this be the song – is this song coming – is it just addressing their head? Or does it draw their heart in as well?' Sometimes, I'm the one asking that. And honestly, it

[58] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[59] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

> really is just, 'Hey, does this feel just as good for a girl to sing it as it does for a guy to sing it?'[60]

Laura sees this more emotional and heart-based music as having the potential for meaningful and long-lasting connection with congregations.

For Laura, it's important that women's experiences of a song are not present for the first time when a church sings the song. They should be considered as part of the creation process:

> Because some of these songs, they're written by guys recorded by guys, and all of that outside of the context of a church. So, the first time that women are singing it is just in the congregation, which I wouldn't do that as a woman. I wouldn't write a song with another woman, record it, and then say, 'Hey, well, let's see if the guys will like it too,' because you're writing for a mixed audience. So, you need representation of the mixed audience as you're writing. And even like, for instance, as if there was a great song – which there's so many great songs written by just guys – it could be worth them saying, 'Hey, I want to run this by you as a woman, before we go to print.' You know?[61]

Laura desires for women to be honoured, empowered, and visible as songwriters and theologians, and recognizes that there are barriers for women being able to do the labour of songwriting. She doesn't think she can answer why women as songwriters is on a decline overall, but shared with me what makes it difficult for her:

> When I was in my 20s, I had a ton of time to write. And then I got married and had kids, and they are my top priority. And so, and most of the women that I know are like that. It doesn't mean that songwriting isn't important. But songwriting is always this thing that – there are a lot of things that are essential about what I do. I have to get my kids to school. I have to get to the school by eight o'clock. I don't necessarily have to keep that appointment on my calendar to write that song I was going, you know… So maybe it's that men often are – their daily rhythms and their daily roles probably promote the bandwidth to write songs more than women's daily rhythms and roles.[62]

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[60] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[61] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[62] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

The experience of becoming a mom has enhanced Laura's songwriting practice too, as much as it may have also restricted it. She describes the way she writes differently after being a mother:

> When I became a mom, I think I saw that my time would look so different, and that my life would be so committed to these little people that needed me so much. But what I didn't realize is that they were actually – there's actually aspects of God's character that I understand better as a mom. I remember even my first couple years after having my daughter Josie and realized man, oh my gosh. I wrote a song my first Easter as a mom. And I had been, I had been hearing my entire life that God sent His only Son to die for us on the cross. I'd heard that my whole life. It's not until you're holding your baby that you realize, it's like I had heard it for the first time. It shocked me. And yeah, which, and that really, that's so much of songwriting, is taking these scriptures that we've been hearing our whole life and looking at it in a new way.[63]

Laura recognizes that her experience as a songwriter has been deeply formed by her experience of motherhood, and names the ways that women may find it harder to write with the expectation of labour that often falls to them. For herself, though, finding ways to hold these things in tension and pursue songwriting has led to a rewarding and meaningful career.

5.4 Obstacles in the Workplace

The stories of Abby, Baily, and Laura share themes in their experience as women "behind the scenes" in the industry. What follows is an exploration of specific obstacles that women identify as particularly challenging for their careers in the industry. These themes emerge from the stories of Abby, Baily, and Laura, and are corroborated by their colleagues. In some cases, a theme comes primarily from one interviewee. Other themes are touched on by all three of the women who's stories we've explored more in depth. The four themes presented here are the challenge of existing in the production space, the overlooked reality of being a mother, an emphasis on following the money, and the impacts of the Billy Graham Rule.

[63] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

5.4.1 The Challenge of Production

A theme that often emerged within my interviews with women in the Christian music industry is the inaccessibility of certain roles to them. This is perhaps most obvious in the lack of women who engage in the music production space. Baily, whose story was shared earlier, is not the only one who has encountered resistance to her role as a producer. I had a similar conversation with Darlene Zschech – a highly influential worship leader – who felt that her production gifts were often sidelined because she was a woman:

Darlene: When we would go into these secular studios, as a woman producer, the secular world didn't have a problem with it. It was just like, 'Darlene's producing,' I'd meet everybody, great, we're ready to go. I'd pray for them before we started. No questions, but like, this is what we do. This is how we do it. And it was fantastic. But in the Christian world it was like, 'Hang on, aren't you a singer? What are you doing?' I'm like, 'Well, yeah, yeah, this is just something else that I'm going to do. Because someone's got to do it.'

Anneli: I love that. (Darlene laughs). I love that. Interesting. What do you think it is about that producing role that caused that discomfort for people?

Darlene: Maybe because it's a final leadership role. You know, because really the skill base you learn, you teach your ears, you learn. Also, the brilliance from the room, you want the room involved, but it's a leadership role. And I think sometimes, traditionally, men would be in that key leadership role. So, I just think it might have unsettled a few of the norms, maybe and made a few men feel a bit uncomfortable. But, you know, maybe I don't know if it's the way I grew up with my parents, my mum always worked. It's just, you know, I've got a really high work ethic, probably too high, you know, as a lot of women do. But it's not been often that I've let the 'you're a woman' small me down for long. I've been like, 'Do you know what? I've got peace on this; I think that's your problem.'

Anneli: Yeah.

Darlene: It's not mine. So, you can keep that problem to you. And I'm just – I've got daughters, so I'm going to rise. Because I need to rise for them.[64]

[64] Author interview with Darlene Zschech, July 11, 2023.

For Darlene, the exclusive narrative she encountered didn't stop her from stepping into the production role. She was able to detach harsh messaging from her sense of call and direction.

Some interviewees explained the lack of women in production as due in part to the immense amount of time it takes for one to become competent with the skills of production. Songwriter and artist Leslie Jordan attributes the large number of men in the role – and lack of women – to the reality that production is "exclusive to folks who have a lot of time to perfect their craft,"[65] something women who fulfill the ideals of a Christian family woman do not have. The steep learning curve of production is made less welcoming with the reality that there are harsh demands on producers. Leslie would like to see slow work in Christian music, which is part of safer, more experimental spaces, and which might invite women to take their time in exploring the production space.

Leslie recognizes that this impacts the way that these dynamics impact women. She says:

> I have watched a lot more men step into that producer role. So, actually, I think it's edging out more women. There is there isn't yet another position that has been kind of – its exclusive to folks who have a lot of time to perfect their craft. You know, I'm in the studio this week with a friend of mine who had a baby six months ago, and her and her partner are really struggling with how to balance that dynamic of who works, and when and whose work is more important, and who takes care of the baby. And those are just real conversations in this space and in all spaces. And where capitalism is king.[66]

Leslie names the ways that the role of production is not easily accessible to women who are juggling family obligations, and who don't have unlimited time and resources to learn this new and complicated craft. These factors become limitations for women's capacities to exist in the production space.

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[65] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

[66] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

5.4.2 Overlooking Maternal Realities

The theme of motherhood is significant for my interviewees, regardless of whether they are parents themselves. Recall how Abby was asked by publishers at age 26 or 27 whether she intended to have kids, and how Laura described her songwriting practices needing to change after she had children. Sarah Kroger – a songwriter and worship leader – articulates that although she doesn't have children yet, she can recognize that the system itself is not designed to see mothers thrive:

> Everyone who has kids and travels for work knows that it's a sacrifice. I don't have kids yet, but many of the women I know in music have to stop traveling for a while because they have a baby that literally depends on them, they have to breastfeed, and so on. So, if we want women to be in positions of leadership and be able to serve with the consistency of our male counterparts, we need to be thinking about how are we helping female worship leaders or women who are in ministry, to not have to think about all these things by themselves and not have to take on the burden by themselves.[67]

From Sarah's perspective, the structures that keep women isolated in their care-giving roles need to change.

When women enter industry spaces, they are greeted by a lack of clear precedent for how women should exist in these male-dominated spaces. Beth, (pseudonym) – an industry executive – has had a front row seat to the need to pave your own path from her perspective dealing with the industry at large. She first experienced this herself in her workplace, noting that her male colleagues had a precedent for mostly had stay-at-home wives who "take on that more Christian female role."[68] When Beth got pregnant, it presented a new challenge in the office. Beth says: "How many questions I got asked: 'Are you coming back to work?' No one would ever ask a

[67] Author interview with Sarah Kroger, January 11, 2024.

[68] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

man that if their wife is pregnant. Instead, I had a choice to make. I could get offended by it, or I could help educate them."[69]

Building on her own experience, Beth uses her understanding of the system to help women who face similar limitations when they become pregnant:

> I think the same way for our female staff writers. I think they have had to fight for that same kind of change in perspective of like, 'Oh, well, now, she's pregnant, so she's probably not gonna wanna tour anymore,' and like kind of making these big leaps in in judgment. But it's not from a place of – it's not even from a bad place. I think it's just from a place of that's what they know. That's what most of them are married to, is that more like traditional female that wants to be the stay-at-home life that doesn't want to have a career. And so, it's not from a place of trying to limit women, I don't think. I think it's just from a place of this is what they know, and this so it's like, I'm an anomaly to them.[70]

Beth doesn't view her colleagues' wrong assumptions as malicious but makes sense of them as coming from their limited worldview, one which is shaped by what they have observed until this point in their lives. For Beth, a strategy for women's empowerment is her own modelling of expectations for what women in the contemporary worship workplace can do.

Julie (pseudonym) similarly understands the ways that having children has impacted her career as a woman songwriter and identifies this obstacle as a double standard – a challenge that men don't have to face. She says:

> I would say the other challenge that a lot of women face is giving birth to babies and navigating that season while working. I know that affects many industries and many jobs, but that's an interesting one for females to navigate in the music industry for sure. Men don't necessarily have to navigate this the same way. Like, I'm nursing right now, and I'm going to have to stop this write and find a place to pump in the next 30 minutes or I'm in trouble. Situations like that are different and unique for females.[71]

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[69] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

[70] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

[71] Author interview with Julie (pseudonym), January 25, 2023.

For Julie, the day-to-day realities of mothering, including breastfeeding, present an additional layer of difficulty that men do not face.

Women who are mothers in the Christian music industry experience an added layer of discrimination based on the ways that their life experiences as women are not welcomed in the music they write. Beyond the realities of needing to acknowledge the logistical demands of motherhood, songs written from a mother's theological perspective are much needed in the Christian music industry, and many of my interviewees articulated this desire. Several songwriters have written powerful songs that draw on maternal imagery, such as Leslie Jordan's song "Mother Bird, Mother Bear," which invites God to be near like a mother bird. Julie notes that women often carry the "mother heart or the daughter heart," which represents an important side of God. She continues, "I think we won't see that side of God woven into the words and into the melodies, if that side's not in the room."[72] These songwriters also recognize, however, that there is a broad discomfort with feminine lyrics that men are expected to sing, an obstacle we have encountered elsewhere in this dissertation.

In congregational song, images that evoke different aspects of God's character are always drawn upon: God is like a rock, a father, a stream. In contemporary worship music, there is almost no feminine imagery for God, even though there are feminine images of God in the Bible. The exclusion of feminine images is often couched under a concern that the images are inaccessible to men. Hannah (pseudonym), a songwriter and worship leader, says: "Men won't sing this. I have heard that 10 billion times."[73] She describes her experiences with this powerful imagery, recalling a song from the Faithful album, the collaboration of all women worship

[72] Author interview with Julie (pseudonym), January 25, 2023.

[73] Author interview with Hannah (pseudonym), date revoked, 2024.

songwriters we have previously encountered.[74] Their song "We Do Not Labor in Vain" was written by Taylor Leonhardt, Trillia Newbell, and Janice Gaines, and as Hannah says, it is "literally about Janice giving birth."[75] As Hannah interprets it, the birth imagery in the song is used to describe the ways that our labor is not in vain when we're doing what's right. Verse one uses verbs that could easily describe childbirth, such as groaning and stretching:

> This is the groaning
> As You count every tear we have sown
> And we trust what those tears will become
> This is the stretching
> Making room for our hope to arrive
> Knowing You come to make us alive, to make us alive

The chorus directly names labor, "we do not labor in vain," and includes other images of birth such as "behold the life born out of pain."

> We wait for light, we wait for rain
> Behold the life born out of pain
> Eyes to the dawn, we're not afraid
> We do not labor in vain.[76]

The final phrase, repeated numerous times in later choruses, is directly taken from the Bible, found at Isaiah 65:23: "They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them." The song's writers use their experiences as women to interpret a popular scripture passage. Hannah recognizes the ways that this powerful imagery has been socially contextualized to be less accessible to men. She notes: "When I think about my dad singing 'this is the stretching

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[74] I have written about this project elsewhere: Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Celebrating the Faithful Project," *Sing! The Center For Congregational Song* (blog), May 20, 2021, https://congregationalsong.org/celebrating-the-faithful-project/.

[75] Author interview with Hannah (pseudonym), date revoked, 2024.

[76] Taylor Leonhardt, Trillia Newbell, and Janice Gaines, "We Do Not Labor in Vain," *Faithful Project,* 2021.

making room for hope to arrive,' he's not going to do it. And I do wonder about like, like, so much of it is learned that I do wonder how things will ever change."[77]

This resistance to sing lyrics that reflect women's experiences of motherhood is particularly striking when we consider the large body of worship music that emphasizes the traits of fatherhood. This has long been a trend in Christian music (consider the old hymn "How Deep the Father's Love for Us,") but is also emphasized those who write worship music today (exemplified in "Good Good Father" by Chris Tomlin or "Run to the Father" by Cody Carnes). Evidently it is not imagery of parenting that is "off limits" to Christians, but rather that which emphasizes women's experiences.

There is significant literature calling for Christians to refer to God as feminine, an approach I wholeheartedly affirm.[78] For Evangelical Christians, however, the introduction of feminine pronouns for God is likely out of reach right now. Instead, Evangelicals might consider bringing in imagery that draws on women's lived experiences, such as the stretching and growing of labour. This could be part of what Marjorie Procter-Smith describes as "feminist liturgical anamnesis," which is the act of remembering women's collective past as seen through their eyes and experienced in their bodies. She writes, "This is necessary not to fragment further the Christian community, but to restore it to that which has been missing from it. Only by recognizing the particularity of such remembering are reconciliation and wholeness possible."[79] When the church remembers and acknowledges women's experiences both in the past and present, it becomes restored to wholeness.

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[77] Author interview with Hannah (pseudonym) date revoked, 2024.

[78] For more on this, see: Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 72.

[79] Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite,* 42.

5.4.3 Following the Money

A third obstacle for women in the industry comes from the drive for financial profitability that propels the Christian music industry. Ethnomusicologist Andrew Mall demonstrates this using the example of a large label like Capitol CMG, which has a vision to *create, impact,* and *lead.* From the perspective of the larger, secular parent company that owns them – and many other Christian labels – however, "profitability was its primary goal."[80] Mall cites Kusber, who says: "We are a for-profit company, but there is a ministry emphasis to what we do. The bottom line is, we're owned by [a major label]. They don't really care what we do, as long as it makes money. As long as it's profitable, that's the bottom line for them."[81] A capitalist emphasis on profitability has defined much of the Christian music industry, despite tumultuous discernment on whether this is appropriate.

Women in the industry identify practical ways that an emphasis on financial gain limits their involvement. Olivia (pseudonym) – an industry executive – identified the way that bringing women on the road is an added expense for labels and publishers. She shared that tours often have an entire crew bus that filled with men, so adding a woman on the bus would require providing separate accommodations. This would limit women from backstage roles like tour managers and merch assistants, or more visible roles like instrumentalists and openers. She said:

> I know it gets complicated because then when you're on the road, then you've got to have separate hotel rooms or separate places for people to take showers and all that stuff. So, it's a little bit more complicated… I'm seeing it happen more, but I think, you know, it just causes more work probably for the tour manager to compensate and make sure everybody's looked after.[82]

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[80] Mall, *God Rock, Inc.,* 69.

[81] Mall, *God Rock, Inc,* 86.

[82] Author interview with Olivia (pseudonym), January 19, 2024.

Olivia subtly articulated the ways that the Billy Graham Rule impacts tour environments through the need for separate spaces for men and women. This increases cost and reduces profitability.

My interviewees lament the way an emphasis on financial intake has impacted their experience in the industry. Leslie spoke about the way that this emphasis has impacted the artistic process:

> I have seen the emphasis on speed and quantity. So, we've stopped really paying attention to quality, and like we've lost patience. I love that story of how a song just quietly makes its way around the world. That does not happen anymore. At all. But we have to have an excess, and we have to have it now. And you know, I've been writing with friends this last month who are working on records, and they, they've written like 50 to 100 songs for one record. And every song that they turn in gets critical feedback from the A and R person, you know. 'Maybe this needs to change, or that, you know, let's work on this, or work on that,' instead of you know, even when we were making records, there was kind of this autonomy of 'we trust you to make that decision.'[83]

She continued:

> So, I do think the speed of things, and you know, putting out a song on Spotify is kind of the king right now. Everybody's watching for streams, and, you know, placements on playlists, and if you don't get on a playlist, your song doesn't get heard, and so there is this like urgency to keep putting music out. So, I feel like we're not making our best art anymore. Because of that. We're in a like a productivity like rut. And so, I'm kind of just like, I don't think it's great, and while there might be people who have proficiency in production, and you know, can write a song in 30 min or a few hours, I just think we missed that slow work, you know. Of listening.[84]

Leslie's experience is that an emphasis on speed and quantity has led to a lower standard of art, one which denies songwriters the slow process of creativity. From her perspective, the industry is missing out on the important work of taking time throughout the creative process, something that has been passed over in favour of quantity of output.

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[83] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

[84] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

This concern for financial and commercial success extends to women-only collaborations. Several of my interviewees were involved with the Faithful Project, the album that features "We Do Not Labor in Vain," described previously. I asked Hannah what it was like to be involved with the project. She acknowledged that the feminine interpretation that pervades the album, combined with the lack of heavy-hitting male artists, sets the songs up not to top the charts:

> Faithful is like, it's really nice being with a bunch of women. So that's great. It is also, um, it is being part of something that I know will never be successful. You know what I mean? So, it's like loving this thing that you know is not playing by the rules and therefore will never take off, without like, I know they were talking about like Matt Maher is super into Faithful like he really loves what Faithful's doing and so does Bart Millard, or whatever his name is. And they were like, yeah, like to really help this take off we need to, like get Matt Maher to feature, or Bart Millard to feature or whatever. And, um, I think it's just like kind of a bummer. And that's how I feel about it. Like it's such a bittersweet thing.[85]

Matt Maher and Bart Millard are two prominent figures in the Christian music industry. To clarify, Hannah isn't critiquing their support of the project, but laments that the project would need their support to gain traction. She appreciates the way the project exists in its own ecosystem but is discouraged that a project by all women would men's voices to find industry success, and therefore financial success.

5.4.4 Resisting the Billy Graham Rule

The Billy Graham Rule is a final obstacle that women need to navigate in the industry. Recall Abby's description of the ways that some men wouldn't write alone with her, and the ways the fear caused by the Billy Graham Rule dictated who would be invited on tour. The Billy Graham

[85] Author interview with Hannah (pseudonym), date revoked, 2024. Italics added.

Rule is not a new challenge, but one that has been impacting women for decades. When Debby Kerner Rettino – who we met in Chapter 3 – was the worship music director at a large Evangelical megachurch in California in the early 2000s, formal guidelines were set in place out of strict observance of the Billy Graham Rule. "You're never to be alone," she said to me. "Don't stay after and talk."[86] She describes her workplace rules:

> If you have to talk with your pastor, you always have a chaperone. Always… You'll hear them go through the aisles, for instance, where everybody's sitting at their desks in the open areas… And they might have to take somebody to the airport that is of the opposite sex, and they will say, 'I need a third, who can come with me?' And people will put their work down and say, 'I'll be your third.' And they'll get in the car. And they're there to make sure that there's a witness, and nothing's happening. And it's more a witness for the outside world than it is for the people in the car. So, it's a way of having purity. And it comes directly out of Billy Graham's guidebook, because we use his rules.[87]

Debby's career in the church was impacted by the Billy Graham Rule.

The women that I interviewed were divided in their perspective on the Billy Graham Rule. Often women who began their careers in the social and political Christian climate that regarded Graham as an influential figure viewed the rule as a solid teaching that serves to protect both men and women. Andrea Hunter, a songwriter in her 70s, said:

> I think it's actually a pretty good rule; I think that a man and a woman shouldn't be alone in an environment, unless they are married. Even when nothing happens, someone can say something happened. Because I've seen the legal issues where people then say something happened, and it's he-said-she-said. So many pastors have fallen in the last couple of years that most likely never would have if they had kept to that Billy Graham rule.[88]

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[86] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[87] Author interview with Debby Kerner Rettino, July 26, 2023.

[88] Author interview with Andrea Hunter, May 17, 2023.

Debby similarly expressed gratitude at the way the Billy Graham Rule has protected her from harassment. She suggested that the reason other people have issues is because they break these rules. Evidently, for some women, the Billy Graham Rule is a welcome addition to their social settings, with a clear positive payoff. Some of these older women express a sense of empowerment at how this rule dictates their interactions.

Among younger interviewees, almost every woman said that the Billy Graham Rule had directly impacted their career in a negative way. Leslie describes the pervasiveness of this ideology, saying:

> I think I probably was raised that way [following the Billy Graham Rule]. And so, there was a long time where I was like, I'm just not going to be in the studio by myself with [male colleague], even though there wasn't anything weird. It was just that it was that thing that was ingrained in me. We can't just be friends or work colleagues – it's going to turn romantic, and I look back, and I'm like there is not a chance [that it would turn romantic]. But it's funny like that is that is the thing that we're taught, is that like one of us is not going to be able to control ourselves, or you know men and women can't be friends or can't be work partners.[89]

For Leslie, the Billy Graham Rule was a deeply engrained set of beliefs that informed her experience in the studio, even if it didn't necessarily resonate with her current beliefs. Similarly, Beth clearly tracks how this ideology has impacted her career development. She says:

> I can say that has directly impacted my career. And it's very challenging, and very hard for me to feel like I'm limited to do my job because I'm a female, and to be seen as some sort of a threat because I'm a female… I'm like on some level I get it, like these guys just want a level of protection because of the world that we live in, and it's sad that they feel like they need that. But it also, what it puts on the woman is unfair that I am going to do something inappropriate, or I'm going to claim something inappropriate. And it takes away all of the professional respect that I deserve, and that I've earned. And I've personally been in a situation where certain writers won't meet alone with me, not even

[89] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

> out in a cafe, or, you know, or come into my office and meet alone with me. And I know there are some male writers who won't write one on one with a female.[90]

Beth articulates the ways that the Billy Graham Rule has set her up to feel like a threat, always potentially about to say or do something inappropriate. For her, the Billy Graham Rule denies her of respect. In the cases of both Beth and Leslie, the Billy Graham Rule is a limitation that holds them back professionally and negatively impacts their careers. They clearly identify that it makes their work as women in the industry harder, and that it is a pervasive and influential force.

Women like Beth adopt the strategy of befriending their colleagues' wives in order to mitigate the implied tension of being a woman who works closely with male colleagues. This is done to make it clear that they are not a threat to the wife, and to communicate that they are not interested in becoming romantically involved with the husband. She says:

> How many men have I signed to deals, but earning the trust of the woman, their wife, is part of getting the deal signed, you know? Like showing her like I'm not a threat. I'm not coming after your husband. I'm not interested in your husband. I'm interested in helping you guys make more money as a family, you know? And I think that's part of the approach that I've taken to just neutralize any fear with the artist's wives, or with the writer's wives because I understand, like, you know, there is some, there is some danger, I guess, in working closely together with someone of the opposite sex or traveling a lot with them.[91]

Julie feels similarly:

> Another thing that we intentionally do is to invite them out. We'll do something with them outside of work, with their families, or with their wife. That really helps to communicate pure intentions. It establishes friendship and pulls down defenses. I make an effort to get to know my co-writer's wives.[92]

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[90] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

[91] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

[92] Author interview with Julie (pseudonym), January 25, 2023.

Befriending a collaborator's wife acts as a public signal that the woman songwriter has no romantic intentions and is done to help put all parties at ease.

An additional layer of challenge with the rule is the way that it is often unnamed, unaddressed, and silently enforced. Julie describes the way it often commands writing environments in an informal way:

> I have had it happen where somebody will come to town for an co-write. I'll show up and suddenly their spouse is in the room, and no one communicated they were coming. Adding another person to any write will change the dynamic of the room. In a pro-write, writers are chosen for the specific roles they will play and the expertise they will bring to the room. Right away, I don't know what they bring to the room. So, professionally, that makes things awkward if no one knew or planned this ahead of time. Maybe this couple leads worship together, so they make the assumption that writes are together too. Or maybe they had a conversation like, 'I'm not comfortable with you writing with so and so, I'm gonna come in that write with you.' I think it's probably more of that.[93]

Julie articulates the ways that the Billy Graham Rule can operate as an informal and unofficial mechanism, one that puts spouses in rooms together to avoid discomfort. While it is sometimes a formal policy, like in the case of Debby's church, it can also be a more casual, behind-the-scenes influence. It can consist of unspoken negotiations dictating who is allowed in certain rooms. It governs collaborative environments even when it is not named as a shared value.

While there may be the perception that the Billy Graham Rule prevents sexual immorality, Julie shared with me that she couldn't think of an instance where an affair happened from collaborative songwriting between a non-married duo of a man and woman. She said, "I'm just thinking about it, if I've ever seen any kind of affair or anything happen with co-writing, in that context. And I would say zero. I have never seen one." She continued, "So I don't think it's

[93] Author interview with Julie (pseudonym), January 25, 2023.

that big of an issue, as long as you know your boundaries."[94] For Julie, the Billy Graham Rule is unnecessary so long as collaborators are aware of their values and limitations.

As the next generation of women worship songwriters hope for the end of the Billy Graham Rule, this must be accompanied by a recognition of the ways that the Billy Graham Rule inherently excludes some women based on how it presumes that women in collaborations are white, straight, married, and able-bodied. I interviewed some women who are not straight, white, married, and able-bodied who expressed that the rule didn't seem to apply to them. One interviewee primarily existed in the Christian music sphere as a college student ministering to other college students and expressed that the Billy Graham Rule is less discussed in that context since all her peers were unmarried with the goal of marriage. Aimee Byrd describes in her writing this as messaging from the church that "a woman's attractiveness serves the purpose of landing a husband, then becomes a threat to all other men."[95] In the college setting, a woman's attractiveness is still viewed as serving the function of finding a husband. I also spoke with Jennifer Knapp, a prominent Christian singer/songwriter whose involvement in the Christian music industry ended when she came out as gay. The Billy Graham Rule meant that she had to travel specifically with a female road manager, her presumed straightness meaning that she was more frequently alone with the gender to which she was attracted.[96] A consideration of who is impacted by the rule may also lead us to consider the experiences of individuals who are disabled and racialized – they may also experience this rule in a different way. Even if white, straight, able-bodied women are more welcomed into songwriting spaces, something more closely

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[94] Author interview with Julie (pseudonym), January 25, 2023.

[95] Aimee Byrd, *Why Can't We Be Friends? Avoidance Is Not Purity* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2018), 23.

[96] Jennifer Knapp, *Facing the Music: My Story* (New York: Howard Books, 2014), 169.

resembling equality won't happen until Black women, women of colour, disabled women, and other marginalized women can be their authentic selves in songwriting collaborations.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the obstacles that women experience behind the scenes of the contemporary worship industry, highlighting the role of the gig economy, the limits of two-person careers, Evangelical family expectations for women, and the enforcement of gender division through the Billy Graham Rule. Using stories from the interviewees, specific obstacles have been named: disregard for maternal experiences, little room for women as producers, the need to resist the Billy Graham Rule, and the financial costs of bringing women on board in a male-dominated environment.

Near the end of my interview with Baily, I asked her if there was anything we hadn't touched on that she wanted to add. From her place as an emerging songwriter and producer she offered a word of encouragement for her fellow songwriters and producers that speaks to the power of women's capacity to create, produce, write, share. She said:

> I think definitely I just want like anybody who like reads this or like encounters this interview, I would just want to like to encourage them that, you know, if there are any like people like girls who are read this, or whatever encounter the interview that want to produce or are producing, and they are afraid to show people like what they're creating, I just like want to encourage them that they can do it, and that they have amazing ideas, and that it's not impossible. And show people what you're creating. Show people what you're doing and keep learning and keep working hard and like don't hide. Like, please, don't hide. Like step into the light, please. Because I just want to see like, an army of female writers, creators, producers like come up in this next [season] because I think they they're so needed. Their sound is needed. Their ideas are needed. I definitely just want to put that in there.[97]

[97] Author interview with Baily Hager, April 26, 2023.

Baily is not the only one who wants to see an army of female writers, creators, and producers. The women in the industry are already empowering each other and forming new collaborations and connections to strengthen their presence. There is so much more to do, but as Baily says, it's time to "step into the light."

Chapter 6. Surveilling the Stage: Monitoring Women's Voices and Bodies

"I have been unchosen, hidden and unseen
Fighting disappointment with insufficient strength
You have seen it all, and You say I belong.

So, I lift my eyes up to the Heavens
You're my help, Lord, I surrender.

This time, this time, I will bring praise
I will bring praise to the Lord."

Excerpt from "This Time I Will Bring Praise" by Leslie Jordan, Trillia Newbell, Ruth Chou Simons, and Kelly Minter from the Faithful Project's album *Go and Speak* (2021)

6.1 Christian Music and Surveillance

Before Jessica Simpson was a celebrated pop singer, fashion designer, and actress, she was a Christian teenager with a passion for sharing her faith through music. And for 13-year-old Jessica Simpson, abstinence was a key concern. In her 2020 autobiography *Open Book*, she describes being in grade eight and recording a song called "God Says Wait."[1] She recounts warming up a crowd by singing "I Will Always Love You," telling them it was about true love

[1] Jessica Simpson, *Open Book* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 73.

waiting.[2] She felt that God was calling her to use her voice to minister to people, and she had a highly effective ministry. Jessica faced a significant roadblock, however. Her body was developing into womanhood, and her new figure was the source of significant discomfort for the Christian gatekeepers around her. In grade seven, her pastor pulled her mother aside to let her know that Jessica could no longer sing at church since because her nipples were visible through her clothing. The pastor chastised, "She will make men lust!" To which Jessica's mother responded, "She's thirteen!"[3] Her mother could clearly identify that Jessica was being overtly sexualized at a young age, concerned that since Jessica's body had developed, she was not being allowed to be a child.

Jessica's pastor wasn't the only one concerned about her changing body in a climate where modesty was paramount. Jessica writes:

> When I performed at abstinence rallies, people were especially hard on me. I would be wearing the exact same shorts and T-shirts other girls my age wore and get yelled at for dressing sexy. When I did a big Southern Baptist youth conference singing in front of nearly 20,000 people at Reunion Arena, I wore flowery Doc Martens, black leggings, a T-shirt, and a white button-up vest. To be safe, my mom even put a second denim vest over me. I wanted to look exactly like Rebecca St. James, who was also on the bill. She was a huge Christian singer at the time, beloved in that same outfit.[4]

However, Jessica's curves meant that she couldn't get away with the same outfit as the beloved Rebecca Saint James. She received a significant amount of negative feedback for her wardrobe. As she says, "Even though I dressed exactly like Rebecca, I was dancing around up there so I

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[2] Simpson, *Open Book,* 72.

[3] Simpson, *Open Book,* 77.

[4] Simpson, *Open Book,* 77-78.

guess things were bouncing."[5] It wasn't just her outfit that caused concerns: it was the way her body looked regardless of what she wore.

In a 2003 *Rolling Stone* interview, Simpson shared how Christian labels ultimately passed on her. The article notes how they rejected her, "claiming they were uncomfortable with Simpson's sexy looks, which would 'make the men lust.'"[6] For Simpson, no matter how devout her faith or her commitment to modesty and abstinence, gatekeepers in the industry would not allow someone with her curvy figure to enter the industry. In his account of Christian rock, Andrew Beaujon offers context for this phenomenon by describing his perception that most women in Christian music did not have large breasts. He writes about his surprise when at the Christian music awards called the Dove Awards, he noticed that Joy Williams had larger breasts than other women that he had seen on stage. He notes that she is almost always photographed "from the neck up or hunched forward with her shoulders forward so her arms obscure her figure,"[7] capturing Christian music's approach to questions of modesty.

Jessica Simpson went on to find success in the secular pop music industry, though not without difficulty. She was too scandalous for Christians but often considered too religious for the mainstream industry. Her story of rejection raises questions about how women are treated in the Christian music industry. Unfortunately, women like Simpson and Joy Williams are not the only ones who have been policed, and questions of modesty are not the only basis on which women are scrutinized. The Christian music industry is a notoriously rigid machine, with gatekeepers ready to oust artists for a range of issues related to gender, sexuality, relationship

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[5] Simpson, *Open Book,* 78.

[6] Vanessa Grigoriadis, "Jessica Simpson: Portrait of a Living Doll," *Rolling Stone*, November 27, 2003, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-news/jessica-simpson-portrait-of-a-living-doll-241202/.

[7] Andrew Beaujon, *Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 175.

status, and appearance. In the case of the Christian music industry, these concerns have been couched under a culture of Christian "accountability." Women like Jessica Simpson are held back in order not to make men "stumble," or have impure sexual thoughts. Accountability culture also extends to LGBTQ+ artists who are told they are a bad influence, individuals who express more progressive (and "less biblical") opinions on gender and sexuality, or those who take a non-normative life path in terms of marriage and dating.

Because Evangelicals have positioned women as sexually promiscuous, the Christian music industry scrutinizes women for their every move, always a breath away from being ousted for any behaviour that might not conform to mainstream expectations. Kate Bowler describes the viral performance of "Majesty" by Cindy Cruse-Ratcliffe under this paradigm, with her performance carefully planned to avoid any possible promiscuity. Bowler writes:

> Her performances will mostly be dictated by what she will never do. She will never heave her bosom or moan during the pauses; she will not linger too long on the high notes or dip down low to growl in a throaty alto. She does not carry a hand-kerchief to wipe sweat from her brow or look overly labored, like a female James Brown. Though she performs in a church founded by card- carrying Pentecostals with a profound delight in the unexpected movements of the Spirit, she will follow the dictates of other white women in megaministry and stay on her mark.[8]

Women – like Cruse-Ratcliffe – are expected to be positive role models and a good influence on younger and emerging Christians according to an Evangelical set of standards.

Christian accountability is a theme that is underrepresented in the literature and largely has not been theorized despite being a foundational practice of Evangelical Christianity. While most Evangelicals can tell countless examples of times they were held to accountability, there is a lack of writing on how this practice functions. Anecdotal evidence points to its significance,

[8] Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife,* 146.

however. I remember hearing my high school youth group leader tell us about a letter that she and her husband had signed stating that they would not have sex before marriage, something they distributed to all their friends in the hopes that they would keep them accountable to their commitment. Accountability functions in both formal and informal ways to keep individuals aligned with Evangelical ideals.

This emphasis on accountability in Evangelicalism is in part because of an over-emphasis on personal convictions and actions over those of the collective. Berkeley Franz notes: "Since Evangelical theology holds that ethical responsibilities are personal in nature, Evangelicals are likely to favor ethical actions in the form of personal choices, similar to the important personal choice of turning toward God and becoming born-again."[9] For many Evangelicals, issues like modesty or abstinence are important because they represent a personal choice, turning either towards or away from God. John P. Bartkowski offers a relevant examination of Christian accountability that touches on Evangelical notions of gender through his article on accountability groups in the Promise Keepers movement, a Christian men's organization that was popular in the early 2000s. Bartkowski describes sitting in accountability groups watching "men talk openly about a range of otherwise highly private topics that they would be hard pressed to lay bare in the 'outside world': various problems with the law; assorted sexual 'improprieties;' as well as thorny interpersonal dilemmas with their wives, children, colleagues, and friends."[10] Bartowski also gives the example of a Promise Keepers participant who was trying to stop masturbating but was having trouble quitting. He was not able to get adequate support from his wife, but ultimately

[9] Berkeley Franz, "Encouraging Accountability: Evangelicals and American Health Care Reform," *Critical Research on Religion* 6, no. 2 (2018): 186.

[10] John P. Bartkowski, "Breaking Walls, Raising Fences: Masculinity, Intimacy, and Accountability among the Promise Keepers," *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 1 (2000): 42-43.

was able to quit with help from an accountability partner who would check in with him to see if he had "fallen again."[11] The groups functioned to keep men accountability on a range of sensitive issues, including sexuality.

This chapter picks up on the question of Christian accountability, exploring both the damaging and the productive sides of this emphasis. It explores the ways that women have been excluded from the Christian music industry when their behavior or circumstance does not seem to align with Evangelical ideals. First, Lauren Winner's concept of *characteristic damage* is explored to understand the dark side of Christian accountability, a practice that is well intentioned yet also deeply harmful. Then we meet Rebecca, a Christian artist who has experienced firsthand the ways the industry monitors her voice and clothing for sexual undertones, and Nikki Leonti, a Christian musician who was ousted from the industry when she got pregnant as a teenager. These stories are paired with context for Evangelical perspectives on the abstinence and modesty movement. The third story in this chapter is of Jennifer Knapp, an artist who was ousted by the Christian music industry when she came out as gay. Her story accompanies a history of Evangelical perspectives on LGBTQ+ relationships and sexualities. Finally, these stories are put in dialogue with other interviewees who offer similar accounts, corroborating their experiences and interpretations.

There are countless stories of women in the Christian music industry being rejected for their beliefs or lived experience, often connected to questions of marriage, family, and sexuality. Here, I highlight the stories of just three of the women I interviewed for this project. Their stories help contextualize the types of limitations that women in the industry face today, and the obstacles they have encountered in the past. Nikki and Jennifer's stories in particular set the

[11] Bartkowski, "Breaking Walls, Raising Fences," 48-49.

historic precedent for understanding how the Christian music industry has negotiated these questions in previous decades. Their experiences of being ousted are older – more than twenty years ago for Nikki, and fifteen years ago for Jennifer – but as will be shown in the discussion after the case studies, similar concerns are still raised today. By contrast, Rebecca's story offers a glimpse into the power dynamics at play today.

6.2 Characteristic Damage and Evangelical Accountability

Christian accountability has involved policing women's involvement in the Christian music industry based on questions of gender and sexuality. In this case, the process of accountability can be considered a Christian practice that has led to characteristic damage. Theorizing around characteristic damage in Christian practice has been thoroughly developed by Lauren Winner, a religion scholar at Duke Divinity School. In her 2018 book, Winner proposes that "When a Christian practice goes wrong, it often does so not incidentally but rather in ways that have to do with the practice itself."[12] Winner makes the bold assertion that Christian practices are damaged and perpetuate damage because they – as with the rest of creation – are touched by the Fall. In referring to the Fall, Winner is describing the theological viewpoint that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve strayed from innocence, bringing sin into the world and turning humanity away from God. This is a widespread Christian belief, but it is not often as widely captured as it is in Winner's writing. She suggests:

> Therefore, because nothing created is untouched by the Fall, Christians should not be surprised when lovely and good, potentially gracious Christian gestures are damaged, or when human beings deploy those Christian gestures in the perpetuation of damage. Because often damage is expressed in a way that is not arbitrary, but is proper to what is

[12] Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University press, 2018), 1.

> expressing it, Christians ought to be able to predict some of the characteristic damages that might be found in those potentially gracious gestures, and Christians ought to be able to predict some of the ways in which human beings put those gestures to work in perpetuating damage.[13]

Winner encourages the church to be aware of good and well-intentioned Christian practices that do the opposite of what they were made to do. In some cases, practices may be "deformed," or damaged in a way that is characteristic of the practice itself. These deformations can reveal truths about the practice itself.

For Winner, the reality that Christian practices can be deformed does not mean that the practices should be avoided. Rather, she acknowledges deformations as an invitation to participate with our eyes wide open. Winner devotes one of her chapters to an analysis of slave-owning women's prayers for obedience from their slaves, specifically observing the ways the act of praying was deformed in that context. She writes, "This is to argue not that therefore we shouldn't engage in petitionary prayer but that we should do so knowing its potential for distortion, and do it in such a way that our knowledge informs our practice."[14] Winner offers several examples of times that prayer may appear to be a benign address of God, but an ulterior motive is present. She imagines a mother verbally thanking God for food on their table when so many are hungry, perhaps inspiring her children to eat the food she has prepared. "Or," she writes,

> in a slightly different frame, consider the church prayer chain that eagerly passes along urgent prayer requests: 'Sally Jo's marriage is in real trouble—I think Rich is stepping out; we really need to pray for them'; 'Mark and Susan's son was arrested last night for drunk driving; we really need to lift that family up in prayer.' Might these morsels lead to prayer? Certainly. But they are also means of exchanging information about people,

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[13] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 3.

[14] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice,* 61-62.

> among people; they are gossip, and they arrange power in the way that gossip always does.[15]

While they may be well intentioned, there are byproducts of this kind of prayer that serve ulterior motives. In the example she describes, the ulterior motive is gossip, spreading unflattering information in the name of care. In the context of slavery, the prayers also served to keep slaves in line with the authority of their masters in the context of the larger church. Slave owners taught slaves prayers that the slaves would be expected to pray. Winner writes, "These rote prayers reminded slaves of their status and gilded that reminder with the authority of Christianity."[16] While the prayers kept the forces of white supremacy at large, these prayers also became an act of resistance for slaves who were able to push back against their oppression.[17]

There are no doubt meaningful components to the Christian practice of accountability including community building, offering spaces for all genders to share openly, and creating safe spaces for processing. This often happens in the context of gender-specific small groups that are designed to create support systems for accountability. However, the negative byproducts also indicate that these practices of accountability have become deformed. They have resulted in the exclusion of women from positions of authority, which is a form of characteristic damage. This practice of accountability is *characteristically* damaged since accountability inherently mandates monitoring, gatekeeping, and likely excluding those who do not meet the criteria for an accountable Christian space. In a context where men are most often in leadership and overseeing this practice, women are the ones who have been monitored the most. This is like the examples that Winner gives: while prayers uttered by distressed slave owners may have been well-

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[15] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice,* 67-68.

[16] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice,* 69-70.

[17] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice,* 70.

intentioned offerings, the context around them highlights the ways this practice is indeed harmful. Similarly, while Evangelicals who police each other on moral terms in the name of accountability may be well intentioned in their pursuit of holiness, in their context this kind of surveillance leads to characteristic damage and the exclusion of women from leadership positions. The unintended consequences far outweigh any perceived benefits.

The types of policing that women in the industry experience come from values that have been prominent for decades. Women have consistently borne the brunt of Evangelical ideals around sexuality, relationships, and family. You may recall in the Chapter 3 the way Karen was critiqued for wearing pants while worship leading, or how Marsha was told she talked too much when her husband should be talking more. These examples occurred in the early days of the industry (in the 1960s/70s) but are still emblematic of the dynamics that exist today. Enforcement of parameters on women's leadership has been characteristic throughout the development of the industry. What follows is an exploration of two particular areas of concern for Evangelicals: abstinence and modesty, and LGBTQ+ rights.

6.3 Abstinence, Modesty, and Nikki and Rebecca's Stories of Surveillance

"Christians are obsessed with sex" writes Nadia Bolz-Weber, "but not in a good way."[18] Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor, articulates what many have noticed: concerns around sex and sexuality have been blown out of proportion in many Christian circles, becoming the center of debates around power, authority, and independence. The byproduct of this obsession is that women's bodies have become moveable pawns that are restricted or liberated depending on how Evangelical theology unfolds in a particular religious or political moment. We see this in

[18] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent, 2019), front flap.

recognizable ways in North American culture today, but this has also been a theme in Evangelicalism for decades. This section provides context on the Evangelical fixation on women's bodies by first setting context and then encountering Rebecca and Nikki's stories.

6.3.1 The Abstinence Movement

The groundwork for a Christian response to mainstream perspectives on sex was laid in response to the women's liberation and gay rights movements in the 1970s with the emergence of the "New Right," later known as the "Religious Right."[19] This movement gained traction particularly with the Supreme Court decision around Roe v. Wade in 1973, giving traction to a wide range of sexuality-related concerns for Christians. As di Mauro and Joffe note, "The explosive issue of abortion served as a 'battering ram,' in Rosalind Petchesky's (1990, p. 242) apt phrase, for a wide range of other issues that would also receive attention from social conservatives in the years ahead: sexuality education, teenage pregnancy, welfare policies, and out-of-wedlock births."[20] Conservative Christians were foundational in expanding the New Right and a number of adjacent groups formed, such as Focus on the Family, the Concerned Women of America, and the Traditional Values Coalition. The movement's response to concerns around sex and sexuality – including same-sex relationships, abortion, abstinence, and modesty – became a kind of "moral panic."[21] Instead of being one of several important topics for the church to discuss, questions around sexuality became the primary focus.

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[19] Diane di Mauro and Carole Joffe, "The Religious Right and the Reshaping of Sexual Policy: An Examination of Reproductive Rights and Sexuality Education," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 68.

[20] di Mauro and Joffe, "The Religious Right and the Reshaping of Sexual Policy," 68.

[21] di Mauro and Joffe, "The Religious Right and the Reshaping of Sexual Policy," 68.

Convictions around sexual purity rose to a new level during the purity movement of the 1990s and early 2000s. Momentum reached a peak with True Love Waits; an initiative founded by a Southern Baptist youth minister in 1993. The movement spread like wildfire until it had hundreds of thousands of supporters across the United States and Canada.[22] Participants – often teens in Christian communities – pledged their allegiance by committing to the True Love Waits pledge: "Believing that True Love Waits, I make a commitment to God, my family, my friends, my future spouse and my future children to live a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until I enter a biblical marriage relationship."[23] The pledge encouraged sexual purity until marriage. For some this meant that kissing was allowed, but for others participation in this movement mandated a rejection of all forms of physical intimacy. Regardless, True Love Waits also included an emphasis on modesty and chastity, values most often placed on women so that they would dress in ways that would not make their male counterparts "stumble" or have sexual thoughts.

The modesty emphasis on young Christian women took many forms. Kelsey Sherrod Michael notes that "for Conservative Christians, clothing is a medium suffused with Christian symbolism."[24] She easily identifies modesty debates as a mode of surveillance, where the way a woman dresses "serves as a 'window' into the state of her soul."[25] Michael describes online debates such as those around whether Christian women should wear yoga pants, a question that

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[22] Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111.

[23] Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 109.

[24] Kelsey Sherrod Michael, "Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve: The Surveillance of Women's Souls in Evangelical Christian Modesty Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 8 (2019): 1131.

[25] Michael, "Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve," 1131.

many Evangelicals answered with a resounding "no." Her analysis of the discourse reveals the way that this policing of women's bodies is a form of surveillance. She writes:

> I argue that modesty standards serve as the interface that enables clothing, as a medium, to make women's purity/piety visible and legible to others. For this process to work, modesty norms—cultural, social, and historical—must become invisible as norms. Women's haptic, subjective experiences of clothing such as yoga pants also must become invisible as the gaze of the observer is centered instead.[26]

Michael aptly observes that that the (male) observer's gaze is often prioritized over that of women, and in this case, that gaze often belongs to the men who gatekeep the industry. Surveillance of women becomes a tool for them to solidify their power as those who approve or deny based on outward markers like clothing.

The abstinence movement and resulting power dynamics have had clear ties to the Christian music industry. Artists like Rebecca St. James promoted chastity over promiscuity, and in 2004, she wrote *SHE: Safe, Healthy, Empowered— The Woman You're Meant to Be,* which promoted what she called "new feminism."[27] Leah Payne describes the movement: "The 'new feminist' was not preoccupied with making strides in the workplace. She embraced purity and sought a 'knight' who would protect her feminine virtue. Practical advice included avoiding 'mind sex' and masturbation. Such a woman would find happiness, health, and power."[28] St. James also promoted this message in her music, especially evident in her 2000 song "Wait for Me," which tells the story of a young St. James writing a letter to her future husband,

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[26] Michael, "Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve," 1132.

[27] Rebecca St James and Lynda Hunter Bjorklund, *SHE: Safe, Healthy, Empowered: The Woman You're Made To Be* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004).

[28] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 141.

encouraging him to remain sexually pure for her. The chorus sings: "I am waiting for, praying for you, darling. Wait for me, too. Wait for me as I wait for you."[29]

Young women singing to younger audiences were highly appealing to the record companies. Payne notes that "Full-grown women like Natalie Grant, Sara Groves, or Ashley Cleveland rarely outsold abstinence icons like St. James or BarlowGirl."[30] Payne quotes journalist Laura Jenkins, who expounds upon this issue, writing: "Someone like Ashley Cleveland was so incredibly talented, but she was an adult grown woman singing about adult things and that wasn't what many of the record companies wanted."[31] Payne further concludes that "When married mothers did have hits, they were often framed first not as artists, but as mothers and wives who upheld traditional family structures."[32] The purity movement meant that young women who furthered the True Love Waits and other abstinence agendas were most appealing to the vital younger audiences.

Payne highlights the story of Sara Groves, a slightly older singer whose persona revolved around her family commitments and who was not able to capitalize on the True Love Waits buy-in. She writes:

> When thirty-year-old singer-songwriter Groves was profiled in CCM Magazine for her 2002 album All Right Here, the article emphasized Groves' status as a pastor's granddaughter with 'strong family roots,' and her role as 'wife, mother, and minister.' One word from "Fly," a track written to her husband Troy, caught the attention of CCM Magazine because of its potential to 'raise eyebrows' of CCM listeners: 'afterglow.' Groves noted that the song was written as an 'outpouring of her life as a worshiper, not just as a wife,' but the article highlighted the 'sensual' nature of the song and Groves' status as an ideal evangelical woman who fulfilled her husband's desires. 'Life may be

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[29] Rebecca St. James, "Wait For Me – Rebecca St. James," uploaded on March 3, 2007, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1thVi6T9rEo.

[30] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 144.

[31] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 144.

[32] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 144.

> almost too perfect for Groves,' it concluded, 'a beautiful family, a successful ministry, and a husband who lingers in the 'aferglow.'[33]

When Payne spoke with Groves in 2022, the singer shared more about what was likely going through her head at the time. Payne writes:

> Looking back on that interview, Groves acknowledged that the stories she shared in the interview for the feature – stories of her grandfather, of welcoming her son home from the hospital – probably came in part from her own discomfort with being a woman with a career in conservative evangelical circles. 'I had a fear of being seen as a neglectful mother,' said Groves, 'so I did so much framing nearly everywhere I went, "What this? ... this isn't a career, it's just this thing I do at night sometimes."'[34]

Groves distanced herself from the career aspect of her music ministry and recognized that her status as married meant that she could not speak about the popular topic of abstinence in the same way. Unlike young, single teens who could easily tour across the country, Groves felt pressure to diminish her career to be seen as a caring mother. Regardless of age, the purity movement had far-reaching impacts on women in the industry. For younger women, they were expected to be spokespeople for the purity movement. For "older" women, it left them unable to speak into the teen movement that was energizing Christians around North America.

6.3.2 Rebecca's Story of Surveillance and Acceptance

Rebecca (pseudonym) always loved singing in church, even from a young age. She describes it as the "first place [she] was given a stage."[35] Early on, she felt a sense of calling to church music ministry:

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[33] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 144. Quoting Matthew Turner, "Oh the Joy of 'Flying,' " CCM Magazine, October 2002, 38– 39.

[34] Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*, 144-145.

[35] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

> Like I remember singing in my Sunday school class and really sensing that something was happening. Like there was something bigger than me going on... It was a response of, I felt God. And I wouldn't have known how to articulate it more than that. But it was enough. That was like the thread that drew me and that I wanted to kind of keep unraveling. And so that was all really good.[36]

Despite her passion for music ministry, Rebecca didn't have many models of what this could look like as a career.

> And I think that's – in [names city] where I'm from, women did music more so in that capacity.[37] As like a choir member, or you know, a solo in church, or maybe they also wrote songs just for fun. But it wasn't often, I didn't have any examples anyway; I should say just personally of women doing it as a career… Like my mom had an Amy Grant record, maybe a Sandi Patty, you know, concert or something. But not a lot of examples of women going this is what I do. This is my art. This is how I see the world. This is my perspective; this is what I want to think about. So, I didn't think it was possible, I thought that I would just do church. And that would have to be enough. But it wasn't enough. And I couldn't be okay with that.[38]

Rebecca tried to choose a more "responsible" career path in university but quickly found herself opening for big names in the Christian music industry. She was eventually signed to a record deal with her husband, who supported her as an instrumentalist.

> So, we showcased as a husband and wife, and they wanted us to sign as a husband and wife. So, we became [names band] in [mid 2010s] and joined officially the American Christian music scene. And it was basically 200 gigs a year for the very first five, six years of our career. So, I didn't have a lot of time to really internalize or process all that was happening in terms of just gender roles and why it was okay if I had Mark[39] by my side to do this, but if I was just by myself and just said this, I was outspoken. Or if, you know, I wore those leather pants, but I was up on stage with my husband, it was okay. But if I was just by myself, it wasn't okay.[40]

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[36] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

[37] Some details about Rebecca's story have been removed to protect her anonymity.

[38] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

[39] Mark is a pseudonym for Rebecca's husband.

[40] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

Having Mark by her side gave Rebecca more agency to speak freely and wear what she wanted. But she knew that if she was standing by herself, the standard would be different.

Rebecca started to notice some trends in the industry, but it took her a while to fully grasp the type of institution she was now affiliated with:

> And so those things started to happen. And I could see them but we were just going so fast that it didn't really sink in. To put it another way, like, what I had signed up for, like the membership card, the company card, to be a part of the club, yeah, I didn't realize how drilled into stone those criteria were. And are. I didn't really understand the rules of the game fully…. But within the industry, there's not a specific Christian industry. So, the label isn't as punched in as hard. And so, it wasn't until a couple years in on the state side of things where it really hit me what was kind of going on, and why when I listened to KLOVE for an hour, I heard one female.[41]

Rebecca is describing a day when her husband and her were on tour, listening to KLOVE, a Christian radio station. She says they heard male voice after male voice, so decided to start counting:

> And I remember the two of us getting into this big conversation like, what in the world is going on here? And like then we started like counting, okay, well how many shows have we played that had a female in the band, never mind the front person, just like even in the band, even in the crew? Oh, they're always doing merch. Okay, so there's a few women doing merch, kind of like there's a few women on staff at a church in children's ministry. Heaven forbid they're the pastor, but like in children's ministry, maybe youth. That's okay.[42]

As she continued to make music, Rebecca noticed specific ways that she was restricted on stage, especially if there was any way sexual overtones could be read onto her music. She described to me the ways she had to change how she sang especially:

> … you're just kind of told from the get-go, like, 'Good luck. Hope that something works out, because our listeners like to listen to male voices. They want it to sound like they're being preached to, they want it to sound like a pastoral voice.' And so, women with lower

[41] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

[42] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

> voices do better than higher voices, because at least you sound a little more male. And if you could sing a little more male, that would also be good. So, no sexy like, sounds... Like I used to sing with so much dynamics, and a lot of inflections, and just personality, and it was all taken away, like record one, it was basically like, can you do that vocal again, because that is never gonna get played on the radio. I was like, 'Why?' 'Well, because you're, it's like airy voice, sexy voice, like, you got to sing it straight. You got to sing it with a full voice. And just don't give anyone any reason to like, question you.'[43]

From an industry perspective, these factors were counted as a recipe for success.

> … it was sort of like, here's your best recipe for winning. And if you win, we win. Let's all win. So could you sing it like a man, and let's not have a controversial, let's have the chorus have a real certain promise that you can sing, that people can put their arms up to, and that KLOVE will play. And if we can do that for your first two or three songs, then we'll have a career.[44]

Rebecca was expected to work at presenting a sound that could not be interpreted as having any sexual overtones, all in the name of success both for her and her label.

In addition to feedback received about her voice, Rebecca received feedback on her wardrobe, particularly since she was supposed to be a modest role model for young girls. She described an album cover where she was wearing leather pants, saying "… I think I was one of the first people to do a bit of a Stevie Nicks impersonation, like that was just what I loved, like fur and black hats and black pants and just a lot more kind of rock influences. Like almost folk Americana rock." She tried to capture a fashionable, edgy look while still operating as a Christian singer. Rebecca credits their label with being open to her look and is grateful they worked with her to express herself in a way that felt comfortable. However, it didn't come without feedback:

> But they definitely got a lot of letters on Winter Jam from pastors and people that saw me. They'd send it directly to the head of our label, like to our president, like, 'we

[43] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

[44] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

> brought our youth group, and [Rebecca's] in leather pants on stage, what kind of precedent does that set for our teen girls when modest is hottest, and she's not embodying that.' Meanwhile, I was in like, full leather pants. They weren't even that tight. I had a full, I had like three layers on like, I had, like, I am the most modest, like I like to wear, fashion is important to me. But I'm, like, I have no boobs. And so like, even if I wore a low-cut shirt, like you wouldn't even, I couldn't be like that if I wanted to be like, I'm so jealous. I'm so jealous of people, like I'm like, 'Come on, give me more boobs.' But that – side note. But like, I'm just not that person anyway, so it was all sort of hilarious to me to be like, really? Okay. Wow, you just don't really have a category for me, I guess. Like, is that what this is? I don't know. So yeah, there was a lot, a lot, a lot of that.[45]

Rebecca names that her figure was not one that was more likely to be viewed as threatening – something that stands in contrast to Jessica's story at the beginning of the chapter. Even despite this, she received feedback for what she wore. For Rebecca, living in love was a strong motto for her despite this pushback, but it impacted how she existed in the industry. She says:

> … once you see it, you can't unsee it. It's just like, wow, now it's my responsibility how everyone else perceives me and if they're living a faithful Christian life because of my leather pants, like can we just all be honest that that's crazy. So again, do everything in love. And if doing everything in love means loving myself, loving God, loving my neighbor means the leather pants feel right, I'm gonna wear them.[46]

With eyes opened to the realities of the industry and an awareness of the kinds of voices that tended to be amplified, Rebecca says she allowed herself to start to make music that really reflected what drew her to Christianity, reflecting her belief in a disruptive Jesus; one who loves people on the margins:

> And so, as I started to allow myself and give myself permission, to really be me, and to start not just on the inside being me, but on the outside, the lyrics start to change a bit on that second record. And I cannot believe that KLOVE and all of the other stations, like pushed that song to number X, because it's all very I know, it's very subversive, like I

[45] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

[46] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

> didn't think they would play if it was all about… it talks about the gray space. And it's not a very certain song.[47]

Rebecca told me that the reason she thinks the song worked on stations like KLOVE was because it had the word God in the title. She said "… we've seen the power of that number of God, or Jesus in the lyric, especially in the title just gives that listener a comfort to know, oh, I can listen to this song. So, I think looking back, that's why it worked. Because the lyrics are pretty out there… and those lyrics were not safe and fun for the whole family, like KLOVE tries to make things be now you know." She was able to find more success when songs were clearly branded as Christian with words like "God" or "Jesus" in the title.

As Rebecca tried to follow what felt like integrity to her, she identified a significant tension. She told me:

> I'm living in this house in [names city] because of what Christian music has given us, and what we've given it. And then I'm also sort of, ousted. I've kind of been pushed out for things we have said and lived and spoken about. Because you just can't live – for me, and I don't think any human can be healthy and out of integrity. I think that like the way of integrity, us being who we really are, inside and out and in our art, is crucial to making art and to staying artistic and creative. It was like I was starting to live two lives where I knew how to be the professional Christian I needed to be to succeed. And I still do, and I could have just kept doing that. But I started to like not actually be able to anymore.

Rebecca has desired to move towards integrity throughout her career and feels frustrated at the lack of compassion and understanding towards different perspectives in the Christian music industry. She has found that she can't speak out about important issues like racism and acceptance without losing social media followers or having concerts cancelled. She has needed to be quiet about certain aspects of her faith to fit in with the industry, pressured to conform to the status quo of beliefs. She told me:

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[47] Author interview with Rebecca (pseudonym), January 30, 2024.

> So long story short, I love the Christian music industry because I understand the business of it and that if you want a career, you've kind of got to sign up. You got to sign up, you got to like join the club. You got to drink the Kool Aid and you got to kind of get on board. But when who you are outgrows the space you're in and you know fit in that that space anymore, we kind of all have the choice to choose fame and popularity or whatever that looks like, or choose integrity. And for me, I didn't know how to say this at the time, but I guess I slowly started pivoting away from the company lines, you know? So, yeah.

For Rebecca, a career in the industry has come with the pain of not conforming to the standards that others have set but has been paired with her own sense of calling and desire to live her career in a way that feels authentic.

6.3.3 Nikki's Story of Pregnancy and Personal Resilience

Nikki Leonti grew up in a highly religious family, submersed in Christian culture to what she describes as "unhealthy degrees."[48] As a teenager, Nikki says she was not allowed to go to the mall by herself, was not allowed to listen to secular music, and was heavily supervised in the TV programming she watched. This all changed when Nikki found herself immersed in the Christian music industry as a young teenager in the 1990s, where the rules and restrictions of her upbringing were suddenly gone. By the time she was seventeen years old, Nikki had four top 5 singles and a Billboard charting album. The lifestyle she lived as a teen Christian music star was radically different than what she grew up with. She told me:

> Well, you go from, you know, being monitored for everything for your television programming, no secular music. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere with non-Christians. I couldn't go to the mall by myself. And now here I am going to like Miami by myself to do a show. Like it's so wild. And then I get back home, and my parents are like 'What do you think you're doing, you're not going...' I'm like I was just taking a taxi over to a drug park. I didn't know it was a drug park. But I'm in the middle of Miami at 3am, taking my friend to Disney World, because we felt like it and I've got cash coming out of my pockets left and right because I've got merch money. I'm making thousands of dollars a

[48] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

> night as a 15-year-old and I'm coming home to like these crazy rules. Like it just didn't make sense to me.[49]

An accidental trip to a sketchy part of town wasn't the only time when Nikki's Christian music experience exposed her to circumstances that were both radically different from what she grew up with, but also deeply unsettling. Her first time being offered drugs and alcohol was from other Christians on tour, when she was peer pressured by colleagues in the industry. She told me about what it was like to be on the road as a teenager in the late 1990s:

> I mean being a woman, well, for me, it was like being a girl, was hard. Being a teenage girl was very hard. I had spoken an interview where I shared like, I went on this big tour with like six different big Christian artists. And one of the first things one of the married males, men said to me was 'eye candy now,' you know, 'we have eye candy on the road.' I think, you know, I was definitely under sixteen at that point and being called eye candy.[50]

As a young teen – under the age of sixteen – Nikki was being objectified by men in the industry. Those around her were heavily invested in her having the "right" kind of appearance. She told me:

> And not long after that, my body was like developing more into a woman. And I gained too much weight. And so, the label sent out a trainer on the road with me to work out in my hotel rooms. Just some guy who was almost 30, by myself in my hotel room with me, telling me what to eat. And trying to watch what I ate, which I revolted and after shows went and literally got a Big Mac and a twenty pack of chicken nuggets, because it was just me going like you are not going to run my life. And you know, back then the body positivity isn't close to what it is now. But at least I'm proud of my old self, at least was like you're not going to do this, but it eventually caused eating issues for me.[51]

The emphasis on being young – and looking young – continued to follow Nikki's career, even as her body changed through puberty. She said:

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[49] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

[50] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

[51] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

> I had my clothes like, picked out for me and things like that. So, there was more image emphasis, for sure. I mean, they had me in media training, I had a person directing me on how to walk across the stage and where to stand and do all that kind of stuff. Like I was submerged in different teachings from different people to present a certain way. You know. My biggest thing, I mean, was just like, their emphasis on me looking like my album cover. Because when I started not looking like my album cover, even people when I got churches were disappointed. I remember them being like, you don't look like you did then. And I was like, well, that's before like, puberty really hit. You know, before, like, I got hips and became like a woman. And before this industry tore me up. You know, it's like, so disappointed. It was just, yeah, so much emphasis on that.[52]

Nikki's looks became vital for her career, and it was important both to her label and her audiences that she present in the "right" way.

Like other women artists at the time, the fact that Nikki was a young woman in the industry meant that she was expected to carry the banner of abstinence as part of movements like True Love Waits. In a video interview posted on YouTube, Nikki expanded on what that role looked like for her:

> Yeah, I mean I was a touring singer, doing these big arena tours. I think at this time I was doing like their winter jam thing, where, you know, 25,000 Christians come together. And, you know, I was a spokesperson for abstinence, I had done like the cover of these magazines, and telling people – which was true at the time – that I will not even give out a kiss, you know, other than my wedding day.[53]

When I spoke to her, she expanded on the way the burden of the purity movement fell to young women over young men:

> And there was more emphasis on our, our sexuality and how, you know, our intimate partners and things like that, like, I didn't see guys getting drilled about their purity, like girls were. Especially us young girls. Like we had to like fully if you're, you know, subscribing to this, if you're a person that is in Christian music then, then you're hand in hand with like, True Love Waits, or purity culture and things like that. So, you knew,

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[52] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

[53] Nikki Leonti and Patrick Custer, "Nikki Leonti Tells Her Story & Sings Like An Angel | Rooted Recovery Stories Podcast Ep. 108," uploaded on May 24, 2023, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWrx5WvVPbM.

> like, you just had to smile and be like, you know. And then it was easy for me. I was like, I'll never kiss someone till I'm married. As you know, I believed that. And I did the whole thing. But you just knew, like, my life is open. They can ask me about kissing and sex and anything in a way that presents as godly, but it's just this curiosity and things that aren't anyone's business.[54]

While she was expected to answer questions about sexuality, Nikki didn't have other young male counterparts who were similarly expected to engage with the purity movement:

> I mean, there wasn't many 17-year-old guys that had successful records, either. It was like women or grown men. Young women, grown men was the thing. I remember thinking Aaron Benword from the group Aaron Jeffrey, I was on the road with him, I remember thinking he was young. And he was like, 27? 25 to 28, you know, something like that. And I think that's about the youngest male that was around. There was never, I mean, name one like 16-year-old guy who had a breakout Christian record. I don't know if there's ever been one.[55]

For Nikki, being in the industry meant necessarily being the spokesperson for purity culture in a way that only teenage girls were required to do.

Nikki describes the way that her model of love both growing up and as formed through her time in the industry did not set her up for romantic success. In the YouTube interview, she explained what it was like to meet the man who would eventually become her husband while she was steeped in the purity culture narrative:

> You know, I had these big visions for myself but yet had never experienced relationship and love from someone, so I didn't come from a very informed place as far as what I would feel and what was happening. And so, you know, the very first person to basically show me like real affection, whether or not he was a healthy person or not, became something that I ran into pretty quick. And you know, it came from a childhood of trauma, a childhood of abuse…. Not having connected parents, not having parents who talked to me, who asked me questions, who hugged me, who did those types of things. So I meet this guy, who has a lot of serious issues… I met him during Gospel Music

[54] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

[55] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

> Association week, downtown. And he was in a Christian band as a guitarist, and he, you know, he had dark hair…[56]

Her new partner had high needs, but Nikki had money so felt that she could help. Within twelve weeks, however, Nikki found out that she was pregnant. A week after finding out, at eighteen years old, Nikki got married to her new partner and the biological father of her child. Nikki says they decided to get married as part of her effort to try to make the pregnancy "right" in the eyes of God and others.[57] Despite the marriage, she says she quickly knew that her career would be over. She told me:

> I knew when I found out I was pregnant, that by having the baby it would be over. Like you just know that. I knew that my career as I knew it wouldn't be the same again. And it wasn't, like it was it was the beginning of the end for me. And it wasn't the label that rejected me. My label still wanted to give it another shot, because the investment was there, you know. So, the problem was once we had released the next record, there weren't enough stations that were willing to play it and stores that were willing to sell it that there was just nothing I could really do. They just all closed their doors. I mean, Lifeway, I remember getting the call that Lifeway Christian booksellers took it off the shelves and I had people that were like, there's like your CDs in a dumpster at our store. And several stores, I mean, most followed suit that they kind of banned me and stuff.[58]

When her records were pulled from the shelves, Nikki was left with almost no social or financial support.

> I wasn't even like involved in a church anymore. Once I started traveling, how do you do that? You know, I wasn't even connected to a church, a community of people of any kind. So, I really didn't have a support system, I wasn't able to get one. I was too busy, you know, fulfilling all the obligations they had for me. So, what do you do, you know, just gotta be on your own and survive on your own. And that became evident that I had no real community when I was pregnant, because there was no resources available to me after that. I was like, what did I just spent all these years building? Like, I'm essentially

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[56] Leonti and Custer, "Nikki Leonti Tells Her Story & Sings Like An Angel", Ends around 17:32. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWrx5WvVPbM

[57] Leonti and Custer, "Nikki Leonti Tells Her Story & Sings Like An Angel", Ends around 18:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWrx5WvVPbM. Ends around 18:33.

[58] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

> alone, and I sang for so many youth events that help raise money for teens in trouble and all these things. And I couldn't, like thousands and thousands and thousands of people. And I didn't have a single resource offered to me as a teen mom, because it's different when you're in the industry and that happens, you're looked at as different. You know. And so, when that happens, they're like, I don't know what to do with you.[59]

Nikki had broken the True Love Waits pledge that gripped her fans, and the options available to her were almost none. Without fans and audiences, her potential in the industry diminished to almost zero.

Having reached rock bottom in the industry, Nikki began to receive offers from older men in high up positions of power who offered to help her back into the industry if she would have sex with them. She says:

> I remember being offered a way out of my situation from a couple of men who were in the more powerful parts of the industry that had influence and it's like, well, if you want to really get out of you know, this hole you're in… So, I was offered a couple of options, they're, like, 'Why are you out there doing,' you know, I was doing cheap demo work after that, where they pay me $100, you know, to sing a song that someone wrote to pitch to someone that they'd never hear my voice. And they'd be like, 'Why are you doing that? You're too smart for that. There's other ways we can work on this for you.' You know, like, wild… I would laugh it off. And I just wouldn't engage or I just wouldn't talk again. Like, I didn't stand up for myself, verbally or anything. I just would 'hahaha bye,' you know, just keep it moving. Because you don't want to ruin that relationship, either. Because they have power and things like that.[60]

Nikki rejected these offers, but the fact that they existed at all paints an egregious picture of the state of the Christian music industry at the time. As a young woman, Nikki was held to a standard that none of her older, male counterparts were expected to match.

Despite major roadblocks, Nikki has gone on to have an incredibly successful career in the music industry. She sang as a backup singer for Carrie Underwood, and recorded vocals for

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[59] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

[60] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

the show Glee for several seasons. Today, she is enjoying being part of a church that accepts her for who she is. She said to me:

> I'm on staff at a church. But it's a dope church. And I can be who I am and not worry about getting fired. I can be who I am and who I am as a person with questions about things. Who I am as someone who really authentically thinks that if you follow the life of Jesus, it's gonna look really radical, because it is. It's going to look so radical to people who are religious, to have that kind of grace and that kind of mercy for people. It's like, it's more than a religious human being can grasp. And so, I just, I just keep trying to authentically be myself, so I'm authentically accepted in the spaces where I can be accepted and I can belong.[61]

Nikki is still sharing her love of music as a follower of Jesus, but it is on her own terms and only in communities that know her story and empower her to be her authentic self.

For Nikki, all the rules of Christian accountability were projected onto her career, manifest in the way she needed to advocate for True Love Waits and then seen even more visibly in the way she was "cancelled" after she became pregnant. By contrast, none of the men she was surrounded by were expected to conform. They behaved in reprehensible ways – calling her eye candy, offering her success in exchange for sex – and yet were not reprimanded. Nikki's story captures the double standard to which women in the industry are expected to conform.

6.4 LGBTQ+ Rights, Inclusion, and Jennifer's Story of Rejection

Evangelical Christians' "obsession with sex" extends further than policing of women's bodies and expectations around saving sex for marriage. It follows that with such specific guidelines around what constitutes a Christian relationship that LGBTQ+ relationships would not meet the Evangelical expectations. This section provides context on the history of Evangelicals

[61] Author interview with Nikki Leonti, March 14, 2024.

perspectives on LGBTQ+ relationships and illuminates how this impacts women's experiences in the industry through the telling of Jennifer's story.

6.4.1 Evangelicals and LGBTQ+ Rights

Evangelicals have been debating their positions on homosexuality since the 1970s, and as is evident today, anti-gay sentiment won overall.[62] For many Evangelicals, a biblical defense is central to their argument against same sex relationships. They understand the Bible to be infallible and literal, and thus conclude that there is only one interpretation of scripture verses that condemn homosexuality.[63] Popular verses used to reinforce the stance that marriage is to be between one man and one woman include ones like Leviticus 18:22, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination." Of course, the irony is that many other laws and guidelines from books like Leviticus are ignored by Evangelicals, such as Leviticus 10:6 which instructs that hair is never to be unkempt. In addition to biblical defenses, though, social concerns are also a primary driver of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. In their article on the Evangelical defense of anti-LGBTQ+ religious freedom, McDowell and Ward found that their Evangelical interviewees in Mississippi seldom referenced Bible verses when advocating for anti-LGBTQ+ structures, and rather "told stories about how they and other Christians are oppressed—or could be in the future—and therefore should be awarded special rights that dictate how LGBTQ+ individuals interact with them."[64] Ultimately, they found that churchgoers defended a Christian

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[62] Isaac Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians—and the Movement That Pushed Them Out* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2023), 210.

[63] Baker A. Rogers, *Conditionally Accepted: Christians' Perspectives on Sexuality and Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 48.

[64] Amy McDowell and Pace T. Ward, "'The Tables Are Turning': The Evangelical Defense of Anti-LGBTQ+ Religious Liberty," *Sociology of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2023): 407.

nationalist perspective, privileging conservative Christian beliefs in a state where that is already the norm.[65]

Simply rejecting LGBTQ+ churchgoers has, in many cases, not been accepted as the most Christ-like response. Evangelicals have been caught between the need to engage LGBTQ+ churchgoers and the desire to defend their anti-LGBTQ+ stance. By the end of the 20th century, support of "ex-gay ministries" became an option that allowed churches to hold a line while also engaging LGBTQ+ people. Isaac Sharp describes this phenomenon:

> In an effort to still be loving while condoning homosexuality, Evangelicals were drawn to supporting ex-gay ministries, which offered a way to provide a solution to 'the problem' and show compassion while still condoning homosexuality… Of course, we know that ex-gay ministries, also known as conversion therapy, do not work. Even when 'ex-gay' people admitted that they continued to experience same-sex desire, the ministries were adamant of their success, providing the answer that Evangelical Christians were looking for.[66]

Even without adequate evidence, ex-gay ministries were the most comfortable solution for Evangelicals for many years.

By the 2010s, when national and government bodies like the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization were publicly and aggressively condoning conversion therapy, many Evangelical churches stopped their overt promotion of conversion therapy. Unfortunately, though, other churches continue to promote "ex-gay" ministries, like Bethel church in California, a prominent megachurch that produces CCLI chart topping contemporary worship music and which continues to uphold strict guidelines around sexuality for their leaders. Bethel supports the CHANGED Movement, a "community of friends who once

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[65] McDowell and Ward, "'The Tables Are Turning',"421.

[66] Isaac Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians—and the Movement That Pushed Them Out* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2023), 231–233.

identified as LGBTQ+. Today, we celebrate the love of Jesus and His freedom in our lives."[67] Support for this kind of ministry is common in the Christian music world. These megachurches, with the support of Christian radio, "continue to gatekeep CCM," [68] keenly excluding those who do not match the image of a heterosexual artist.

Sharp observes that even though the ex-gay movement ultimately failed, Evangelicals interpretation of the Bible's "obvious" condemnation of same sex relationships meant that they felt LGBTQ+ rights should still be opposed by Christians.[69] Across North America, most Evangelical churches still subscribe to this belief, and many enforce lifestyle policies which dictate moral guidelines for how congregants and staff should live their lives. Unfortunately, these guidelines are often not clear and can be unspoken or merely implied. Nathaniel Totten was a keyboardist and music director at Elevation Church, one of the main megachurches that produces CWM. During his time there, he affirmed for himself that he was gay. He writes: "I was the closeted gay kid on stage every weekend, watching seats fill up with strangers, some of whom I had no doubt were like me."[70] Totten began to make sense of the church's stance on LGBTQ+ participation and leadership, even though it was unspoken. He had "never once heard LGBTQ+ people or sexual ethics addressed anywhere in the church."[71] When he eventually told his worship leader that he was gay and had a boyfriend, it opened the door for further conversation, which eventually had detrimental impacts. He writes:

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[67] "CHANGED Movement," accessed June 3, 2024, https://changedmovement.com/.

[68] Hannah Steinkopf-Frank, "Queer Christian Artists Keep The Faith: How LGBTQ+ Musicians Are Redefining Praise Music," *Grammy.Com*, June 8, 2022, https://www.grammy.com/news/pride-month-2024-playlist-rising-lgbtqia-artists-musicians-singers.

[69] Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals,* 251.

[70] Nathaniel Totten, "Church Clarity Stories: Elevation Church (Nathanial Totten) | Church Clarity," *Church Clarity* (blog), January 1, 2018, https://www.churchclarity.org/updates/church-clarity-100-stories-elevation-church-nathanial-totten.

[71] Totten, "Church Clarity Stories."

> Due to the personal matters of some worship staff, Elevation's senior administration had decided it was time to enforce more stringent requirements on worship team members, holding them to higher standards alongside staff. My sexuality was not originally that which would preclude my involvement, but due to the general increase in expectations, it was a liability. Anyone on stage was to be seen as being in a position of leadership. I would be seen in violation of rules I had never seen nor agreed to. I was asked to step down, effective at the end of the month.[72]

Totten extends a lot of grace towards Elevation but shares that the lack of clear policy around LGBTQ+ people in leadership had detrimental impacts. He concludes: "Without any clarified standard on LGBTQ+ inclusion, people will continue to be hurt, pushed out, and riddled with trauma." For Totten, clarity on their position is essential.

Expectations around LGBTQ+ people in leadership are often unclear in churches – as was the case in Totten's story. In other contexts, institutions have clearly delineated what kind of behaviour would be acceptable. Vicky Beeching – a Christian singer songwriter who came out as gay after more than ten years in the industry – experienced stark expectations around her sexuality. She writes about how her music contract impacted her coming out journey:

> A morals clause allows the contract to be legally terminated if the person engages In behavior that brings disrepute to the employer. What "disrepute" meant in mainstream contracts was open to interpretation, but in the Christian music industry it had faith-based overtones and would be judged by evangelical standards of behavior. I knew that meant being openly gay or in a same-sex relationship would likely result in a one-way ticket out the door and the crashing and burning of my livelihood.[73]

The morals clause is an escape hatch that labels and administrators can pull if an artist begins to reflect their brand poorly. While there may be appropriate places for a morals clause (as grounds

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[72] Totten, "Church Clarity Stories."

[73] Vicky Beeching, *Undivided: Coming Out, Becoming Whole, and Living Free from Shame* (HarperOne, 2019), 111.

to terminate a contract with an artist who perpetuates abuse, for example), in the Christian music industry, it has primarily meant that queer artists are unable to come out and continue their work.

Beyond the practical considerations of leaving the Christian music industry, interpersonal connections and a sense of community can also contribute to the decision to stay in an exclusive environment. As E. Patrick Johnson suggests, "Unfortunately, many queer church members choose to endure this bigotry because their church family is like their first family—in other words, it was their community before they came to an understanding of their sexuality. Thus, leaving the church once one comes to terms with his or her sexuality is not as easy as it may seem."[74] The Christian community surrounding these artists functions as a family, a job, a community, and a church, which further complicates the decision to leave. With morals clauses hanging over the heads of queer musicians, it becomes nearly impossible to come out as gay while operating under contracts in the mainstream industry.

6.4.2 Jennifer's Story of Industry Exile

With just a few semesters left in her psychology degree, a 22-year-old Jennifer Knapp found herself signed to a Christian label, Gotee Records.[75] The career boost came at the end of a period of searching for artist stability as a relatively new convert to Christianity, at the end of a few difficult years in college. Jennifer wrote in her memoir:

> There were only a few guitar-wielding chicks that I had ever heard of in CCM anyway, and I didn't look or sound anything like them. I was used to playing in grungy little Christian coffeehouses for college students. When I heard artists like Amy Grant, Twila Paris, and Sandi Patty, I thought there was no way that CCM would consider me. They

[74] E. Patrick Johnson, "The Gospel According to the Gays: Queering the Roots of Gospel Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, Oxford Handbooks Series, (Oxford University Press, 2022), 89.

[75] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 118.

> seemed so clean cut. Me? I was a woman who grew up in the world. I had a dark past littered with sex and booze. I had a hard time imagining, despite my story of redemption, that I had been a Christian long enough to be considered trustworthy enough to be on a Christian label.[76]

Jennifer quickly found success in the CCM world, but was required to go through a makeover – new hair products and spa treatments – to fit in. She writes: "My body, my faith, and my music had always been mine to decide. Now, I was only at the beginning stages of learning what it would be like to have to share elements of my private domain with others."[77]

As she continued to tour as an artist, finding increasing success, Jennifer became frustrated by her manager's expectation that she stay with a host family, rather than in a hotel. She needed time alone to recharge, and it was difficult to do this without her own space. Her request to stay in a hotel was not well received, however. She describes her manager's explanation:

> Part of what came with my role as a leader in the church, he explained, was to be open to accountability. The idea being that, in avoiding the appearance of evil out on the road, I was to always be surrounded by witnesses to testify on my behalf that I was indeed on my best behaviour. Going to a hotel was not only ignoring the gracious hospitality offered by my hosts, but also meant that I wasn't observed or protected.[78]

Jennifer quickly became aware of how optics and image played into her life as a Christian artist. This was not only an informal expectation but was actually bound into her contract. She writes:

> There was a time, and perhaps it still exists, when a new artist would have to be observed by the label for a year or so before they were allowed to sign a contract. It needs to be evident that the artist is the proper kind of Christian in order to proceed… Some artists have been required to sign legal documents that attest that they will abstain from sex if unmarried, avoid drunkenness, and, occasionally, declare that they are not gay. The

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[76] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 112.

[77] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 123.

[78] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 134.

> principal obligations for every artist, writer, preacher, or leader of any kind are to be the embodiment of the Christian lifestyle…[79]

Jennifer continued in the Christian music industry, aware of the expectations on her lifestyle, even though she disagreed with them. At one concert, a young woman approached her to say "I have to thank you. Your music has saved me from a life of homosexuality."[80] Jennifer felt alarmed and confused, thinking "What on earth gave you the idea that *I* thought being gay was wrong?"[81] She kept her personal thoughts on the issue to herself.

As Jennifer continued to reflect on that incident, she also wondered about her own experiences of sexuality. She writes:

> I knew better than to speak of it, but there were a couple of times when I had felt drawn to kiss a girl friend or two myself. When I bothered to think of it, my own sexual experiences with men weren't really all that appealing. As it was turning out, celibacy was a great safety net for my private, internal questioning. *Maybe,* I wondered, *human sexuality is a little more diverse than just being attracted to the opposite sex?*[82]

Despite being in an environment where this line of self-reflection was frowned upon, Jennifer continued to reflect on her sexuality.

Jennifer's career continued to unfold with a series of highlights: in 1999 she was invited to spend a week on tour with Sarah McLachlan's Lilith Fair. She viewed this as an incredible opportunity for crossover into the mainstream industry environment, though she was critiqued for accepting the invitation.[83] She and a colleague established a jointly owned artist management agency called Alabaster Arts, with the goal of managing and supporting Christian artists both

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[79] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 136-137.

[80] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 139.

[81] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 139.

[82] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 141. Italics in original.

[83] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 144.

inside and outside of the church. They signed a young Christian artist from California, Katy Hudson, an artist who we know now as the global pop icon Katy Perry.[84]

As time went on, rumours began to circulate that Jennifer was gay. She had a blossoming friendship with her road manager, Karen, and the rumours seemed possible to those on the outside. Jennifer was burnt out at the time, and Karen was one of her primary supports. She felt the need for something to give and waited out her personal feelings by focusing on wrapping up her career. She writes:

> For the last year of my CCM career, I attempted to put a gag on my personal sufferings, and go about my business as if nothing were wrong. Whoever Karen and I were going to be, or not be, had to wait. Whether I was going to be a Christian any more, only God knew. I couldn't even see my way to keep music as a meaningful experience in my life. I was walking through a wasteland of loss and despair.[85]

In September 2002, Jennifer finished a show, closed her guitar case, and vowed to never play again. She was depressed and cut off from the world she knew, her relationship with Karen the only bright spot in a difficult time. She felt that if she was gay, God would not want her to sing. She and Karen began to explore what a relationship together would look like, though the idea filled Jennifer with fear: "Every admonishing, antigay, Christian conversation replayed itself in my head, telling me that there was something wrong with me."[86] She continued to work through her feelings, and she and Karen entered a romantic relationship, living and working together.

After a seven-year hiatus from music, including time away in Australia, Jennifer began to wonder about making music again. Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl" was popular, and Jennifer

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[84] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 157.

[85] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 191.

[86] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 193.

could see a place for her music. She recorded some new songs and returned to Nashville to interested and excited fans. She writes:

> People were excited about my return, but at the same time, spoke with a familiar nervousness, alluding to, but never fully daring enough to ask me the million-dollar question: *Are you gay?* In front of my face, everyone smiled, but when I turned, speculative whispers tickled the back of my neck like a zephyr.[87]

In March 2010, Jennifer did interviews with various news outlets who together would share that she was gay.[88] And when the news was finally published, she received welcome praise from allies, and harsh criticism from conservative Christians. She writes:

> The inevitable crush of those concerned with supposed Christian rightness had to be made known. Christian radio stations made it a point to remove my songs from their playlists. Christian bookstore chains deleted me from their search engines. Religious leaders wrote editorial blogs, gave sermons, and encouraged faithful Christians to keep tight to the teaching that homosexuality is a sin.[89]

Jennifer found people in her corner who would support her and has built back a fan base of LGBTQ+ affirming Christians who promote her and her music. She began singing again, bolstered by a new community. In May 2010, her album *Letting Go* debuted at #73 on the Billboard 200 Albums chart, the first time any of her records charted so highly.[90] She concludes: "By coming back to music and coming out, I've had the chance to be part of a movement to end religion-endorsed discrimination, marginalization, and judgement against LGBT people and their allies."[91]

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[87] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 247. Italics in original.

[88] Jennifer's story is similar to that of Chely Wright, a country musician who came out as lesbian around the same time. She documents the story in her memoir: Chely Wright, *Like Me: Confessions of a Heartland Country Singer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011).

[89] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 262.

[90] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 287.

[91] Knapp, *Facing the Music,* 287.

Jennifer's story is a testimony of resilience in the face of rejection, but it is also a devastating indicator of the reality for queer artists in the Christian music industry. The exclusion of LGBTQ+ people and their relationships is deeply embedded in Evangelical culture, and the Christian music industry has followed suit by adopting a hostile stance towards queer artists and their ministries. Unfortunately, until the listeners of Christian music are encouraged to be affirming by their church communities, it is unlikely that there will be a place for LGBTQ+ artists in the industry. Jennifer Knapp's story shares some similarities with other queer, Christian artists, like Flamy Grant and Grace Baldridge (known professionally as Semler), two out, queer artists.[92] Flamy and Semler have not been part of the mainstream industry as artists but have charted an alternate and affirming path for themselves that runs alongside the industry. Their ministries as Christian musicians are effective outside of the established industry but deserve to be recognized by the larger system. While their stories highlight alternative pathways for creative work within the popular music industry, their experiences also reveal that even 15 years after Jennifer came out and was rejected by the industry, there has not been meaningful change for queer artists in the industry. The mainstream Christian music industry continues not just to reject, but also to harm the LGBTQ+ artists (and their fans) who are striving to make meaningful contributions to the industry.

6.5 Monitoring Women Across the Industry

Nikki, Rebecca, and Jennifer aren't the only artists who have had experiences of being rejected by the industry, both past and present. When I spoke to other women in the industry, they shared about the ways they have been similarly monitored and potentially even rejected for things they

[92] While the stories of Flamy Grant and Semler are not shared in this project, I presented this work at the American Musicological Society in 2023 and am working on a forthcoming journal article on their experiences.

say, beliefs they hold, clothing they wear, or ways they sound. While Nikki and Jennifer's stories reveals nuances of how the industry existed in decades past, Rebecca's story is more recent, illuminating the ways that exclusion still runs rampant in the industry. What follows are reflections from these artists peers, who share similar experiences to them. Two themes are explored: modesty and clothing, and the power of women's voices.

6.5.1 Modesty and Clothing

Women like Rebecca face a conundrum in the industry: they must dress in ways that are trendy and cool to cement their celebrity status, and they also must be modest and remain positive role models for younger girls with regards to their fashion. It is a difficult balance for an artist like Rebecca who wanted to wear leather pants to express her artistic persona but then received negative feedback because she was perceived as too immodest. Evangelical blogger Rachel Held Evans captured this well in a blog post on modesty. She wrote:

> While popular culture tends to disempower women by telling them they must dress to get men to look at them, the modesty culture tends to disempower women by telling them they must dress to keep men from looking at them . . . Often, these two cultures combine to send out a pulse of confusing messages: 'Look cute . . . but not too cute! Be modest ... but not frumpy! Make yourself attractive… but not too attractive!'[93]

The layer of microcelebrity means that my interviewees – including industry executives and those who operate more behind the scenes – feel the pressure to be put together and look well prepared, while also conforming to Evangelical standards around modesty.

Within the industry, there is a double standard for women to look presentable as compared with their male counterparts. This is not unique to the Christian industry, and in many

[93] Rachel Held Evans, "Modesty: I Don't Think It Means What You Think It Means," *Qideas* (blog), June 25, 2013, . http://qideas.org/articles/modesty-i-dont-think-it-meanswhat-you-think-it-means/. As cited in Michael, "Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve," 1139.

facets of music industry women are expected to work harder at their appearance with elaborate makeup and clothing, while men are able to show up in "as is" more easily. A famous picture of Beyoncé and Ed Sheeran singing together on stage at the Global Citizens Festival in South Africa in 2018 encapsulates this: Beyoncé is wearing a large and elaborate hot pink ball gown with poofy sleeves and layered ruffles, complete with beautifully done hair, makeup, and accessories, while Ed Sheeran wears running shoes, jeans, and a T Shirt. She clearly spent time, money, and labour on her public appearance, while Ed could have rolled out of bed and shown up. Beth (pseudonym) – an industry executive – reflected on this dynamic:

> I think, like some of the country artists, the man I'm like, 'Who are you? How did you become rich and famous?' And then the women have to be perfect, and you know. So, I think that's just an overall expectation that we all have as women of like. Do I ever show up to work with no make-up on? No! Like, no way. I wouldn't do that because there is an expectation that I look a certain way right? That men don't have, that they just get to show how. But I actually like putting on make-up, thankfully, and I like wearing fun clothes, so I don't hate it. But it is just something that's become expected of us right. Like no female artists could probably come into our office and play songs for us with no makeup on, and it would be like, 'oh, well, is she gonna…' I don't know![94]

For Beth, the expectation for women to look put-together isn't felt as a burden, though she recognizes it as a double standard that men are not expected to conform to.

For many of my interviewees, guidelines around modesty are not viewed as a restriction but are in fact a welcome accountability check. They are situated in communities where conversations around modesty are common, and some view it as part of their vocation to support this messaging. Laura Story, the songwriter and worship leader we met in the last chapter, described the way that an emphasis on modesty impacts her parenting:

> We always talk to our girls about, 'We'd love for you to dress stylish. Don't wear clothes that are too tight. I know the world may say that that's the style, but we're not going to,

[94] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

> you know, ultimately, we know that you don't want to do anything that's going to detract from the glory of God, but also where you wouldn't be taken seriously.' But I would say the same things to guys. All the things I'm thinking of, I would say the very same thing to guys, it just may look a little bit different. Also, for women, making sure you know, everything from what they say, between the songs, making sure that it's not – when you when you're up on stage praying, you're praying a collective prayer on behalf of the people that you're leading, okay? So, I would say, to both the men and the women make sure you're representing both genders.[95]

For Laura, modesty shouldn't be an issue that only impacts women. Instead, ideally, it helps guide men as well. Unfortunately, this is not always lived out in practice. For Sarah Kroger, a songwriter and worship leader, the guidelines feel like a double standard that is enforced more for women. She is frustrated by the expectation for her to dress differently than men. She said to me:

> I've had like more mentors, you know, who show me the ropes of leading worship and what that looks like, and I've definitely had, you know, the random comments from people who are like, 'Oh, be careful what you wear on stage. You don't want to lead people into sin.' Like, absolutely, yes. Okay. Absolutely. Absolutely. I understand what people are trying to say. But you would not say that to a man. Okay? You would not say that to a man. And so, it absolutely infuriates me that someone would think to say that to me when it's like, okay, just back off.[96]

Sarah's experience is that as a woman in the industry, the guidelines are enforced for her in a unique way, and her male counterparts are not subject to the same scrutiny. The pressure of needing to be both fashionable and appealing as a celebrity while also being modestly dressed is an added layer for women in the industry.

For Leslie Jordan – a songwriter and worship leader – a lot of the power to critique came from the lead pastor of the churches she worked in. A male pastor was given ultimate authority

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[95] Author interview with Laura Story, August 28, 2023.

[96] Author interview with Sarah Kroger, January 11, 2024.

and so would be the one to offer input on who should and should not be allowed to do certain roles, in many cases because of the way women dressed or led. She said:

> Maybe I was put under the microscope, but I think because I was in that leadership position I would sit in meetings with our lead pastor, and he would say things like, 'Hey, next week, we need to make sure so and so doesn't wear those leather pants because it's too much of a distraction.' At one point I was told this person can't lead because they're too overweight. I was told this person can't choose the songs because we can't trust that they're going to make good song choice decisions. I mean, like this is micromanaging, like authoritative, you know, and I don't know if that's just because it was women I think there were probably criticisms of the guys leading too, but I just remember thinking like as long as we're propping up one person, there, I don't think there really is gonna, like, I don't know. I don't know that we'll be able to change.[97]

From Leslie's perspective, so long as the senior male pastor continued to have the say around who could do what roles in worship based on indicators like their choice of pants or their weight, it would be hard to make meaningful change in the industry.

6.5.2 The Power of Women's Voices

Rebecca is not the only woman who has received specific and overt feedback on her voice, and how to use her voice. Many of my interviewees noticed specific fear around how women should use their voices with an observation that women's voices were perceived as threatening by those in the industry. For Beth, she clearly understands the ways that women's voices have been flagged as a threat. She said:

> And again, this is just all speculation but I just think, like men, are used to being guided spiritually by men, and they are not used to being guided spiritually by women, so I think it feels more compelling to them, or more comfortable to them when it's coming from a male voice, because the pastor that speaks to them on Sunday is a male voice.[98]

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[97] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

[98] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

She continued, talking about the common trope of "Becky," who radio stations imagine as the most common listener: somewhere in her late 30s or early 40s, perhaps divorced or maybe volunteering at the local foodbank.[99] In his writing on this, Nathan Myrick describes the narrative around Becky as "almost mythical," yet it has defined Christian music's target audience.[100] Beth continued to share about Becky's influence:

> And even Becky, who, Becky is probably stereotypically the traditional Christian woman who stays at home who raises her kids. And she is probably more comfortable hearing spiritual messages from men, because of the place that she's been taught to be in church. So, I think that's where a lot of that has come from. And I don't I don't get any sense that the industry as a whole is saying only this many female voices on the radio at the same time. I think it just all boils down to like, how far can you push a consumer that is, maybe in a certain, I don't know, demographic…[101]

For Beth, the reality that an average listener may be uncomfortable hearing spiritual messages from women contributes to the concern about amplifying women's voices. From her vantage point as an industry executive, she sees the way that concerns about pushing the audience too far are playing out.

Ginny Owens, a songwriter and worship leader, spoke to the way that this emphasis on male voices on the radio extends to congregational worship, with many songs set in ways that are difficult to women to sing. She said to me:

> And so, I think what happens is, even though there are more female songwriters now, the vast majority are still male. The most popular songs in worship and on radio are written by males because radio says, based on their surveys, females want to hear male voices. And it's not surprising. I think we've trained women, perhaps especially in the church, to prefer male voices, and to be ok with adjusting to their keys and vocal ranges, no matter how difficult they are to sing along to. I mean, I am a worship leader, and I find it just so

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[99] Nathan Myrick, "Todd and Becky: Authenticity, Dissent, and Gender in Christian Punk and Metal," *Christian Punk: Identity and Performance*, 2020, 129.

[100] Myrick, "Todd and Becky,"130.

[101] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

> daunting that there are so many songs, and there have been for years, that are suitable for a certain, specific male range, but not for women's voices.[102]

Since there is significant overlap between songs written for radio and songs sung in church, an emphasis on songs that men can sing has a direct impact on women's experience of worship.

Abby, the songwriter and worship leader we met in Chapter 4, described talking to her friend who works for the radio station KLOVE, and feeling discouraged by the way women's voices were talked about in that context. She said:

> And like I think about this all the time, my friend is the is a host for KLOVE, like a radio station for KLOVE. And she said behind the scenes that they do not encourage playing two female songs in a row, because their studies have shown that audiences turn it off if it's two women in a row.[103] So, I also think, too, that I have empathy because I think that we've actually been trained to like resent women's voices. And I do have empathy for that too where I'm like, okay, yeah, like if, if you like resent women, and you resent women's voices, and you've been taught to fear women, then why would we record that?[104]

Abby can extend some grace to those who made the decisions not to amplify women's voices because she recognizes that it's part of a much larger, structural fear around women and authority. Like in many other cases, my interviewees were able to be gracious and forgiving towards those who have harmed them and their careers.

For Sarah Kroger, taking a step back from the system and its baggage has allowed her to both appreciate the work that has been done, and recognize how far there is to go. She said:

> I really believe that, that he made us male and female and there's a reason for that and that for a long, long, long time, and even in my church, we only hear from men and so it's been hard to be a female in this space, but I continue to, by the grace of God, try to step forward and bravery and courage and kind of, I don't know, just buck the system and

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[102] Author interview with Ginny Owens, April 6, 2023.

[103] We encountered this widely held guideline in the introduction. For more, see: Marissa R. Moss, *Her Country: How the Women of Country Music Became the Success They Were Never Supposed to Be* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2022), 15.

[104] Author interview with Abby (pseudonym), January 23, 2024.

> kind of stir things up. So, I don't know… There's a lot there. I just think it's really fascinating to kind of like, take a 30,000-foot view of it all and just be like, yeah, there's still a lot of work to be done. There's a lot of work that has happened and a lot of doors that have opened, and I'm grateful for that. But there is a lot of work still to be done. And I'm not necessarily sure what the what the answer is to that, you know.[105]

Sarah both recognizes that work has happened in the industry to open doors for women, and she also views it as her mandate to "buck the system." She feels a tension between these two things, caught between a recognition that there have already been significant strides made and that there is still work to be done. Her perspective allows her to extend some grace to the industry, optimistically acknowledging how far it has already come while calling for further reform.

6.6 Conclusion

Jessica Simpson – as successful as she has been – was ultimately failed by the Christian music industry. Her powerful voice and clear message were silenced because of her physical appearance and her body's development. Christian accountability put a structure in place for fellow Evangelicals to oust her for reasons of accountability and their own protection, harming a young girl instead of facing the shadow side of their own beliefs. Instead of casting a wide net, Christian music became a hostile place, forcing Jessica to build her career in a secular music space.

Jessica is not the only artist to have experienced this. The stories of Nikki and Rebecca reveal upsetting and concerning realities about what it has been like to be a woman in the Christian music industry. Nikki's story highlights the reality that women – especially young women – have not always been well supported, and they have been viewed as dispensable, only

[105] Author interview with Sarah Kroger, January 11, 2024.

valuable to the industry when their lived realities perfectly align with what is expected of them. When she got pregnant, as a young woman whose network was in the industry, Nikki lost the career she had worked so hard to build. She was held to a standard of accountability that her male counterparts were not, even when their behaviour was reprehensible. For Rebecca, her career was reliant on her ability to represent resonant theological beliefs, and her role in the industry has been shaken when she has taken a stand towards inclusion. She experienced firsthand the way that women are asked to change their voice and their clothing to protect men and prevent them from "stumbling." Jennifer watched as the Christian music industry removed her records from shelves when she came out as gay, no longer interested in her message once she stopped being a role model according to their expectations. She witnessed their rejection of her ministry because it didn't comply with Evangelical lifestyle policies.

In the cases of Nikki, Rebecca, and Jennifer, the damage caused to women in the industry – by Christians in the industry – appears to be characteristic damage. They have each received the negative side of a practice that has good intentions. At its best, Christian accountability should hold leaders to account, requiring them to live by the Christian beliefs they promote. Accountability can be a way to ensure that the power of celebrity is not abused. Like many of the practices that Winner describes, the intentions are good. This was illuminated for me during a casual conversation I had with a progressive Christian music publishing executive, when I asked her whether they had ever used morals clauses in their contracts. I expected her to shudder and say that they got rid of those a long time ago. However, she shared with me that they had recently added something resembling a morals clause to their contracts in response to a case of sexual abuse with one of their composers. In this case, the morals clause – that has been used to

silence so many queer artists – was being used as a productive form of accountability to ultimately protect women.

In the Christian music industry, the practice of accountability, that has been intended to hold leaders to be responsible for their actions, has resulted in an ecosystem where artists are silenced or can't say what they truly believe. Women have borne the brunt of this burden through the ways their sexuality is represented in their clothing and the reality that their voices are always under surveillance. This accountability culture has limited LGBTQ+ people from leadership as well as others who want to stand as allies with them. More freedom within the industry will not come until these questions are addressed more broadly in Evangelical culture and theology. Until then, women will continue to find ways to resist and empower themselves in a system that holds them to a higher standard of accountability than their male counterparts.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 Leading Worship at Carnegie Hall, a vignette

It was a warm February evening in New York City as I made my way towards Carnegie Hall, notebook in hand. I was on my way to see Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes perform live with an orchestra and full choir, something unusual for a duo that is more at home with a drum kit and acoustic guitar. I was excited to see how they merged their contemporary Christian music with the classical music systems embedded in one of North America's most prestigious performance venues.

A few minutes after 7 PM the principal violinist walked onstage to applause from the audience. She was followed by the conductor, who bowed. The band came next, including Jessica Stropko on the keyboard. She was the only female band member, and was wearing a long, puffy black dress with intricate textured material. The men in the band were wearing suits. Kari and Cody entered last, to an immediate standing ovation. The room lit up when they arrived. Kari was wearing a huge champagne gown, with tulle on the bottom and a very wide skirt. It looked like a ball gown. The top was high necked with transparent sleeves. Cody was wearing a traditional but well-fitting black tuxedo.

When Kari got to the mic, a woman in the audience yelled out "You look like a princess!" to which Kari responded, "I feel like a princess!" She said that they were excited to experience the presence of God in a beautiful space. The keyboard began playing a soft pad. After Kari spoke, Cody said "Take a deep breath, babe, we made it to Carnegie Hall!" My immediate reaction was that Cody was being condescending to Kari, but she seemed thrilled. Cody then pulled his phone from his jacket pocket and read psalm 150 to begin the evening.

From stages in local congregations, to megachurch arenas, to Carnegie Hall, women like Kari Jobe have overcome obstacles and limitations on their paths to sharing their faith through

music. On stage and off, whether setting the stage for what is to come or finding community after being rejected from the stage, women in the industry show resilience towards the large-scale systems that limit their involvement. And whether or not I encounter the narratives around them as limiting or condescending, they find agency and empowerment in their pursuit of ministry.

7.1.1 Christian Music, Women's Roles, and Structural Agency

Through semi-structured interviews with 22 artists, songwriters, worship leaders, and industry professionals in the Christian music industry, this dissertation has revealed the challenges that women face in the industry. They come up against deeply embedded expectations for them follow the normative life course of a Christian woman and stay home with the children. They operate in a neoliberal capitalist gig system that does not recognize the demands of their marriage and family obligations. They are set up as "threats" based on their gender and sexuality, sidelined because their very existence is thought to pose a risk to the men at the center of the industry. Women are monitored for what they wear, who they are intimate with, which relationships they choose to affirm. They are kicked off the stage when their decisions or life circumstances don't align with what's expected. They exist within structures that most women are unable to fully address, systems that reach far beyond their control.

These systems are not new. Women have historically been monitored and withheld from certain leadership roles even in the early days of the Christian music industry in the 1960s and 1970s. The stories of Karen Lafferty, Debby Kerner Rettino, and Marsha Stevens-Pino offer a broad picture of the state of gender dynamics at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa. Four broad areas of influence were explored, drawing on the stories of these songwriters and worship leaders. First,

they helped establish the guitar as essential in the folk-like and flexible genre and set a precedent that women indeed can be instrumentalists in the industry. Second, women's less authoritative set them up to advance language of intimacy in the music, something that became a recognizable trait of CWM. Third, women were able to be more influential because of the informality of the movement, helping us to understand the ways that formal industry structures may be exclusive of women. Similarly, and finally, women became less involved as the industry was established because of the demands placed upon women to be on the road and recognizable as celebrities.

The story of married couple Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes offered a case study for an examination of how gender differences are performed in liturgical contexts on stage in terms of instruments, gesture, and voice. Through an analysis of their 2020 music video for "The Blessing," it became clear that Cody carried himself with more musical authority while Kari did emotional and spiritual labour through her leadership at the bridge of the song. Cody's strong and authoritative movements manifest biblical manhood, while Kari's more emotional, embodied, and expressive leadership enacts biblical womanhood. The concept of spiritual verses liturgical authority – or oversight verses relational authority – was introduced to explain how these different types of authority manifest in gendered ways. This was extended to the example of Cody Carnes collaborating with Chandler Moore, a Black artist who exerted relational authority while Cody remained in oversight as the white male on top. Other interviews were brought in which further highlight that women themselves perceive this difference in authority on stage, though they vary in their response to it with some finding it to be helpful and others finding it limiting.

Dynamics that dictate women's experiences "off stage" were shared in Chapter 5 as they manifested in the stories of Abby – a singer/songwriter who observed that her male colleagues

had an unfair advantage in the industry, Baily – an emerging producer who found that she was policed for the way she spoke in studios, and Laura – a renowned artist who experienced firsthand the challenge of being a mother while working in the industry. Their stories reveal "behind the scenes" obstacles faced by women in the industry, and their perspectives were corroborated by other interviewees who expressed similar struggles with the work of production, the dynamics of gig labour, the challenge of parenting in the system, and the enforcement of rules like the Billy Graham Rule.

Finally, Evangelical values around marriage and sexuality were explored in Chapter 6 for how they are enforced under a culture of accountability, one that makes it difficult for women to do their work with freedom and authority. We encountered the story of Rebecca, who needed to monitor what she wore and how she sung to avoid sexual overtones. We also met Nikki, who rose to popularity as a young Christian teen, but was rejected from the industry when she got pregnant at nineteen years old. These stories capture the staunch enforcement of Evangelical values around modesty and abstinence. Finally, Jennifer's story of being rejected by the Christian music industry was shared, highlighting the way the industry opposes LGBTQ+ people and their ministries. Each story highlights the way that the practice of Christian accountability has become "deformed" and ultimately limits women.

7.2 Changing Power Systems

Power is organized in the contemporary worship music industry through a matrix of influence. Most foundational are theological beliefs – core values, often based on scripture, which guide Evangelical communities. These beliefs dictate the ways institutions are structured, with institutional systems designed to uphold theological virtues. Ultimately, these systems have impacts on individual experiences within the industry. Women can resist this top-down flow

through their own sense of agency, which allows them to accept or persist against the structures that dictate their experience.

Watson's exploration of how the matrix of domination applies to music industries helpfully draws attention to the ruling systems that impact individual experiences and outputs in the industry. In what follows, she describes the impact of repeated practices such as radio airplay, social media engagement, and charts:

> As these repetitive practices buildup and legitimize white men, they also marginalize, delegitimize, and reject others. More critically, this repetition normalizes oppressive behaviors and ideas about who belongs to an institution, serving to further cement them (white men and the behaviors) within institutional structures.[1]

With repeated structures that have evolved to exclude women and people of colour and to keep white men at the fore, it is difficult for a more equal playing field to emerge without critical examination of the role of these governing systems. Since the structural, disciplinary, and cultural domains of power governing the industry are so deeply embedded in industry practices – and are increasingly solidified through repetition – the space for women to make meaningful change is limited. Forces of exclusion that elevate white men are so foundational to the industry that even when groups like Capitol CMG or Integrity Music prioritize elevating women's voices, meaningful and lasting change is out of reach unless these larger systems are interrogated. This level of change is out of reach for most women – and artists in general – in the industry. Largescale change would require a larger and deeply intentional movement towards inclusion.

[1] Watson, "A Double-Edged Sword: Industry Data and the Construction of Music Industry Narratives," 57.

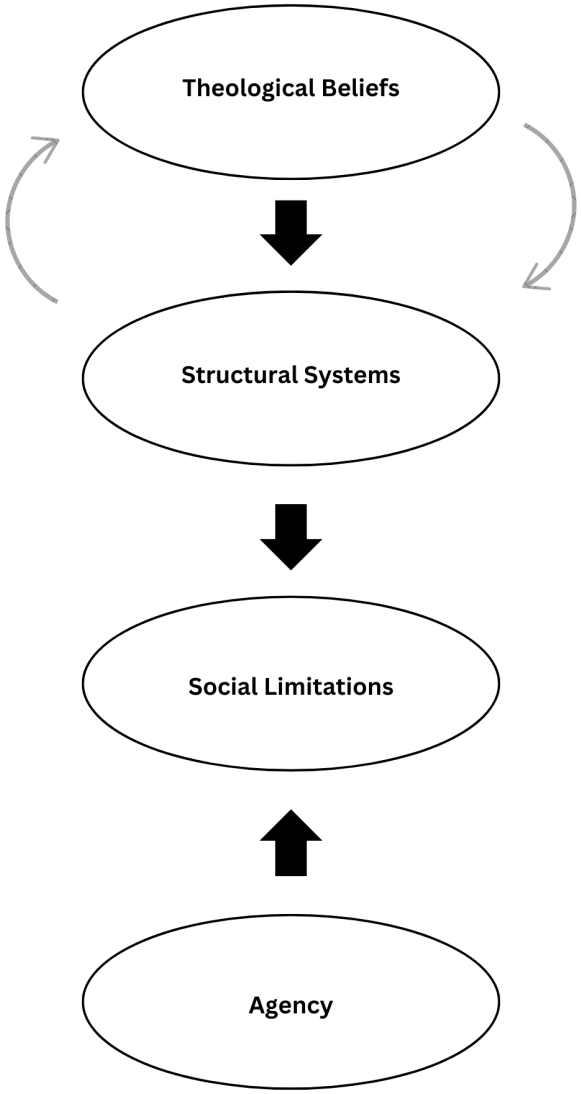

Figure 7.1 Mapping Structural Agency with a Feedback Loop

Working with the stories in this dissertation has also revealed the ways that the structural systems in the industry are not only influenced by theological beliefs but also engage in a feedback loop that dictate which theological beliefs are important. This relationship is marked

with the addition of semi-circular arrows connecting theological beliefs and structural systems in Figure 7.1, which captures the potential for reciprocal influence between these two structuring spheres, each potentially influencing the other in a circular way. Because of the patriarchal values embedded in both the theological and structural systems governing the industry, women's personal experiences are unlikely to influence meaningful structural change, but it is possible that the structural systems in which they participate can influence the higher layer of beliefs. Evangelicals – like every group of Christians – have elevated the importance of scripture verses that resonate with their values. Because of this, it can be hard to know which came first, the structure or the belief. Reflecting on the stories told in this dissertation, this framework allows us to question, for example: was the ordination of women in the early days of the contemporary worship movement was refuted because of a concern for scripture, or was it because those scriptures were amplified to keep men at the helm? Are women expected to be heartfelt and emotional on stage because of an inherent spiritual gifting, or has this invitation been extended to women to protect the distanced masculinity of men in leadership? Did the expectation for women to remain at home with children emerge in response to a biblical precedent, or was it established so that men – like those in the Christian music industry – would continue to have uninterrupted access to power? Did Evangelicals set up systems to monitor women's sexual expression because sexual purity was a theological value, or have they prioritized the theological value of sexual purity because it allows them to restrict women's expression on places like worship stages?

The tensions in these questions reveal a tendency for Evangelicals to hide behind theological beliefs as an explanation for why the system is structured the way it is. Theological beliefs are not objectively valued or immune from external influence, and many of the stories

shared by my interviewees reveal ways the industry manipulates these beliefs, values, and policy to uphold damaging structures. In many cases the answers to any of the previous questions are not black-and-white, and influence is often bidirectional. Acknowledging the two-directional flow of influence allows for more honest reflections on how and why the system is so restrictive and opens the possibility for interrogating whether these theological beliefs are indeed being followed in a critical and faithful way.

Without access to large-scale change at the level of theological beliefs or structural systems, women have found ways to pursue empowerment that are within their reach. They express agency through their decision to continue being involved in the industry, even when the structures are restrictive of them. What follows in this conclusion are examples of how women work to create meaningful change at each of these three levels: through interpersonal mentorship, through changing industry structures to be more representative, and finally by chipping away at prevailing theological beliefs with the goal of increasing women's authority. At any of these levels, this type of change is an expression of hope and solidarity.

7.2.1 Mentorship for Interpersonal Change

Mentorship by women to other women is a generative way for women to help each other thrive in a system that limited their opportunity and mobility, and this offers women a tool for empowerment even when they can't change the structures or theological beliefs that surround their work. Ellen Rowe, a jazz educator, speaks from her own experience in suggesting that women might succeed more in male-dominated musical spaces with the kind of mentorship that

can come from a woman.[2] She finds that they often need "extra mentoring when it comes to marketing themselves, getting gigs and learning to display their skills with confidence."[3] For women in the Christian music industry, this kind of mentorship is essential for instilling confidence and practical knowledge about how to exist in a male-dominated environment.

For many women, Darlene Zschech has been the woman at the goal post who signals to them that they can make it. Her career was groundbreaking in the 90s, when she became the face of the industry with her anthem "Shout to the Lord," her influence reaching far beyond her home in Australia, and impacting people around the world.[4] Natalie Layne – a recording artist and songwriter – describes the experience of watching Darlene "make it," saying:

> Like, even if you would ask me today, like, who's your favorite female worship leader? Like, I would probably say, Darlene Zschech. Who was leading in the 90s, right? And like, and continues to lead, but like, that, to me is the finish line. You know, that's what it looks like.[5]

For Natalie, having a woman like Darlene at the "finish line" has made her own career more viable. From her vantage point as a trailblazer, Darlene recognizes that women need encouragement in a system that limits their growth. She says:

> And for most people, not just women, but you know, we're talking about the women, we need encouragement, not discouragement. So, if you get enough discouragement, it just waters down the 'on button' you need to find in yourself to go, 'Okay, I'm going to do this.' And it's like, we just, we need encouragement around each for each other. To help us get past that insecurity that we all – you have to wrestle with, you know. So, I just find those statements so unhelpful. Because we need women everywhere, men and women,

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[2] Ellen Rowe, "Addressing Gender Imbalance Through Advocacy and Mentorship," in *The Routledge Companion of Jazz and Gender*, ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr, Routledge Music Companions (New York: Routledge, 2022), 459.

[3] Rowe, "Addressing Gender Imbalance Through Advocacy and Mentorship," 462.

[4] Thomas Wagner, *Music, Branding, and Consumer Culture in Church: Hillsong in Focus*, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York: Routledge, 2020), 82.

[5] Author interview with Natalie Layne, June 29, 2023.

> God created them equal gave them dominion, and he blessed them. He blessed both of them![6]

Darlene's desire for a more egalitarian music industry climate is nestled in her spiritual convictions, the belief that "God created them equal."

As an industry executive, Beth uses the authority that she has to set up mentorship positions whenever possible. She recognizes the importance of role models for women who are emerging in the industry:

> For me, it's like putting someone in a role that's never looked like that or never came from that place that adds diversity, and then the whole younger generation can dream into a space that they never thought there was an opening for them… And I think it goes back to a little bit of what I mentioned of, we need to see more females thriving in these roles, so some other females can know that they can also thrive and raise their hands up like I want to do that. I want to try that. And also, you need more churches to be open to elevating the role that a woman can take in the church. Which there's going to be a lot of churches that are really far off from that. So yeah, it's like we've come a long way in finding a space, but it's like they're only so comfortable with so much, you know.[7]

Beth critically names that churches themselves must be comfortable seeing women in leadership, for industry structures to effectively be able to promote women in these roles. This is a two-way street: both the industry and the Church need to work collaboratively for their spaces to become safer and more hospitable for women.

For Leslie, mentoring the next generation is part of her calling as someone who has been in the industry for over a decade. She uses her experience to help emerging women songwriters navigate some of the more uncomfortable dynamics they might encounter. She says:

> I feel like it's my responsibility when I see a young female writer, artist, I'm like it's like open door like, come, talk to me. Like I have so many conversations about somebody offered me this contract or I feel kind of weird around this person, or what do you –

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[6] Author interview with Darlene Zschech, July 11, 2023.

[7] Author interview with Beth (pseudonym), March 20, 2023.

> what's your take on, you know, this, this and this… like I feel like it's my responsibility having been in that position and going, 'Who do I talk to? Who are the women that I can have honest, real conversations with about being a woman in this industry?'

Mentorship is an important part of expanding the roles that women are invited into, including the production space. Leslie described to me the way she invites emerging women songwriters and producers to use her equipment and her space to make sure they're able to start learning the skills they will need. She says "Now I sit with young writers and artists who are like 'I want to be able to do that,' and so I give them the keys to my studio. I just say like, 'Come any time.' There's a second desktop, you know. I've got instructions they can print out."[8] She described to me opening her studio to a young woman in the industry a few weeks before we spoke.

> She was like – I'd love to get some stuff and just start to learn. I was like 'Just come here.' And so, she texted me the next night – she's like, 'Are you serious? Can I come to your place?' My studio is like in a separate space from our house. So, I said 'Come,' like she came, you know, after my son was in bed, and I set her up, and she like stayed here till midnight…. She got to play, and I think that's part of it is like we're in this pressure cooker of you have to know in order to be invited in those spaces. And so, I don't want not having the money or the equipment to be a roadblock for other women to learn, like it was for me. So, I'm just so open handed with it.[9]

The practice of inviting young artists to house sit for her family when they go out of town is important for Leslie, and she always encourages them to "go play in the studio:"

> Even if nothing comes out like it's just the obedience of like going and sitting, and the practice of it, because I do think women are just as capable [as] men at producing. But we just haven't been given the time, the permission, and really, like, the representation. There are not that many women producers. So yeah.[10]

[8] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

[9] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

[10] Author interview with Leslie Jordan, February 1, 2023.

Leslie observes that women haven't been given the time or tools to develop the skills necessary for production, even though they have the skills for it.

Even when women in the industry don't have the tools to rework the entire system, they have successfully found ways to mentor each other towards new experiences and new expertise, setting each other up for further success. At some points, this has gone beyond the grassroots. Krissy Nordhoff founded Brave Worship to mentor young women in the worship space, coming out of her own desire for a female worship mentor when she first moved to Nashville at the beginning of her career. Women Who Worship is a collaboration of all women artists who recently released an album through intentional mentorship and effort from Capitol CMG. Other interviewees described grassroots efforts to host small groups of women in worship for discussion and song sharing. Mentorship is a powerful tool for growth and networking for women in the Christian music industry.

7.2.2 Representation for Industry Change

Increasing the diversity of racial representation in Christian music spaces is another way that the industry can begin to change. In 2023, I took a trip to San Francisco, CA to watch one of the final concerts in the It's Time Tour, a country-wide worship tour made up of three white artists (Natalie Grant, TAYA from Hillsong, and Katie Torwalt from Bethel) and three Black artists (Tasha Cobbs Leonard, Naomi Raine from Maverick City Music, and Tamela Mann). The concert was developed to elevate women's voices in the worship space, intentionally bridging music emerging from contemporary worship music and gospel spaces and bringing together white and Black artists. It is an example of change at the structural level, working to alter the way that the CWM systems operate. My fieldnotes from the concert describe the atmosphere:

It was a warm June evening when I arrived at The Masonic in San Francisco for the It's Time concert. I sat in my seat and watched attendees trickle in. There was a definite majority of women attendees, maybe 10% of attendees were men. The average age was middle aged, around 40-60. I noticed that it seemed like most attendees were Black. There were groups of younger people in the cheaper seats. Alcohol was for sale, so several people had drinks ($33 USD for a cocktail!). At the front of the stage sat three guitars, a drum kit, two keyboards on top of each other, and five mics in a row at the front, which indicated to me that the stage would be evenly shared. Natalie Grant was unable to attend this concert, so there were only five performers.

The instrumentalists started playing the riff of "Cry Out," a song by Naomi Raine, as the women entered to immense applause. The man in front of me stood up to clap for them. As the artists entered the stage, I noticed that most of the backup singers and instrumentalists were Black. It really seemed like the Black gospel industry was hosting the event, and the white women singers were guests.

I immediately noticed the artists' clothing. Naomi was wearing a pink cape with a white t-shirt and ripped jeans. Katie was wearing an all-white long skirt with a sort of white jacket over. Tamela was wearing an all-black tunic and leather pants. Tasha was wearing a peach suit, and the blazer covered her butt. Taya was wearing leather pants and black suit jacket; her jacket covered her butt, but her pants were tight. They were all dressed very modestly, with their butts covered or wearing loose clothing. Katie, Naomi, and Taya all had very high neck shirts, but not Tamela and Tasha.

Throughout the whole opening set I observed that the white women were really talking a back seat to the Black artists. The Black artists songs were foregrounded, they were doing more of the leadership. I made a note that this is what the whole industry needs to be doing, collaborating while also being followers of those who haven't held the mic historically.

The collaborative nature of this concert as a signal of growth for the industry, which as discussed has previously been highly segregated by genre and race. Milmon F. Harrison has suggested that the industry is being used as a site where ideologies of racial reconciliation ideologies are being worked out, to varying degrees.[11] When discussing the tour, gospel artist Cobbs Leonard has said: "God calls us to advance His Kingdom, in part, through unity and

[11] Harrison, "'ERACE-Ing' the Color Line," 28.

collaboration… I'm so excited to join these incredible artists— my sisters— on this tour. This is the move that we've been praying for! IT'S TIME!"[12] Artists like Cobbs Leonard were empowered through the tour to collaborate across racial divides and to amplify the voices of other women, especially those who have often been siloed separately.

My experience at the concert itself pointed to the ways that this type of action is effective. The artists brought together a full audience to encounter their music, with some songs performed as collaborations among all five artists on stage and each artist also performing a solo set. The songs performed were versions of artist's previous repertoire, and at times there were powerful symbolic collaborations such as Tasha Cobbs Leonard and TAYA doing a duet version of "Oceans," one of Hillsong's most popular anthem. It was powerful to watch the artists engage in repertoire that was not from their "home traditions."

However, throughout the entire three-hour concert there was no mention of the goals of the concert or the fact that it was all women performers. The tour organizers made a significant structural change by including only women, but did not attempt to address the larger ideological and power shifts that might result from this kind of change. About halfway through the concert point a man came on stage to collect funds for a group that raises money to address world hunger and sharing about the gospel. He delivered a type of "sermon" about making change for world hunger, and except for a quick joke about being a man on stage in a concert of women, the goal of the evening as amplifying women's voices did not come up.

I left the concert curious about the lack of acknowledgement about the realities of being a woman in the industry today and wondering whose idea it was to put on the concert and who

[12] CCM News, "Naomi Raine, Tasha Cobbs Leonard, Natalie Grant & TAYA Announce It's Time Tour," *CCM Magazine* (blog), January 17, 2023, https://www.ccmmagazine.com/news/naomi-raine-tasha-cobbs-leonard-natalie-grant-taya-announce-its-time-tour/.

decided what should remain unspoken. The concert did make a structural change – overcoming racial divisions and elevating women's voices – but without working to change the underlying belief systems that have kept women – and especially women of colour – silent, more long-lasting change would be difficult. Overall, the concert is an example of meaningful change at the structural level. It could be even more impactful if the theological and ideological beliefs that contributed to this underrepresentation in the first place had also been named.

7.2.3 Collaboration for Theological Change

While mentorship helps women navigate the interpersonal challenges and movements like the It's Time Tour help to chart new structural paths, change that gets at the root of the system must address the theological beliefs that dictate how women can exist. One recent initiative has been intentional about calling these theological barriers into account. Integrity Music, a prominent label based in Nashville, began the Faithful Project to connect women songwriters and artists and amplify the stories of biblical women.[13] Ginny Owens, one of their participants, said the following to me about the project: "Not only has the journey been fun, but it's been cathartic in a certain sense. You get to share with a group of women with which you have lots of things in common. So, they know the loneliness. They know the struggle of songwriting in a male-dominated world. So all of us are starting from the same point, which is really nice."[14] For Ginny, being part of a group that had the same kinds of experiences was meaningful.

[13] For more on the Faithful Project, see: https://www.faithfulproject.com/.

[14] Author interview with Ginny Owens, April 6, 2023.

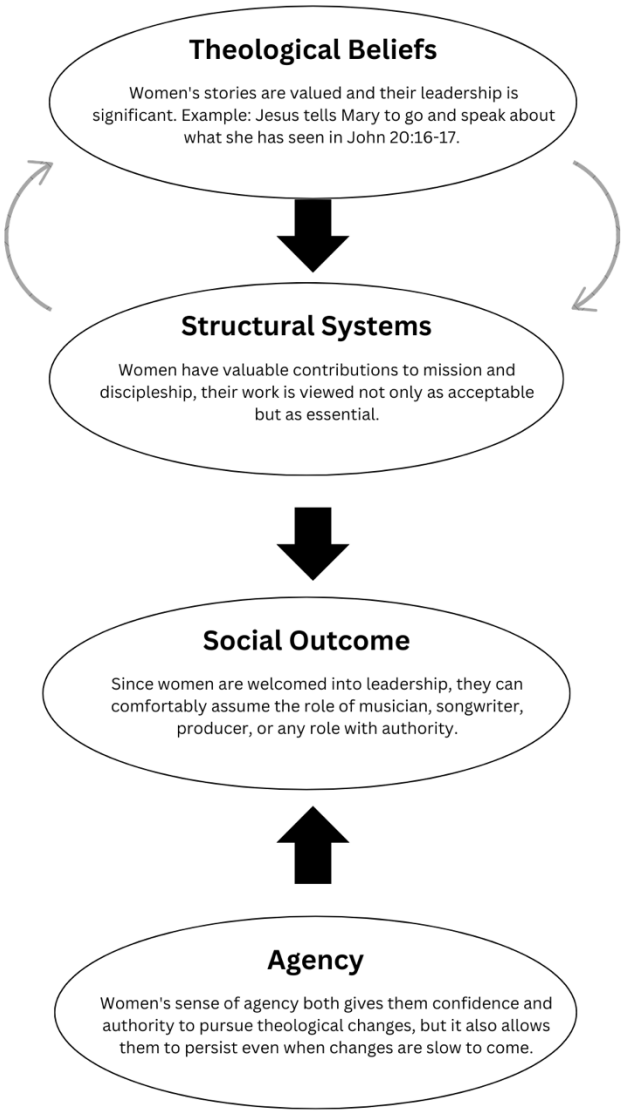

Figure 7.2 Map of Structural Agency in the Faithful Project

Faithful's impact is deeper than just the shared experience, however. Figure 7.1 highlights how the project offers women a space to resist the systems that push down on their expression. By drawing inspiration from Bible stories and elevating the experiences of women leaders in the scriptures, the project goes directly to the source and calls the very beliefs that

form these structures into question. It demonstrates how a feedback loop between beliefs and structures can lead to change that empowers women, with the possibility for new structures to shape affirming beliefs. The Faithful project can include women as producers, songwriters, vocalists, guitarists, and other instrumentalists, because it is built on a foundation that theologically upholds women's stories and leadership. When we reimagine the beliefs and systems channel in a way that places women's experiences at the fore and in places of theological significance, it is easier for the social outcomes to put women in places of authority and influence. The Faithful project does this by highlighting and amplifying the stories of women in the Bible. For example, the first song of the album, "Go and Speak (A Woman)" tells the story of Mary Magdalene who was a close friend of Jesus. Although her story is not often told, she is credited with being the first person to see Jesus after he rose from the dead and was then sent to tell others the good news. The Faithful Project uses her story to empower women on a larger scale. They lyrics sing:

> I have seen the Lord, I will speak of Him
> And nobody could talk me out of it
> I have seen the Lord and my Lord's seen me
> Oh, He said my name and told me
> 'Go and speak, of what you've seen.'[15]

These lyrics both reframe a scripture passage in the context of women's leadership and offer a theologically grounded invitation to women today to "go and speak."

Projects like this go to the source and find ways to amplify women that reimagine the theological virtues of Evangelicalism. If women are empowered in the stories we tell and the beliefs we share, they can be empowered on our worship stages. Women's sense of agency is

[15] Ellie Holcomb, Ann VosKamp and Sarah MacIntosh, "A Woman (Go and Speak)," *FAITHFUL,* 2021.

what allows them to pursue this change, and what sustains them when this change is slow to come. Future initiatives around women in worship will also thrive if they can consider the deep-seated theological beliefs that dictate the experiences not only of women, but also of people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, and other people who are minoritized.

In a North American context where Evangelical churches are reckoning with questions of diversity and leadership, women's stories of religious structural agency reveal ways that individuals can operate in limiting systems. This project has reimagined how Evangelical theology and socially conservative music industries inform women's careers, providing critical scholarship that suggests ways for the church to more equitably embrace the diversity of God's kingdom in worship. Going forward, there are ways to further strengthen this research to apply to a wider range of marginalized actors.

7.3 Future Directions for Research

As described in the introduction, this project primarily focused on the experiences of white women, most of whom were upper class, able bodied, and straight. Until this project was written, these stories had largely not been put in dialogue with each other, even though they are essential for understanding the experience of Evangelical women in the Christian music industry. Future research in this area now is tasked with applying a more intersectional lens to the topic and bringing in the experiences of a wider range of women, and especially women of colour. With the rise of groups like Maverick City Music, and initiatives like the It's Time Tour, I am hopeful that we will continue to see collaborations between women across racial divides. While it has been important to name the limitations and restrictions that white women in the industry have faced, it is imperative to recognize that the experience of women of colour has been even more restricted. The governing theological beliefs for the Black church, for example, may be

somewhat different, but the structures that have emerged often function in similar ways. In that context, women are also policed for how they dress, their perspectives on topics like LGBTQ+ marriage, and how they interact with married men. I am interested in pursuing more intersectional representation in this work going forward, but only in the context of clear collaboration and mutual benefit for the women I work with.

As I pursued this research, several unanswerable questions emerged for me. What is the role of Nashville as a location in contributing to women's experiences? How does the Nashville country music industry influence expectations for gender in Christian music (and vice versa)? Before pursuing publication of this research in other venues, I am keen to do more fieldwork on the ground in Nashville to uncover how the structures of that specific place impact women's experiences. I am interested in finding ways to observe the Nashville industry culture as a bystander, engaging in participant observation when possible. I also wonder: How would women in leadership in "Big Four" megachurches might react to this research? What unique perspectives they might contribute that are otherwise not represented? While I did make efforts to speak with women in megachurches for this project, my efforts were largely unsuccessful. A next step for this project would be to spend time and resources working to get beyond the barrier to megachurches, ideally securing interviews with women in these megachurch spaces.

7.4 Final Thoughts

As I sat in Carnegie Hall in February 2024, watching as Kari Jobe performed the spiritual labour of singing intimate love songs to a masculine God – surrounded by male instrumentalists – I reflected on how my perspective on women's experiences in systems that place limitations on their opportunities and mobility has changed throughout this project. I felt the tension of wanting Jobe to be liberated from needing to do the emotional and spiritual labour that is too frequently

assigned to women. I observed my desire for her to acknowledge that women instrumentalists are vastly underrepresented, that the burden of touring while being a mother is uniquely difficult for her in a context that places such high value on being home with children. But I also noticed how inspired I was by her ability to adapt to a context that places limitations on women. I observed how encouraged I was by her genuine presence and compelling performance, even when it doesn't look like that of her male counterparts. I sang along as she led me in a powerful worship experience. Whether she feels held back or not, she has risen above a system that limits her role and has led a powerful ministry that has made meaningful change in her corner of the world. This has inspired me.

As I have described my dissertation research to colleagues and friends over the past several years, I found myself defending my interviewees for their participation in a very imperfect system. I tend to explain the ways that I, too, operate in systems of limitation. I share that I participate in church structures where the most privileged participants have made it so that their voices and values are most elevated. I have taught in a university that upholds colonial constructs of excellence, where as a professor I found the unequal power distribution between students and professors to be a challenge. I shop at large, capitalist grocery shops even though I so strongly disagree with the way food is wasted, and costs are inflated. It's likely that all of us participate in systems and institutions that we have issues with, yet our choice to participate in them means that we have some form of agency.

In her article on women's agency in gender traditional religions, Burke concludes that: "Detaching the definition of agency from ideas about autonomy and liberation is a lesson not only for those studying religious women, but also for any scholar interested in understanding the

agency of individuals whose identities may appear to oppose progressive western sensibilities."[16] Working with the stories of women in the Christian music industry has invited me to reconsider my own sense of agency, and to evaluate the ways I exercise autonomy by choosing to participate in certain systems over others. I find it difficult to critique my interviewee's decisions when I recall the ways I, too, participate in these limiting systems.

Despite theological beliefs that create limiting structures with social impacts – and structures that work to uphold oppressive beliefs – Evangelical women in the Christian music industry are resilient, exhibiting agency through their choice to participate as songwriters, worship leaders, and industry professionals. Whether on stage or off stage, they have found creative ways to overcome barriers and lift each other up through intentional mentorship. Although they desire to see changes in the industry, they have also found ways to navigate its complexities in the meantime. They are a model of faithful service to a cause they believe in, and an inspiration for finding empowerment even in difficult circumstances. Throughout this project they have inspired me with their persistence, resistance, and acceptance, and I will continue to be inspired by their faithful leadership in a limited space.

[16] Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions," 129.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

For this dissertation, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted via Zoom. In many cases interviewees touched on the topics listed below, though they were rarely prompted in the exact way that the below sequence describes. An individual interview guide was prepared for each interviewee based on their age, role, experience in the industry, and the amount of time allotted (certain interviewees could only meet for 30 minutes or less, which changed the conversational flow). If the interviewee had published a book, I always read it before the interview, sometimes following up with specific questions based on their writing. I also listened to their music, observed their social media, and read media interviews they had done. Observations from this process helped to shape the interview guide.

Introductory Questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What city are you based in?
3. How did you get into the contemporary worship/Christian music industry?

Understanding the Industry:

1. Tell me about what it has been like to be a woman in the contemporary worship industry.
2. What roles do women play in the CWM industry?
    a. What support systems and networks are in place for their advancement?
3. How has the industry evolved over the past several years or decades?
4. Has the rise of technology in the industry impact women's participation? How?
5. Does your faith influence your perspective on women's roles in the industry?
6. How do you notice women's experiences as differing from their male counterparts?

Specific Roles:

1. What narratives do you hear about what women should/shouldn't do on stage?
    a. Do you hear narratives about what they should wear?
    b. Do you hear narratives about what they can say?
2. What is it like being a woman in the production space?

Looking Ahead:

1. What do you think women in the industry need to be able to thrive? What could the industry do to help them?
2. Do you have anything else you want to share with me?
3. Do any names come to mind of other people I should talk to for this project?
    a. Would you consider introducing me to them?