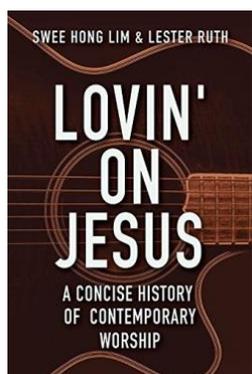


[Review] *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, by Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth; *Worshiping with the Anaheim Vineyard: The Emergence of Contemporary Worship*, by Andy Park, Lester Ruth, and Cindy Rethmeier

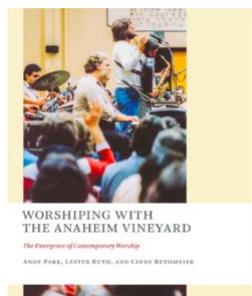


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Lim, Swee Hong, and Lester Ruth. *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2017. 162pp. ISBN 978-1-4267-9513-0.



Park, Andy, Lester Ruth, and Cindy Rethmeier. *Worshiping with the Anaheim Vineyard: The Emergence of Contemporary Worship*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017. 148pp. ISBN 978-0-8028-7397-9.

“Is it a contradiction in terms to write a *history* of something that is still called *contemporary*?”

Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth open the preface of their book, *Lovin' on Jesus*, with this poignant question (ix). What, indeed, does the word “contemporary” mean when applied to worship? For most ministers and lay people today, the word “contemporary” translates to band-driven music that borrows in some measure from

secular rock, empties the choir loft, revels in media technology, and promotes a more casual atmosphere in



church. I have experienced all of this since beginning my own journey with contemporary worship in 1994. It was in that year that I first had to differentiate between music styles, with one contemporary service and one service that was more traditionally oriented. I went on a personal journey of reading, research, and writing that helped me deal with the nuts and bolts of planning a contemporary service. Along that journey, I also struggled to understand how these changes fit into the larger panorama of worship history—and how I should respond in the present. Many books about “contemporary worship” have been how-to guides, not history books; some of those resources are included in the reference list at the end of this review. Then there were books that did a little pushing back on contemporary worship, trying to reconnect it in some way to the historical liturgy of the church. Champions of this perspective were the late Robert Webber and Marva Dawn. A good scholarly chronicle of later 20th-century contemporariness in worship was completed by Donald P. Hustad in *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal*. But even *Jubilate* follows in the footsteps of many other histories of the songs of the church. These works have tended to take a gestalten and hymnological view of a timeline down through the centuries, tacking on some chapters near the end to look at contemporary worship. *Lovin’ on Jesus* and *Worshiping with the Anaheim Vineyard* provide the historical insight that comes a generation later and help those of us who worked in the trenches to understand what was going on. Read together, these books give the reader a perspective on these in worship that have swept through American evangelicalism and many mainline Protestant churches in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Worshiping with the Anaheim Vineyard tells the more specific story of the two books. As the title suggests, it focuses on the congregation led by John Wimber and the emergence of a praise and worship style in southern California, before it came to be known as “contemporary worship.” Much of what happened there was in response to an “anti-tradition” posture that was catching on among churches in Southern California. At Wimber’s congregation, these innovations were tied to a developing understanding of worship as a lifestyle, not merely a Sunday morning activity:

Wimber continually emphasized this broad definition of worship. He would often say, “Every act of obedience is worship. Every time we choose another over ourselves, it is an act of worship. Every time we decide to lay our own way down in favor of Jesus’ way is an act of worship.” For the Anaheim Vineyard congregation, the vision of worship as all of life not only focused their corporate times of worship but shaped their personal lives as well. (Park, Ruth, and Rethmeier, 31)

Wimber thereby redefined worship, raising it above just singing some hymns at church. This emphasis on a worship lifestyle was also a reinterpretation of the congregation’s original goal, when it was called the Yorba Linda Calvary Chapel: “to reach this generation for Christ” (Park, Ruth, and Rethmeier, 116). This original

mission emphasis had called the congregation to reach what they called the “church drop-outs” and a generation influenced more by the music of secular rock than by any church music tradition. This outward focus was combined with Wimber’s growing emphasis on a “Spirit-led” ministry, which later developed throughout the Vineyard churches into a catalytic force for change in worship culture in the United States. This full-life approach to worship, along with a total embrace of the work of the Holy Spirit, appealed to people who had left the established church or who did not grow up in it.

I’ve never thought of myself as a follower of the Vineyard movement, and so I was surprised to learn how their work has influenced mine. One of the early defining characteristics of contemporary worship was a strong influence of the charismatic movement—speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing—even in church traditions that might not embrace these *charismata*. Negotiating the influence of the more controversial spiritual gifts was not a significant issue in my experience because the congregations where I chose to serve did not practice activities such as healing services, being slain in the spirit, or glossolalia. Some of the other traits (hand raising, enthusiastic singing, rock-style music), however, were apparent. These pseudo-charismatic markers became more and more prevalent and can be found even in very conservative non-charismatic congregations. The book also explores the close connection between the Church Growth Movement and the Anaheim Vineyard model. “‘Innovate or die’ became a mantra for many church leaders in the late twentieth century, a commitment reinforced by growing anxieties over the numerical decline of mainline churches” (Park, Ruth, and Rethmeier, 8). Several congregations in which I have ministered, or at least the pastors of those congregations, were heavily influenced by this motto. Adding a musically contemporary service had the most profound effect on music ministries and their leaders. This even included a deliberate attempt to be more casual by exchanging the coat and tie for something more relaxed. I find it interesting that the change to more casual clothing (and Vineyard was incredibly casual) has also had a pervasive influence. Even the Reformed church where I currently minister is extremely casual: no ties for the men (who are mostly wearing jeans), and very few dresses worn by the women. I also discovered that methods of worship planning which have helped me over the years actually have their provenance in these Vineyard churches, particularly in the work of Wimber and the worship leaders who worked alongside him. The music of Wimber’s church was largely home-grown and intimate, talking directly to God. This “funnel” approach, whereby worshipers are led gradually from faster songs of praise *about* God to songs which speak directly *to* God and are musically softer and more emotive, has become a template I still find useful in planning worship events.

Two of the authors of *Anaheim Vineyard*, Andy Park and Cindy Rethmeier, are worship leaders, and Rethmeier has a personal history with the Vineyard churches. Lester Ruth, co-author of both books being reviewed, is a scholar and worship historian at Duke Divinity School, and he brings a unique combination and balance to the

Anaheim book: approachable, with a scholarly and pedagogical tone. Included are many stories and personal testimonies about how the church grew up around these leaders. Other unique features of the book include: a timeline that lines up with current events of the day (very helpful for perspective); documents which outline Vineyard's developing theology of worship and ministry; sermon transcripts from John Wimber; and some descriptions of worship. The book's dimensions offer roomier margins than many paperbacks. In these wide margins are clarifying comments (in red ink) and questions for the reader. These margins are also good for personal notes. The end of the book includes suggestions for further study. The concluding chapter of the *Anaheim Vineyard* book, "Why Study Anaheim Vineyard's Worship? A Guide for Different Disciplines and Areas of Interest," is essentially an apologetic for the book, organized into general areas such as Christian worship, preaching, and evangelism, along with guiding questions. Additional educational materials include a glossary and resources for further study. I found the footnotes (included in both books reviewed here) a welcome change from chapter endnotes.

If the Anaheim Vineyard book focused a microscope on one congregation, *Lovin' on Jesus* provides a panoramic perspective on the wider contemporary worship movement. It explores some unique aspects of contemporized worship ministry: time in contemporary worship; the space where worship takes place; the role of prayer; how preaching and the scriptures are handled; and the "sacramentality" of contemporary worship, a subject about which very little has been written. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth have brought scholarly research and practical writing together, using James White's classic *Introduction to Christian Worship* as a model. They begin with nine qualities of contemporary worship (Lim and Ruth, 2–3) that include the pointed use of non-archaic English, strategically targeting people based on contemporary social trends, employing popular musical styles, encouraging physical expressiveness, and the centrality of musicians and technology. Music is a fundamental aspect of the contemporary worship movement, and two chapters draw a line of division between music in the 1980s and in the 1990s. Those chapters include an excellent chronicle of the British and Australian "invasions" of American worship music. This brings to light the stream of modern hymn-writing, which is also part of contemporary worship. Lim's influence as a professor and an ethnodoxologist is evident when the discussion turns from a Western perspective to consider the musical worship of Asian and African-American congregations. The contemporary worship band model was developed in America beginning in the 20th century and has now gone around the world, coming into contact with other indigenous artistic forms. Another aspect of the music portions of the book is the authors' willingness to tackle the music theory used in contemporary worship music, employing an approach similar to that of Greg Scheer's *The Art of Worship: A Musician's Guide to Leading Modern Worship*. Scheer's book, however, is more technical in music theory and tries to cover blended, traditional, and contemporary needs. Lim and Ruth summarize the harmonic simplicity of popular music by detailing primary chord progressions, illustrating how playing in

different keys can guide a song set, and discussing the evolution of form. Form also includes the use of a song's "high point" as a defining characteristic. This high point or emotive climax is determined more by performance practice than by the musical structure (Lim and Ruth, 67–68).

The treatment of "sacramentality" in *Lovin' on Jesus* was especially helpful for me. I confess that my Baptist background made me a bit tense when I first saw the term in this book, but this chapter turned out to be one of my favorites. How is this word understood by the authors?

One of the distinctive elements of contemporary worship, especially in its Pentecostal expressions, has been to develop this idea of divine presence through congregational song into systems of theology and piety, which might be called *sacramental* if we allow this term to refer to a general notion of encounter with God's presence. (Lim and Ruth, 121)

This association of God's presence with singing also came out in *Anaheim Vineyard*. Lim and Ruth unpack that idea from a theological standpoint, placing it within the historical framework of liturgy. This idea has a significant effect on the planning and organization of worship in a contemporary setting. Eventually, the authors take the reader on a journey to understand what is meant by a "sacramentality of praise" and where that idea might have come from (Lim and Ruth, 124–131).

Among other subjects, I teach the history of worship music, both from a hymnological and musical perspective, how this history applies to current issues of worship culture, and how to have a worship ministry of depth in the 21st century. As contemporary worship receives increased attention within the academy, *Lovin' on Jesus* should become an important resource for the classroom and a must-read for worship leaders—especially those who have little formal training. I've seen a general tendency in students of the past decade to evaluate their contemporary-ness primarily through their personal experiences. There is also a tremendous amount of peer pressure to keep up with the latest worship music that is flooding out through audio streams and social media. Students are not always prepared (or willing) to consider the theology being expressed by the music that attracts them or how it must be translated into practical ministry. One of the great features of this book is that it connects the streams of Pentecostalism, the Jesus People, and Church Growth with age-segregated youth group worship and the isolation of the Boomers. It seems that many students who come to study music and worship leadership in higher education have musical training and an understanding of corporate worship that come from participation in their church's youth praise band. It can be challenging to convince them that there is a wider world and historical continuum, and that it is relevant for them in the present; looking in the rearview mirror often does not hold their interest. *Lovin' on Jesus* won't solve all these

problems, but it may be a better tool to draw in the disinterested and uninitiated than the typical textbook on hymnology.

The methods of research and the cataloging of documents for *Lovin' on Jesus* was likely somewhat problematic since sources were not logically arranged in a formal collection. Much information was scattered on the web or to be found on various recordings. Some of the source material is on cassettes or videotape, adding the possible issue of media technology becoming obsolete or being difficult to access. Discovering primary audio and video of worship music from the early days of the Vineyard movement was particularly important for studying performance practices and the sonic ambience of the bands. The authors' ability to find and use these resources is impressive. On the positive side, due to the close proximity in time, many primary sources were available via interviews, emails, and phone calls. Lim and Ruth approached the filtering of such sources with integrity, doing their best to present an accurate picture of what may arguably be one the most significant and far-reaching movements in twentieth-century American Christianity.

Lovin' on Jesus and *Worshipping with the Anaheim Vineyard* are worthy additions to the library of the both the contemporary worship leader and the academic. One feature I enjoyed greatly but have not yet mentioned is the photographs. The middle sections of both books draw the reader in with photos of people, worship services, book covers, conference advertisements, and examples of worship media.

I encourage especially those who consider themselves more musically traditional to read these books. The contents provide needed perspective and may inspire creative thinking about the future of worship. Lim and Ruth bravely conclude their book with a look down the road and trends they see on the horizon. My take on that chapter is that the future need not be feared, hymnody will continue to make a comeback (albeit looking and sounding different), and that whatever is ahead, they are "confident that it will be *con-temp-orary* [emphasis by the authors], with-the-times. Its core qualities and defining values will continue to hold sway" (Lim and Ruth, 143). I agree.

Recommend related resources

- Basden, Paul. 1999. *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to Fit Your Church*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
- Carson, Timothy L., and Kathy Carson. 1997. *So You're Thinking About Contemporary Worship*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press.
- Cherry, Constance M. 2010. *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.
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- White, James F. 2007. *Introduction to Christian Worship*. 3rd ed. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press.
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