Selling Entertainment and Salvation:
Thoughts Toward Analyzing Christian Media Marketing

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This presentation represents the first steps toward a longer-form project that explores Christian media marketing, and its implications for how we understand and approach the Christian faith. This presentation is not composed of fully-fleshed out ideas or a mature framework of analysis—rather it is best understood as a series of notes, an early draft of an introductory chapter that will establish the conceptualizations for an as-of-yet developed argument in a larger project. That project, which will address what Christian mass media do, must first acknowledge what Christian mass media are. This presentation represents a packing (and unpacking) of ideas toward defining Christian media.

Simply put, this talk addresses “Christian media” as an oversimplified concept. Despite being ubiquitous, “Christian mass media” is not defined simply. What makes media “Christian?” We will explore the term “Christian media” through a review of how it is defined and used by observers, creators, distributors and other participants in the Christian media industry. In particular, we’ll explore the Christian media industry through a variety of texts—books, articles, press releases, blogs, etc.—to identify five dominant approaches to “Christian media”: by genre, content, artist, distributor, and purpose. The presentation concludes with an argument that each of these approaches affirms the role of the marketplace in understanding and defining “Christian media.”

Genre

Genres are distinguished by aesthetics. The “rock” genre, for instance, features different rhythms, instrumentations, and vocal performances than the “country,” “vocal,” or even “pop” genres. If “rock” music sounds has a particular sound, then what does “Christian” music sound like?
Based on the Christian music press, Christian music sounds a lot like rock. Pop, too, as well as rap and country. TodaysChristianMusic.com tells us that Christian artist Andrew Peterson’s instrumentality evokes Paul Simon.\(^1\) TobyMac’s newest album opens with a song described as “Owl City-esque.”\(^2\) Audry Asaad’s style is modeled after Joni Mitchell and Carole King.\(^3\) As far as sound is concerned, there seems to be little effort to distinguish Christian music from mainstream sounds.

Even though the sound of Christian music attempts to be indistinguishable from its mainstream counterparts, “Christian” is nonetheless a regular signifier of music. Perhaps a more pragmatic understanding of genre is to look at how it is used by retailers to stock music based on genre. The iTunes store, for instance, categorizes its stock into “Rock,” “Vocal,” “Country,” and other categories, in part to simplify the process of helping consumers find new music in styles they already enjoy. “Christian” music is a common category among media retailers. But it is not clear what “style” Christian music is. To be sure, iTunes lists many artists under its “Christian” category, even though these artists reflect the styles of other genres.

In short, Christian music does not sound Christian. In fact, we would be hard pressed to identify what Christianity itself even sounds like. This is not necessarily bad,


especially to evangelical Christians, believers who not only make a concerted effort to enmesh Christianity into mainstream culture rather than draw a clear line of distinction between the sacred and profane, as their fundamentalist brothers are wont to do, but who are also the target audience for much Christian media. Still, if “Christian” music is similar to, if not derivative from, other genres, what is the virtue of distinguishing TobyMac as a “Christian” artist? Why not list him as an “electronic” artist like Owl City? Why place TobyMac in another part of the iTunes store away from his musical influences? What is the virtue of categorizing this “electronic” artist alongside Christian country and western acts? What do these Christian artists have in common, if not style?

Content (Text)

The answer may become apparent if we categorize Christian media less for its aesthetics and more for its themes. A content-centered approach to Christian media addresses the degree to which the text affirms Christian beliefs. To see an example of this content-centered approach in practice, take a cursory look at the top CCM singles. Last week, on October 20, the top slot on the Billboard Christian Songs chart was Matt Redman’s “10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord).” In ten lines, Redman refers to God eight times:

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Bless the Lord, O my soul
O my soul
Worship His holy name
Sing like never before
O my soul
I'll worship Your holy name
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You're rich in love, and You're slow to anger
Your name is great, and Your heart is kind
For all Your goodness I will keep on singing
Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find

We also see the content-centered approach to Christian music in some of the products otherwise derided as “Jesus Junk.” The widely-mocked “Testamints” are merely regular breath-saving gum with bible verses on the wrapper, not unlike how fortune cookies are just cookies with fortunes printed inside. Likewise, the Oriental Trading Company offers pencils stamped with “I Love Jesus.” The pencil is turned into a “Christian” writing implement by being stamped with J-E-S-U-S.

A successful Christian text suggests that the Christian themes are made explicit, but this explicitness ghettoizes Christian media from the mainstream media market. The more explicit it makes its Christian themes clear, the more successful it can be in the Christian marketplace, but the less successful it will be in the mainstream marketplace.

Artist

In his book Body Piercing Saved My Soul, Andrew Beaujoin interviews many CCM insiders about the ins and outs of the Christian media industry. He describes this exchange with Brandon Ebel, the founder of Tooth & Nail, a distributor of edgy Christian music:

We shot the breeze for a few minutes, and when I mentioned a jam-band festival I’d attended the year before in Tennessee, Ebel told me the first of many things he didn’t want me to publish.

“I wanna tell him my jam-band story, but I’m afraid it’ll go in the book,” he said to MacKinnon [Tooth & Nail’s publicist].

“Why are you worried about that?” I asked him.

“It kind of compromises . . .”
He paused.  
"Do you feel like you have an image to maintain?" I asked.

"Well, only so much," he said.  "Tooth & Nail’s been different from a lot of labels--we don’t hide anything. But there’s a lot of stuff that goes on in the Christian music industry that’s pretty hidden."

"Such as?"

"Well, like, if an artist is divorced or has an affair, labels try to cover it up," he said.  "It’s bad imaging."

The purpose of this anecdote is to demonstrate the role that the artist’s perceived piety plays in the success of Christian media. This artist-centered approach places the definition of Christian-ness less on the content and the sound, and more on the performer or creator. The virtue of the text is linked to the belief and lifestyle (real or imagined) of the artist.

The significance of the artist’s image is common among all mass media, not just that of the Christian variety. The appeal of boy bands, for instance, comes in part with the selling of an image of them as cute and Mom-acceptable, while being just enough of a “bad boy” for the affections of pre-teen girls. The quality of the music itself is incidental as long as the boys are appealing. But for Christian artists, their images are not incidental to the text. Their lives probably come under more scrutiny that the lives of their mainstream counterparts because their lives are key factors in moving product.

*Relevant* magazine (whose tagline reads, “Faith, Culture, and Intentional Living”) recently featured the married musical duo Welcome Wagon. The interview weaves the artists’ religious beliefs and *bona fides* with the promotion of their album:

Vito Aiuto: In putting the record together, that title

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Q: Who would you say you make music for? Is it for yourselves? The community? God?

Monique Aiuto: I think it’s just part of who God made us to be, in having these gifts and these tendencies toward music and loving music and being able to play music together.

Vito Aiuto: I’m only really interested in singing about God. Almost all our songs [are] about God, what Jesus has done, our attempts to try to love Him and our failures at that, and our attempts and failures at loving others.”

Further, the couple connects their music-making and marriage with their Christian faith:

Vito Aiuto: It’s difficult to be married, period. But [making music together is] like a practice ground for our marriage, one more arena in which we are given the opportunity to love one another and for me to say, “How am I going to love Monique as Christ loved the Church?”

The interview also acknowledges Vito’s day job: pastor for the Resurrection Presbyterian Church in Williamsburg.

Rebecca St. James made an industry out of her virginity. As a teenage Christian rock star, she made her case for abstinence a key aspect of her “testimonial” that she delivered between songs, saying she would be “saving herself” until marriage. She wrote a song and a book about “purity,” both titled *Wait For Me*. One website goes so far as to

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8 Misener, 38.
call her “the face for sexual purity.” Her virginity was a ministry, sure, but it also gave her brand a cache. Sex sells rock albums; chastity sells Christian albums.

The significance of the artist’s faith in Christian media is most apparent, though, when the artist fails to meet the projected expectations of what it means to be a Christian. Christian music superstar Amy Grant was blacklisted from Christian radio stations blacklisted after her divorce. The catchiness of her songs could not win over the station managers and Christian magazine publishers who were appalled at her failure to promote a Christian example. Her lifestyle trumped the music; her sins affected her spins.

Grant may be the most notable example, but she is certainly not the only Christian artist whose fall from grace affected her cache in the Christian media industry. Marsha Stevens, who was influential in the Jesus Music scene of the 1960s, was essentially blacklisted from CCM when she came out as a lesbian. David Bazan was banned from a Christian music festival for several years after performing drunk. More recently, right-wing author and filmmaker Dinesh D’Souza stepped down as president of the evangelical King’s College after sharing a hotel room with a woman who is not his wife.

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11 Beaujoin, 23.
after speaking at a Christian conference in South Carolina.\textsuperscript{13}

Some Christian artists acknowledge how the expectations of appearing holy affect their popularity, particularly by addressing their struggles to maintain that image. Former CCM Magazine editor Matthew Paul Turner writes of an unnamed Christian musician who left the industry in frustration after being pressured to testify to a less-than-genuine abstinence message.\textsuperscript{14} Even Rebecca St. James, “the face of sexual purity,” notes:

The one thing about the spotlight is that it almost encourages you to be fake. You do feel expectations to be a certain way. If I’m hanging out backstage with people who have helped promote the gig or even kids of people who are working at the concert, and I’m not friendly, that’s the one memory they’re going to have of me. I think there’s almost more pressure on someone to be fake in the spotlight than anywhere else. I’m extremely committed to being the same onstage and off. That whole thing about being real—that’s something I work on. . . . To be honest, I find that constant pressure to be "on" spiritually, emotionally, physically is a big, massive drain. I’ve shed a lot of tears about that because I feel so weak. The road often taxes you in all those ways. I get really tired sometimes and feel like I can’t keep doing this much longer. But in those times, God encourages me somehow… encouraging me to keep on and to focus my eyes on Him.\textsuperscript{15}

Distributors

In 2011, B&H Publishing Group distributed the Here’s Hope: Cancer Awareness Bible. Each copy sold was to raise $1.00 for breast cancer causes. In 2011, Lifeway Christian Stores, which is owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention, refused to stock the Bible. Lifeway objected that the money would go to the Susan G.

\textsuperscript{14} Turner, 2010.
\textsuperscript{15} Ewald, 2010.
Komen foundation, which at the time contributed money to Planned Parenthood.¹⁶

Lifeway’s President and CEO Thom S. Rainer released a press release which said succinctly, “We made a mistake.”¹⁷

Lifeway is now trying to avoid making another mistake. In the past couple weeks, the writer Rachel Held Evans has acknowledged the struggles she’s had with her publisher about the use of the word “vagina” in her next book, *Year of Biblical Womanhood*.¹⁸ She writes:

I’m too busy arguing with my publisher. They won’t let me use the word “vagina” in my book because we have to sell it to Christian bookstores, which apparently have a thing against vaginas. I make a big scene about it and say that if Christian bookstores stuck to their own ridiculous standards, they wouldn’t be able carry the freaking Bible.

I tell everyone that I’m going to fight it out of principle, but I cave within a few days because I want Christian bookstores to carry the sanitized version of my book because I want to make a lot of money, because we’ve needed a new roof on our house for four years now, and because I really want a Mac so I can fit in at the mega-churches.¹⁹

On Wednesday her fear became manifest: Lifeway announced it would not carry *The Year of Biblical Womanhood*, stating it does not meet its standards of Biblical

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¹⁹ Evans, “Scattered thoughts.”
appropriate:\textsuperscript{20}

These two anecdotes reflect the significance that the distributor has in the Christian media industry. The distributor and retailer are de facto arbiters of Christian media. They are the means through which the faithful access texts, and as such play a powerful role in identifying which media are “worthy” for the Christian market. In this case, Christian media are defined by the spaces where the texts are available. If the text can be purchased at a recognized “Christian” store, such as Lifeway and its competitor Family Christian Stores, then the text is “Christian.” If they refuse to stock it—even a Bible like the \textit{Here’s Hope} Bible—the text can be pegged as unchristian at worst, or at the very least insignificant to the Christian culture.

In a similar vein we can also look to Christian radio and television stations for their definition of what constitutes “Christian” music. Salem Communications owns many radio stations with a Christian music format, twenty-three of which are in the top twenty-five media markets. Likewise, the K-LOVE radio network has a nationwide reach. When Amy Grant was pulled from heavy rotation at stations such as these, the message to Christian media consumers was clear: the stations determined Amy Grant’s music was no longer “Christian” enough for mass consumption.

Christian texts are not distributed solely by Christian retailers or media. In fact, Christian texts are competing with their secular counterparts more frequently in mainstream retail outlets and stations. Wal-Mart carries some of the more popular Christian texts, much to the chagrin of the Christian Booksellers Association. Barnes &

Noble has a remarkably large collection of Bibles and Christian titles available. NBC picked up *Veggie-Tales*, which had previously only been available as a straight-to-DVD product marketed to the evangelical consumer. Further, some musicians like Amy Grant, Sixpence None the Richer, Jars of Clay, P.O.D. and Switchfoot get some mainstream attention and airplay on secular stations.

Some see this broader, mainstream distribution of Christian texts as virtuous, in that the faith becomes “acceptable” enough to get out of the Christian ghetto and into the mainstream marketplace. It is worth noting, though, the role that Christian distributors play in this characterization. To say that Switchfoot or *Veggie-Tales* transcends the Christian marketplace implies that the Christian marketplace defines a certain text as suitable for its niche target audience. Those texts transcend the market defined by the Christian niche retailers when they were stocked by the general, mainstream retailers.

**Purpose**

Lifeway, the store that refused to stock the *Here’s Hope* bible, stocked primarily church goods when it was founded in 1891. It was essentially a church-supply store, where pastors got the robes, communion supplies, Sunday School curricula, and other items for worship services. Churches can still order these items from Lifeway, but much of the sales floor today showcases products that are less essential for Christian services. The CDs, videos, and t-shirts serve little purpose in formal worship, yet Lifeway commits significant space to them. What is the purpose of these non-liturgical products?

Heather Hendershot’s *Shaking the World for Jesus* tackles the role that religious lifestyle products plays in the life of evangelical consumers. She classifies much
Christian media as "religious lifestyle products," which reveals some of the perspective she takes toward Christian media.\textsuperscript{21} In this conceptualization, Christian media are nonessential luxuries that affirm a religious identity rather than penetrate the soul.

These religious lifestyle products have also been associated with the therapeutic Christianity culture. An offshoot of the prosperity gospel—which states that God rewards faithfulness with earthly prosperity—therapeutic Christianity suggests that the closer you are with God, the more emotionally healthy you will become. These products center less around addressing Jesus as a model of piety or focus of worship, and more about how Jesus can make you feel better about yourself. In doing so, religious lifestyle products help us feel good about, and affirm, our faith.

While some texts affirm belief, others seem to be \textit{created} with the intention to worship. This utilitarian approach considers whether or not the media do “Christian” things. If a song is written to lead people in praise, that makes it Christian. Howard and Streck identify this use in their classification of “seperational CCM,” which is contemporary Christian music produced to evangelize, facilitate worship, and encourage believers.\textsuperscript{22} Seperational CCM artists argue that Christian texts must minister; otherwise, the text cannot be defined as “Christian” in any way. As Petra drummer Louis Weaver put it:

\begin{quote}
I’ll tell you something I don’t like: all these new bands that say, “We just want to play. We don’t want to minister, we don’t want to talk about Jesus. Our songs talk about Jesus, get it out of that.” My response has been, “Why don’t you
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{22} Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, \textit{Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music} (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 54-55.
This evangelistic goal, though, is more idealistic than realistic. Many surveys reveal that the audience for Christian media is composed of believers, not unbelievers. Christian media doesn’t win converts; rather, it affirms faith.

**Market-driven definition**

A text may lead the listener to praise or affirm the consumer’s faith, but those purposes alone do not put the text in the media marketplace. The question "Why is this particular Christian product in the marketplace" cannot be effectively answered merely with appeals to affirming a belief or proselytization. We must also acknowledge that the text must recoup the costs of production. If it cannot recoup the cost to make, market, and distribute the text, it will not compete in the Christian media marketplace.

Pete Ward (2012) identifies how Christian artists in the United Kingdom make their living despite selling relatively few albums. These artists brand their albums multiple ways—packaged with books, for example, and producing live and studio albums. They also earn revenue through publishing royalties and the Christian Copyright Licensing Scheme (which is similar to the CCLI copyright licensing organization in the United States). Without these money-making systems in place, these Christian artists would have to abandon their creative works for typical “day jobs.”

To find an example of how Christian performers attempt to recoup the costs of production, consider the business model for televangelism. Although these ministers are

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23 Quoted in Howard and Streck, 54.
rightly scrutinized for their questionable financial practices, their appeals for money during the broadcast reflects less of an inherent greed and more of an inherent need. To air on the Trinity Broadcasting Network and other Christian outlets they must pay the network a premium. TBN programming is essentially composed of infomercials 24-hours a day. Televangelists are often criticized for soliciting donations as a part of their message, but their operations would be unable to function without those donations.

This is not to suggest that the sole reason for Christian media is to make a profit. However, the marketplace demands that media products generate a profit in order to be sold. Christian media—and Christian ministries as well, in fact—must not lose money, or else they will perish in the marketplace. If Christian media cannot recoup production costs, all other purposes—sacred and profane—are moot.

Conclusion

It is not necessarily inappropriate to define Christian media in regards to its genre, content, artist, distributor or purpose. But each of these conceptualizations are significantly influenced by post-Fordist economic forces in the media market. In short, “Christian” media does not identify the style of music, or the religious preference of the music. There is nothing inherently “Christian” about Christian media. Rather, the word “Christian” identifies the consumer to whom the media is marketed.

Many observers of Christian media warn against reducing the merger of belief and commerce as an enterprise where the faithful are duped by capitalists. “Dismissing spiritual entrepreneurs as exploitative charlatans, and their clients as deluded fools,” writes Bowman, “simply is not an acceptable modus operandi for getting to grips with a significant economic and business phenomenon which potentially disrupts and challenges
existing organizational and commercial theories and practices.”25 (21). The merger of commodification and Christianity, they suggest, is too nuanced to be dismissed as superficial at best, and exploitative at worst.

These writers are not necessarily wrong. The Gospels address commodification with some degree of sacralization. For instance, Jesus blessed the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with perfume—a valuable commodity. It is worth noting, though, that these writers and critics approach Christian media from loci that address how media are made and used. Bowman addresses the role that spiritual commerce plays in community-building, while Hendershot looks at the motivations at play in the creation and use of Christian media. My work-in-progress, on the other hand, addresses how it is marketed and sold. Community-building is a worthwhile use of media, but community-building in and of itself will not get a product sold in the marketplace. To sell the product, it must be marketed, and this marketing oftentimes runs counter to the beliefs of the religious faithful.

But now we are beginning to get ahead of ourselves. This presentation is merely an attempt to make sense of a series of notes and observations. It is not the end of the inquiry, but the first baby steps of a journey toward deconstructing Christian media and marketing.


