

## WHAT ARE WE SINGING ON SUNDAY? THE TRINITY, CANADIAN PENTECOSTALS, AND CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MUSIC<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

In principle, Canadian evangelicals largely adopt an acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is clearly reflected in various core statements of belief. Does, however, a trinitarian framework truly inform corporate worship among Canadian Pentecostals in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), the largest evangelical denomination in Canada? This paper offers an analysis of the trinitarian impulses embedded in contemporary worship music used by the PAOC from 2007 to 2015. Drawing from data secured from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), this research considers whether lyrics from the most commonly sung songs (103 songs, in total) are consistent with the PAOC's trinitarian statement of faith. Three original and qualitative content analyses of these songs are presented. Making use of trinitarian, Pentecostal, and worship studies scholars, this paper serves as a helpful descriptive and prescriptive resource for the dynamic practice of a trinitarian faith among Canadian Pentecostals.

### INTRODUCTION

Central to the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) is a proclamation in their Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths expressing overwhelming support for the doctrine of God as Trinity: one God in three persons. It states, "The Godhead exists eternally in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are one God, having the same nature and attributes and are worthy of the same homage, confidence, and obedience."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper represents an abbreviated version of a more thorough body of my research that evaluates trinitarian impulses in the commonly used lyrics of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. See Michael Tapper, *The Things We Sing: Canadian Pentecostals, The Trinity, and Contemporary Worship Music* (Leiden, Boston: Brill Publishers, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, *2014 Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths*, <https://paoc.org/family/what-we-believe> (accessed 6/13/2018).

However, does a trinitarian framework truly inform corporate worship within the largest evangelical denomination in Canada? This paper analyses the popular song lyrics of a sampling of PAOC churches in an effort to evaluate a potential discrepancy that may exist between a core confession of the PAOC's doctrinal beliefs and an important expression of their contemporary worship practices, mainly corporate singing.<sup>3</sup> I propose that, while the PAOC may endorse God as Trinity in official statements of faith, the lyrics of the most popular congregational music sung in corporate worship settings do not necessarily correlate with this fundamental Christian doctrine.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

At the onset of this paper it is worth asking—why does singing about God as Trinity *really* matter? It could be argued that, in many evangelical contexts, a trinitarian doctrine of God, if addressed at all, presents itself as more of a disconnected, mathematical conundrum than a faith-building motivation. This reinforces Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's well-known 1970's quip that “should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”<sup>4</sup> What difference does it make if a trinitarian God is not prominently displayed in what a Canadian evangelical denomination sings?

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<sup>3</sup> An increasing number of scholars have identified correlations between trinitarian theology and liturgical worship practices. For examples, see John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); *Worship with One Accord: Where Liturgy and Ecumenism Embrace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster Press, 1996); Cornelius Plantinga and Sue A. Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking About Christian Worship Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Lester Ruth, “Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi: The Trinity in the Most-used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs,” in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 342–359; Ruth C. Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1999); Bryan D. Spinks, “Trinitarian Belief and Worship: a Historical Case,” in *God's Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 211–222; Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns & Oates, 1972), 10–11.

Briefly, I offer three responses. First, the Trinity matters because music sung in corporate worship settings has a profound effect on how Christians view God, as well as themselves, their world, and those around them.<sup>5</sup> Colin Gunton wrote, “In the light of the theology of the Trinity, everything looks different.”<sup>6</sup> As such, participation in congregational music serves a significant role in worshippers’ responses to the character of God.<sup>7</sup> Since the resurgence of twentieth-century trinitarian theology, certain theologians have argued that God, viewed as a modalistic, abstract deity, shapes an understanding of theology proper in profoundly different ways than conceptions of a Godhead engaged in a perichoretic, relational embrace.<sup>8</sup> Inevitably and often unconsciously, these views shape our corporate worship. As Robin Parry points out, “Believing right things about God is an essential component of honouring God appropriately....If we are to give God the glory He deserves, we need to think and speak rightly about God. Thinking right about God involves having a trinitarian framework for thinking about God. The Trinity should be at the core of our worship because the God who is at the heart of worship is Trinity.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, the Trinity matters because diluted or incorrect theology has the potential to lead to impoverished Christian faith.<sup>10</sup> In other words, if one of the goals of the Christian faith is being conformed to

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Seamands reinforces this idea by emphasizing the doctrine of the Trinity is “the grammar of the Christian faith.” Stephen A. Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 100.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church* (London: Equinox, 2006), 13. Describing the impact of words in contemporary worship music, Nick Page writes, “Make the words right and they will write themselves on people’s hearts. Make the words right and they will form part of people’s lives. Make the words right and they will open people’s eyes to the reality of God. Make the words right and, as they sing them, God will come home to people’s hearts.” Nick Page, *And Now Let’s Move Into a Time of Nonsense: Why Worship Songs Are Failing the Church* (Franklin, TN: Authentic Publishers, 2005), 111–112.

<sup>8</sup> For prominent examples of this see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (Norwich: SCM Press, 1981); Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*; Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*.

<sup>9</sup> Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> John Thompson writes, “It is as we properly understand God as triune that we will have a right view of faith, of its doctrines, and of the relevance of all this for every sphere of human life and activity.” John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

convictions true to the Bible and the ecumenical creeds, then it stands to reason that a life that does not practically express core biblical and creedal distinctions will not be enhanced by the rich vision disclosed therein.<sup>11</sup>

Third, from a historical perspective, a trinitarian doctrine of God should matter to the PAOC because this Christian doctrine served as a key distinctive in the context of early twentieth century Pentecostal disagreements over oneness and trinitarian theology. Unavoidably, a trinitarian doctrine of God is at the core of the PAOC heritage. It should stand to reason, then, that this belief ought to be well represented in commonly sung PAOC songs. Thus, this paper advances on the presupposition that the doctrine of the Trinity *should* represent an important element of the PAOC's core belief systems and singing practices.

## CONTEXT OF THIS ANALYSIS

The impetus for this paper builds on a foundation of academic work pursued in the field of trinitarian theology and Christian worship studies. In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the role that contemporary congregational music plays in forming and reinforcing views about God. For example, in the late 1980s, David Tripp indexed popular British hymnals and concluded that only a small minority of the texts contained “substantially trinitarian content.”<sup>12</sup> Bert Polman was among the first scholars to analyse the most commonly sung Christian choruses in the United States from 1989-1990.<sup>13</sup> A decade later in 2006, Robin Parry conducted an inquiry of the lyrical content of Vineyard worship song albums between 1999 and 2004 and also affirmed a

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<sup>11</sup> Lester Ruth, “Worship True to God,” March 2005, <http://iws.edu/2005/03/lester-ruth-worship-true-to-god> (accessed 06/13/2018).

<sup>12</sup> David H. Tripp, “Hymnody and Liturgical Theology: Hymns as an Index of the Trinitarian Character of Worship in Some Western Christian Traditions,” in *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers Presented to the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine* (London: Inter-Church House, 1991), 63–88. Of note, Tripp observed that song collections that were put together by denominational bodies had a noticeably higher percentage of “substantially Trinitarian” songs. Collections put together by interdenominational or charismatic groups tended to have fewer “in-your-face” trinitarian songs. Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*, 130–131.

<sup>13</sup> Bert Polman, “The Praise and Worship Hit Parade: a Brief Analysis of Some of the Most-sung Choruses of 1990,” *Reformed Worship* 20 (June 1, 1991): 33–35. Trinitarianism was not the primary focus of Polman's study.

deficiency of trinitarian language in these popular songs.<sup>14</sup> Independent studies in related areas have been pursued by other scholars: Robert Woods and Brian Walrath, Robin Knowles Wallace, John Witvliet, Mark Evans, Andreas Marti, Monique Ingalls, Paul Jacobs, Megan Livengood, Connie Ledoux Book, and Edward Lee Steele.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, however, both in breadth and depth, the work of Lester Ruth represents the most formidable study in the area of contemporary Christian music and lyrical analysis.<sup>16</sup> To date, Ruth's research has analysed the trinitarian impulses in the lyrics of approximately one hundred contemporary choruses over three decades. This paper relies significantly on Ruth's research methodologies and offers both unique

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<sup>14</sup> Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert H. Woods and Brian D. Walrath, *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007); Robin Knowles Wallace, "Praise and Worship Music: Looking at Language," *Hymn* 55.3 (July 1, 2004): 24–28; John D. Witvliet, "Evaluating Recent Changes in the Practices of Christian Worship," *Crux* 38.3 (September 2002): 17–25; Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*; Andreas Marti, "'Just You and Me': Beobachtungen an Liedern Einer Charismatischen Gruppe," *Jahrbuch Für Liturgik Und Hymnologie* 48 (January 1, 2009): 209–217; Monique M. Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship" (University of Pennsylvania, 2008); Paul D. Jacobs, "Sing Unto the Lord a New Song: An Examination of the Theological Orthodoxy and Biblical Content of the Top 20 Contemporary Songs of 2006," *Criswell Theological Review* 5.1 (September 1, 2007): 97–106; Megan Livengood and Connie Ledoux Book, "Watering Down Christianity? An Examination of the Use of Theological Words in Christian Music," *Journal of Media and Religion* 3, no. 2 (2004): 119–129; Edward Steele "Theological Themes in Contemporary Hymnody" (paper submitted to the Evangelical Theological Society, November 2010). With the exception of Andreas Marti's independent study, each one analyses choruses exclusively written in English prose. Marti's study is a compelling one that examines contemporary German choruses published in a 2005 songbook used predominantly by young adults associated with International Christian Fellowship in Zurich, Switzerland.

<sup>16</sup> Lester Ruth, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Attempts at Classifying North American Protestant Worship," in *Conviction of Things Not Seen* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 33–51; "Don't Lose the Trinity! A Plea to Songwriters," *The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies Blog* (February 1, 2006), <http://iws.edu/2006/02/lester-ruth-dont-lose-the-trinity/> (accessed 06/13/2018); "Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi: The Trinity in the Most-used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs;" "Is God Just Hanging Out on the Sofa? (Initial Wonderings About the Inactivity of God)," *The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies Blog* (July 1, 2011), <http://iws.edu/2011/07/lester-ruth-is-god-just-hanging-out-on-the-sofa-initial-wonderings-about-the-inactivity-of-god/> (accessed 06/13/2018).

and contributing research by issuing a study that involves a lyrical analysis of the most commonly sung songs among the largest Canadian evangelical and Pentecostal denomination.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this paper, I analyse the theological content of the lyrics expressed in the most popular contemporary worship songs sung by a cluster sample of the PAOC churches. Specifically, the songs reported by these churches to CCLI are of primary interest.<sup>17</sup> CCLI, in compliance with copyright laws and royalty payout protocols, urges churches that sing contemporary Christian songs in their worship settings to purchase annual licenses and complete copy activity reports every two and half years. It is estimated that the number of reporting churches included in this study is approximately 35% of the churches in the denomination.<sup>18</sup> From the completed copy activity reports, CCLI is able to provide data indicating the top 25 songs of reporting churches within a denomination over a six-month period. For this study, I acquired 16 lists of the most commonly sung songs reported by PAOC churches in a recent and sequential eight-year period. A song was selected as part of this study if it appeared at least once on the Top 25 list of reporting PAOC churches between October 1, 2007 and September 30, 2015. Of these 400 reported songs, once redundancy was accounted for *and* matches were made, 103 unique songs were recognized.<sup>19</sup> These 103 reported songs represent the dataset for this paper. (See appendix A).

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<sup>17</sup> From the CCLI website: “Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) was established in 1988 to provide churches with simple, affordable solutions to complex copyright issues. CCLI helps churches maintain their integrity and avoid costly lawsuits, while also giving churches the freedom to expressively and spontaneously worship. CCLI’s Vision is: ‘to establish a strong communications network serving the Christian community, providing resources that inform, inspire, equip and add value. CCLI’s Mission Statement is: to encourage the spirit of worship to churches, organizations, and Christians individually, so that they may enhance their worship expression spontaneously, conveniently, affordably and legally.’” <https://us.ccli.com/> (accessed 06/13/2018).

<sup>18</sup> This estimate is drawn from statements made in PAOC official documentation regarding approximated total number of churches.

<sup>19</sup> These methodological decisions closely parallel Lester Ruth’s work that analyses contemporary Christian choruses more broadly.

Undeniably, there are limitations to utilizing the content of CCLI reports. First, though I contend the data collected provides an adequate cluster sample by most social scientific accounts, CCLI's auditing and reporting protocol does not account for reports from *every* PAOC church, nor *every* song sung within these churches throughout the selected time of the study.<sup>20</sup> Second, this study is limited by the fact that it only analyses the lyrical content of the selected songs. It does not take into consideration, for example, the musicological, ethnographic, nor the actual worship context of the songs.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, a straightforward analysis of lyrical content, irrespective of verse, chorus, or line repetition, for example, may not entirely capture the way the lyrics "live within the music."<sup>22</sup> This paper advances, however, on the presumption that lyrics in songs *do*, in fact, possess an influencing factor, albeit among other factors, upon those who sing them.<sup>23</sup> Third, the songs in the CCLI registry exclude those which are in the public domain (and no longer under copyright restrictions). Thus, most hymns fall beyond the purview of this particular study. Further studies that consider hymns sung by PAOC churches could serve to bolster or refute the conclusions in this paper.<sup>24</sup> At this point in time, however, there is no comparative

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<sup>20</sup> Regarding songs not included in this corpus, it can be fairly assumed there were other songs sung in PAOC churches during the selected time period, notwithstanding those considered for this study. While the songs analysed for this study were reported as the most commonly sung songs in PAOC churches between October 2007 and October 2015, it would be imprudent to assume they were the *only* ones integrated into corporate worship.

<sup>21</sup> Two academics who do assume a significantly broader methodological approach in their assessment of Christian contemporary music are Mark Evans and Monique Ingalls. See Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*; Monique Ingalls, "Awesome in the Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship." (University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*, 114.

<sup>23</sup> Several other scholars reinforce the importance of lyrics in contemporary Christian music. See Ruth, "Don't Lose the Trinity! A Plea to Songwriters;" Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*, 8–11; Page, *And Now Let's Move Into a Time of Nonsense*, 111–112.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth's research in the United States has also compared contemporary worship choruses with eighteenth and nineteenth century hymns. Interestingly, his findings reveal that some of the most commonly reported deficiencies related to contemporary choruses can also be claimed of the frequently sung evangelical hymns from the past. In this regard, what may commonly be viewed as "new" phenomena in contemporary choruses could be, according to Ruth, also interpreted as rather unexceptional and a mere representation of a longstanding historical trend. In Canada, sociologist Sam Reimer has engaged in preliminary work that assesses the frequency with which

body or framework like CCLI to pursue this type of extensive hymnal research in North America.

To assess the dataset for this study, I performed three separate qualitative content analyses on the lyrics of the reported songs. First, I examined patterns that appeared when divine naming within the songs were assessed, keeping in mind that, if a trinitarian doctrine of God is at the core of Pentecostal theology and, more broadly, the Christian ecumenical creeds, then it would stand to reason this belief *ought* to be well represented in commonly sung PAOC songs. Second, I analysed divine actions attributed to the persons of the Trinity within the songs. Following trinitarian theologians such as J.B. Torrance, Colin Gunton, and Jürgen Moltmann,<sup>25</sup> I anticipated that the ways in which the actions of God are described in the songs might provide important insight into the PAOC worshippers' acceptance of perceived roles within the triune Godhead. Finally, I observed the ways in which the worshipper was described in these songs. This represented an attempt to understand the role that human instrumentality played as PAOC worshippers engaged in corporate worship.

## OBSERVATIONS

### i) Divine Naming

In regard to divine naming, four general trends were observed (see figure 1).<sup>26</sup> First, by comparison, there were significantly fewer references to the First Person of the Trinity in the reported PAOC songs. Of the 103 songs, nine songs offered a specific reference to "Father," while four additional songs offered a generic reference to "God" that appeared to be an allusion to the First Person of the Trinity.<sup>27</sup> In total,

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hymns are sung in Canadian evangelical contexts. Further study in both countries is needed to accurately indicate how frequently hymns are being sung in contemporary American and Canadian evangelical churches. Anecdotally and generally, it is assumed hymn singing is in steep decline.

<sup>25</sup> See Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*; Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.

<sup>26</sup> Several of these trends are also observed in varying degrees in the majority of independent studies, including Ruth's, mentioned above.

<sup>27</sup> For a compelling exploration of the Trinity through a tripartite framing of divine names, see R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity. Volume 1: Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011); Soulen, Gerhard Wehmeier, and Gerhard Sauter, "Der Trinitarische Name Gottes in Seinem Verhältnis Zum Tetragramm," *Evangelische Theologie* 64, no. 5 (January 1, 2004): 327–



of the 1,335 divine names recorded in the songs in this study, only 3.1% (or 41 of the total divine names) were direct addresses or implicit references to God as Father.

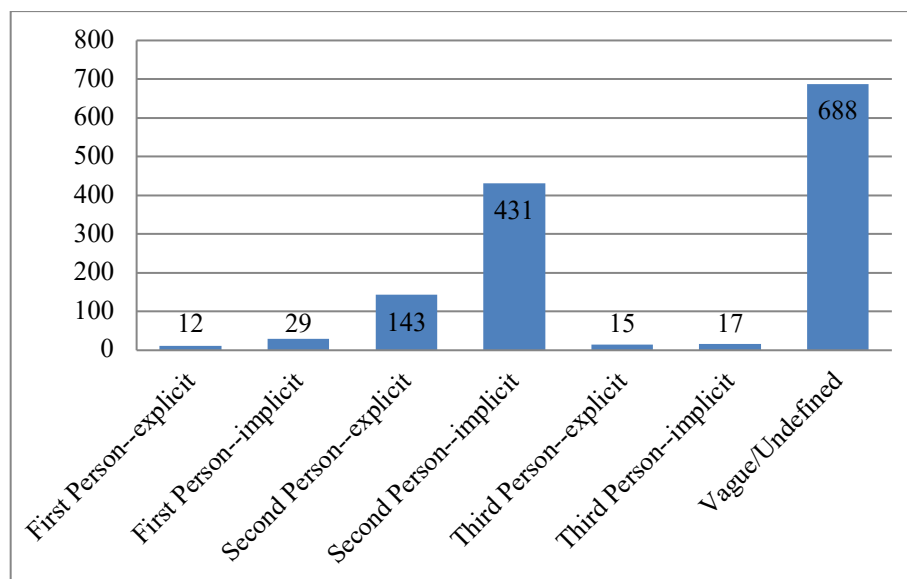


Figure 1. Divine naming—evaluated by cumulative sum total.

A similar trend was observed in regard to the Third Person of the Trinity. Of the 103 songs analysed, only 12 possessed a specific or implied reference to “Spirit.” In total, less than three percent (a total of 32) of all the divine titles directly referenced the Holy Spirit.

Concerning references and addresses to Jesus Christ, higher numbers were clearly observed. Of the 103 reported PAOC songs, a total of 47 offered at least one explicit reference to Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> In sum, of the 1,335 divine names, 43% (or 574 of all the divine names) were direct or indirect addresses or references to the Second Divine Person. Only two songs [Chris Tomlin’s “How Great is Our God” and Hillsong Worship’s “This I Believe (The Creed)”] explicitly referred to or named all three Persons in one fashion or another.

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<sup>28</sup> This included references to “Jesus,” “Him,” “Christ,” “He,” and “Son” as well as implied divine titles where, by virtue of the content and context of the song, a Christological emphasis was clearly implied. In these cases, references to “Beautiful One,” “Savior,” “Lamb,” “Coming King,” “Redeemer,” and “Cornerstone” were most common.

A final trend was observed in regard to divine naming in the selected lyrics. Of all the songs represented in this study, 55% of them (or 57 songs in the repertoire) contained only vague or generic references to God in which there was no definitive way of determining a direct address or reference to the First, Second, or Third Divine Person of the Trinity.<sup>29</sup> Expressed another way, 52% (or 688 out of a total of 1,335) of the total references addressed or denoted abstract divine names such as “God,” “Lord,” “King” and, by far the most common, “You.”<sup>30</sup>

## ii) Divine Actions

By collecting and coding the verbs (i.e. active, passive, and “linking/state-of-being” verbs) associated with the actions of God in the reported PAOC songs, some patterns also emerged (see figure 2).<sup>31</sup>

First, in a substantial number of songs, the acts of the divine Persons were detached from explicitly biblical narrative.<sup>32</sup> In 34% of the total divine action verbs (330 of 990 verbs), there was no explicit reference to God’s acts in salvation history.<sup>33</sup> Noticeably absent were references, for example, to the fall of humanity, the flood, God’s dealing with Israel, the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, the earthly ministry

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Ford interprets this “genericising of God” as particularly detrimental as evidenced in this following quote: “There is no clear message in songs like that, no hint of doctrine. As you listen, you might apply the words to God. But there’s nothing to stop you thinking about the attractive girl sitting in front of you.” Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Robin Knowles Wallace draws a similar conclusion about ambiguous references to a divine “You” and “Lord” in an analysis of 47 popular songs in 2003-2004. Wallace, “Praise and Worship Music: Looking at Language,” 26-27. Similar observations are found by Evans in regard to generic God references, Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*, 164 and Jenell Paris, “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever,” in Woods and Walrath, *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*, 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> In total, 990 verbs were associated with the acts of God in the reported songs from this study.

<sup>32</sup> Andy Goodliff also recognizes this pattern in his study of Christian worship music. Andrew Goodliff, “‘It’s All About Jesus’: A Critical Analysis of the Ways in Which the Songs of Four Contemporary Worship Songwriters Can Lead to an Impoverished Christology,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 81.3 (July 1, 2009): 258-259. This claim can also be found in John D. Witvliet, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Theology and Practice of Christian Worship in the Reformed Tradition” (University of Notre Dame, 1997), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth also acknowledges this pervasive trend. Ruth, “Is God Just Hanging Out on the Sofa? (Initial Wonderings About the Inactivity of God),” 3.

of Jesus, and the ascension.<sup>34</sup> This is not to suggest biblical references were entirely absent from these songs. A careful examination of the lyrical content in this study clearly revealed that many Scriptural references did, in fact, exist.<sup>35</sup> However, these references were most prominently derived from poetic language sited in the Psalms, and prophetic and apocalyptic biblical texts—particularly those that tended not to ex

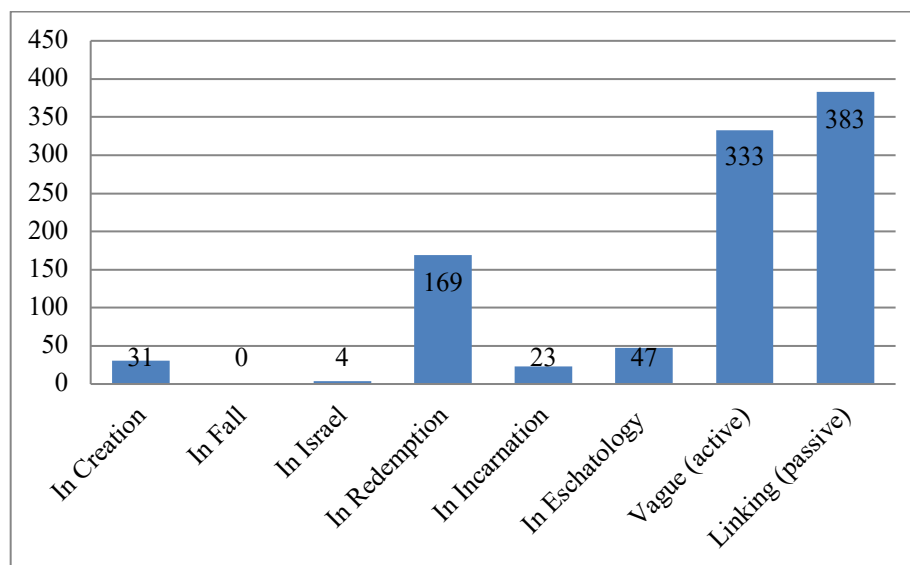


Figure 2. Divine action in salvation history—evaluated by cumulative sum total.

<sup>34</sup> Parry observed this among Vineyard worship songs in his study. Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*, 1. See also John D. Witvliet, “Discipleship and the Future of Contemporary Worship Music,” in Woods and Walrath, *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*, 185.

<sup>35</sup> Ruth acknowledges that “many of the composers mention deriving their songs from Scripture, either by directly singing a biblical text, or by scriptural allusion or short phrases. The Psalms are the scriptural material most mentioned in the accounts of composition and most suggested for future compositions. While the use of Psalms is commendable and historical, it contributes to a lack of trinitarian content in this study’s songs since the triune God is not obvious there. Moreover, if a song is scripturally derived, the biblical connection is self-validating; there seems to be no need for theological revision” Ruth, “Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi: The Trinity in the Most-used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs,” 352.

plicitly refer to concrete salvation history. Of the 103 songs, 28% (or 29 of the total songs) contained only generic divine actions with no conclusive connection to the biblical text.<sup>36</sup> This can briefly be illustrated in the following lyrical phrases (where “You” is a reference to God): “*You opened my eyes,*” “*Come once again to me,*” and “*Take me as You find me.*”

Notably, of all the actions attributed to God, 32% (or 312 of 990 verbs) described divine actions directly linked to a human object (e.g. “*You came to save us*” and “*He rescued my soul,*” while 11% (106 of 990) were imperative commands invoked by human subjects (e.g. “*Consume me,*” “*Heal my heart,*” “*Remember your people*”). In other words, these examples reinforce that over 43% of the acts attributed to God were, in fact, references to God’s ability to meet individual and corporate worshippers’ needs rather than descriptions of divine actions in and of themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Conversely, the 28% of verbs (274 of a total 990 verbs) that *were* explicitly associated with God’s acts in salvation history could be delimited by five basic sub-groups: 3% indicated God’s involvement in creation (where references to the First Person of the Trinity were most likely to be found), 0.4% indicated some explicit reference to Old Testament narrative, 17% referred to Jesus’ actions in redemption (i.e. death, resurrection, and ascension), 2% were tied to Jesus’ acts in the Incarnation, and 5% of the total references correlated to the acts of God in eschatology (where Holy Spirit addresses and references were most likely to be found).<sup>38</sup> The remaining 39% of the references were “linking/being verbs” (a total of 383 verbs). That is, though these verbs did not state a specific action in salvation history, they nonetheless offered description of the nature of God’s character. Two examples of these are “(God), *You are faithful,*” and “*How great is Your love for me.*”

### iii) Worshipper Actions

<sup>36</sup> Andy Goodliff draws similar conclusions about songs “divorced from any narrative context.” Goodliff, “‘It’s All About Jesus’: A Critical Analysis of the Ways in Which the Songs of Four Contemporary Worship Songwriters Can Lead to an Impoverished Christology,” 258–259.

<sup>37</sup> Michelle K. Baker-Wright, “Intimacy and Orthodoxy: Evaluating Existing Paradigms of Contemporary Worship Music,” *Missiology* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 173.

<sup>38</sup> Of note and particular reference to this study, *none* of the songs in these five categories represented an example in which all three divine persons were described as actively engaging with each another.

Finally, in regard to the acts of the worshippers, a comparison of singular and plural pronouns, an analysis of the tense of utilized verbs, and an account of the most frequently referenced acts of the worshipper revealed some observable trends.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding a comparison of the number of singular and plural pronouns, a total of 1,341 were recorded and coded from the list of PAOC reported songs (see figure 3).

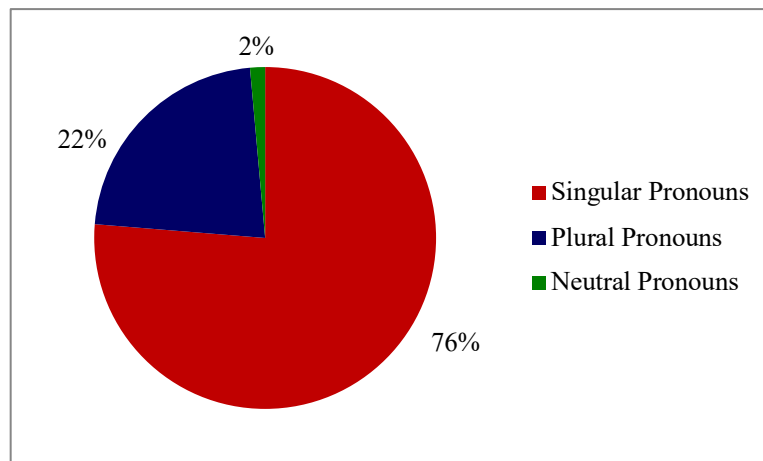


Figure 3. Human pronouns—evaluated by cumulative sum total.

Pronouns categorized as “singular” were “me,” “I,” “I’m,” “my,” “I’ve,” “mine,” “I’ll,” and “I’d.” The pronouns categorized as “plural” were “we,” “our,” “we’ll,” “us,” and “we’re.” When all the pronouns were tabulated and coded, 76% of the total pronouns were singular and 22% were plural. Expressed another way, 68% (or 70 songs) of the total songs evidenced a *singular exclusive* or *singular predominant* pronoun emphasis while 28% (or 29 songs in the song corpus) expressed a *plural exclusive* or *plural predominant* pronoun stress. Viewed together, an overwhelming partiality toward singular pronouns in the reported PAOC songs was evident.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Lester Ruth writes, “If God seems passive in these songs, we are not. Humans usually get the good verbs in the songs.” Ruth, “Don’t Lose the Trinity! A Plea to Songwriters,” 4.

<sup>40</sup> James Steven has drawn similar conclusions in his study of popular contemporary choruses in the charismatic Anglican movement in the 1990s. James H.S. Steven, “Charismatic Hymnody in the Light of Early Methodist Hymnody,” *Studia Liturgica* 27, no. 2 (January 1, 1997): 224.

Concerning the tense of verbs associated with the worshipper, a total of 1,037 verbs were tabulated and coded (see figure 4). Of those verbs, 78% were expressed in the present tense, 17% expressed the acts of the worshipper in the future tense, and 5% of the total number of verbs expressed the actions of the worshipper in past tense. When the songs were viewed as a collective whole, similar numbers emerged. In 84% of the songs (or 87 in total) a predominance toward the present actions of the worshipper was evident, 10% (or 10 songs in total) predominantly emphasized future actions, while only one song placed a predominant importance on the past actions of the worshipper engaged in PAOC worship contexts. In this regard, an overwhelming emphasis on the present tense experience of the worshipper was evident in the reported songs.

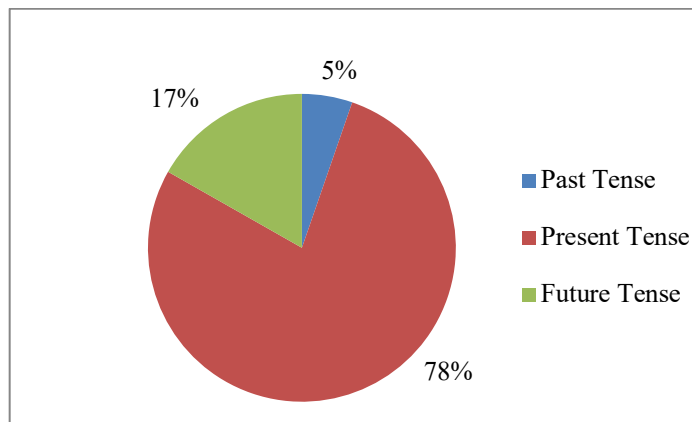


Figure 4. Tense emphasis in human verbs—evaluated by cumulative sum total.

Regarding a tabulation of the most commonly described actions of the worshipper, verbs that appeared in more than 10% of the songs were: “sing,” “rise,” “shout,” “come,” “let,” and “bow.” Of these verbs, “sing” was the overwhelmingly common verb expressing the acts of the worshipper in the lyrics, evident in 19% (or 20) of the reported songs.

## DISCUSSION

Various inferences can be drawn from this data. First, it may come as a surprise to some that the PAOC churches in this study expressed such a meagre emphasis on God, the Holy Spirit. To be fair, it is worth considering at a level deeper than explicit lyrical content analysis how prominently an address to the Holy Spirit was assumed—though not explicitly named—in the corporate worship settings of reporting churches for this study.<sup>41</sup> In other words, pneumatological impulses that may have been absent in lyrical content might have been more clearly evident in the “delivery” of the songs. Here, further ethnomusicological and pheno-textual studies would have proven beneficial.<sup>42</sup> That said, the overwhelming absence of references to the Holy Spirit in the lyrics of the most commonly reported PAOC songs should serve as a red flag for a Canadian denomination that has, historically, viewed the Holy Spirit as central to a distinctly Pentecostal theology and to those expressing a growing concern about a loss of Pentecostal identity.<sup>43</sup>

Second, in regard to trends related to the acts of God in the reported songs, this study may serve notice that PAOC churches have inadvertently accepted vague and hazy conceptions of God in the most common contemporary Christian music sung in our worship settings.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Evans’ and Monique Ingalls work is particularly sensitive to a multi-dimensional analysis of contemporary Christian music. Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*; Ingalls, “Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship.”

<sup>43</sup> Gunton lamented the “major deficiency in the development of pneumatology in the West,” and he drew a correlation between this weakness and an inadequate expression of the eschatological dimension of Christian theology. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 65; *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartsorne and Karl Barth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 163. This concern is also echoed by Arnold Van Ruler who, in his observation of the undervaluing of the Holy Spirit, argues for a “more catholic, purely Trinitarian way.” Arnold Albert van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays toward a Public Theology*, Toronto Studies in Theology (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Gunton described these notions as, “floating off into abstraction from the concrete history of salvation.” Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 34. As Goodliff writes, “Worship is impoverished when it is divorced from the whole drama, where the story is only partially told. Worship that is limited theologically means a people who are poorly served.” Goodliff, “‘It’s All About Jesus’: A Critical Analysis of the

An attenuated view of the triune God's acts in salvation history, not to mention a general disregard of significant aspects of the biblical narrative, may play to a Canadian Pentecostal tendency toward proof-texting and isolating specific theological matters believed to be most relevant. Might a Pentecostal veracity of the biblical text, actually serve as a potential obstacle, at times, to a more profound understanding of God's actions in a great, unfolding drama?

Third, a common critique among academics who analyse contemporary congregational songs is that a significant portion of the most popular music places an overemphasis on the personal and present experience of the individual Christian worshipper within a corporate worship setting.<sup>45</sup> Based on the data from this paper, it could be argued that PAOC churches may have reinforced these trends in a majority of commonly sung songs between 2007 and 2015. The findings indicate that many of these songs evidence a strong emphasis on the individual worshipper and their present-day experience at the expense of references to corporate, past, and future experiences. To qualify, it can be reasonably argued that a theology of experience, couched in the intimate, if not sensual, language of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century hymns, has a historical precedence that far predates the contemporary Christian music movement that emerged in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Still, the data from this paper should serve as a caution to a Canadian religious group that may wish to avoid a prevalent anthropocentric lyrical message that may parallel the worst aspects of a Western culture possessing

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Ways in Which the Songs of Four Contemporary Worship Songwriters Can Lead to an Impoverished Christology," 268.

<sup>45</sup> See Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*; Goodliff, "It's All About Jesus': a Critical Analysis of the Ways in Which the Songs of Four Contemporary Worship Songwriters Can Lead to an Impoverished Christology;" Ruth, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Attempts at Classifying North American Protestant Worship;" Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*.

<sup>46</sup> Evans, *Open up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*, 136; Woods and Walrath, *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*, 56; Susan J. White, "What Ever Happened to the Father? The Jesus Heresy in Modern Worship," *The General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church*, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/what-ever-happened-to-the-father-the-jesus-heresy-in-modern-worship> (accessed 6/13/2018).



what, some like Gunton have argued, are distorted views about intimacy and emotional security.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, a particularly interesting observation gleaned from this paper is that the most common verbs associated with the acts of the PAOC worshipper (i.e. “sing,” “stand,” “worship,” and “see”) are those which actually describe the *act* of worship rather than express actual worship of our triune God. Michelle Baker-Wright describes this tendency as “looking into a funhouse mirror and reflecting upon reflecting about God.”<sup>48</sup> The propensity to understand Christian worship as exclusively something that Christians *do*, irrespective of Christian notions of mediation and divine means of grace, is particularly chastised in the work of theologian J.B. Torrance. In a culture that tends to overemphasize human instrumentality, Torrance implored that our worship not, inadvertently, devolve into an exclusively anthropocentric experience.<sup>49</sup> A question raised from the data in this and other independent studies remains whether or not the primary reference point in many of these songs is on the somatic and privatized expression of the worshipper to the detriment of the One intended for worship.<sup>50</sup> Songs sung in PAOC churches that imply worship is an act of human orientation do not help to advance their best theological arguments.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In closing, this paper has attempted to shed light on a discrepancy that exists between PAOC trinitarian statements of faith and popular lyrics sung in our contemporary contexts. By looking at divine naming and divine and worshipper actions in these lyrics, an argument

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<sup>47</sup> Gunton wrote, “Modernity promised us a culture of unintimidated, curious, rational, self-reliant individuals, and it produced. . . a herd society, a race of anxious, timid, conformist sheep and a culture of utter banality.” Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16. See also Baker-Wright, “Intimacy and Orthodoxy: Evaluating Existing Paradigms of Contemporary Worship Music,” 169.

<sup>48</sup> “Intimacy and Orthodoxy: Evaluating Existing Paradigms of Contemporary Worship Music,” 175. See also Steven, “Charismatic Hymnody in the Light of Early Methodist Hymnody,” 222.

<sup>49</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 29–30.

<sup>50</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing down: a Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 77.

<sup>51</sup> Witvliet, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Theology and Practice of Christian Worship in the Reformed Tradition,” 8.

can be made that inconsistencies do, indeed, exist. Based on the findings of this paper, I offer that PAOC worshippers may be vulnerable to the weaknesses associated with an under-developed trinitarian expression.

Further studies that move beyond lyrical content analysis could serve to exploit this apparent discrepancy in our midst. Research that considers how trinitarian impulses are expressed in Pentecostal sermon content and Christian education curriculum, for example, might offer additional insight to the conclusions of this paper. Further, an analysis of trinitarian teaching and understanding in our higher education institutions might prove particularly telling. A university student recently wrote, "As far as Worshiping (sic) the Trinity goes, I do not feel as though musical worship is where we need to distinguish the Trinity. I think God would rather people Worship (sic) Him than get caught up in the logistics of theology. It is minutia and not important to the greater picture and task."<sup>52</sup> If this quotation by a fourth-year Canadian ministerial student is any indicator of the most common trinitarian views among present and future PAOC ministers, there may be cause for concern. Finally, and more positively, additional studies may reveal how the PAOC, with unique roots and a trinitarian heritage, may be distinctly open to the possibilities associated with a more developed and relational trinitarian understanding. These potential areas of research could represent new and possibly fruitful ventures in honour and worship of our triune God.

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<sup>52</sup> This quotation is used with permission received from Kingswood University professor, Betty Weatherby. The quotation was referenced in Betty Weatherby, "Historical Development of Worship Studies" (The Institute for Worship Studies, 2010).

**APPENDIX A: THE MOST POPULAR SONGS ON THE PAOC CHURCH CCLI TOP 25 LISTS FROM OCTOBER 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2007 TO OCTOBER 31<sup>ST</sup>, 2015 (in alphabetical order)**

Complete list of selected song titles

10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)	Draw Me Close	Here For You	In Your Light	Once Again	This is Amazing Grace
Above All	Enough	Here I Am To Worship	Indescribable	One Thing Remains (Your Love Never Fails)	Today is the Day
Alive	Everlasting God	Holy And Anointed One	Jesus Messiah	Open The Eyes Of My Heart	Trading My Sorrows
Amazed	Forever	Holy Is The Lord	Joy To the World (Un-speakable Joy)	Our God	Un-changing
Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)	Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)	Holy Spirit	King Of Majesty	Our God Saves	We Are Free
At Your Name	Forever Reign	Hosanna	Let It Be Known	Overcome	We Fall Down
Awe-some Is The Lord Most High	Freedom Reigns	Hosanna (Praise Is Rising)	Lord I Need You	Revelation Song	Whom Shall I Fear God of Angel Armies

Beautiful One	Friend Of God	How Deep the Father's Love For Us	Love Came Down	Shout To The Lord	You Are Good
Because He Lives	Glory To God Forever	How Great Is Our God	Made Me Glad	Sing Sing Sing	You Are My King (Amazing Love)
Blessed Be Your Name	God I Look To You	How Great Thou Art	Majesty	Sing To The King	Your Grace Is Enough
Breathe	God of Wonders	How He Loves	Mighty To Save	Still	Your Great Name
Broken Vessels (Amazing Grace)	Good Good Father	I Am Free	My Redeemer Lives	Stronger	Your Love Never Fails
Christ Is Enough	Great Are You Lord	I Could Sing Of Your Love Forever	My Savior Lives	Surrender	Your Name
Come Now Is The Time To Worship	Hallelujah	I Exalt Thee	Nothing Is Impossible	The Anthem	
Consuming Fire	Hands to the Heavens	I Give You My Heart	O Praise Him	The Heart of Worship	
Cornerstone	Happy Day	I Know Who I Am	O The Blood	The Stand	

Days Of Elijah	He Is Faithful	I Love You Lord	Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)	The Way	
Desert Song	Healer	In Christ Alone	Offering	This I Believe (The Creed)	