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# An Examination of Contemporary Christian Music Success Within Mainstream Rock and Country Billboard Charts

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**An Examination of Contemporary Christian Music Success  
Within Mainstream Rock and Country Billboard Charts**

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## **Abstract**

Ranging from inspirational songs void of theological language to worship music imbued with overt religious messages, Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) has a long history of being ill-defined. Due to the genre's flexible nature, many Christian artists over the years have used vague imagery and secular lyrical content to find favor among mainstream outlets. This study examined the most recent ten-year period of CCM to determine its ability to cross over into the mainstream music scene, while also assessing the impact of its lyrical content and genre on the probability of reaching such mainstream success. For the years 2008-2018, Billboard data were collected for every Christian song on the Hot 100, Hot Rock Songs, or Hot Country Songs in order to detect any noticeable trend regarding the rise or fall of CCM; each song then was coded for theological language. No obvious trend emerged regarding the mainstream success of CCM as a whole, but the genre of Rock was found to possess the greatest degree of mainstream success. Rock also, however, was shown to have a very low tolerance for theological language, contrasted with the high tolerance of Country. As such, it is reasonable to question whether Mainstream Christian Rock is even really Christian at all.

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## **Introduction**

For a long time, a standard understanding of Christian Music included songs with blatantly theological lyrics that alienated infrequent church attendees, or songs that failed to reach beyond church-going crowds because they were never aired on secular radio stations. In the past year, however, there has been a noticeable shift of CCM into the mainstream music scene via artists such as Lauren Daigle and Tori Kelly that have created legitimate questions regarding what constitutes actual “Christian Music.”

## **Literature Review**

### **History of Christian Music**

Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) or what some might call “inspirational music” is a genre of music that focuses on God and Christianity. It is the result of the marriage of two seemingly contradictory genres, but by the end of the 1960s, it had radically grown in acceptance both by the church and secular music scenes.

#### *The Jesus Movement and Christian Rock*

Although the term CCM had not yet been coined, the genre’s roots go back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when young Christians of the hippie generation began creating “Jesus Music” (Prothero 132) that was more contemporary than hymns and gospel music within the

church at the time. In his *Contemporary Worship Music*, John Frame wrote "About that time, many young people from the sixties' counterculture professed to believe in Jesus. Convinced of the bareness of a lifestyle based on drugs, free sex, and radical politics, 'hippies' became Jesus people" (52). In a 2018 *New Yorker* article "The Unlikely Endurance of Christian Rock", Kelefa Sanneh described that time period as what Tom Wolfe called "one of the most extraordinary religious fevers of all time" fueled by "the hippie movement, with its eagerness to remake society." It was during this religious fever that we see gospel music take its first steps into the mainstream with Christian Rock. Until this point, the general attitude of the church toward contemporary Christian music is best reflected in a 1958 advice column by Martin Luther King Jr. in response to a young musician's question about being both a gospel and rock n roll musician: "The profound sacred and spiritual meaning of the great music of the church must never be mixed with the transitory quality of rock and roll music." Less than a year later, however, "King's protégé Andrew Young declared that rock and roll had done 'more for integration than the church'" (Sanneh). Ultimately, the acceptance of Jesus Music into the 1970s mainstream essentially created an industry of its own. Paul Wohlegemuth, author of *Rethinking Church Music*, even predicted "[the] 1970s will see a marked acceptance of rock-influenced music in all levels of church music. The rock style will become more familiar to all people, its rhythmic excesses will become refined, and its earlier secular associations will be less remembered" (Baker 140). His predictions proved valid when churches who originally dismissed Rock n Roll as "sinful" began adapting the music to appeal to young people.

Much of the success of Christian Rock during this time can be credited to Larry Norman, the "founding father of Christian Rock". He released his first solo Christian album called *Upon*

*This Rock*, a concept album in 1969 that was considered to be the first full-blown Christian rock album. The music of the album was “a blend of folk, psychedelic, and rock influences,” combined with “street language and gritty imagery” (Thompson 49). Norman is a perfect example of how some Christian artists began using non-traditional music and lyrics in order to cast a wider net into the music scene and blur the lines of genre. This is a common tactic still used today by CCM artists to enter into mainstream spaces, and it begs the question that this paper will begin to tackle: is this music truly “Christian” or just inspirational?

The genre of “Contemporary Christian Music” didn’t officially develop in the music industry until 1975 when Myrrh Records began to sign Christian rock bands (McNeil 266). The term was coined by a critic named Ron Moore in 1976 when he used it to describe Richie Furay’s rock album *I’ve Got a Reason* which reflected Furay’s newfound Christian beliefs (Nanamaker). Furay was another in a long line of popular artists that pushed the boundaries of their genres into Christian music.

Since Larry Norman and the 1970s Jesus Movement, CCM continued to develop into a very profitable genre of music. However, a huge reason for its mainstream success is its ability to blur the lines of the genre like Norman with *Upon This Rock* and Furay with *I’ve Got a Reason*. While the inspiration and meaning behind CCM is the gospel of Jesus Christ, not all of the music under this category explicitly states the religious beliefs behind it. The ability to blur these lines is the common thread throughout any CCM song in history that’s achieved mainstream success. Early pioneers like Norman and Furay set the tone of Christian music for decades to come.

*1980s & 1990s*



Because of the success of these early crossover pioneers' ability to blur the lines of genre, the Jesus music phenomenon grew into a multimillion-dollar industry by the 1980s (Powell). Artists like Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, and Jars of Clay were able to find major crossover success in the mainstream Top 40. The 1980s also found the CCM genre to be a broader, more all-encompassing genre than Christian Rock of the 1960s and 1970s. Amy Grant, for instance, is considered the "Queen of Christian Pop" and another prime example of how vague lyrics and imagery can successfully catapult a Christian song into the mainstream. In *The Week's* 2016 article entitled "Who Killed the Contemporary Christian Music Industry?", Tyler Huckabee writes "Grant was especially revelatory, a comely teen whose lyrical vagaries left it a very open question as to whether she was singing about God or boys. It was a potent strategy, and it led to several Billboard-topping singles and the first Christian album to ever go platinum". Artists like Amy Grant were proving CCM to be a relevant and even popular contribution to the music industry. Huckabee writes that "This laid the foundation for the next wave of faithful crooners, including Phil Keaggy, the Newsboys, Steven Curtis Chapman, and Jaci Valesquez" and that "together, these artists helped CCM become one of the fastest growing music genres in America, with many bands finding crossover appeal among both spiritual and secular listeners."

Hip-hop was another genre that made its way onto the CCM scene in the 1990s, and one trio turned grunge group (called dcTalk) was one of the decade's greatest CCM success stories. Huckabee noted that "In 1997, it wasn't unusual to find dcTalk songs on MTV or Billboard charts, making them one of CCM's most prized commodities: a Christian band that also appealed to the culture at large." The music of dcTalk had an edge that transcended Christian music and reached out to even non-believers. "We were reaching out," Kevin Max of dcTalk says. "We

were trying to communicate to the non-believer as much as we were communicating to the believer” (Huckabee). Once again, major success was achieved from an ability to reach beyond the natural limitations of Christian music. It is this experimental and transcendent approach that made CCM a major success throughout the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s.

### *The Decline of Mainstream CCM*

After decades of massive success, the 2000s had people begging the question “what happened to CCM?” It seemed to many as though CCM’s experimental era had ended and that musicians were reverting back to their old limited ideas of “church music”. Although the genre still had a large audience of Christian believers, it was losing its ability to enter the mainstream because of rigid lyrics and theology. Kevin Max stated that:

Today, when I listen to Christian radio and see the festivals and see what's happening in the church, I don't see a whole lot of that interactivity. Where I'm at right now, it's almost like the doors have shut on the experimenting with lyrics and images and ideas to get people interactive.

(Huckabee)

Matt Bronlewe, a prominent CCM producer of the 1990s, contrasted modern CCM by saying: “There was a time where you might hear a song about God, but there was an understanding that it might also bring something else to the table.” He also contributed much of CCM’s decline in experimental creativity to the rise of the digital market. “There's not much room to fail anymore,” he explains. “And failure's such a creative gift. When the ability to fail is taken away, it fuels a lot of fear. It narrows the pool of producers and writers to such a degree that there's a sameness that starts to occur” (Huckabee).

## *The Rise of Worship Music*

After the rise of the digital age and decline of the experimental era of CCM, the industry shifted their focus to what was considered the safest bet in Christian music: worship music. Worship music differs from Christian music in many ways, but one main difference is that worship music sings *to* God, rather than simply singing *about* God. Worship music is usually directly addressing Gospel and Biblical theology. While a common identifying factor of CCM music to this point has been vague language, worship music leaves little question as to whom and what the songs address. Today, worship music is CCM's largest and most profitable export - "a fact worship-focused bands like Hillsong United have leveraged into playing stadiums around the world" (Huckabee). However, it is extremely rare for a worship song to appear on mainstream charts if overtly singing about Jesus. The shift from experimental crossover CCM to worship music is a huge reason why CCM lost its mainstream relevance in this millennium.

### **Christian Music Today**

In the last decade, CCM has once again experienced a noticeable shift into the mainstream music scene. The year 2018 showed many mainstream artists creating Christian music, as well as Christian artists creating mainstream Christian chart-toppers. Below are some notable artists from the last few years that exemplify the changing landscape of CCM.

#### *Lauren Daigle*

At the top of the list is the highly successful Lauren Daigle, who in 2018 hit the Billboard List for "Top Christian Artists". Daigle is a perfect example of how Christian artists are crossing over into the Pop music scene and breaking into the mainstream. Her 2018 album *Look Up Child* rose to heights generally unheard of for female Christian artists and debuted at number three on

the Billboard 200 chart with the biggest sales week for any Christian artist in nearly a decade, with 115,000 units (103,000 of which were traditional album sales). In one *Rolling Stone* article entitled “A Christian Singer Is Bigger Than Drake and Ariana Grande This Week”, Amy X. Wang wrote “Lauren Daigle’s chart-topping debut highlights the deep endurance of Christian music in America,” and in an interview with the *Associated Press*, Daigle talked about staying true to her Christian fan base while also casting a wider net to reach a broader audience through vague lyrics and an extremely modern style (Hall). In fact, one of her most popular songs from the album was “You Say” which was performed live by a contestant on the 2018 season of *The Voice* as well as the 2019 season of *American Idol*. Daigle performed the song on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and the 2019 Billboard Music Awards. The song was a shocking success to everyone following the CCM genre when it broke into the Billboard Top 40 chart. Daigle’s success continued to grow as she made appearances on popular talk shows like *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* where she performed another vaguely Christian song from her album entitled “Still Rolling Stone”. When asked about her mainstream success from *The Christian Post* she responded:

I think the passage that says, ‘Go out into the world and draw people unto Him,’ the Great Commission, that's what I think about in regards to the mainstream aspect...I wasn't looking at [making my music] as in mainstream versus Christian. I was like, 'OK, what is the purest version of me? Or what is the purest thing that God has written into my spirit and how do I express that? How do I communicate that?

(Gibson)

This answer is vaguely reminiscent of the way Larry Norman spoke about his album *Upon This Rock* when explaining his intentions to “break down the church doors” during the Jesus

Movement. It is clear that artists like Lauren Daigle are picking up where CCM left off in the 1990s, and are once again carrying Christian music back into the mainstream.

### *Kanye West*

One of the most influential mainstream artists today, Kanye West is leading the trend back toward Christian crossover music. *Cosmopolitan* (in January 2019) even released an article in which author Mehera Bonner speculates that Kanye might have some Christian music in the works based on recent social media posts showing him “tapping into his spirituality” plus a comment from Kanye himself:

You can take music that's going on right now and you change it, and you put the lord, Jesus, make it Christian. And it kinda draws the youth to church. You know what I mean? It makes church cool.

(Bonner)

Kanye actually has a long history of faith-inspired music. For example, his album *The Life of Pablo* has deep spiritual roots, and a 2016 article by Genius’ Kevin Loo even gave five reasons why Kanye's latest album can be considered Gospel, which ranged from numerous Biblical references to Kanye’s depiction of a classical Biblical struggle. In fact, Kanye even categorized the album as Gospel when he told Big Boy’s Neighborhood “This is a gospel album ... A whole lot of cursing on it, but it’s still a gospel album” (Loo).

### *Tori Kelly*

Another artist that exemplifies this modern Christian crossover trend is pop singer Tori Kelly, who in 2018 fulfilled her long-time dream of recording a gospel album. The album *Hiding Place* reflected her deep Christian roots and launched at number one on Billboard’s Top Gospel

Album Chart. One of the top songs from the album “Never Alone” (featuring Kirk Franklin) also hit number one on the Billboard Gospel chart.

### *Avril Lavigne*

Popular crossover artists are too numerous to fully recount; however, Avril Lavigne’s crossover is too important to omit. In 2018, Lavigne made a return to music after a long battle with Lyme disease. During her fight, Lavigne’s faith grew and inspired new music to reflect that journey. She made her triumphant return with the Christian song “Head Above Water” which debuted on the Hot Christian Songs top five. According to Jim Asker’s Billboard article “Tori Kelly & Avril Lavigne Segue From Pop to Gospel, Christian Charts”, the song was “ fueled by 10,000 first-week downloads sold, good for a No. 2 start on Christian Digital Song Sales” (Asker). For some, Lavigne was the last artist expected to record a Christian album. According to Billboard, she banked “19 entries on the Billboard Hot 100 since 2002, including five top 10s, led by 2007’s pop-punk No. 1 classic ‘Girlfriend’” (Asker). She is best known for her pop and emo style of music with lyrics centering around boys, partying, and rebellion - making Lavigne another truly unique example of what CCM can look like today.

### **Crossovers**

As the history of CCM shows, the genre is one of constant change. The genre itself was born out of a desire to blend the message of the church with the popular sounds of the times and reach beyond the isolation of its culture. It was born out of a desire to fit into the mainstream. Today, nothing has changed. CCM cannot exist in isolation; it relies on the existence of other genres and popular musical trends to define its current state. Any piece of music that has appeal in more than one genre or audience can be considered a crossover, but what makes a Christian

crossover so common is it's unique potential to be recognized as two genres at the same time: one based on musical style and the other based on lyrics. Because of this large potential for crossover, it is worth clarifying some of the many ways a song can become a Christian crossover single. There are four common ways that this can happen. The first and probably the most common way a crossover happens is by a Christian artist releasing a Christian song that finds mass appeal through its vague lyrics. For instance, Lauren Daigle wrote "You Say" about God's love for her; however, the lyrics were vague enough to leave it up to the audience as to whom the "you" in the song refers. Another way a crossover can happen is through a popular secular artist of any genre releasing a non-Christian song with the lyrical potential to be about God, faith, or any other Christian concept. This is very similar to what happened with Daigle's "You Say"; however, in this case the song has been defined as Christian by a select group of Christian listeners rather than the artist. A great example of this would be "The Climb" by Miley Cyrus. This song was not written for a Christian audience, but the inspirational lyrics struck a huge chord with Christian audiences. It is also fair to assume that the Christian radio industry capitalizes on these types of opportunities; finding hugely popular songs that can be passed off as Christian and claiming them for their gain. Sometimes songs that have absolutely no Christian message can be claimed by Christian audiences just by the association the artist has with the Christian music industry. This happens when artists like The Fray or Switchfoot, who are known for dipping their toes in both Christian and secular pools, release a completely secular song that Christian audiences accept. And lastly, the same can happen for secular artists. When mainstream artists like Tori Kelly or Avril Lavigne release Christian music, their non-Christian

audiences will often accept this song because of the person singing it. It therefore becomes a Christian song in the mainstream or a Christian crossover single.

This new landscape of Christian music is one where Christian artists like Lauren Daigle invite secular audiences into their world, and religious audiences likewise invite secular musicians (like Avril Lavigne and Kanye West) to be part of their world. It is comprised of a combination of genres with lyrics ranging from inspirational music with no theological content to worship music with explicitly religious messages. This study will examine not only the success of CCM in the mainstream music scene in the last decade but also the genre and lyrical content of these songs and how they affect the mainstream appeal.

### **Methodology**

The data used in this study include every Christian single that appeared on the Hot 100 chart, Hot Rock Songs chart, and Hot Country Songs chart from 2008-2018 (as reported by Billboard.com). For the purpose of this study, “Christian single” is defined as any song that also can be found on a Billboard Christian chart. The Billboard charts calculate relative weekly popularity of singles and albums in the United States for various popular genres, which includes pop, country, rock, and contemporary Christian music. For this study, the author chose to focus on Rock and Country music, as they are two major players in the CCM music industry.

The Billboard Hot 100 chart is the music industry standard in the U.S. In this study, the Hot 100 will represent mainstream popularity across genres. The Billboard Hot Country Songs chart (the music industry standard for popular country music) will represent mainstream popularity for the country music genre. The Billboard Hot Rock Songs chart (the music industry standard for popular Rock music) will represent mainstream popularity in the rock music genre.



Rankings for all three charts are based on physical sales, digital sales, radio play, and online streaming.

First, an in-depth analysis was conducted for each chart for the years 2008-2018. Each song on these charts which also were eligible for placement on the Billboard Christian charts (Hot Christian Songs, Christian Airplay, Christian Digital Song Sales, Christian Streaming Songs) were categorized as “Christian Crossover Single” and recorded for the number of weeks spent on chart and peak position on the chart.

Borrowing from Megan Livengood and Connie Ledoux Book’s (2004) system of analysis used in their “Watering Down Christianity? An Examination of the Use of Theological Words In Christian Music”, every “Christian Crossover Single” from each chart was coded for theological words and classified into three categories: explicitly, moderately, and ambiguously religious. Operational definitions for each category were also borrowed from their system (as follows):

For this study, the operational definition of explicitly theological words is:

*Any single word that, if heard in a song in any context, would cause the listener to immediately classify the song as “religious.”*

The operational definition of moderately theological words is:

*Any single word that, when placed in a religious context, is obviously theological, and when used in secular contexts it still retains some reverence or religious feeling.*

The operational definition of ambiguously theological words is:

*A word that is often used in religious contexts, but carries no reverence or*

*religious feeling when used in secular context*

(Livengood and Book 9)

### **Data Analysis**

#### *Crossover Success*

Figures 1-3 illustrate the total number of Christian Crossover Singles on each chart, the sum number of weeks each single spent on said chart, and the average peak position of those singles for the years 2008-2018. From a collective examination of these data, it is clear that Rock is the dominant genre for Christian Crossover Singles. Even without considering unknown data from the 2008 Hot Rock Songs chart, (1) the total number of Hot Rock singles are more than twice that found in Hot Country, (2) the sum number of weeks spent on the Hot Rock chart is over four times those spent on the Hot Country chart, and on average, (3) Hot Rock singles rank seven spots higher than Hot Country singles. A yearly examination by genre, however, does not suggest any obvious trend of growth or decline for Christian Crossover Singles.

#### **Figure 1**

#### **Descriptive Data for Christian Crossover Singles on Hot 100 Chart (2008-2018)**

	<b>Number of Singles</b>	<b>Total Weeks on Chart</b>	<b>Average Peak Position</b>
<b>2008</b>	2	40	37
<b>2009</b>	6	107	50
<b>2010</b>	2	49	30
<b>2011</b>	2	2	92
<b>2012</b>	2	26	58
<b>2013</b>	1	3	83
<b>2014</b>	3	34	55
<b>2015</b>	3	4	63
<b>2016</b>	2	2	53
<b>2017</b>	0	0	0

<b>2018</b>	2	30	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>Overall Average: 56</b>

**Figure 2**

**Descriptive Data for Christian Crossover Singles on Hot Rock Songs Chart (2008-2018)**

	<b>Number of Singles</b>	<b>Total Weeks on Chart</b>	<b>Average Peak Position</b>
<b>2008</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>2009</b>	2	37	24
<b>2010</b>	7	145	22
<b>2011</b>	4	72	26
<b>2012</b>	3	38	32
<b>2013</b>	3	27	25
<b>2014</b>	5	30	24
<b>2015</b>	1	28	8
<b>2016</b>	7	62	34
<b>2017</b>	7	143	19
<b>2018</b>	5	59	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>641</b>	<b>Overall Average: 24</b>

\*Billboard Hot Rock Songs chart only archived to 2009.

**Figure 3**

**Descriptive Data for Christian Crossover Singles on Hot Country Songs Chart (2008-2018)**

	<b>Number of Singles</b>	<b>Total Weeks on Chart</b>	<b>Average Peak Position</b>
<b>2008</b>	1	5	52
<b>2009</b>	3	34	42
<b>2010</b>	1	20	1
<b>2011</b>	0	0	0
<b>2012</b>	0	0	0
<b>2013</b>	1	20	25
<b>2014</b>	3	30	16
<b>2015</b>	3	3	38

<b>2016</b>	5	26	37
<b>2017</b>	3	11	36
<b>2018</b>	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>Overall Average: 31</b>

*Lyrical Content*

Because CCM is so heavily based on lyrical content (Price 61), this study attempts to assess any relationship between lyrical content and mainstream success. Figures 4-6 illustrate the average frequency of explicitly, moderately, and ambiguously theological words per year in the lyrics of the three popular Billboard charts used in this study. When considering the total theological words for each year, there does not seem to be an overall decline. The frequency fluctuates over the years, which suggests that the numbers are not related to any systematic attempt to water down the lyrics.

**Figure 4**  
**Average Theological Words Per Song on Hot 100 Chart**

	<b>Explicitly</b>	<b>Moderately</b>	<b>Ambiguously</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2008</b>	1	0.5	0	1.5
<b>2009</b>	0.5	0.3	0.7	1.5
<b>2010</b>	0.5	0	0	0.5
<b>2011</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>2012</b>	0.5	0	0.5	1
<b>2013</b>	0	0	2	2

<b>2014</b>	1.7	0.7	10	12.4
<b>2015</b>	2.3	7	2.3	11.6
<b>2016</b>	1.5	1	6.5	9
<b>2017</b>	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs
<b>2018</b>	2	1.5	0	3.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>43</b>

**Figure 5**  
**Average Theological Words Per Song on Hot Rock Songs Chart**

	<b>Explicitly</b>	<b>Moderately</b>	<b>Ambiguously</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2008</b>	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs
<b>2009</b>	0	6	0	6
<b>2010</b>	0	0	0.3	0.3
<b>2011</b>	0	0	0.75	0.75
<b>2012</b>	0	3.7	0.7	4.4
<b>2013</b>	0	0.3	0	0.3
<b>2014</b>	2.6	0.8	0.6	4
<b>2015</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>2016</b>	0	0.1	0.6	0.7

<b>2017</b>	0.6	0.7	2.1	3.4
<b>2018</b>	1.6	0	3.6	5.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>8.65</b>	25.05

**Figure 6**

**Average Theological Words Per Song on Hot Country Songs Chart**

	<b>Explicitly</b>	<b>Moderately</b>	<b>Ambiguously</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2008</b>	1	1	0	2
<b>2009</b>	1.7	1.7	6	9.4
<b>2010</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>2011</b>	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs
<b>2012</b>	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs
<b>2013</b>	1	0	1	2
<b>2014</b>	5.7	3	5	13.7
<b>2015</b>	2	3	2	7
<b>2016</b>	8.8	2.2	2.8	13.8
<b>2017</b>	1.7	4.7	0.3	6.7
<b>2018</b>	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs	No Songs
<b>Total</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>17.1</b>	55.6

The fluctuations in the average frequency of theological words per song do not correlate with the fluctuations in crossover success shown in Figures 1-3. Because the population sizes for each year in each genre are so small, these inconsistencies could be due to outliers - or songs in each year that did exceptionally well for a “Christian song” compared to the other songs found in that same chart that year. For example, “Fireflies” by Owl City reached major mainstream and CCM success in 2009. The song peaked at number one on the Hot 100 and stayed on the chart for a total of 31 weeks. This song had a total of zero theological words in it and was interpreted by most listeners as a completely secular song. In order to account for songs such as these and gain a better idea of how theological language can influence success, Figures 7-9 break down each genre by the top 10 songs as computed from weeks spent on the chart along with each song’s theological word counts. Of these top ten Christian Crossover Singles to reach the Hot Rock chart in the last decade, 60% of them have no theological language whatsoever, and 80% of them have no explicitly or moderately theological language. Out of the four songs that do have theological language, 50% of those songs contain only ambiguously theological words. While considering this data, the Hot Rock chart seems to have very low tolerance for theological language or overtly religious songs.

**Figure 7**

**Top Ten Hot Rock Christian Crossover Songs (weeks on chart and theological word counts)**

Song	Artist	Weeks on Chart	Explicit	Moderate	Ambiguous	Total Theological Words
Again	Flyleaf	33	0	0	0	0

Brother	NEEDTOBREAT HE	28	0	0	0	0
Chain Breaker	Zach Williams	26	0	0	4	4
Old Church Choir	Zach Williams	26	3	5	4	12
Feel Invincible	Skillet	26	0	0	0	0
Testify	NEEDTOBREAT HE	25	0	0	0	0
Hard Love	NEEDTOBREAT HE	24	0	0	0	0
Awake and Alive	Skillet	24	0	0	2	2
Multiplied	NEEDTOBREAT HE	22	3	4	3	10
The Sound (John M Perkins' Blues)	Switchfoot	21	0	0	0	0

Of the top ten Christian Crossover Singles to hit the Hot Country chart in the last decade, 100% of the songs have some sort of theological language in them, and 90% of them have explicitly theological language. When considering this data, the Hot Country chart seems to be much more tolerant of theological language or overtly religious music than the Hot Rock chart.

### Figure 8

#### Top Ten Hot Country Christian Crossover Songs (weeks on chart and theological word counts)

Song	Artist	Weeks on Chart	Explicit	Moderate	Ambiguous	Total Theological Words
Something In The Water	Carrie Underwood	24	3	1	3	7
The Climb	Miley Cyrus	23	0	0	4	4
Thy Will	Hillary Scott	21	4	1	0	5
Changed	Rascal Flatts	20	1	0	1	2
Temporary Home	Carrie Underwood	20	1	0	0	1



I Wish	Point of Grace	10	2	2	0	4
Back To God	Lauren Daigle & Reba McEntire	7	3	3	0	6
How You Live (Turn Up The Music)	Point of Grace	5	1	1	0	2
Silent Night	Kelly Clarkson	4	14	7	4	25
When I Pray For You	Dan + Shay	3	2	9	0	11

Of these 2008-2018 Top Ten Christian Crossover Singles to reach the Hot 100 chart, 50% have no theological language whatsoever, 60% have no explicit theological language, and 80% have no moderate or ambiguous theological language. As such, the Hot 100 appears, at best, to have a moderate tolerance for theological language. Given that the Hot 100 is a cross-genre chart encompassing both rock and country, it is not surprising that the amounts of tolerance vary (from very tolerant to very little tolerance). In fact, the Hot 100 chart indicated that 16% and 20% of its songs came from the Hot Rock and Hot country charts respectively. Every Hot Rock song on the Hot 100 chart was completely void of theological language, while every Hot Country song on the Hot 100 chart had some degree of theological language. The difference between Rock (16%) and Country's (20%) percentage amounts to one single song. Given, then, that both genres have essentially the same probability of breaking into the Hot 100 but with differing tolerance levels, it becomes reasonably clear that the remaining 64% need to be examined as a collective group. Of these songs, 50% had explicit theological language, 38% had moderate theological language, 31% had ambiguous theological language, and 44% had no theological language whatsoever.

**Figure 9**

## Top Ten Hot 100 Christian Crossover Songs (weeks on chart and theological word counts)

Song	Artist	Weeks on Chart	Explicit	Moderate	Ambiguous	Total Theological Words
You Found Me	The Fray	39	1	0	0	1
Fireflies	Owl City	31	0	0	0	0
Live Like We're Dying	Kris Allen	29	0	0	0	0
Let You Down	NF	28	0	0	0	0
The Climb	Miley Cyrus	28	0	0	4	4
Something In The Water	Carrie Underwood	20	3	1	3	7
Temporary Home	Carrie Underwood	20	1	0	0	1
Whatever It Takes	Lifeshouse	20	0	0	0	0
All Around Me	Flyleaf	20	2	1	0	3
Heartbeat	The Fray	18	0	0	0	0

### Conclusion

Christian Crossover success has been sporadic and unpredictable in the past decade, yielding no discernable trends regarding its rise or fall in mainstream circles. The simple lack of a firm definition for CCM makes tracking its success very difficult. Some might argue that the inclusion of songs like “The Climb” by Miley Cyrus or “Fireflies” by Owl City in this study is misleading because they were not created to be “Christian Songs”. Throughout this study, however, it’s become abundantly clear that the power of defining music is in the hands of the audience; if a Christian audience has found any kind of religious value in a piece of music it then becomes Christian. As E.A. Bucchianeri famously writes in *Brushstrokes of a Gadfly*, “Art is in the eye of the beholder, and everyone will have their own interpretation”. For the sake of honoring the audience and taking personal opinions out of this study, the author has chosen to

allow the charts to define what is and isn't Christian music. Through this study, however, we've learned that some audiences are more receptive to "Christian" music than others. At the same time, some Christian audiences are more receptive to secular music than others.

A comparison of the success of the two dominant Christian genres (Hot Rock and Hot Country) identifies more consistent success within Christian rock music in the past ten years. Christian rock's secular intolerance to theological lyrics, however, supports the conclusion that the most dominant type of crossover happening in the rock genre is that of secular music crossing over into Christian audiences. Christian country's high tolerance of such theological language, on the other hand, supports the conclusion that the most dominant type of crossover happening in the country genre is that of "Christian" music crossing over into secular audiences. Even with these obvious differing lyrical contents, both country and rock were surprisingly able to achieve similar rates of success crossing into the Hot 100 chart outside the confounds of country and rock audiences. Therefore, the success of a Christian crossover single in the mainstream is indeed dependent on its degree of theological lyrics and basic genre. Country music appears to have the freedom to use explicitly religious lyrics, while rock seems more comfortable with secular language to convey religious messages.

The success of Contemporary Christian Music is hard to track due to the absence of one industry definitional standard. Why a "secular" pop song like Miley Cyrus' "The Climb" reaches the Christian music charts while other famously inspirational songs like Christina Aguilera's "Beautiful" fail to achieve such crossover is a mystery. Many songs labeled simply inspirational by some often are labeled Christian by others (and vice versa). There is no one defining factor whereby Christian music can garner full agreement on the issue, but one common trend seen

throughout the decades is the ability of Contemporary Christian Music to bring people together regardless of genres, religion, and culture.

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