

A HOME FOR THE OUTCASTS: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN ROCK AS AN  
EXPRESSION OF POSTMODERN CHRISTIANITY

BY

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## List of Abbreviations

CCM - Contemporary Christian Music

NRM - New Religious Movement

## Abstract

Christian rock music has a rich history in Evangelical culture, providing believers with a unique form of popular music created by those who share their religious identity. Although the scene has changed significantly over time, it is still analyzed as a *sui generis* phenomenon with a fixed essence. This thesis presents a new framework for studying Christian rock by adopting a social constructionist approach to demonstrate how the meaning of “Christian rock” has evolved in response to shifting power relations. Building on this framework, this thesis delves into the spiritual significance of Christian rock for fans and performers by shedding light on a movement within the scene for Evangelicals who feel alienated from mainstream churches and are seeking alternative expressions of their faith. In particular, Christian rock events, such as the Cornerstone Festival, offer these individuals a safe space to explore alternative expressions that may not be available in traditional Evangelical settings while remaining within the protective cocoon of the Evangelical nomos. As such, they serve as a rite of passage for young people as they navigate the challenges of growing up and transitioning into new phases of their lives. By contextualizing the Christian rock scene within the broader trend of Americans distancing themselves from organized religion in favor of more individualized expressions of faith, Christian rock emerges not just as a small subculture, but as a powerful cultural force that offers valuable insight into broader religious and cultural trends in America.

## Introduction

In 2021, I had the privilege of attending FurnaceFest, a secular hardcore punk music festival in Birmingham, Alabama, that had previously operated from 2000-2003. Following the festival's closure, former attendees recognized its impact on the hardcore punk scene and became nostalgic about their experiences there, which culminated in the festival's resurgence in 2021 to a sold-out attendance.

Although FurnaceFest is a secular music festival, the appreciation of the long-awaited reunion resembled a religious experience for many of the artists and attendees. On the festival's opening day, artists tentatively made vague references to "something special" in the air and expressed their gratitude to the festival's attendees and organizers for allowing the event to happen. As the day progressed, the audience's welcoming response to religious comments emboldened performers to speak more candidly about their faith, with various performers openly expressing gratitude to God for the festival and casually talking about their religious beliefs on stage. By the end of the first night, Chad Johnston, the founder and lead organizer of the festival, took to the stage between performances to publicly offer prayers to Jesus Christ, setting the standard for the rest of the weekend.

With the festival's atmosphere of alcohol consumption, profanity, and aggressive music, I was not expecting the environment to be particularly religious. However, the conversations I had with other attendees suggested that a high proportion came from sheltered Christian environments. While most of the

people I talked to had strayed from the traditional church<sup>1</sup> in their adult lives, they still demonstrated a desire to be part of a spiritual community. Many of the performers were also considered part of the Christian rock scene at some point in their careers, a testament to Christian rock's success in this genre. However, as with the attendees, many of these musicians have since distanced themselves from the "Christian" label and ceased marketing to Christian audiences.

This trend is indicative of the broader shift occurring in America, as church attendance is rapidly declining and organized religion is increasingly rejected. Those who are leaving their churches are not necessarily abandoning their spirituality altogether but are instead joining the growing subset of Americans classified as "spiritual but not religious" (McDowell 2017a, 58). Many Evangelical churches view this widespread rejection of organized religion as a significant issue and are struggling to attract new members with limited success. However, FurnaceFest, a secular hardcore music festival, has inadvertently gathered these spiritual seekers together in a religious environment. So, why does this festival draw so many people from conservative Christian backgrounds? And why do they feel such a strong sense of spiritual fulfillment at secular gatherings such as FurnaceFest, but not in the traditional church, despite the church's best efforts?

### Cornerstone Festival

Similar to FurnaceFest, Cornerstone Festival, a Christian rock music festival that ran from 1984-2012 in rural Illinois, has also provided a profound sense of community, which can help provide insight into these questions. Moreover, since the closure of the festival in 2012, there has been a growing

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<sup>1</sup> The term "church" throughout this thesis refers to the Evangelical church.

sense of nostalgia among former attendees, who have come to appreciate the significance of the festival and express a desire for its revival. In academic literature, for example, scant information was published on this festival during its operation. However, there has been a notable increase in interest in this festival since the mid-2010s, especially among scholars who had previously attended this festival themselves, such as sociologist Amy McDowell, music industry scholar Shawn David Young, and sociologist Colleen Pastoor. Interestingly, this trend has not been observed for other defunct Christian rock festivals. Ichthus Music Festival, for example, was a larger and older Christian music festival in the neighboring state of Kentucky, which features many of the same artists as Cornerstone and also closed its doors in 2012, yet has not sparked the same level of interest in subsequent years as Cornerstone, suggesting that there is something unique about Cornerstone that has made it especially meaningful to its former attendees.

This thesis explores the significance of the Cornerstone Festival and the wider Christian rock scene, not solely as entertainment outlets but as avenues for exploring one's faith. As Americans migrate away from organized religion and into the "spiritual but not religious" category, they move towards a postmodernist perspective of Christianity, challenging overarching narratives about the correct way to practice the faith and embracing a more individualized and subjective version of Christianity. The Christian rock scene helps guide them along this journey by offering alternative expressions of the Christian faith in contrast to a traditional church setting. Cornerstone, in particular, served as a site of

experimentation for those who had become disillusioned with the established church. In this vein, it shares similarities with new religious movements (NRMs), which serve as sites of experimentation during the transition to adulthood. Studying Cornerstone in this light, I argue that it serves as a liminal space, functioning as a rite of passage for youth and young adults during their transition to the next phase of life.

### Overview of Christian Rock

Christian rock music has its roots in the 1950s and 1960s when rock and roll began to emerge as a popular genre. At the time, conservative Christians were highly skeptical of rock music, viewing it as a corrupting influence on youth. However, some rock and roll stars, such as Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, also produced gospel music, which provided a bridge between secular and religious music.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a countercultural movement emerged in the United States known as the "Jesus movement." This movement was comprised of young people who sought to live out their faith in a way that was relevant to their generation. The Jesus movement embraced the hippie culture of the time, with its emphasis on peace, love, and social justice, but rejected the drugs and promiscuity associated with it. Instead, the Jesus people turned to the long-haired, peace-loving Jesus Christ as a revolutionary figure who embodied these ideals (Young 2015; Gudauskas 2004).

As part of this movement, a new form of Christian music emerged that blended rock and roll with Christian lyrics. This music was initially known as



"Jesus music" and was produced by a range of artists, including Larry Norman, Randy Stonehill, and Keith Green. Although the music was met with some resistance from conservative Christians, it quickly gained popularity among young people who were looking for a way to express their faith in a contemporary context.

As the Jesus movement faded in the mid-1970s, Christian rock music continued to evolve. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the genre began to split into subgenres, including punk rock, heavy metal, and classic rock. Artists such as the Crucified, Stryper, and the Resurrection Band helped to define these subgenres, and Christian rock festivals like Cornerstone and Creation Fest provided a platform for Christian rock bands to perform and connect with fans. By the 1990s, Christian rock had become even more diverse, with artists experimenting with a broader range of styles, including alternative rock, rap rock, and indie rock. Bands like Jars of Clay, DC Talk, and P.O.D. became mainstream successes, with songs that were both musically and lyrically complex. As these artists helped to legitimize the genre, Christian rock exploded in mainstream popularity in the 2000s, as will be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

### Overview of Cornerstone Festival

Cornerstone Festival has played a key role in shaping the Christian rock scene by serving as a central location for the gathering of artists and fans of Christian rock and associated subgenres. Its roots can be traced back to the formation of the Resurrection Band in 1972, which served as one of the earliest Christian rock bands in the scene. As they toured across the country in a bus

they held "Jesus rallies," where they would perform their music live, and were instrumental in establishing the Jesus People USA (JPUSA) commune, which hosted Cornerstone and still exists today as one of the remaining bastions of the Jesus people movement.

As Christian music festivals were evolving into safe, mainstream, contemporary Christian gatherings in the late 1970s and early 1980s, JPUSA challenged this trend by creating a music festival that placed a greater emphasis on artistic freedom than on meeting the expectations of the church. While other music festivals were largely funded by Evangelical interests and were judged by how many people were "saved," Cornerstone rejected corporate sponsorships altogether. This unconventional approach allowed greater opportunities for both artists and fans. Fans were able to congregate with others who shared their interest in this genre, and artists were able to perform to large crowds of fans for the first time, often planning their performances months in advance.

By challenging the established church and welcoming alternative expressions of the Christian faith, Cornerstone embraced a postmodernist perspective on Christianity. As a response to modernism, postmodernism questions the grand narratives and metanarratives that have traditionally structured human understanding and instead emphasizes the subjective, contextual, and contingent nature of knowledge and reality. In postmodern thought, knowledge and meaning are seen as socially constructed, and different interpretations of reality are produced in different cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. In the Christian context, postmodernism emphasizes that theological

claims and religious traditions are constructed within specific cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts and emphasizes the importance of personal experience, community, and narrative in shaping one's understanding of faith and spirituality.

Following broader trends in the American religious landscape, many in the Christian rock scene embrace this postmodern perspective on Christianity by challenging overarching narratives of the established church and adopting more individualized expressions of the faith. While many feel pressured to conform to the established church, Cornerstone emerged as a platform for experimenting with alternative forms of worship that might feel out of place in a more traditional Christian setting. By providing a safe space to test different ways of practicing the Christian faith, Cornerstone had a profound impact on the broader Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) scene that has become a major influence on American religion and culture.

### Chapter Summaries

The first chapter focuses on a transformative shift in the Christian rock scene in the 2000s. While Christian rock artists were originally marginalized by both the church and the secular music scene, the church soon recognized the potential of Christian rock music to evangelize the lost and invested substantial resources into promoting the genre. Similarly, secular music promoters later recognized the untapped market of tens of millions of Christians and began investing resources in promoting Christian rock music. The increased support from both the church and the secular music industry propelled Christian rock bands to the forefront of the mainstream music scene in the 2000s. This change

marked a significant departure from the genre's earlier status as a small subculture, with Christian rock now topping even secular music charts. Demographic shifts in the audience also led to significant changes in the music itself; lyrics became more ambiguous, spirituality became just one of many different subjects artists sang about, and musicians became bolder about challenging the church.

The second chapter delves into the relationship between the Christian rock movement and the Evangelical church. It begins by exploring the complexities of the term "Christian" through the lens of social constructionism to demonstrate how its meaning has evolved over time. The term "Christian rock" was initially viewed as an oxymoron, as it involved affixing a holy label to a seemingly demonic genre. As the Christian rock scene grew and developed, rock music was increasingly seen as morally neutral, and "Christian rock" was predominantly understood as rock music with faith-based lyrics intended to promote a Christian worldview or convert new believers. However, as the genre became more mainstream, faith-based lyrics were no longer deemed essential for Christian rock, which points to a further shift in the understanding of the term.

In the second half of the chapter, the focus turns to the performers and fans in the Christian rock scene. I argue that these individuals can accurately be characterized as Christian, citing their alignment with the four ingredients of Evangelicalism, as identified by David Bebbington, as well as their overlap with Fundamentalism. However, there is also a movement within the Christian rock scene, which I label the "Cornerstone Movement," as a homage to the

significance of the Cornerstone Festival, whose members feel like outsiders to the church due to cultural differences. Those in this movement challenge many of the ideologies common in the Evangelical community, such as conservative politics and traditional gender roles, and criticize the church for overemphasizing conformity to arbitrary cultural standards while neglecting their commitment to the teachings of Jesus.

The final chapter of this thesis offers an in-depth analysis of the Cornerstone Movement by examining it as a sect within Evangelicalism. Building upon the discussion of the similarities and differences between this movement and the mainstream church in the preceding chapter, this final chapter delves further into the shared culture and spirituality of those who attend this music festival to provide a framework for analyzing the significance of this festival for participants. While rejecting many of the fashion trends and forms of worship of the traditional Evangelical church, those in the Cornerstone movement have adopted new forms by incorporating musical subcultures into the CCM scene. Various themes in alternative music genres, such as aggression and despair, are reinterpreted in a Christian context to reflect Christian themes, and Christianity is interpreted as a spiritual journey and a quest for truth rather than a set of beliefs or practices.

Through this alternative form of Christianity, Cornerstone offered a refuge for those who saw themselves as outsiders to the church, providing them with a safe space to explore their spirituality within a Christian environment that shielded them from the criticisms that they might face in their home church.

Framing the movement in this way, the chapter concludes by analyzing the movement in light of research conducted on new religious movements (NRMs). Building on the research of scholars such as Saul Levine and Eileen Barker, this chapter highlights the role of NRMs as liminal spaces offering a rite of passage for people who are struggling to break free of childhood attachments as they transition into adulthood. Since many of the attendees at Cornerstone come from sheltered environments and struggle to find their place in the world as adults, this festival provides a safe cocoon for these people to freely explore their Christian faith.

Overall, this thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the Christian rock scene, not only as a subculture but also as a significant movement that has substantially influenced American culture. The Christian rock movement presents a distinctive viewpoint into Christianity from the standpoint of artists, which can aid in deciphering contemporary religious trends in America. Additionally, the movement can facilitate a Christian's spiritual growth by offering them secure opportunities to explore and question their faith without fear of being ostracized from the church. Given the increasing prominence of the Christian rock movement, it is likely to emerge as a significant force in American spirituality and entertainment, thereby becoming an invaluable source of information for social scientists.

Overall, this thesis offers a deeper understanding of the Christian rock scene, not just as a subculture but as a major movement that has had a profound impact on American culture. Further, the Christian rock scene offers a unique

look into Christianity from the perspective of artists, which can help provide insight into contemporary religious trends in America. As the rising prominence of this movement demonstrates, the Christian rock movement is likely to be a significant force in American spirituality and entertainment in the future and will be a valuable source of information for social scientists.

## Chapter 1: A New Era of Christian Rock

When many people think of Christian rock, they recall the 1970s and early 1980s when artists such as Larry Norman, Stryper, and Petra broke new ground. The music scene during this period was a tight subculture of youth who isolated themselves from popular entertainment and created bubbles free from the world's destructive influences. The music they enjoyed could not be found on television or radio. Instead, fans would keep an eye on record labels, churches, Christian bookstore bins, and magazines supporting the Christian rock scene, often gathering at concerts or music festivals to connect with others in this subculture. If understood in this way, the Christian rock scene has largely died out; most of the record labels that defined this genre are defunct or have shifted to other interests, churches like Calvary Chapel, based in Southern California, are no longer centers for the movement, most of the music festivals have closed their doors, and most of the musicians in this era are older and rarely if ever, perform live or create new music.

However, while this original scene might have disappeared, Christian rock is still alive; in fact, it is more popular than ever. Today, Christian rock bands such as Skillet, Thousand Foot Krutch, and Twenty-One Pilots are a constant presence on mainstream radio, are topping secular music charts, and can often be found on television and in movies. This shift in Christian rock has also coincided with a change in the music itself. Not only does modern Christian rock music encompass a greater variety of genres than in earlier years, but many of the characteristics that defined the earlier scene are also absent. In contrast to



earlier years, Christian rock music no longer places the conversion of others to the Christian faith as primary importance. For many artists, references to their Christian faith are vague or absent entirely, and much of the music has introduced profanity, dark topics, and other themes that would have previously been condemned in the scene. Yet, this music scene has still maintained a Christian element that keeps it distinctive from other mainstream acts. While references to faith are no longer as explicit as they were in earlier years, artists in this movement still use their music as an outpost of their spirituality in a way that aligns with the four ingredients of Evangelicalism laid out by David Bebbington, and many retain the separatism of many conservative churches, viewing the music as a safe outlet to explore mainstream music styles within the protective net of the Evangelical church.

Current scholarship on Christian rock generally fails to account for this shift in the music scene. Research is typically centered on books such as *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*, published in 1999, and *Raised by Wolves: The Story of Christian Rock & Roll*, published in 2000, as well as the research of William D. Romanowski in the early 1990s, all of which were published before this shift occurred. As a result, scholarship is often inconsistent or contradictory, failing to adequately account for the differences between Christian rock in the contemporary world and Christian rock produced several decades earlier.

In this chapter, I offer a new framework for understanding Christian rock by highlighting a notable shift that occurred in the 2000s. Christian rock music

previously existed as a subculture within the Evangelical church, which was marketed primarily through Christian bookstores. However, secular record labels later recognized the potential of Christian rock artists to reach an untapped market of tens of millions of Christians while remaining relevant to secular audiences. Therefore, they acquired or partnered with Christian record labels to promote Christian rock artists. With this influence of mainstream music promoters in the Christian rock scene, the music began to be marketed in retail stores such as Walmart and Best Buy rather than focusing primarily on Christian bookstores, allowing it to be seen by more people. Sales in Christian bookstores too, which had previously been overlooked, began to be included in music ranking charts, providing further visibility to these artists. As a result, there was a sharp rise in the commercial success of Christian rock artists in the 2000s, as indicated by album sales and placement on Billboard charts. As the audience and promoters of Christian rock became increasingly diverse, the music became increasingly diverse, too, often challenging the church as an institution and singing about secular topics, whereas they previously tended to promote an Evangelical worldview. While the study of Christian rock has hitherto been confined to learning about a specific subculture, this shift in the scene demonstrates that it is a powerful cultural force, having a widespread impact on the mainstream church and American culture in general.

#### Movement of Outsiders: The Formation of the Christian Rock Scene

When the Christian rock scene first emerged, it was a movement of outsiders pushed to the margins by the church and the mainstream music scene,

both of which were reluctant to adopt this new form of music. This reluctance to adopt new forms of music is nothing new (Howard and Streck 1999, 32); when rock and roll emerged, there was also widespread concern about the corrupting influence this new style of music would have on American youth, following on the heels of panic over jazz music in the 1920s and social dancing in the 1890s (Nekola 2013, 410). However, while these concerns began to taper off in the mainstream in the 1960s, conservative Christians remained critical of rock music (Howard and Streck 1999, 32; Nekola 2013, 411). Prominent Christian leaders, such as Bob Larson, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Falwell, became harsh critics of all forms of rock n roll, including Christian rock. They argued that the syncopated beat in rock music brainwashed youth into godless communism (Nekola 2013, 412), that it physically harmed people as well as plants (Nekola 2013, 414), and that it brainwashed listeners through subliminal messages (Giagnoni 2007, 60). Many believed that rock music emerged from music used to glorify Satan, tracing the lineage through “heathen tribal and voodoo rites” or through Robert Johnson, whom they believed sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his music-playing abilities (Nekola 2013, 412).

This fear of rock music was widely shared by conservative Christians and coincided with broader societal fears, such as communism, atheism, sexual promiscuity, and multiculturalism (Nekola 2013; Giagnoni 2007, 60; Howard and Streck 1999, 32-36). When John Lennon claimed that The Beatles were “more popular than Jesus,” he was met with fierce backlash from Christians in America (Haines 2011, 229-230). Ozzy Osbourne’s incident of biting the head off the bat

during a live performance was widely publicized as an example of the corrupting influence of rock music, further fueled by explicit endorsements of satanism by metal bands at the height of the Satanic Panic (Moreman 2003, 5). Various punk concerts involved self-mutilation, public defecation, and indecent exposure from the performing musicians (McNeil and McCain 2016). Rock stars were well-known for indulging in drugs, experimenting with Eastern religions, and being sexually promiscuous (Howard and Streck 1999, 32).

In many ways, rock music became the embodiment of fundamentalist fears, so when Christian rock emerged, many Christians hesitated to adopt it into the church. For many, Christian rock was seen as a “‘commercial imitation’ of mainstream music ‘with redundant religious themes’ or, in the terms of evangelicalism, ‘a blatant compromise with the world’” (Howard and Streck 1999, 19). Christians drew comparisons between Larry Norman’s 1969 album *Upon This Rock*, widely regarded as the first Christian rock album, and the Beatles to demonstrate the threat it posed to the church (Haines 2011, 241). As Amy Grant was rising to become the first commercially successful Christian pop star in the 1980s and 1990s, many Christians criticized her leopard jacket, condemned her show of independence, and accused her of selling out to Satan (109-110). The band Stryper also came under fire in the 1980s for embracing glam metal’s heavy music and feminine fashion trends. As John J. Thompson reports, “not everyone was thrilled about these spandex-clad, long-haired, makeup-wearing, girlish guys singing loud music and throwing Bibles around” (152). These concerns were further compounded by their 1986 album *To Hell With the Devil*, in

which the image of the band on the front cover bore a suspicious resemblance to the creatures of the abyss described in Revelation 9, causing some to ask if the band was inviting people to go to Hell with the Devil (Watkins 1996).

While mainstream rock acts were typically able to shrug off these criticisms of conservative Christian leaders, it impacted the Christian rock scene more significantly because many of these artists both came out of and marketed their music towards Christians with this separatist ideology. These artists disagreed with the widespread condemnation of all forms of rock music and instead believed that rock music was a morally neutral tool that could be used for righteous purposes, as articulated by Christian rock pioneer Larry Norman in his song “Why Should the Devil Have all the Good Music?” (Giagnoni 2007, 69). However, they generally agreed with the sentiment expressed by Christians who opposed Christian rock that Christians should isolate themselves from worldly influences. Further, they did not deny that much of rock music was a corrupting influence that should therefore be avoided. However, the corrupting influences were attributed to the artists who created and performed the music rather than the rock music itself (Howard and Streck 1999, 51). Therefore, they used rock music as a tool to bring people out of the world and into the church.

Using the terminology of Howard and Streck, most Christian rock bands in this era represented “Separational CCM,” which corresponds to the “Christ against culture” perspective outlined by theologian H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture* (1952). For these artists, their music was a ministry intended to “maintain a stark distinction between Christian and secular culture

while at the same time remaining committed to reaching non-Christians and making converts” (Howard and Streck 1999, 16). However, these two goals often conflicted, as artists’ “commitment to evangelism – and the cultural relevance it requires – has routinely demanded that concessions be made to secular culture” (16). Unwilling to make these concessions, their music became isolated within the Christian subculture as “music created by and almost exclusively for evangelicals” (16).

In addition to their marginalization from the church, Christian rock artists also found themselves marginalized by the mainstream music scene. While these pioneers of Christian rock viewed their music as a tool of evangelism to save the lost (Howard and Streck 1999, 49-74; Abraham 2020, 41), the average person did not want to be preached to when trying to enjoy music (Dueck 2000, 131; Lauritsen 2011, 10; Romanowski 1993, 55). In addition, many saw Christian rock as a bad imitation of mainstream bands, and Christian rock artists were denounced as “non-authentic,” parroting the lessons of the church rather than making their own music (Lauritsen 2011, 11-12; Giagnoni 2007, 146). So, while these pioneering artists were trying to reach as broad of an audience as possible to help spread the gospel, most struggled to branch out into the mainstream music scene, instead playing mostly to other Christians and relying on love offerings to support themselves (Giagnoni 2007, 90; Schultze 1992, 152).

### Acceptance

However, even with this opposition from both the mainstream market and the church, Christian rock pioneers pressed on in a battle to legitimize their music

in the eyes of the public. Their power in this fight was significantly strengthened by Christian institutions who recognized the potential of this music to share the gospel to the lost, such as Calvary Chapel in the 1970s, which hosted concerts by pioneers such as Larry Norman and Randy Matthews and likely influenced the conversion of Bob Dylan (Cusic 2010, 163, 274). Following on the heels of Woodstock in 1969, considerable resources were also poured into Christian music festivals as a modern form of revival services; in 1970, Faith Festival drew in 14,000 attendees; in 1971, 20,000 people attended Love Song Festival; and Campus Crusade for Christ's Explo '72 music festival the following year drew 80,000 people that heard the gospel (Plowman 1971; "Love Song" 1973, 8; Shepherd and Horn 2012, 139). Capitalizing on this momentum, record labels dedicated to producing and distributing Christian rock formed, helping to solidify the genre as an established scene, such as Maranatha! Music (1971), Myrrh Records (1972), Solid Rock Records (1975), and Sparrow Records (1976). Magazines and Zines promoting Christian rock also formed and became prominent in the Christian market, such as *CCM Magazine* (1978) and *Cornerstone* (1971), the precursor to the Cornerstone Festival. Recurring music festivals, such as Ichthus Festival (1970) and Creationfest (1979), also became established during this era, continuing to gather tens of thousands of people well into the twenty-first century.

In the mainstream music scene, people also became increasingly welcoming of Christian rock music. As the rock genre developed throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, many artists, such as Black Sabbath, the Sex

Pistols, and Metallica, began to embrace dark and pessimistic music that influenced many other artists. As a result, the industry was looking for opportunities for more positive messages, which was met by Christian rock artists (Giagnoni 2007, 111). In addition, many mainstream artists employed Christian themes in their lyrics; in their 1968 song “Mrs. Robinson,” Simon and Garfunkel famously sang, “Here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson; Jesus loves you more than you should know;” the 1965 song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” by the Byrds is essentially a passage from the Bible put to popular music; the rock band U2, formed in 1976, was very open about their Christian faith (Giagnoni 2007, 19); and even Black Sabbath preached a Christian message in their 1971 song “After Forever.” Although the mainstream audience did not want to feel like they were being preached to through their music, these songs demonstrated an openness to religious themes and contributed to the normalization of Christian language in the secular music scene (Lauritsen 2011, 10).

In addition to employing religious language in their music, mainstream music acts also endorsed this new form of rock created by Evangelicals; Bob Dylan became a born-again Christian after attending services at a church pastored by a Christian rock artist (Cusic 2010, 163). Jeremy Spencer, the vocalist and composer for Fleetwood Mac, ran off with the Children of God, a new religious movement within the Jesus People movement, and began playing free concerts with his new community (Giagnoni 2007, 67). Pat Boone had similar goals as the early Christian rock stars, asking, “Why not talk to young people about Jesus in their own language, and with the sound of their own



music?" (Howard and Streck 1999, 8). He also financially supported the Christian rock scene, offering to use his swimming pool as a baptismal and donating thousands of dollars to Larry Norman and Randy Stone Hill to create a Christian rock record label (Thompson 2012, 52).

While Christian Rock was initially embraced by only a handful of churches, the Evangelical community also became more accepting of Christian rock over time. Although many Christians were accustomed to church music that was sung acapella or with soft instruments, televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker exposed them to Pentecostalism and charismatic forms of Christianity that had a much louder, more energetic, and more emotional style of worship (Giagnoni 2007, 61, 80). Further, as Evangelicalism evolved, a new generation of Christians that grew up with Christian rock stepped into prominent leadership roles, helping to shape public opinion (Giagnoni 2007, 115). By the end of the 1980s, rock music was only condemned if it promoted harmful behaviors, such as drug use and sexual promiscuity (Steinberg and Kincheloe 2019, 235). The anti-rock views of the televangelists were pushed to the fringes of American Christianity, and rock music instead became seen as morally neutral (Giagnoni 2007, 69).

With this support and endorsement of Christian institutions, as well as an increasing openness to Christian rock from the mainstream music audience, the Christian rock genre started to thrive and evolve into the scene as it exists today. This was due, in large part, to changing marketing approaches that were largely influenced by the career of Christian pop star Amy Grant. Releasing her first

album in 1978 with impressive sales, Dan Harrell, Grant's brother-in-law, and Mike Blanton, Word Records' A&R director in Nashville, partnered as her managers in 1980. In contrast to other Christian musicians that performed largely in churches, Blanton and Harell recognized that these artists "never made it" in terms of commercial success and instead took a more mainstream approach, performing primarily in concert venues and becoming more subtle about Grant's Christian message. This change of direction proved successful as her following album, *Age to Age* (1982), demonstrated unprecedented success in the CCM scene, and became the first gospel album to be certified platinum by the RIAA, with 90% of the sales coming from Christian bookstores (Romanowski 1993, 52).

*Age to Age* was released through Myrrh Records, whose parent company, Word Records, was the most prominent Christian record label at the time, controlling up to 65% of the Christian music market and producing at least two-thirds of the "top 15 albums on the Billboard contemporary charts" at "any given time" (Darden 1986, 78). As the Christian rock scene was becoming established, though, it captured the interest of secular record labels, who bought or partnered with Christian record labels to profit from them; ABC acquired Word Records (1974), Sparrow partnered with MCA (1978), and EMI purchased Sparrow records (1992), StarSong (1994), and Forefront (1996) (Howard and Streck 1999, 12; Giagnoni 2007, 89-90, 113; Romanowski 1993, 55). The success of Amy Grant, in particular, captured the interest of A&M Records, who partnered with Word Records in 1985 for distribution rights of Grant's material (Romanowski 1993, 54).

As with other Christian rock promoters, Word Records marketed primarily to Christian bookstores, accounting for 80-85% of their album sales and almost 90% of sales for Amy Grant's *Age to Age* album (Darden 1986, 78; Romanowski 1993, 54). However, the widely used sales tracking service SoundScan did not include sales from Christian retail stores until 1995, causing the commercial success of these artists to go largely unnoticed in the mainstream market (Giagnoni 2007, 113). In addition, following their partnership with A&M, Word learned that only about 10% of their target audience of 100 million Americans that are "active in some way in church" frequent Christian retail stores. Therefore, they announced that their "next thrust" would be to target these 90 million Christians with "secular" buying habits by branching out into secular retail stores (Romanowski 1993, 55-56).

In addition to this change in marketing strategies, the lyrical content of Grant's music changed as well. Before Word partnered with A&M, Grant's music had a strong religious focus, as with other Christian rock albums at the time, but this narrow focus was imposed on Grant's music by her record label. As with many other musicians who feel like they have to compromise their music to conform to the interests of their record labels, Grant explained that she "felt boxed in at times, as far as Christian music [was] concerned," and suggested that "it would be blind and closed-minded to say that only music with Christian lyrics has any artistic value" (Romanowski 1993, 52). In contrast to Word Records, A&M, who wanted to expand Grant's fanbase while maintaining her Evangelical fans, supported Grant's desire to broaden her lyrical themes. As a

result, while Grant's music remained wholesome, explicit references to Christianity became less frequent, and her albums were marketed in the popular music section of retail stores rather than the sacred music sections (Romanowski 1993, 55, 57).

While the early Christian rock scene was dominated by what Howard and Streck (1999) describe as "separational CCM," Grant introduced a shift toward "Integrational CCM" that would later become the dominant format in Christian rock. As described by Howard and Streck (1999, 16), integrational CCM artists are "opposed to the idea of withdrawing into an insulated Christian subculture" and instead conceive their music as a "wholesome alternative to mainstream rock, an alternative that served to articulate the Christian worldview to those who might not otherwise be exposed to it." As this new approach to CCM was embraced by the Christian rock scene, it laid the groundwork for the genre to transition from being a small subculture to a major cultural influence in America.

Migrating toward this integrational approach to CCM, Grant, by the early 1990s, wanted to move into the mainstream pop scene, which aligned with A&M's goal of building an audience in the mainstream market (Romanowski 1993, 59-60). Working together towards this shared vision, their goal was accomplished with the song "Baby Baby," which reached the top spot on the Billboard Hot 100, was widely played on MTV and VH-1, and resulted in television shows such as *Good Morning America* and *Inside Edition* featuring segments on her (Romanowski 1993, 60). The album containing this song, *Heart in Motion*, also demonstrated unprecedented success in the CCM scene, earning

a 5x platinum certification by the RIAA and reaching the top ten of the Billboard 200.

While *Heart in Motion* was a remarkable success for both Grant and A&M, Word was not as enthusiastic about it and urged Grant to change her music on this album due to concerns about a negative response from her Evangelical fanbase (Romanowski 1993, 59-60). However, unlike many Christian rock bands who had previously been asked to edit their music, Grant refused to make the requested changes (Romanowski 1993, 60). Since Grant was, by far, their most profitable client, Word acquiesced, and the album was released with almost no references to Grant's Christian faith (Romanowski 1993, 59). This album resulted in criticisms from many Evangelicals, as Word predicted; however, sales numbers revealed that Grant had successfully maintained her Evangelical fanbase while also expanding into the mainstream market (Romanowski 1993, 62).

As the success of Amy Grant demonstrated, Christian music could reach a broader audience by conforming to mainstream culture and downplaying explicit references to the Christian faith. Mainstream record labels soon pushed their Christian artists in this direction, too, recognizing the potential to increase sales, and musicians welcomed this change as it provided them with greater artistic freedom. While Evangelicals were initially hesitant to adopt this change, they soon embraced it, too, recognizing the potential to evangelize to a broader audience. Soon, there was a new era of Christian rock as the previous strategies for creating and promoting Christian rock faded away.

## The Rise of Christian Rock

With this pattern of success laid out by Grant, the genre broke out of its isolated community and became a powerful force in mainstream entertainment. As Grant was penetrating the mainstream pop scene, Stryper became a prominent force in the mainstream rock and metal scenes. Their 1984 album, *Yellow and Black Attack* was the first Christian rock album to place on the Billboard 200 in the 103rd slot. Their 1985 album, *Soldiers Under Command*, became the first Christian rock album to earn a gold certification by the RIAA,<sup>2</sup> and their 1986 album, *To Hell With the Devil*, placed 32nd on the Billboard 200 and was the first Christian rock album to earn a platinum certification by the RIAA, selling a million copies. As Thompson explains, “Stryper nailed the pop-metal craze of the 1980s and was as big or bigger than bands such as Def Leppard and Whitesnake” (152).

The rap/rock band DC Talk demonstrated even greater commercial success in the 1990s. Their album *Jesus Freak*, released in 1995, peaked at number 16 on the Billboard 200 and became the first Christian rock album to be certified double platinum by the RIAA. In 1998, their final studio album, *Supernatural*, also had crossover success, reaching number 4 on the Billboard 200. Soon, various other Christian rock artists crossed into the mainstream market.

Many of the earliest crossover bands came from the alternative rock or adult contemporary genres. The same year the sales tracking service

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<sup>2</sup> Other Christian albums had previously been certified as gold by the RIAA, such as the 1976 album *My Father's Eyes* by Amy Grant, but are not classified as rock.

SoundScan included Christian bookstore sales in their data, Jars of Clay's 1995 song "Flood" peaked at number 20 on the Top 40 Mainstream Airplay chart and number 4 on the Adult Alternative Airplay chart. This hit was included on their eponymous album, which peaked at 46 on the Billboard 200 and was certified double platinum by the RIAA. Their following album, *Much Afraid* (1997), peaked at number 8 on the Billboard 200 and was certified platinum by the RIAA. The 1997 song "Kiss Me" by Sixpence None the Richer also became popular among secular audiences, peaking at number 2 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and number 1 on the Mainstream Top 40 chart, earning the band a Grammy nomination for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocals.

With this momentum in the late 1990s, Christian rock exploded into the mainstream market in the 2000s, starting with the 2000 song "Hanging by a Moment" by the alternative rock band Lifehouse, which earned the number 2 slot on both the Billboard Hot 100 and Pop Airplay charts. Lifehouse's commercial success remained over the next decade, with four of their five albums released between 2000 and 2010 placing in the top ten on the Billboard 200. In the hard rock scene, P.O.D. became "the biggest-selling group on Atlantic Records not named Led Zeppelin" (Young 2015, 203). All four of P.O.D.'s albums released in the 2000s decade placed in the top ten of the Billboard 200, including their 2001 album *Satellite*, which became the first Christian rock album to be certified triple platinum by the RIAA and earned the band three Grammy nominations in the hard rock and metal categories. The alternative rock band Switchfoot's 2003 album *The Beautiful Letdown* was certified double platinum, and their 2005

album *Nothing is Sound* placed at number three on the Billboard 200. The following year, the metalcore band Underoath became the first Christian rock band to place at number two on the Billboard 200, despite being in a more marginalized genre. The Christian rock bands Norma Jean, Fair, The Fold, and Hawk Nelson all received Grammy nominations for Best Recording Package in 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009, respectively, all of whom had their Grammy-nominated artwork created by members of the Christian metalcore band Demon Hunter, who also had a regular presence on the Billboard charts. The 4x Grammy-nominated alternative rock band The Fray kept this momentum going with their 2005 song “Over My Head (Cable Car)” and 2006 song “How to Save a Life,” both being certified triple platinum, followed by their 2008 song “You Found Me,” certified 4x platinum, and their self-titled second album released in 2009, which became the first Christian rock album to score the number one position on the Billboard 200 chart. That same year, Adam Young’s electronica solo project Owl City reached unprecedented success with his song “Fireflies,” which became certified 7x platinum and was included on his first of three albums in a row that placed in the top ten of the Billboard 200.

This rise in popularity has continued into the 2010s, with artists such as TobyMac, Skillet, RED, Twenty-One Pilots, and NEEDTOBREATHE landing in the number one or two slots on the Billboard 200. CCM artists outside the Christian rock genre have also generated significant commercial success this decade. In Christian hip-hop, for example, Lecrae’s 2014 album *Anomaly*, and NF’s 2017 album *Perception*, and 2019 album *The Search* all reached the



number-one spot on the Billboard 200. Worship artists have also proven popular in the mainstream market, with Chris Tomlin, Casting Crowns, Hillsong United, and the David Crowder Band all reaching the number one or two spots on the Billboard 200 in the 2010s. While Christian rock existed as a small subculture with a relatively small following for decades, it has now become incorporated as a major part of the mainstream music scene.

### Lyrical Changes

This rise to mainstream success demonstrates a remarkable victory for the Christian rock scene but also marks a notable change in the industry, musically, lyrically, and culturally. While the Christian rock scene was initially dominated by separational CCM, by the 2000s, artists adjusted their music to conform to cultural standards and became less concerned with promoting their Christian faith in their lyrics. Today, Christian rock artists are no longer expected to talk about Jesus at all, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish various Christian artists from their secular counterparts based on their music alone.

One of the most significant changes that came with this new era of Christian rock is a notable rise in ambiguous lyrics that could be interpreted in either a Christian or secular manner. Many songs could be interpreted as being about either Jesus or a significant other, such as the song “Hanging by a Moment” by Lifehouse, which says, “I’m falling even more in love with you/Letting go of all I’ve held on to/I’m standing here until you make me move/I’m hanging by a moment here with you.” Other songs offer general encouragement that could

be directed at either God or a close friend, such as “Flood” by Jars of Clay (“Lift me up when I'm falling/Lift me up I'm weak and I'm dying/Lift me up I need you to hold me/Lift me up and keep me from drowning again”). Other songs, like “Frontline” by Pillar, promote solidarity (“Everybody with your fists raised high/Let me hear your battle cry tonight/Stand beside, or step aside/We're on the frontline”), while using Biblical language (“It's not like I'm walking alone into the valley of the shadow of death” [Psalm 23:4]) that could invoke a sense of Christian unity for a religious audience but could also be interpreted in terms of a number of non-religious struggles.

This trend has proven to be a strategic way to make music relevant to a Christian fanbase without alienating secular fans, as can be seen in the example of the hard rock band Skillet. On their first album, released in 1996, every song had a Christian message, with constant explicit references to God, Jesus, and the Bible, but the band went unnoticed in the mainstream market. However, their several subsequent albums (except one live worship album released in 2000) had less explicit references to Jesus or the Bible and introduced some songs that had ambiguous lyrics. As a result, each album performed better than the previous, with their 2001 album *Alien Youth* being the first to chart on the Billboard 200, at spot 141.

Their following album, *Collide*, marked a change towards their current style of music. This album had a heavier sound, no explicit references to God or Jesus, and virtually every song was ambiguous. They refined their sound on their following album, which also had no explicit religious references, and had

considerable success in the mainstream markets; it placed 55 on the Billboard 200, reached 16 on the Rock chart, and became their first album to go platinum. While this album addressed non-religious subjects, such as drug addiction and suicide, their next album, *Awake*, released in 2009, had ambiguous lyrics in every song. To use their biggest hit from the album as an example, the chorus of “Hero” says, “I need a hero to save me now/I need a hero (save me now)/I need a hero to save my life/A hero’ll save me (just in time).” What does the singer need to be saved from? Who does he want to save him? The song never gives any indication. It could be about God, a mentor, a romantic partner, or whoever else the listener reads into the song. Like all others on the album, this song is devoid of intrinsic meaning but offers an ambiguous message that can be relevant to anyone, whether they are a Christian or not. This album proved a major success, landing at number 2 on the Billboard 200 and becoming the second Christian rock album in history to be certified triple platinum by the RIAA. And it represented a larger pattern that other Christian artists and groups utilized.

While ambiguous lyrics allowed Christian listeners to connect music to their Christian faith, by the late 1990s, much of Christian rock had moved toward a more straightforward message that was not religious, demonstrating that Christian audiences no longer expected that Christian rock music must be relevant to Christian topics. Some common topics included romantic relationships, such as the song “Kiss Me” by Sixpence None the Richer, high school life, such as “Sadie Hawkins Dance” by Relient K, and hanging out with friends, such as “High 5” by Calibretto 13. Christian music often addressed

darker subjects, too, often with no mention of turning to Jesus for help or any other sort of resolution. The song “Youth of the Nation” by P.O.D., for example, talks about school shootings, the song “Story of a Man with a Bad Heart” by Emery talks about adultery, and the song “Dear Angel” by April Sixth talks about suicide.

### Rebelling Against Censorship

Another notable change that accompanied the commercial rise of Christian rock bands was a migration away from Christian record labels, liberating artists from restrictions the Christian industry imposed on them (Dueck 2000, 132).

For example, P.O.D., Skillet, Thousand Foot Krutch, Switchfoot, Emery, Anberlin, Mat Kearney, Needtobreathe, and August Burns Red all left their Christian record labels after they rose to prominence in the mainstream market. Other artists were able to be commercially successful from the start, never signing to a Christian record label, such as Lifehouse, Twenty-One Pilots, Flyleaf, Beartooth, The Fray, and Memphis May Fire. Although there are a few exceptions, virtually every band in the early phase of Christian rock relied on a Christian record label to create their music, allowing these labels to have a considerable influence over the music produced. However, today, Christian rock demonstrates a lack of dependency on these Christian record labels.

Without this need to conform to the standards of Christian record labels, artists began pushing the limits on what was acceptable for Christian music, as can be seen, most clearly in their use of profanity. Previously, the Christian music

industry kept a tight rein on what artists were permitted to release. In 1981, the band Lifesavers was banned from Calvary Chapel because the singer danced while he played music (Powell 2003, 548). In 1983, the album *Social Decay* by The Predators was banned in Christian bookstores because the album art featuring a person and a skeleton holding hands was deemed “too spooky” (Rimmer 2009). Stryper’s 1990 album *Against the Law* was banned in Christian bookstores because the band wore leather and did not have enough religious references (“What does Stryper” 2001). The album *What I Believe* by Squad Five-O was banned in 1997 for having the word “sucks” (Powell 2003, 860), and the W’s album *Fourth from the Last* was similarly banned the following year for saying both “suck” and “butt” (Baldwin 1998). There are a few anomalies with the use of profanity in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the 1996 album *Little Foxes* by Barnabas during a time when the band was frustrated with the church but still contractually obligated to make a Christian record (Powell 2003, 67). However, musicians were generally held to strict standards to be welcomed in the Christian community.

This started to change, though, as Christian rock artists became more commercially successful and were less dependent on Christian record labels, although not without backlash. P.O.D.’s 2003 album *Payable on Death* was banned in 85% of Christian bookstores because the album art was perceived to resemble the occult (Fiasco 2003), although the band, which had already achieved mainstream success, was unfazed (Moss 2003). Derek Webb’s first solo album in 2004 was likewise edited to exclude the word “damn” due to

pressure from Christian retailers, although it kept the word “whore” in a different song, leading to controversy (Challies 2005). In 2008, Brian “Head” Welch released a music video about drug addiction that had mature content, resulting in retailers refusing to carry his album *Save Me From Myself* (Welch 2008).

By the end of the 2010s, the debate about the use of profanity in Christian songs became a recurring issue, with *Patrol Magazine* suggesting that censorship by Christian record labels “happens on an almost weekly basis in the industry” (Sessions 2009). In 2009, Derek Webb broke the dam of censorship by successfully fighting against his record label to release an album with profanity. In his song “What Matters More,” he uses the word “shit” in reference to a famous quote by Tony Campolo, who said,

“I have three things I’d like to say today. First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don’t give a shit. What’s worse is that you’re more upset with the fact that I said shit than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night.” (Olsen 2003)

When Webb’s record label deemed his record too offensive to release, he publicly fought back, causing his label to release the album in its original form (Sessions 2009).

Soon after, profanity in song lyrics became commonplace among Christian artists. In 2012, P.O.D. used the word “fuck” in their song “I Am” to emphasize their unworthiness before God. The following year, Christian rapper Sho Baraka included the words “nigga,” “bitch,” and “hoe” in a song denouncing racism. In 2015, mewithoutYou used the word “fuck” to poke fun at the singer’s hairline on his wedding day (“Threw a mute curse at the Boise sky/For my fucked up Napoleon-of-St.-Helena-hairline”). In 2016, Aaron Gillespie included the lyric,

“I’ve been full of shit for years,” on one of his solo albums. He later defended his use of profanity on Twitter, writing, “If you say “fuck” people think you’re evil these days? We got waaaaaay bigger stuff to talk about folks. Waayyy bigger” (Gillespie 2018). Bradley Hathaway pushed the limits even further in 2017 with his album *Flesh Eater*, in which he describes in graphic detail a struggle between sex addiction and the Christian faith. In his song “He Fucked,” for example, he sings, “He fucked a lot of women/And for that he’s ashamed/But when he fucked all those women/He was whispering one name/Jesus Jesus Jesus, save me from myself.”

Hathaway’s album also demonstrates another trend in Christian rock towards a greater openness for sexually explicit content. In his song “Haunted,” for example, he describes oral sex in detail, singing, “She puts me in her mouth/Holds me in her hands/...She’s on her knees but I ain’t/I’m off in the clouds I’m in the sky man/I’m in outer space/She wipes off her mouth/Stands to her feet/Looks me in the eyes/But we don’t speak.” The song “Fig with a Bellyache” by mewithoutYou includes a light-hearted suggestion of homosexual arousal; “the Dog below our waist’s aroused/as arms embrace the pretty Gals/but came much more as a surprise/it happening while I hugged the Guys!” The music video for “Flush” by Bryan “Head” Welch features sexually suggestive imagery of two scantily clad women licking each other’s bodies and caressing each other’s breasts.

Christian record labels promoting Christian Rock have also become less restrictive with censorship. BEC Records, who had previously censored their

artists, allowed Kings Kaleidoscope to release a song with the word “fucking” in 2016. At Audiofeed Music Festival, the successor to Cornerstone Music Festival, it is not uncommon to hear artists using profanity from the stage, as well as musicians performing that many would consider outsiders to the Christian faith, such as Pedro the Lion and Michael Gungor (Billman 2019). After the band Everyday Sunday's lead singer came out as gay, Joshuafest, a Christian music festival, still allowed him to play on stage, despite fierce opposition (Carey 2017). Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill Church also welcomed “satanic speed metal” bands and even hosted a concert where the band stripped naked (Abraham 2020 107). While many Christian rock artists might not conform to the standards of the established church, many Christian establishments have changed their standards to be more accommodating to this new wave of Christian rock.

### Conclusion

The Christian rock scene today is notably different from the scene as it existed fifty years ago. Originally, Christian rock was confined to a subculture within the Evangelical community as a tool to promote a conservative Christian message and isolate Christian youth from the corrupting influences of the world. However, after a dramatic rise in the mainstream popularity of Christian bands, the scene became notably different by the early to mid-2000s. Rather than being confined to a subculture, Christian rock can be found anywhere secular rock is. Instead of surviving on love offerings, artists are embarking on world tours and selling out large venues. Rather than conforming to the demands of the church, artists no longer have to rely on support from Christian institutions. As a result of



these changes, the Christian rock scene has shifted from reflecting the interests of the church to reflecting the interests of the artists. By recognizing this shift in the scene, Christian rock can be better studied, not merely as a subculture, but as a phenomenon that has significantly influenced mainstream American culture and that offers a new perspective on Evangelicalism from the point of view of artists in the community.

## Chapter 2: Christian Rock and the Established Church

The Christian rock scene was initially a small subculture of artists and fans that shared a general vision of using popular music to reach the lost and protect Christians from worldly influences. In this era that was dominated by the separational CCM approach to Christian rock artists maintained clear lines of distinction between their music and secular rock music. However, as the dominant approach to Christian rock shifted towards integrational CCM, the genre has diversified to the extent that, today, it might be difficult to tell, based on the music alone, which artists are part of the Christian rock scene, especially among artists that violate Evangelical norms, such as through the use of profanity. As such, it raises the question of whether the “Christian” rock label still applies to these artists.

This chapter will delve into the complexities surrounding the concept of the “Christian” label in this music scene. Examining this issue within the context of social constructionism, I argue that the term has no inherent, fixed meaning but changes based on culture. The second half of this chapter explores the Christian rock movement’s relationship with the established church. Maintaining its roots in the Jesus movement, I demonstrate that those in the Christian rock scene can be generally classified as Evangelical, with many also being classified as Fundamentalist. However, I also introduce the Cornerstone Movement within the Christian rock scene and highlight how it differs from the established church. This movement will be explored more in-depth in the final chapter, where I argue that

it can be accurately defined as a sect within Evangelicalism that serves a similar function to new religious movements.

My study will focus primarily on the Cornerstone Festival, which played an essential role in the formation of this movement. Therefore, I will refer to it as the “Cornerstone Movement.” However, this does not imply that everyone at Cornerstone can be identified as part of this movement, nor that everyone in this movement has attended this festival, especially when we consider that it is no longer in operation. Instead, this is a group of people interconnected through various mediators, such as Christian rock record labels, magazines, and radio stations, who have collectively developed a shared spirituality and culture that binds them together.

### Defining “Christian” Rock

This question of how to define Christian rock is not new but dates to the start of the genre. Yet, since there still does not exist a clear definition of Christian rock, this question remains just as relevant today as it was fifty years ago. In their book *Apostles of Rock*, sociologist Jay Howard and collaborator John Streck offer three definitions of Christian rock, which reflect the complexities and variations within the genre. Using the insights of social constructionist theory, this section will examine their definitions in the context of the evolution and development of the Christian rock scene, demonstrating how they correspond to different stages in the formation and negotiation of the genre’s meaning and identity.

Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective in the social sciences that emphasizes the role of cultural and social practices in shaping how people understand and experience the world around them. According to social constructionism, knowledge, identity, and reality are not objectively given but are constructed through human interaction and communication. This means that the meanings and interpretations attached to things, such as gender, race, sexuality, and even musical genres like Christian rock, are shaped by social and cultural forces rather than being inherent or biologically determined. Social constructionism explores how people's experiences and perceptions are shaped by language, culture, power relationships, and social institutions and how these constructions are continually being negotiated and redefined over time (Hall 2013, 3-62)

As Stuart Hall (2013) explains, "things 'in themselves' rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning" (3). The language we utilize does not mirror an objective reality; instead, discourse gives objects their meaning. In his book *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger (1969) presents a similar perspective on society, arguing that "Society is constituted and maintained by acting human beings. It has no being, no reality, apart from this activity" (13). From this, he introduces the concept of *nomos*, which he defined as a shared system of meaning and order that underpins social institutions and provides a framework for human action. Since societies need order to function, members create an ordered reality, in the form of a *nomos*, as a "shield against terror" (15).

The nomos must therefore be protected at all costs to prevent society from descending into chaos.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Evangelicals initially hesitated to welcome rock music into the church. In contrast to the perspective of social constructionists, many Christian leaders believed that the true meaning of rock music is inherent in the music itself and, therefore, must be discovered rather than constructed. Highlighting how the rock scene violated the norms of the conservative Christian church, they concluded that rock music was demonic and a threat to the church and therefore rallied against this new form of entertainment to protect the nomos.

The Christian rock movement challenged this perception of rock music as a fixed, demonic reality and instead argued that rock music was morally neutral and could be used for either secular or profane purposes. This perspective eventually became the dominant understanding among Evangelicals, who saw the potential of Christian rock as an effective tool for evangelism. The Evangelical community embraced Christian rock as a means to reach young people, leading to a shift in the discourse surrounding Christian rock and a redefinition that emphasized the faith-based lyrics as primary defining factor.

This conception of Christian rock is not without its problems, though. Howard and Streck (1999) argue that defining Christian rock by the lyrics alone has “proven to be extremely problematic” because it opens a “Pandora’s box of follow-up questions concerning who God is, what it means to follow Him, and what qualifies as biblical and/or Christian” (10). Other problems can be

highlighted as well. For example, this definition invites debates about whether it is appropriate to categorize a genre based entirely on the lyrics alone. Lyrics are only one component of the music, and focusing only on them overlooks how the instruments, tempo, vocal sound, and various other elements combine to create a piece of music. Further, this approach focuses primarily on the music itself, neglecting the larger context and factors surrounding it. It suggests that the music can be fully isolated from the artist as if it has its own ontology separate from others, which has been criticized as oversimplifying the complex nature of music and its relationship to the artist.

However, a more significant issue in defining Christian rock primarily in terms of lyrics is that it no longer reflects how the qualifier “Christian” in this context is understood by others. As Stuart Hall (2013) explains, “it is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events” (3). Therefore, the definition of a word only has value if it is shared by others. However, as explored in the previous chapter, this conception of Christian rock does not align with how the term is used by the general public, as many bands regarded as “Christian” have few if any, explicit references to the Christian faith. Todd Lawry of the band Once Nothing, for example, said, “We are not a ‘ministry band,’ and we never have been.” He explains that the members are “believers in God and His only son and the message that is the Gospel” but that these beliefs are “personal decisions and not something we want to force on anyone else” (“Once Nothing”). Similarly, the frontman for the band O Sleeper said, “We would be lying if we said we can still operate under the Christian umbrella and say everything we do is

characterized by a Christian motivation” (Flowerday 2013). As this shift from Evangelicals seeing Christian rock as an oxymoron to them seeing Christian rock as a holy tool for evangelism demonstrates, meaning, as a product of discourse, is temporal. The meaning of “Christian rock,” therefore, does not have a single answer but changes based on factors such as time, place, and culture.

### Mainstream Shift

The Christian rock scene continued to evolve as it crossed over into the mainstream markets, changing the field of discourse. As secular institutions became involved in this movement, the music changed by minimizing or excluding religious references. The categorization of “Christian rock,” as defined by the lyrics alone, no longer aligned with public perception as much of the music recognized as Christian rock had few if any, references to Christianity. As a result, the scene was defined in two competing ways.

First is the “artist-based conception,” in which the label “requires a connection between the beliefs of the artist and his or her creative output” (Howard and Streck 1999, 9). Under this definition, the label “Christian” is not contingent on the music’s content but on the religious beliefs of the musicians who create the music. However, this definition also presents several challenges. For instance, many Christian rock bands have undergone transformations over time, including changes in their membership, which may include individuals who do not identify as Christians. Furthermore, artists themselves may undergo shifts in their religious beliefs and commitments, which may impact the nature of their creative output. For example, Andrew Neufeld of Figure Four said, “I’ve been

involved in Figure Four for half of my life--literally...and we're definitely in different places than we were when we started this band, and we have different ideas and different beliefs" (Beast 2018). Likewise, Dan Haseltine of Jars of Clay said, "I did grow up as a youth group kid wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Jesus on it. I did drive a car with a 'Christian' bumper sticker on it. And at one point, I was sure of who God was and how God operated. But I am not that way now. And so it is impossible to write from that old version of myself" (Evans).

In addition, only a small proportion of American rock musicians are classified as "Christian rock," while a much larger percentage of the American population identifies as Christian. There were many bands composed of members who all identified with the Christian faith, yet their music was not considered "Christian rock" due to reasons that are not explained by this understanding of the term "Christian." Moreover, this definition of "Christian" relies solely on beliefs and disregards other elements, such as rituals or religious affiliation. The notion of "connection" between beliefs and music is also ill-defined and can lead to inconsistent applications of the "Christian" label. Bands like U2 and Creed, for example, sing about spiritual themes in their music but are not generally accepted as members of the "Christian rock" scene.

A second way the "Christian" label has been defined is in organizational terms as "music that is promoted, distributed, broadcast, and sold primarily by and to Christians" (Howard and Streck 1999, 11). This perspective has been embraced by various scholars who have referred to the Christian rock scene as a "Christian ghetto" and assumes a pronounced divide between "Christian" and



“secular” organizations (11). Howard and Streck, writing in 1999, assert that this analysis is accurate, explaining, “Despite the growth of CCM, it is still difficult to find much in the way of contemporary Christian music on mainstream record store shelves, and more elusive yet has been access to the airwaves of mainstream radio” (11). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, this is no longer the case. Thus, this interpretation of the term poses a threat of excluding artists, such as Stryper, who are commonly recognized as Christian, and including artists, such as Chevelle, who are not typically associated with the Christian rock community.

This evolving discourse surrounding the concept of “Christian rock” resulted in new and residual power relations that constrained the artists. Originally, they were pressured not to create rock music and could only pursue creative expression in a limited number of outlets that welcomed their music. Then, as the genre became embraced by the Evangelical community, artists were pressured to share their music with as wide of an audience as possible and were expected to evangelize and write songs that were explicitly about Jesus. While the involvement of secular institutions and the crossover success of these artists in the mainstream helped liberate them from these restrictions, they also created additional constraints, as the artists had to tailor their music to appeal to the mainstream audience without alienating their Christian fans. With each change, a remnant of the past has remained, resulting in artists receiving contradictory expectations from others.

As a result of these constraints, there has been a widespread rejection of the “Christian” label by artists, even when they were still widely recognized as being in the Christian rock scene. Some have articulated a similar position to Jacques Ellul (1991, 28), who argued that the term “Christian” presupposes an act of faith and was, therefore, not a label that could be applied to an abstract concept like a band or genre of music. As Tim Foreman of Switchfoot, for example, explained, “We’re Christian by faith, not genre” (Miller 2003). Other groups, such as Skillet, avoided the term “Christian” because they did not want to “alienate” their fans (Law 2014). Others, like the pop-punk band Relient K, distanced themselves from the term because it causes people to “blow off” their music without ever listening to it (Smith). Bands like O Sleeper and The Devil Wears Prada have avoided the term because many of the members are not Christian (Flowerday 2013). Overall, these artists have chosen to distance themselves from the power relationships created by the discourse of Christian rock.

### Evangelicalism

While there are complexities in analyzing if the genre can accurately be described as Christian and many within the scene have asserted that their band or music is not Christian, few would dispute that the *people* in this movement would be considered Christian. In general, those in this movement are aligned with orthodox beliefs, such as an alignment with the Apostolic and Nicene creeds, commitment to the teachings of Jesus and the Bible, a belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the centrality of salvation, and belief in the Trinity.

Further, considering the historical foundations of the Christian rock scene, as well as the absence of Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and various other denominations, this movement can be defined more narrowly as a movement within Evangelicalism.

The most widely accepted definition of Evangelicalism is offered by David Bebbington, who said it is composed of four key ingredients. While there is no unified set of beliefs or doctrine in the Christian rock scene, the artists and fans generally display a belief in all these ideas. First, there is a focus on the supremacy of scripture, which can be seen in how Christian rock artists address religious issues. For example, When asked about Christian hip hop, Thomas Terry of the band Beautiful Eulogy praised it for being able to “point people back to scripture” (Beast 2018), Collin Simula of the band Maranatha turned to the Bible to justify negative emotions captured in their music (Stagg 2015), and Fit for a King, in discussing the “cheesy” nature of worship songs, says, “nowhere in the Bible does it say, ‘You must write “Hallelujah” 50 times in a song” (Glover 2016). In the Christian rock scene, one rarely, if ever, hears people turn to creeds or religious traditions in explaining their faith, as they might if the genre was rooted in non-evangelical traditions. Instead, they base their faith on the supremacy of scripture.

Secondly is a focus on the cross, which can be seen clearly in their lyrics. The song “Do or Die” by Dogwood, for example, expresses remorse that his sins caused Jesus to die but gratitude that Jesus “died for me” and that he wants to “make it up” by “d[y]ing] to myself for [Jesus].” The song Khampa Nomads by the

deathcore band Mortal Treason, speaking from the perspective of Jesus, says, “I will pay for your life/With my blood and my pain, you will be saved from death/By my price I paid for your sins on the cross/I will purify you and give you life.”

Lecrae’s song “Nothin” says, “my rhyme’s intent is to point straight at the cross.”

In “Jesus Name,” Kutless sings, “Son of righteousness crucified/Hanging on the cross You paid the price/To give us life/In Jesus’ name our sins are washed away/In Jesus’ name we are rescued, we are saved.”

The two final ingredients of Evangelicalism are an emphasis on conversion and activism, or “the expression of the gospel in effort” (Bebbington 2005, 16), both of which can be seen in the desire to evangelize by Christian artists. While Christian rock artists, in general, have distanced themselves from the goal of evangelism that defined the pioneering artists, many still retain the Evangelical sentiment that they should recruit others to the Christian faith, even if they might separate it from their profession. As one band performing at Cornerstone explained, they want to show people that God is loving by forming “one-on-one relationships” with people at concerts, which allows them to see that “you have love for them and that you know there’s something different about you” (Hunter and Whinna 10:48). Rapper Refugee likewise explained, “We have had many youth and even adults come up to us after a show asking about Jesus. A lot of times they will accept Christ right then and there” (Lindenbaum 2012, 71). Amy McDowell referred to this as “loving on” fans, which is one of the defining characteristics of the scene as artists “believe that God made them punk so that they can minister to society’s ‘black sheep’” (Abraham 2020, 53).

## Fundamentalism

George Marsden (1980, 195) explains that many people who identify as Evangelical can also be categorized as Fundamentalist, and while it is not as common as in the past, many Christian rock artists also retain the Fundamentalist heritage of the scene (Enroth et al. 1972, 16); namely, the separatism, which, as Preston Shires and George Marsden explain, “alienate[s] youth” from the wider world and leaves them “culturally isolated” (Young 2015, 136). Since the dissenting nature of the Fundamentalist community reflects the dissenting nature of punk and metal (Abraham 2020, 120), many Fundamentalists have embraced these genres to help isolate youth from the secular world. In doing so, they are providing an avenue for the church to better control the discourse that will form the youth’s identity (Parascandalo 2013, 206). As one organizer of Christian rock concerts explained, “Some churches mix both Christian and non-Christian, but we have Biblical authority for not mixing the light and the dark” (Lindenbaum 2012, 75). As a result, the artists at these concerts boldly talked about their Christian faith on stage to signal to the audience that they belonged to the Christian community rather than the secular world (Lindenbaum 2012, 75). This separationist lifestyle can be seen especially in the Christian straight-edge community, which maintains a teetotaler lifestyle because they believe it is a necessary part of being a Christian (Abraham 2020, 81). As one singer of an Australian metalcore band explained, “I wanna live a life of purity and sobriety for God” (Abraham 2020, 81).

## Differences from the Church

While Christian rock can be accurately described as a movement within Evangelical Christianity, there is also a faction within it that looks quite different from what one might expect from an Evangelical community. Take, for example, a 2004 article on the Cornerstone Festival in the *Washington Post*. Describing the performance of the band Pedro the Lion, Andrew Beaujon writes,

[Frontman David] Bazan has already blown through a gallon jug of water mixed with vodka, so what's one more shattered taboo? "You were too busy steering the conversation toward the Lord," he sings, "to hear the voice of the Spirit begging you to shut the [expletive] up." A slight squeal goes up, and then some objects fly at the stage. They're a few pairs of ladies' underwear.

While one would typically not expect to see heavy drinking, explicit language, and sexually suggestive behavior at an Evangelical event, especially from the performers, Cornerstone challenged what is appropriate in a Christian setting. In doing so, they created a space for Evangelicals who are disillusioned with the established church to develop their faith in a postmodernist context, offering them the freedom to challenge the established church and explore alternative expressions of the Christian faith.

Cornerstone is a Christian rock music festival organized by the Jesus People USA (JPUSA) commune, which ran from 1984-2012 in rural Illinois. JPUSA included pioneers of the Christian rock scene, such as the REZ Band, who became dissatisfied with the increasing commercialization of existing Christian rock music festivals. Therefore, they organized their own music festival that rejected corporate sponsorships and promoted independent artistic expression. This festival became one of the largest Christian music festivals in

the world, drawing 25,000 people annually, and has had a significant impact on the Christian rock scene (Young 2015, 87-93).

This festival shined a light into a subculture within Christian rock that can accurately be described as a sect of Evangelicalism. While Cornerstone has served as a major gathering area for those in this sect to come together, this movement extends beyond the festival and is preserved through various other intermediaries, such as Audiofeed Music Festival (the successor to Cornerstone), Tooth and Nail Records, HM Magazine, and Radio U, all of which play a pivotal role in serving as mediators and intermediaries for the artists in this scene and distinguishing this movement from other forms of Christian rock.

When Cornerstone began, Christian rock was still a small movement of artists who generally relied on Christian organizations for support. While these organizations created opportunities for musicians to promote their art, they were generally more interested in using the music as a tool to pursue Evangelical interests, such as converting new people to the Christian faith, than in promoting music as a form of art. Therefore, they favored performers that played more traditional or mainstream genres and intended to use their music as a ministry to pursue Evangelical interests. Those who challenged the church or represented more marginalized genres and subcultures, such as punk rock or heavy metal, were often overlooked and struggled to become established.

By separating the event from the established church and intentionally carving out opportunities for performers of more marginalized forms of Christian rock to share their art, Cornerstone created a welcoming environment for

Evangelicals who felt isolated and excluded from the dominant Evangelical community, as can be seen, most clearly among the punks, the most prominent genre in this subculture. In her analysis of Christian hardcore punk, Amy Mcdowell (2017b) explains that “They state that ‘the church’ rejected and judged them for being punk and that ‘the church’ tried to change them for the mainstream” (9). These youth “talk about the mainstream church as if it is an immoral individual who holds ignorant and mean stereotypes about subcultural youth,” however, maintaining their Evangelical faith, they highlight that it is people, rather than God, that are the problem (9). Further, in keeping with the Evangelical emphasis on conversion and activism, she notes that their vision is to “spread the gospel to secular punks, who they also consider rejected.” (8). As such, many have created subcultural music ministries to try to reach punk, goth, and hardcore youth (8).

Related to this feeling of being rejected by the church, many in the Cornerstone Movement also feel like the church pushes people to conform to arbitrary standards. As one Christian goth explained, the “mainstream church” harms Christianity because it “doesn’t motivate people to think for themselves, act for themselves and be responsible for themselves;” instead, it teaches people to form their spirituality around “some leader they are paying” (Abraham 2020, 64). Many blame the church for the large number of young men that are leaving the faith because “it judges and mistreats people who do not fit the mold of a stereotypical Sunday Christian” (231) and condemn the church for encouraging



Christians to “follow the herd allow[ing] a leader to guide their relationship with Jesus” (64).

The disillusionment those in this movement have with the established church often manifests itself as anger towards the church, as can be seen in the music produced in the movement. The song “Christian Hate Mail” by Calibretto 13,<sup>3</sup> for example, condemns their Christian critics, singing, “Send us your hate mail in the name of Christ/Insult us, bash us, but don’t play nice/I’m sure the Father’s proud of the way you treat your brother/It’s sad to say the Christian way is beating up each other.” In the song “God Hates Flags,” Five Iron Frenzy sings, “If God is love, you’ve got it wrong/Waving all your placards and flags/The very fact that you’re alive/Says God must also love douchebags.” In the song “Youth Group” Semler, referring to a “sexual awakening” at a youth group lock-in, sings, “At church camp youth group/They really tried it on us/Now we’re grown up and we’re fucked up/Is there still a God we can trust?”.

While these artists retain the Evangelical desire to spread the gospel, their dissatisfaction with the church has caused many to reject traditional forms of evangelism. Audiofeed music festival, for example, has overcome the potential for confrontations among people with different beliefs by minimizing religious content and “not trying to evangelize everybody” (Abraham 2020, 149). As the vocalist of Celestial Static explained at an interview at Cornerstone, “We’re out there to play music and entertain and provide a positive message, and yet, to

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<sup>3</sup> Calibretto 13 later made a radical departure from the Evangelical church, rebranding as Harley Poe and singing positively about taboo subjects such as murder, cannibalism, and necrophilia, as demonstrated in the lyrics of songs such as “Transvestites Can be Cannibals Too,” “Corpse Grindin’ Man,” and “I’m Coming for You.”

minister, but not necessarily preach” (Hunter and Whinna 2004, 7:57). In keeping with a larger trend in Christian rock as I discussed above, those in this movement are not as concerned as other Evangelicals with bringing people into the church on Sunday mornings. Instead, they emphasize the idea that the “church” is not a building but a people and can therefore be experienced anywhere (Abraham 2020, 64).

Many groups express a radical commitment to their faith and condemn the mainstream church for living comfortable lives and watering down the gospel. As Eric Strother explains, “Christian punks tak[e] on a ‘prophetic’ role, using aggressive music to bring a discomfoting message to American evangelicals living comfortable lives” (Abraham 2020, 38). Amy Mcdowell likewise writes, “Christian hardcore punks often describe these mainstream Christians as insincere Sunday Christians, who attend church on Sunday mornings but do not practice the love and grace of Jesus in their everyday lives” (Abraham 2021, 64). For example, the anarchist folk-punk band Psalters asserts that Jesus calls his followers to a radical life of actively opposing violence, capitalism, and hierarchies and instead stands with the oppressed. As a result, they live a homeless and nomadic lifestyle and engage in radical forms of missionary work, such as traveling to Iraq during the 2003 U.S. invasion to rebuild the houses destroyed by U.S. troops (“Psalters” 2023).

Another difference between the Cornerstone movement and the church is the stance on social issues demonstrated by many artists. Evangelicals have historically supported the Republican party (“Religious landscape study” 2022),

and a study conducted by the Barna Institute found that Evangelical Christians are primarily understood as “religiously conservative” and “politically conservative” above any other traits or qualities that could be used to describe them (“U.S. Adults” 2019). However, the majority of people in the Cornerstone movement that have been outspoken about their faith almost always support liberal views (Lindenbaum 2012, 115). Jesus People USA is defined by its commitment to left-wing causes, such as pacifism, feminism, and social justice, and is affiliated with various artists, such as Danielson, Ballydowse, and Glenn Kaiser of Rez Band, all of whom have publicly expressed similar sentiments (Young 2015, 129, 143). Hip Hop artist Propaganda placed social issues such as police brutality and racism at the forefront of his music. Aaron Weiss, the frontman of mewithoutYou, is connected to the Simply Way community founded by Shane Claiborne, as well as the Bruderhof, both of whom have been active in liberal social justice campaigns (Claiborne 2015; Hartse 2021). Josh Dies, the frontman of Showbread, has been outspoken about his anarchist, pacifist, and anti-capitalist ideologies, and Five Iron Frenzy has produced music in support of various left-wing topics, such as the mistreatment of Native Americans (“Banner Year,” “The Day We Killed”), Police Abuse (“Get your Riot Gear”), capitalism (“Giants,” “American Kryptonite,” “Someone Else’s Problem”) and gun control (“Renegades”).

In contrast to the liberal political views promoted by many in the Cornerstone Movement, there has also been an embrace of more traditional conceptions of gender roles, namely through a hypermasculinity that extends

beyond what is standard in the Evangelical church (Mcdowell 2017a, 232). In her analysis of the Christian hardcore scene in the Cornerstone Movement, Amy McDowell argues that it hardcore promotes “hegemonic masculinity,” defined as “tough, violent, emotionally distant, and fixated on heterosexual conquest” (233-234). She explains that this form of masculinity is expressed in a “hybrid construction of manhood that is both aggressive and loving,” noting that this “reinforce[s] gender hegemony by obscuring how privileged men strengthen gender binaries that are oppressive to women and subordinate masculinities” (226-227). To demonstrate the “aggressive” nature of their masculinity, she highlights the aggressive dance styles in the mosh pits at Hardcore concerts, which she says is “not merely a destructive release; [but] helps [participants] achieve membership in the hardcore brotherhood” (231-232). She also highlights the aggressive music and lyrics of these artists (233), as well as the high percentage of men in these audiences (234).

As an example of the loving side of hegemonic masculinity, she highlights the lyric “overcome this world with love,” sung at a Sleeping Giant show (232). The aggressive music and dancing in this subculture also serve as a bonding experience for those involved, exemplified in the effort to “love on” people by talking to them after the show and building relationships.

While this version of hegemonic masculinity goes beyond what is typically seen in the Evangelical church, others in the Cornerstone movement have taken the opposite approach, standing against the traditional gender norms endorsed by the church. For example, the hardcore band August Burns Red, Bowler notes,

“clearly stand[s] against... ‘constitutive elements of ‘hegemonic’ masculinity.’” Other artists, such as Showbread and Stryper, perform in women’s clothes and makeup, reflecting the feminine styles of the glam metal and emo music scenes (McNeil 2016, 17). Many are also taking a notably different stance on gender and sexuality than has historically been the case in the Evangelical community; various artists have come out as openly gay, including Marsha Stevens, the founder of Children of the Day; Doug Pinnick, the frontman of King’s X; worship artist Ray Botlz; Jennifer Knapp; Vicky Beeching; Trey Pearson of Everyday Sunday; and Semler has been openly gay and non-binary since the start of their music career in 2021.

### Conclusion

Although many people in the Cornerstone movement have distanced themselves from the established church, it does not mean that they have renounced their Evangelical faith. Instead, they embrace a postmodern approach to Evangelicalism in which they challenge dominant narratives in the church and develop more individualized and subjective expressions of the Christian faith. In this collective journey of spiritual exploration with people who have similar artistic interests and worldviews, they form deep spiritual connections that help take the place of the community that they feel has rejected them. Together, they form a new spiritual community that promotes individuality while also adopting shared cultural practices and ideologies. The next chapter explores this spiritual community of the Cornerstone movement, to demonstrate how it functions as a rite of passage for youth and young adults in a transitional period of life.

### Chapter 3: Cornerstone as a Rite of Passage

As explored in the first chapter, Christian rock music has undergone considerable changes throughout its history. Initially, the genre challenged both the church and the mainstream culture, carving out a small intersection between both spheres, where it conveyed the church's message through worldly culture. Recognizing the potential for Christian rock as a means of evangelism, Evangelical organizations infused funds into supporting this genre through record labels, music festivals, and similar avenues, providing a platform for otherwise unknown artists to build a following; however, these artists often felt restricted by the expectations of their Evangelical supporters. The secular music industry eventually took an interest in the genre, though, leading to two pivotal changes in the scene. Firstly, Christian rock artists had greater commercial success, allowing this subculture to expand into a movement with a significant mainstream presence. Secondly, artists had greater freedom to challenge the church and push the limits of what was acceptable for Christian music.

The second chapter delves into the relationship between the Christian rock scene and the church. While there may be ambiguity in determining whether these bands qualify as "Christian," the *people* in this scene can accurately be identified as "Christian," especially in regard to Evangelicalism. However, there is still widespread disillusionment towards the established church, sparking the emergence of the Cornerstone movement of Christians that exist on the fringes of Evangelicalism.

The current chapter explores the Cornerstone Movement as a sect within Christianity, analyzed through the lens of research on new religious movements (NRMs). The artists and fans discussed here are not limited to the festival and continue through networks even after the festival went defunct in 2012. Nevertheless, Cornerstone will receive the greatest attention as it is where these facets of the movement are most pronounced, and the festival played a crucial role in forming this religious community. Overall, this chapter will demonstrate how Cornerstone serves as a rite of passage by providing a liminal space in which participants are afforded the freedom to explore their identity in ways that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

#### Cornerstone Culture and Spirituality

In his research on new religious movements (NRMs), J. Gordon Melton divides religious groups into three areas; “churches” are “groups that dominate and control” major religious traditions, “sects” are groups “that dissent [from a major religious tradition] but within acceptable limits,” and “new religions” are “groups that diverge beyond those limits” (Lewis 2008, 23). Under this classification, the Cornerstone movement is not a church, as it does not dominate major religious traditions, nor is it a “new religion” since the movement continues to be accepted in the Evangelical community. Instead, it would most accurately be described as a “sect” within Evangelicalism; while they dissent from the mainstream church, they still retain the core set of beliefs, allowing them to retain a “filial relationship” with the church (Lewis 2008, 27).

The practice of worshipping God through music persists across diverse cultural contexts, yet the associated rituals can differ significantly. For many Evangelicals, Sunday church services are the focal point of their worship. These services typically feature a neatly organized congregation seated in rows facing the altar. Unless it is a charismatic church, the audience usually remains quiet during the sermon, except perhaps for an occasional “amen.” At more conservative churches, men dress in business attire and women in dresses that do not attract undue attention, while congregants in more modern churches might be dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. There is typically a time of music during which congregants stand and sing in unison either hymns or adult contemporary songs. Soft instruments are favored, with some churches rejecting drums or any instruments at all. Congregants generally focus their gaze on the lyrics, toward the ceiling, or have their eyes closed. If someone feels a strong connection to the music, they might place their hands in front of their body with their palms up, raise a hand in the air, or clap to the music. Churches typically try to avoid drawing too much attention to the performers or person leading the music, instead trying to make the congregation focused primarily on worshipping God or having a mystical or emotional experience that is attributed to a connection with God.

Compare this to a Flatfoot 56 show at Cornerstone, or its successor Audiofeed, which constitutes an entirely different type of worship service. At a typical performance, hundreds or thousands of participants dressed in spikes, mohawks, and tattered clothes congregate in rows with their arms around each



other as they listen to the band's frontman deliver a sermon or personal testimony about his relationship with Christ. The audience then joins in singing "Amazing Grace" in unison while the band plays the melody on bagpipes. Suddenly, heavy drums and distorted guitars kick in as the crowd erupts into a frenzy, pushing and shoving each other. As the singer shouts the lyrics of the song into the microphone with rough vocals, the crowd sings along at the top of their lungs while running in a circle. Onstage, the band directs the mosh pits, commanding the crowd to create a "meat grinder" or "wall of death," and members of the audience climb on stage to go crowd surfing. The band may add a waterslide in the mosh pit, initiate a food fight, or distribute giant Pac-Man figurines to be crowd-surfed in a life-sized version of the game. This worship experience, while still grounded in Evangelicalism, as defined by Bebbington, is a fun, chaotic, and physically demanding experience for many participants (Abraham 2020, 149-155).

Many in the Cornerstone Movement have expressed dissatisfaction with worship music in traditional church services (Abraham 2020, 111-117, 129). Mark Driscoll described Evangelical music leaders as "weepy worship dudes" and "effeminate anatomically male" musicians who "seem to be very in touch with their feelings and exceedingly chickified from playing too much acoustic guitar and singing prom songs to Jesus while channeling Michael Bolton and flipping their hair (Abraham 2020, 111). Myrick likewise noted that Christian punk musicians view CCM as having a very narrow target market of "a white, middle-aged housewife named Becky," which bears little relation to themselves

(Abraham 2020, 129). The band Showbread, who adopted an image of music notes crossed out as a paradoxical logo for their music, criticized modern art in their song “Stabbing Art to Death” for being “ego and selfishness” that has been reduced to “a class in school.” They accuse the church of spreading this “virus” through their Sunday morning worship music and instead embrace what they consider to be a more authentic form of worship through the music of “screams and screeches” while commanding the listener to “stab art to death.” Josh Scogan, the frontman of the hardcore band The Chariot expressed a similar interest in this countercultural form of worship. When asked, “What sort of music do you find lets you ‘worship’ God the best, or bring you closest?” he answered, “Something that feels real, something with passion” (H 2013). As one reviewer described one of his shows,

The best word I can find is destruction. There's a frantic mix of bodies flailing, limbs flying, strings bending... Scogin threw his microphone twice, the guitarist climbed up on the stack of amps and hung from the rafters twice, and the set ended with the band piling up amps, drums, mic stands, lights and instruments in the middle of the stage and scraping their guitar strings across the edges of the pile. I wouldn't have been surprised if they poured gasoline on the mess and lit it up (Van Pelt 2009).

Performances like these offer an opportunity for Evangelicals who are dissatisfied with other forms of worship to explore diverse expressions of faith that lie outside the conventions of both mainstream religious institutions and embrace alternative rituals that might be discouraged or forbidden in other worship settings. Therefore, Cornerstone offers a unique refuge for those who profess Christianity but have become disillusioned with the church, providing a fertile space for the shared cultivation of religious practices that diverge from conventional forms of worship (Young 2015).

While there is typically little diversity in genres of music offered during church services (McDannell 2001, 122), Cornerstone artists incorporate the discourses of various genres into alternative forms of religious expression (Jousmäki 2013). Heavy metal music, for example, creates an intense, unsettling, and often frightening atmosphere that compliments satanic themes and gory imagery. While secular bands often use these themes to convey an anti-Christian message, Christian metal bands adjust the discourse to align with Christian beliefs. In the song “Necromanicide,” for instance, the Christian death metal band Mortification describes the horrors of Hell. On top of chaotic guitar riffs and disquieting music, the singer growls, “rotting corpses buried deep/decomposing in a mangled heap/unable to speak at all/only demons answer their call/necromanicide!” In the bridge, the band incorporates what one might expect to imagine as the sounds of demons while the vocalist growls, speaking from the perspective of Satan, “I am no relation of yours, But one spawned from the depths of Hades, Whose task is to deceive you.” To make clear their intentions to condemn Hell rather than glorify it, they present an opposing voice in the following verse, offering a solution while preserving the dark and gory discourse of the metal genre; “This foul practice must be stopped/Before your cadaver starts to rot/Fall prostrate before the cross/Bathe in the blood of the sacrifice.”

Similarly, hardcore punk music, also at Cornerstone, creates a feeling of aggression and power and is often employed in the context of spiritual warfare or boldness about one’s faith (McDowell 2017a). For instance, the song

“Devastator” by For Today features a powerful introduction in which the vocalist growls, “Hell, fear me/I am the one that will bring you down/And when you fall, feel me/You’ll see my face on the battleground.” In the pre-chorus and chorus, the Christian journey is portrayed as a spiritual battle with Jesus as the conqueror over evil; “The chosen ones will rise!/(Tear it to the ground) This is the army we’ve been waiting for/(Tear it to the ground) We will storm the gates of Hell and we will/(Tear it to the ground) We stand behind the one that conquered death/(Tear it to the ground) And we will stand when there is nothing left.” In describing victory in a battle over the forces of evil through Jesus, they are maintaining a similar Evangelical discourse that one might find in a traditional church but articulating their worldview through a notably different cultural medium.

Fashion trends at Cornerstone are also markedly different from what one might expect to see in other Evangelical settings. While the t-shirt and jeans of modernized Evangelical churches are still common at Cornerstone, the formal attire of more conservative churches is replaced by subcultural styles of dress. Fashion accessories such as spikes, fishnets, and the occasional kilt complement one’s attire, while some participants opt to wear heavy black makeup, face paint, or even Halloween masks. T-shirts are used to express one’s musical interests, with dark or gruesome images featuring prominently on black clothing, often conveying Christian messages. The clothing sold by the Christian metal band Demon Hunter, for example, often combines the imagery of skulls

and satanism, common in heavy metal music, in the form of a demon skull with a hole in the forehead, representing a defeat of demonic forces.

As a music festival, Cornerstone intentionally places the musicians at the center of focus, in contrast to church services, which typically try to direct attention away from the musical performers. These performances emphasize visual imagery, often including costume changes, fog machines, strobe lights, and flame throwers. Traditional singing is often replaced with rap or animalistic growls, guitars are often down-tuned to lower keys and heavily distorted, and drums are typically louder, faster, and more central to the music. In contrast to many church services, dancing is encouraged at Cornerstone, often in the form of highly energetic and aggressive mosh pits.

As Pastoor et. al (2016, 13) explain, mosh pits at Cornerstone serve as rituals that “assert and reaffirm the truths” of countercultural Christianity by serving as a “performance of Christian being, constituted within the terms of a particular community of believers, which helps to sustain that community’s form and expectations.” These pits offer complete bodily freedom for attendees, allowing them to run, push, kick, climb, and use their bodies in many other ways that would be forbidden in other contexts. This act is especially liberating for attendees who grew up in sheltered environments, as it provides them with a safe place to engage in taboo behaviors. On stage, the performers lead this environment, telling the crowd what to do and encouraging them to be more energetic. Blurring the boundaries between the crowd and the performers, fans climb onto the stage, and musicians mimic the patterns of the crowd as much as

they are able while still playing their instruments, such as swinging their guitars, jumping into the crowd, and even smashing their instruments.

### Shared Spirituality at Cornerstone

In addition to this shared culture that sets them apart from the established church, there is also a shared sense of spirituality at Cornerstone. In contrast to other Christian rock artists, the performers at this festival are generally more intentional about sharing the gospel (Gudauskas 2004). However, as discussed in the preceding chapter, evangelism looks notably different at Cornerstone than it does in other Evangelical settings.

For many Evangelicals, evangelism is intended to convert a person to the Christian faith. The Evangelical website Got Questions, for example, citing Matthew 28:19, claims that “evangelism should be the lifestyle of every true Christian” because it is necessary to fulfill our obligation to convert others into “disciples” of Jesus (“Why Should I Evangelize” 2020). Pew Research polls demonstrate that 94% of Evangelicals believe that “working to lead others to Christ” is “essential” to be a “good Evangelical,” 96% believe that “Christianity is the one, true faith leading to eternal life,” and 82% believe that Hell awaits those who do not receive eternal life through Jesus (“Evangelical Beliefs” 2020; “Religious Landscape Study” 2022). Conversion, then, is of utmost importance as the eternal destiny of a person is determined by their relationship with Jesus, and various organizations have developed and fine-tuned formulas for converting the greatest number of people as possible by pushing them to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior on the spot. Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort’s *Way of the Master*

Television series, for example, instructs viewers to convert others through a series of four questions designed to create a fear of going to Hell and closing the conversation by leading them through the sinner's prayer with the intention of causing the person to renounce their sinful life and instead become a committed follower of Jesus.

In contrast, those in the Cornerstone movement are not as concerned with ensuring that their evangelism results in a personal conversion in the moment. Instead, Cornerstone predominantly views evangelism as exposing individuals to the Christian message and gaining a broader understanding of the Christian religion (Gudauskas 2004). As one performer at Cornerstone explained, "This is a place where the alternative kid, the kid who thinks the church is dead, or Christianity doesn't make sense, that he can come and maybe not feel pressured to have to answer an altar call here tonight, but at the same time can begin to understand more about what it means to be a Christian, understand that Christians are not just a bunch of people that quote slogans" (Gudauskas 2004, 1:11:38). While those in the Cornerstone movement would generally agree with Evangelists like Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron in the importance of becoming a Christian, their primary focus is not on encouraging others to convert on the spot, but instead to gain a more accurate and complete understanding of the Christian religion.

For many Evangelicals, converting to the Christian faith entails adopting a certain set of beliefs. Evangelical leader John Piper (2010), for example, in discussing how to be saved, explains that it requires certain beliefs, such as the

belief that Jesus is divine, that he died for our sins, that we are sinners in need of salvation, that God exists, that we are “under [God’s] holy judgment,” the penal substitutionary theory of atonement, and that having certain beliefs are necessary for salvation, rather than works.

The Cornerstone movement, on the other hand, does not place as strong of an emphasis on having certain theological beliefs. In fact, the diversity of belief systems present at the festival is one of the major themes that many who attend this festival say make it so unique (Young 2015). Christianity is instead understood as a quest for spiritual truth. In the Christian metal genre, for example, Henna Jousmäki (2013, 274) notes that the genre grew out of a “dissatisfaction with prevalent forms of religious expression and religious music” within Christianity and therefore challenges traditional forms of preaching by embracing a dialogical delivery of the Christian message. As an example, she references the lyrics of the song “Spell of Hell” by Deuteronomium, which demonstrates a conversation between three people discussing the nature of Hell, each of which have opposing viewpoints (Jousmäki 2013, 281). Although the band would certainly favor a specific position, they are not directly telling the listener what to believe. Instead, the band articulates how their views are both distinct from and in a conversation with competing positions. The overall goal of the music is not necessarily to force the listener into adopting a certain belief. Instead, the Christian faith is presented as a spiritual journey through which one becomes closer to God through the dialogue they have with others.



Similarly, emo music, a subgenre of punk that is also common at Cornerstone, provides an example of the search for spiritual truth within Evangelicalism, especially for those who are losing trust in their own worldview. Since the genre creates a sense of sadness and despair, it is often used to articulate the pain that comes from challenging one's own faith as they embark on this spiritual journey. The song "Contact" by As Cities Burn, for example, captures the paradoxical sense of a loss of faith by asking God if God is real;

Hearts aren't really our guides  
We are truly alone  
Cause God ain't up in the sky  
Holding together our bones

Remember we used to speak  
Now I'm starting to think  
Your voice was really my own  
Bouncing off the ceiling back to me

God, this can't be  
God, this can't be  
God, could it be that all we see is it?  
Is this it?  
Is this it?

For Evangelicals such as John Piper, this suggestion that God might not exist would likely be seen as problematic as it risks rejecting one of the beliefs that he claims is necessary for salvation. Many Evangelical apologists, such as William Lane Craig, Lee Strobel, and Josh McDowell, express similar concerns and construct detailed arguments intended to convince the person of the truth of certain religious beliefs and encourage others to familiarize themselves with them to already be ready to give a response when someone confronts them with doubts to help ensure their salvation. However, at Cornerstone, these doubts are more normalized as part of the Christian journey. There is less of a concern with

pushing people to adopt certain beliefs. Instead, people are encouraged to freely explore their own faith, even if it might differ from the faith of others.

For those who are disillusioned by the church, any doubts they have can cause them to feel further alienated from their Christian community. Questioning certain beliefs can incite a response of trying to convince the person to remain firm in these beliefs as they are seen as necessary for belonging to the Christian community. However, if their doubts remain, then this pressure further highlights how they are different from others in their spiritual community. Cornerstone, on the other hand, offers them an avenue to maintain their Christian faith while also providing them the freedom to openly explore their thoughts and feelings that they might be tempted to keep private in other religious environments. As such, it provides them with an alternative community where they might feel a deeper spiritual connection with others than they would in other religious settings. As Pastoor et al. (2016, 12) explain, a common theme at Cornerstone was that attendees "'lived for the week of the festival,' depending on it for spiritual and social sustenance, to nourish them through the rest of the year, as both mainstream secular culture and mainstream Evangelicalism were in some ways hostile to their spiritual identities." John J. Thompson (2012), in an article for *Christianity Today*, wrote a eulogy for the festival when it closed its doors, noting that "every aspect of my life has been touched by this community, and after this week, it's as if my hometown is being wiped from the map or my native language is being officially retired." Similarly, a member of Pillar described the festival as creating a sense of oneness, while Glen Kaiser of Rez Band referred to it as

"Unity in Diversity" (Gudauskas 2004, 1:09:38). Linford Detweiler of Over the Rhine likewise explained that "there's some element of [Cornerstone] that seems to set people free for a week" (Gudauskas 2004, 1:12:40).

### Rite of Passage

While the Cornerstone movement would most accurately be described as a sect of Evangelicalism, based on Melton's classification, there are also notable similarities between this movement and NRMs that help shed light on the community that attends this festival. In his analysis of members of NRMs, Lorne L. Dawson (2009, 121-122) explains their demographics are "disproportionately young," with most members in their early 20s, and 80-90% of members leaving after 2-3 years. Citing Eileen Barker's research on the Unification Church as an example, Dawson explains that those who join NRMs are characterized as idealistic individuals hailing from conventional, respectable families that prioritize duty over financial gain. Having grown up in sheltered environments, they encountered "disappointments, hurt, and disillusionment" upon entering the wider world (Dawson 2009, 124). Therefore, they turn to an NRM, such as the Unification Church, as a means of finding fulfillment in a more desirable setting, having discovered that the transition to adulthood was more challenging than expected.

In his analysis of the motivations behind individuals who join NRMs, Canadian psychologist Saul Levine provides a more nuanced perspective on the process of identity formation that underpins this phenomenon. As he argues, the process of transitioning into adulthood is characterized by a necessary period of

separation from one's parents, during which individuals must establish their own sense of identity independent from their parental figures (Dawson 2009, 138). However, for some individuals, this process of separation is particularly difficult, resulting in a lingering attachment to their parents that prevents them from fully establishing their own identity. As a result, they may struggle to form meaningful attachments with others or establish a strong sense of belonging within a community. Whatever they see as good within themselves is dependent on parental ties, so by severing these ties, they devalue these attributes and, therefore, "find themselves unlovable and of no significance" (Dawson 2009, 140). Consequently, their self-esteem becomes so low that "there seem[s] to be no self at all" (Dawson 2009, 140).

In regard to their ideology, Levine posits that these "radical departers" believe that "an ideology should, without the effort of their own analysis, offer every answer absolutely" (Dawson 2009, 141). During childhood, young individuals have a binary understanding of the world, where all answers are either affirmative or negative. As they approach adolescence, however, they develop the cognitive ability to appreciate issues from diverse perspectives and understand that there is some degree of veracity in each one. This new realization can be unsettling, causing confusion about the concept of "truth;" whereas there was previously a right answer for everything, they now feel as though nothing has a definitive answer, leaving them without a foundation upon which to build their self-identity.

This search for an all-encompassing ideology is further motivated by their loss of parental attachments. As children distance themselves from parental guidance and attention, they also withdraw their unconditional love and faith in their parents. Furthermore, the beliefs they once held as irrefutable are now uncertain. For instance, they may have been taught that abortion is immoral, only to be exposed to opposing viewpoints that cast doubt on their previously held beliefs, exposing cracks in their nomos. Further, these cracks exposed their parents as flawed creatures, failing to live up to the moral standards they attempt to pass on to their children or imparting advice that no longer holds true. To radical departers, their parents have become “fallen idols,” and there are no other untainted idols to take their place (Dawson 2009, 125).

Therefore, radical departers need coherent and stable nomos to safeguard them against identity loss, fallen heroes, and low self-esteem. Already losing so much, “they can’t shoulder the responsibility of perhaps making a wrong moral choice and thereby feeling more worthless still” (Dawson 2009, 142) and therefore require an all-encompassing and coherent ideology that enables them to cling to the hope that there is still something “good” within them that needs discovering and to identify the “bad” things that they need to eliminate now that their parents are unable to do it for them. Consequently, they temporarily seek refuge in a NRM that provides them with such an ideology.

Since the cult experience is generally a temporary experience for young adults, Melton and Moore (1986) explain that it “must be seen within the context of states of transition – particularly the transition from adolescence to young

adulthood” (46). Therefore, as Palmer and Prince point out, membership in an NRM can be accurately understood as a rite of passage within the context of liminality (Dawson 2009, 250). As introduced by van Gennep and Turner, liminality refers to a state of in-betweenness that occurs during times of transition or ritual and is characterized by ambiguity, disorientation, and a sense of being on the threshold of something new. During these periods, individuals or groups are stripped of their usual social roles and statuses and are placed in a state where the normal rules and expectations of society are temporarily suspended. This transformative and potentially powerful state offers individuals and groups the freedom to experiment with new ways of being and to challenge existing social norms and conventions, leading to the emergence of new ideas, values, and behaviors.

In her study of women in NRMs, Susan J. Palmer explains that NRMs exist in the margins of society, not conforming to the wider culture, and as such, they serve as a safe area to experiment with alternative forms of sexuality and gender roles. Therefore, they provide an experience of “*communitas*, a generic bond outside the limits of social structure; a transient condition that liberates them from conformity to general norms and opens a space for experimentation” (Dawson 2009, 253). She describes this space as a “cocoon” or a “protective microsociet[y]” that protects the women as they transition into the next period of life (Dawson 2009, 253).

As studies on the Cornerstone Festival have revealed, most attendees are young individuals who are in the process of transitioning into adulthood (Young

2015; Pastoor et al. 2016; Abraham 2020). Like those who join NRMs, Cornerstone attendees often come from sheltered, conservative Christian backgrounds that have isolated them from secular entertainment, which was often what first drew them to Christian rock music as one of the few avenues to appreciate popular music genres while remaining protected from worldly influences (Pastoor et al. 2016, 12). While their religious upbringing emphasized the importance of adhering to Christian values, they frequently find themselves questioning their faith and struggling to adapt to the broader world as they transition to adulthood. Therefore, they highly value the festival as a means of connecting with others with similar struggles (Pastoor et al. 2016)

Levine's characterization of those who join NRMs as people who "feel like they belong to no one, [and] believe in nothing" (Dawson 2009, 140) also highlights a common sentiment of those at Cornerstone. They feel rejected by both the church and the mainstream culture and have not yet formed their own complete worldview that will define their adult lives. Moreover, in contrast to the established church, low self-esteem is embraced at Cornerstone and is a common theme in the music. In typical Evangelical churches, Jesus is regarded as the solution to one's problems. Evangelicals frequently compose their testimonies in a predetermined manner to better share them with others, following a similar structure of portraying a dissatisfying or problematic life that Jesus helped overcome after being saved. Music is almost always a form of praise, expressing gratitude towards God for his benevolence, and places of

worship are generally happy environments where individuals smile, greet each other, and welcome visitors.

In contrast, the music played at Cornerstone is often somber, with themes of despair, including suicide, being prevalent. The first album by the band Showbread, for example, was called *Life, Kisses, and Other Wasted Efforts*, featuring song titles such as “Killing Myself” and “Cry For Help.” In the song “Seven Sisters” by mewithoutYou, the singer shouts, “I still have a thousand half-loves! Oh, my God! I want to shoot myself just thinking about it! And you think I don’t mean what I say? Well, I mean every word I say!!” Some artists have even passed away by suicide, such as Timothy Jordan II of Jonezetta and Jon Bunch of Further Seems Forever. The despair that comes from seeing parents as fallen heroes is also common, as evidenced in songs such as “The Widow” by As Cities Burn and “Oh Yeah, Well My Daddy Died With A Needle In His Arm” by Nodes of Ranvier.

Barker explained that Moonies “do not appear to be rejecting the values that were instilled into them during their childhood; they appear, on the contrary, to have imbibed these so successfully that they are prepared to respond to the opportunity (which society does not seem to be offering them) to live according to those very standards” (Dawson 2009, 125). As explored in the previous chapter, attendees at Cornerstone, too, have not fully renounced their religious upbringing, although they are exploring alternative manifestations of it. While they are becoming increasingly cognizant that understanding the truth is not as clear-cut as they thought, they also understand that openly questioning these



teachings may jeopardize their identity, self-worth, parental relationships, and membership in their spiritual community, all of which would be unbearable. Therefore, they need a space to freely explore these ideas with others who also remain within the Christian faith, and Cornerstone provides such a space.

However, they also often seek and adopt the all-encompassing black-and-white worldview that Levine discusses. Through this, they can make a more radical commitment to the faith to make up for the perceived failings of their parents and the religious environment they were raised in. The folk-punk band Psalters, for instance, is highly critical of right-wing Christianity and instead believes that Jesus calls for a radical commitment to the faith that involves siding with the oppressed and opposing warfare, patriotism, and the accumulation of wealth. As such, members have largely renounced the American lifestyle, instead living nomadically and traveling to other countries to help reverse the damage caused by the US military (Psalters Corporation 2023). More broadly, the promotion of truth over falsehood common to heavy metal music (Jousmäki 2013), the victory of good over evil promoted by hardcore bands (McDowell 2017a), and the emphasis on not conforming to the patterns of the world explored in punk rock (Abraham 2020, 35-51) all promote and depend on this binary worldview that encourages the listener to a more radical commitment to their faith.

As with NRMs, Pastoor et al. (2016) argue that Cornerstone also functions as a liminal space. The authors note that Cornerstone “overtly constituted itself as a space to push boundaries” while still being “wrapped in the safe envelope of

a Christian festival environment,” creating an atmosphere of “controlled-decontrol” (Pastoor et al. 2016, 11-12). Therefore, liminality is not only “a perceived condition on the part of attendees” but “a tool actively harnessed by festival organizers to generate desired outcomes” (Pastoor et al. 2016, 10). In agreement with Palmer’s characterization of NRMs as “cocoon” or “protective microsocieties,” Pastoor et al. (2016) describe Cornerstone as an intentionally constructed “safe haven” for people to form their identities (12).

This concept of liminality can also be seen in mosh pits, which are common at Cornerstone. Highlighting the role of a mosh pit as a “spontaneous communitas,” Dechaine (2002, 94) described his experience in one:

[I’m] almost up to the pit now. I teeter here, on the periphery of an undulating, swirling sea of elbows, boots and fists, jockeying for position, yelling and smiling. Counter-clockwise movement of a saw blade expanding outward toward onlookers, occasionally imploding on itself. Boys and girls veer by, sometimes three across with arms interlocked in unity. Music is blaring, directing the speed and intensity of the nucleus of bodies. Like a giant human color organ, the moshers churn to the rhythm: mohawks and skins, Hispanic and Anglo, a seething, shape-shifting organism within an organism. A mosher swings around his partner and the centrifugal force throws him across the whirlpool, slamming into bodies like a pinball, crumpling to the ground. Three moshers immediately stop, pick him up, ask him if he’s okay, slap him on the back, push him back into the thick of it. My heart is racing. I move in closer, feel the occasional elbow as it flies past. A skinhead whirls past, locks eyes with me, and yells, “Comin’ in?” I nod tentatively, not wanting to appear afraid. But I am afraid, not for my physical safety, but for . . . for what? What’s the nature of this strange anxiety? My adrenaline’s really pumping now. Perched on a precipice, feeling myself sucked into the undertow, I start to shake, take a deep breath, throw myself in . . .

Reflecting on this experience, he explains, “Liminality entails risk. Where excitement and anticipation mix with the fear of uncertainty, here, says Turner, are spaces of transformation” (Dechaine 2002, 94). Riches (2011) notes that as a liminal space, a mosh pit “embodies and blurs various dichotomies such as

structure/anti-structure, pain/pleasure, destructive/creative, disorder/order, control/chaos and individuality/collectivity” (326). In his analysis of mosh pits, Purcell asked, “What could better express the paradox of simultaneously being supremely alive and yet separated from the self as a part of something shared?” (Riches 2011, 325).

Mosh pits at Cornerstone are perhaps the clearest example of “controlled-decontrol” described by Pastoor et al. (2016, 11-12). To the unaccustomed observer, mosh pits might appear to be pure chaos, with arms flailing and bodies flying. Yet, even in the chaos, the pit is still governed by a sense of order. Bodies move in a synchronous manner, corresponding to the type of dance that is performed at a particular moment. People migrate to certain areas to fill certain roles, such as forming a “wall” around the pit where participants push those in the pit to keep the energy going while providing a safe exit for those who wish to leave. Participants are expected to follow the verbal and nonverbal commands from the performers, such as moving the hand in a circle with a finger pointed in the air to command a circle pit. There is also a “pit etiquette” in which certain behaviors are expected, and others are forbidden. For example, participants are expected to pick others up when they fall and respect those who do not wish to participate in the pit and are discouraged from entering the pit while intoxicated or from wearing fashion accessories that could injure others (Riches 2011, 326). Therefore, the pit provides people with “the regulated freedom to establish, out of the chaos, their own social order” (Riches 2011, 316).

Pastoor et al. (2016, 57) explain that the experience of liminality offered at Cornerstone creates “a sense of freedom to behave differently from how one might at home, the ability to more readily pursue and achieve a state of existential authenticity and the creation of *communitas* - or intense bonding with strangers sharing the experience.” Riches (2011) likewise notes that a mosh pit serves as a “spontaneous *communitas*,” which collectively embodies “shared sentiments of frustration, pleasure, admiration and pain in a gestural manner” (Riches 2011, 318). It reflects the “darker aspects of humanity,” and by entering the pit, “one embraces all the pain, hurt, joy, pleasure and suffering that delineate existence” (Riches 2011, 320). Therefore, “The mosh pit can be understood as not just a physical experience, but a transcendent one, allowing audiences to feel a greater connection to life amidst the chaos” (Riches 2011, 322). In this environment, participants are “stripped of their socio-economic status, everyday positions and routine expectations” and instead enter into a “transitional phase, rejecting the society that they belong to while being reincorporated into an alternative society” (Riches 2011, 322).

The mosh pit, therefore, serves as the embodiment of the liminality of Cornerstone that creates the *communitas*, which offers attendees a similar experience as those who join new religious movements. As attendees are transitioning into adulthood, Cornerstone serves as a rite of passage, allowing attendees to freely explore alternative forms of Christianity within the protective cocoon of a Christian environment. While they are situated within a transitional phase of life that causes them to lose their sense of identity and feel like no one

understands them (Dawson 2003, 140), Cornerstone is the intermediary that connects them with others who feel a similar way. The spiritual and emotional connections that they have with their music cease becoming private at Cornerstone and instead become shared experiences through which attendees can step away from their previous identities and connect with others in an intimate way.

### Conclusion

As the world is becoming more connected, people are increasingly coming into contact with new forms of information that challenge their preexisting worldviews. While a person might have previously believed that they had an internally consistent and all-encompassing worldview, they are constantly confronted with new information which could fundamentally challenge the foundation on which they have built their identity. For many Christians, this is especially painful as changes to their worldview risk a loss of their spiritual community and threaten them with Hell if they are wrong. As such, they are often discouraged from challenging their faith and must wrestle with their ideologies privately.

Cornerstone provided them with a refuge to openly explore alternative forms of Christianity within the safety of a Christian environment. Here, attendees can shed their previous identities and collectively embrace an alternative sect of Evangelism where Christianity is understood as a spiritual quest for truth rather than a specific set of beliefs, and the culture reflects that of musical subcultures rather than that of the established church. Therefore, they can become part of a

community that will help them transition to the next stage in life. As this demonstrates, Cornerstone is more than just a music festival; it is a site of postmodern Christianity that fills a spiritual gap for those who feel like outsiders in other areas of life.

## Conclusion: The Significance of the Christian Rock Scene

Today's Christian rock scene is notably different from the 1970s but is often analyzed as if it contained some *sui generis* essence fixed over time. Therefore, examining how the scene has evolved is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Christian rock scene and its broader impact on American culture. Initially, the Christian rock scene emerged as an opposition movement within the church, with pioneers advocating for the integration of rock music into religious practice, countering the anti-rock discourse propagated by many Christian leaders. This struggle for legitimacy was eventually won, as Christian rock musicians demonstrated the effectiveness of their art form in spreading the gospel to large audiences. This success led to greater investment from Christian institutions, which in turn led to increased recognition for artists in this scene. This newfound recognition caught the attention of secular record labels, who introduced new marketing strategies to promote Christian rock music to a broader, mainstream audience. Consequently, the Christian rock scene underwent a significant transformation as it broke free from the separatist Evangelical subculture and emerged as a major force in the broader American music landscape.

Although Christian rock music has become widely incorporated into the mainstream music scene, it still provides a distinct and significant experience for many Christian listeners, namely, the protective cocoon of the Evangelical nomos. While many Evangelicals today might listen to rock and other mainstream styles of music, there remains a comfort of knowing that the

performers represent one's own spiritual community and are creating their music within a Christian worldview. The Christian rock scene also offers perspectives on Christianity from artists rather than religious leaders, which is particularly meaningful for those who are disillusioned with established churches but still adhere to the Evangelical nomos. Therefore, it became a fertile ground for the emergence of the Cornerstone Movement as an Evangelical sect providing Evangelicals with opportunities to explore diverse expressions of their faith during a transitional period in their lives without departing from the sacred canopy of Christianity.

As the shifts and acceptance of the Christian rock scene demonstrate, the genre can no longer be dismissed as a marginalized subculture but has become a major movement that can provide valuable insight into the cultural and religious landscape of America, as it both reflects and attracts the growing population of Americans that are migrating toward a more personalized approach to spirituality. As this thesis demonstrates, those who are departing from the church are not necessarily abandoning Christianity altogether; instead, they often embrace a more postmodernist interpretation of the faith that diverges from traditional church doctrine.



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## Appendix

### Selected Christian Rock Discography

Album	Artist	Year	Genre	RIAA Certification	Billboard 200	US Rock	US Hard Rock
To Hell With the Devil	Stryper	1986	Metal	Platinum	32		
In God We Trust	Stryper	1988	Metal	Gold	32		
Against the Law	Stryper	1990	Metal		39		
Jesus Freak	DC Talk	1995	Rock/Hip-Hop	2x Platinum	16		
Jars of Clay	Jars of Clay	1995	Alternative Rock	2x Platinum	46		
God's Property from Kirk Franklin's Nu Nation	Kirk Franklin	1997	Gospel	3x Platinum	3		
Much Afraid	Jars of Clay	1997	Alternative Rock	Platinum	8		
Kiss Me (single)	Sixpence None the Richer	1998	Alternative Rock	Gold	2		
Supernatural	DC Talk	1998	Rock/Hip-Hop	Platinum	4		
No Name Face	Lifehouse	2000	Alternative Rock	2x Platinum	6		
Satellite	P.O.D.	2001	Metal	3x Platinum	6		
Stanley Climbfall	Lifehouse	2002	Alternative Rock		7		
Payable on Death	P.O.D.	2003	Metal	Gold	9		
The Beautiful Letdown	Switchfoot	2003	Alternative Rock	2x Platinum	16		
Mmhmm	Relient K	2004	Alternative Rock	Gold	15		
Nothing Is Sound	Switchfoot	2005	Alternative Rock	Gold	3		
Lifehouse	Lifehouse	2005	Alternative Rock	Gold	10		
How to Save a Life	The Fray	2005	Alternative Rock	4x Platinum	14	4	
Define the Great Line	Underoath	2006	Metalcore	Gold	2	1	
Testify	P.O.D.	2006	Metal		9		
Oh! Gravity.	Switchfoot	2006	Alternative Rock		18	4	
Five Score and Seven Years Ago	Relient K	2007	Alternative Rock		6	3	
An Ocean Between Us	As I Lay Dying	2007	Metalcore		8	1	1
Portable Sounds	TobyMac	2007	Rock/Hip-Hop	Gold	10	3	
Who We Are	Lifehouse	2007	Alternative Rock	Gold	14		
Cities	Anberlin	2007	Alternative Rock		19	6	
Lost in the Sound of Separation	Underoath	2008	Metalcore		8	3	
When Angels & Serpents Dance	P.O.D.	2008	Metal		9		
New Surrender	Anberlin	2008	Alternative Rock		13	5	
Fireflies (Single)	Owl City	2009	Pop	6x Platinum	1		
The Fray	The Fray	2009	Alternative Rock	Platinum	1	1	
Awake	Skillet	2009	Hard Rock	3x Platinum	2	2	
Memento Mori	Flyleaf	2009	Hard Rock		8	2	1
Ocean Eyes	Owl City	2009	Pop	Platinum	8		
With Roots Above and Branches Below	The Devil Wears Prada	2009	Metalcore		11	4	1

City of Black & White	Mat Kearney	2009	CCM		13	3	
Hello Hurricane	Switchfoot	2009	Alternative Rock		13	4	
Innocence & Instinct	RED	2009	Hard Rock		15	6	
Forget and Not Slow Down	Relient K	2009	Alternative Rock		15	5	
Constellations	August Burns Red	2009	Metalcore		24	8	2
Smoke & Mirrors	Lifehouse	2010	Alternative Rock		6		
Tonight	TobyMac	2010	Rock/Hip-Hop	Gold	6		
Dark Is the Way, Light Is a Place	Anberlin	2010	Alternative Rock		9	4	
The Powerless Rise	As I Lay Dying	2010	Metalcore		10	5	3
Zombie EP	The Devil Wears Prada	2010	Metalcore		10	2	1
Rehab	Lecrae	2010	Hip Hop		17		
Until We Have Faces	RED	2011	Hard Rock		2	1	1
Young Love	Mat Kearney	2011	CCM		4	1	
The Reckoning	Needtobreathe	2011	Alternative Rock		6	1	
All Things Bright and Beautiful	Owl City	2011	Pop		6		
Vice Verses	Switchfoot	2011	Alternative Rock		8	3	
Dead Throne	The Devil Wears Prada	2011	Metalcore		10		3
Leveler	August Burns Red	2011	Metalcore		11	2	1
Rehab: The Overdose	Lecrae	2011	Hip Hop		15		
Eye on It	TobyMac	2012	Rock/Hip-Hop	Gold	1		
Gravity	Lecrae	2012	Hip Hop		3		
Scars & Stories	The Fray	2012	Alternative Rock		4	2	
The Midsummer Station	Owl City	2012	Pop		7		
Good Time (Single)	Owl City	2012	Pop	2x Platinum	8		
Awakened	As I Lay Dying	2012	Metalcore		11	6	1
The End Is Where We Begin	Thousand Foot Krutch	2012	Hard Rock		14	7	
Immortal	For Today	2012	Metalcore		15	7	1
Challenger	Memphis May Fire	2012	Metalcore		16	5	3
Murdered Love	P.O.D.	2012	Metal		17		
The Good Life	Trip Lee	2012	Hip-Hop		17		
Rise	Skillet	2013	Hard Rock	Gold	4	1	
Release the Panic	RED	2013	Hard Rock		7	2	1
Rescue & Restore	August Burns Red	2013	Metalcore		9	3	2
Heroes for Sale	Andy Mineo	2013	Hip-Hop		11		
Vessel	Twenty One Pilots	2013	Rock/Hip-Hop	2x Platinum	21		
Anomaly	Lecrae	2014	Hip Hop	Gold	1		
Rivers in the Wasteland	Needtobreathe	2014	Alternative Rock		3	1	
Unconditional	Memphis May Fire	2014	Metalcore		4	1	
Fading West	Switchfoot	2014	Alternative Rock		6	2	
Helios	The Fray	2014	Alternative Rock		8	2	

Lowborn	Anberlin	2014	Alternative Rock		10	2	
OXYGEN:INHALE	Thousand Foot Krutch	2014	Hard Rock		11	2	
Never Land (EP)	Andy Mineo	2014	Hip-Hop		13		
Extremist	Demon Hunter	2014	Metalcore		16	5	2
Rise	Trip Lee	2014	Hip-Hop		16		
Blurryface	Twenty One Pilots	2015	Rock/Hip-Hop	5x Platinum	1		
This Is Not a Test	TobyMac	2015	Rock/Hip-Hop	Gold	4		
Found in Far Away Places	August Burns Red	2015	Metalcore		9	1	1
Uncomfortable	Andy Mineo	2015	Hip-Hop		10		
Mobile Orchestra	Owl City	2015	Pop		11		
Of Beauty and Rage	RED	2015	Hard Rock		14	3	1
Hard Love	Needtobreathe	2016	Alternative Rock		2	1	
Unleashed	Skillet	2016	Hard Rock	Gold	3	2	
Where the Light Shines Through	Switchfoot	2016	Alternative Rock		10	3	
Church Clothes 3	Lecrae	2016	Hip Hop		12		
Therapy Session	NF	2016	Hip-Hop		12		
Perception	NF	2017	Hip-Hop	Platinum	1		
All Things Work Together	Lecrae	2017	Hip Hop		11		
Phantom Anthem	August Burns Red	2017	Metalcore		19	4	2
Trench	Twenty One Pilots	2018	Rock/Hip-Hop	Platinum	2		
The Elements	TobyMac	2018	Rock/Hip-Hop		18		
The Search	NF	2019	Hip-Hop	Platinum	1		
Victorious	Skillet	2019	Hard Rock		17	3	
Out of Body	Needtobreathe	2020	Alternative Rock		17	2	
Clouds	NF	2021	Hip-Hop		3		
Scaled and Icy	Twenty One Pilots	2021	Rock/Hip-Hop		3		
Dominion	Skillet	2022	Hard Rock		38	4	

Curriculum Vitae

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**EDUCATION**

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**Master of Arts in Religious Studies** **2023**

*Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC*

- *Thesis: "A Home for the Outcasts: An Analysis of Christian Rock as an Expression of Postmodern Christianity"*

**Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Religious Studies (dual major)** **2016**

*Wright State University, Dayton, OH*

- *Thesis: "'Were You There?': The Young Earth Creationist Worldview of Answers in Genesis"*

**CONFERENCE & SYMPOSIA PARTICIPATION**

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"Marginal to Mainstream: A New Framework for Studying Christian Rock as a Lens Into the Diverse Evangelical Landscape," Florida State University Graduate Student Symposium. Tallahassee, FL. February 2023.

"The Evangelical Identity: An Analysis of the Factors that Motivated the Evangelical Support of Donald Trump," North Carolina Religious Studies Association Annual Meeting. Pembroke, NC. October 2022.

"Renouncing the World and Embracing Jesus: A Modern Movement of Radical Christians." University of North Carolina Charlotte Annual Graduate Student Conference. Charlotte, NC. April 2022.

"Community Peacemaker Teams: Pacifists in the Face of Danger," Wake Forest University Student Research Symposium On Gender and Sexuality. Winston-Salem, NC. March 2022.

"Guns, Race, and God: An Examination of the Miracle Valley Shootout in Light of the Master Narrative," Florida State University Graduate Student Symposium. Tallahassee, FL. February 2022.

"Ebernezerhof Hutterian Brethren: An Emerging Christian Commune," Wake Forest University Internship Celebration Breakfast. Dayton, OH. April 2016.



## RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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- Independent Researcher: Ebenezerhof Hutterian Brethren** 2014-2016  
*Wright State University, Dayton, OH*
- Lived in an Anabaptist commune as part of a two-year independent research project
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## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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- Graduate Student Operations Manager** 2021-2023  
*Wake Forest University, Campus Programs and Services, Winston-Salem, NC*
- Graduate Assistant** 2022-2023  
*Wake Forest University, Department for the Study of Religions, Winston-Salem, NC*
- Operations Associate** 2019-2021  
*Intrepid College Prep Schools, Antioch, TN*
- Science Teacher (Grade 6)** 2019  
*Intrepid College Prep Schools, Antioch, TN*
- Teach for America: Elementary Teacher (Grades 3 & 5)** 2017-2019  
*Promise Academy, Memphis, TN*
- Residential Coordinator** 2016-2017  
*ViaQuest, Inc., Dayton, OH*
- Director of Children's Ministries** 2016  
*Riverside Church of the Nazarene, Riverside, OH*

## VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

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- Dean's Student Advisory Board** 2014-2016  
*Wright State University College of Liberal Arts, Dayton, OH*
- President** 2014-2015  
*Crosswalk Collegiate Ministries, Dayton, OH*

<b>Co-Founder, President</b> <i>Ahimsa's Army, Dayton, OH</i>	<b>2013-2014</b>
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<b>Co-Founder, Youth Leader</b> <i>Center Pointe Church, Centerburg, OH</i>	<b>2009-2011</b>

## **HONORS AND AWARDS**

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Graduate Assistantship Award	2022
North Carolina Religious Studies Association Annual Meeting Best Essay Award	2022
Featured Speaker, Wright State University Internship Celebration Breakfast	2016
Wright State University Religion, Philosophy, and Classics Internship Award	2016
Dean's Leadership Award	2015