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End-Time Lyrics and Music in Contemporary Christian "ApokRock"

Marcus Moberg

Introduction

As has been persuasively shown by a larger number of studies, modern communications media-based popular culture has increasingly come to shape the character of contemporary religious life and practice (Hoover 2006, 55-56; Woods 2013; Wagner 2019). Indeed, considering the many transformations that the religious landscape of the West has undergone during the past five to six decades, it has become increasingly important to explore the ways and extent to which various types of mass-mediated popular culture have become entwined with contemporary forms of religious expression and practice (e.g., Lynch 2010). This, not least, also involves looking into the ways in which various types of popular music and their associated aesthetics and subcultural worlds have, to varying extents, become appropriated by religious groups and communities themselves. While such appropriations can nowadays be found across much of the religious spectrum (Partridge and Moberg 2017), nowhere has it been as evident and purposeful as in the phenomenon of so-called Evangelical Popular Music, also known as Contemporary Christian Music (CCM).

CCM originally emerged as an innovation of the so-called Jesus Movement of the 1960s, which was principally focused on "appealing to the countercultural young by presenting a theologically conservative biblical message in the language of the counter-culture," especially through the medium of popular music (McLeod 2007, 137; cf. Young 2017, 101). The movement's vanguard, the so-called "Jesus Freaks," were often "reformed" and converted hippies and street musicians who, having converted to evangelical Christianity, refashioned their music into a vehicle for the expression and dissemination of their newfound faith. Due to the particular evangelical milieu from which they sprang, the Jesus Freaks were heavily inspired by apocalyptic dispensational pre-millennialism (discussed in more detail below), ~~and~~ especially as articulated in the popular literary production of evangelist Hal Lindsey (Young 2012, 56). This inspiration would also become clearly reflected in the core messages of their music.

The so-called evangelical popular culture industry (discussed in more detail below) has developed into a prime contemporary purveyor of neo-evangelical pre-millenarian thought. As previously argued by Clark (2005, 25), the evangelical popular culture industry has played a central role in the mainstreaming and popularization of ideas and themes related to the "dark side of evangelicalism" and thereby significantly contributed to the "publicly available stock of symbols and narratives that are incorporated into the entertainment media" (Clark 2005, 25). This pertains both to Judeo-Christian notions about supernatural evil and demonology as well as apocalyptic notions about the "End Times," the Antichrist, the Final Judgment, and the end of the world. Indeed, since at least the 1960s, these notions have become increasingly widely circulated through various types of mass-mediated popular culture, ranging from films and television series to computer games and music (Partridge 2005). These themes also continue to be explored and disseminated through various types of CCM, where they remain more firmly embedded in an evangelical interpretive frame. While CCM has often stood in an uneasy and sometimes antagonistic relationship to "secular" (i.e., not explicitly Christian) popular music, many Christian artists and bands have nevertheless strived to conform to the established lyrical and aesthetic conventions of the more particular popular musical styles and subgenres that they (musically, at least) represent. Consequently, the treatment of apocalyptic and "end-time"-related themes has tended to be most commonly and conspicuously explored by Christian artists and bands that represent more aggressive styles of rock where such themes already constitute part of established genre conventions and commonly drawn upon lyrical and aesthetic repertoires. This is particularly evident in so-called Christian metal music.

This article provides a discussion and analysis of some of the most explicit explorations of apocalyptic themes to be found in Christian metal music, or what can appropriately be referred to as the epitome of contemporary Christian "Apokrock."[1] In order to be able to more firmly situate the discussion and analysis that follows within a broader social, cultural, and religious context, the article opens with a brief overview of evangelicalism (or neo-evangelicalism as it has subsequently also come to be called in its current form) and the main types of beliefs and dispositions that typically tend to be espoused by people who self-identify as evangelical. The

[1] Lorenzo DiTommaso coined the term "ApokRock" and introduced me to it. See the introduction to this volume.

discussion will primarily focus on developments in the United States where neo-evangelicalism has been particularly socially and culturally influential and where the bulk of Christian popular music continues to be produced and consumed. This is followed by a general account of the evangelical popular culture industry and its main underlying ethos, with a particular focus on CCM. The remainder of the article is devoted to an analysis of a set of notable concrete examples of the explicit treatment of apocalyptic themes in the lyrics and aesthetics of some well-known Christian metal music bands.

Evangelicalism and Evangelicals: A Brief Overview

As a particular form of Christianity, evangelicalism can ultimately be traced back to the Protestant Reformation. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelicalism primarily proliferated in the United States, where it gradually developed into a major religious, cultural, and political force (Smith 1998). The early 1900s witnessed a series of developments that would prove particularly decisive for the future shape of evangelicalism in the United States, and indeed beyond. The first years of the 1920s marked the start of a drawn-out and highly divisive series of conflicts in the Protestant field that became known as the "fundamentalist-modernist controversy" (Smith 1998, 6-7; Hankins 2008, 5). The conflict was fought between "modernists"—who advocated progressive ideals, theological and doctrinal reforms based on modern ways of thinking, and higher biblical criticism—and "fundamentalists" who, as Lantzer (2012, 42) puts it, "sought to protect their faith from a transformation that would embrace the world at the expense of the Word." Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the battle between modernists and fundamentalists raged on a wide range of different fronts, including, perhaps most notably, the theological implications of the theory of evolution as it was making its way into public school curricula (Smith 1998, 7, 12-13).

By the 1940s, however, many moderate evangelicals had grown weary of the seemingly never-ending and increasingly entrenched fight. In an effort to counter both the accommodating liberalism of the modernists and the separationist approach of the fundamentalists, a group of moderate evangelicals began to actively distinguish themselves from both of these opposing camps. This group went on to form its own National Association of Evangelicals in 1942,

followed by Fuller Seminary in 1947, and *Christianity Today* magazine in 1956 (Hankins 2008, 6). This movement became known as "neo-evangelicalism," with Southern Baptist minister Billy Graham as its most prominent representative. The boundary between evangelicals and fundamentalists, however, was always fleeting and remains so to this day. As Hankins (2008, 6) points out, while "Fundamentalists today make up the right wing of evangelicalism," and while "all Fundamentalists are evangelicals," most "evangelicals are not fundamentalists and resist being called fundamentalists."

Neo-evangelicalism in its various forms continued to grow exponentially throughout the decades leading up to the new millennium (Miller 1997) and managed to open up "a 'space' between fundamentalism and liberalism in the field of collective religious identity" (Smith 1998, 14). Rather than grounding their identity in either dismissive reactions or uncritical accommodations to modernity, neo-evangelicals instead actively crafted their own counter-narratives and versions of what modern Christian life was to be all about (Luhr 2009, 177). In comparing the "cultural toolkits" of modern America's great Protestant traditions, Smith has argued that neo-evangelicalism has managed to generate a "subcultural orientation" and disposition of "distinction-with-engagement," which clearly sets it apart from both fundamentalists and the traditional so-called mainline. As part of these developments, the nature of evangelical faith and practice also took a general turn away from issues relating to theology and doctrinal purity towards an increasing emphasis on the self and subjective experience (Hunter 1987, 66; Miller 1997). At the dawn of the new millennium, neo-evangelicalism had totally eclipsed both the fundamentalists and the old Protestant mainline and firmly cemented its position as the preeminent Christian tradition of the United States (Smith 1998, 20; Pew Research Center 2014).

More precisely, then, what is neo-evangelicalism, and who are the neo-evangelicals? Notwithstanding the abundance of more specific understandings, the term "evangelical/neo-evangelical" tends to be most commonly used to denote a certain type of Protestant Christian who espouses a more particular set of beliefs and understandings of the principal meaning of a Christian life and how such a life should be led (*cf*. Bebbington 1989, 2-3). Indeed, as Hendershot has argued, "evangelicals tend to see themselves not as a *type* of Christian but as the only true Christians" (2004, 2). According to a widely employed definition developed by

Bebbington (1989), evangelicalism has historically displayed four distinctive features, each of which also applies to neo-evangelicalism: “biblicism,” “conversionism,” “crucicentrism,” and “activism.”

In line with the core Protestant Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*, evangelicals are “biblicist” in that they typically regard the Bible as the literally true, infallible, and inspired word of God. The Bible is also understood to predict the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ (Hendershot 2004, 10, 101). It follows from this that evangelicals also tend to take “a more literal approach” to the interpretation of biblical eschatology and prophecy (Hendershot 2004, 178). Especially in the United States, evangelical understandings of the biblical foretelling of the Second Coming of Christ have been quite strongly influenced by so-called pre-millenial dispensationalism. While developed in several slightly different versions, dispensationalist teachings are essentially based on a particular type of reading and interpretation of Scripture according to which the record of history in the biblical narrative is divided up into a set of (usually seven) main successive periods or “dispensations,” each of which are considered to be marked by particular types of relations between God and humanity.

The so-called *rapture* occupies a central position in these teachings. This is the belief that all “true” Christians literally will be “lifted up” or “raptured” from earth to Heaven either sometime before, during, or towards the end of a seven-year period of “tribulation”—a time of great distress, suffering, and the rise of the Antichrist—that is believed to precede the Second Coming (Hendershot 2004, 101). This belief plays an important role in underpinning evangelicals’ preoccupation with the “end-times” as well as their (sometimes incessant) search for “signs” that these times might soon be, or indeed already are, upon us. The belief in the rapture has consequently also come to occupy a central position in evangelical popular culture and sparked the development of a particular genre of products that have been variously referred to as “apocalyptic fiction” (Clark 2005, 34), “apocalyptic media” (Hendershot 2004, 179), and “prophecy fiction” (Gribben 2009). Manifested in a variety of forms including films, novels, comics, computer games, and popular music, these media typically strive to educate audiences about biblical prophecy and the rapture, compel people to accept Christ as their personal savior, and provide instruction and solace for those who end up being “left behind” on earth after the

rapture (Hendershot 2004, 179-180). The wider popularization of these teachings has perhaps occurred most effectively through Jerry Jenkins's and Tim LaHaye's hugely successful *Left Behind*-novel series (Gribben 2009), which has inspired a wide range of related products, including three feature films and two computer games. Themes relating to biblical prophecy, the "end-times," and the rapture have also figured prominently in the lyrics and imagery of much CCM, especially during the 1980s and 1990s (Young 2012, 60).

In line with the core Reformation doctrine of *sola fides*, evangelicals are also "conversionist" in that they typically emphasize the critical importance of the personal conversion experience (Hankins 2008, 2). Evangelicals thus tend to regard faith as primarily a matter of *personal salvation* (Hendershot 2004, 97, 112, 124). The Evangelical emphasis on personal salvation is also directly connected to the notion that all "true" Christians should adhere to the biblical Great Commission and aim to spread their faith to others. Evangelicals are also "crucicentric" in that they tend to attach great importance to the crucifixion of Christ as a crucial precondition for salvation. Because of this, evangelicals place a particularly strong emphasis on Christ's sacrificial death since "the Christlike lifestyle is something that follows conversion made possible by the crucifixion" (Hankins 2008, 2). Lastly, evangelicals are "activist" because of their desire to spread and instill the virtues of Christian living throughout society and culture on the whole. This activist streak has historically inspired evangelicals to partake in various types of moral crusades and social causes, ranging from abolition in the nineteenth century, to prohibition in the early twentieth century, to pro-life advocacy in the later twentieth century (Hankins 2008, 2). As already noted, evangelicalism also occupies a highly visible position in the political life of the United States through the conglomerate of Christian organizations and political action committees collectively referred to as the Christian Right (Hankins 2008, 143).

Evangelical Popular Culture and CCM

The neo-evangelical movement has always been characterized by a general openness to culture and new communications media (Schultze 2001, 39-41). The phenomenon of evangelical popular culture provides a particularly apt example of this. Since its initial emergence in the mid-1970s and subsequent development into a global multi-billion dollar industry, evangelical

popular culture now constitutes a highly visible, but all too frequently overlooked, component of the present-day popular cultural environment of the United States. Since its inception, one of its principal aims has been to provide evangelical youth with Christianized and family friendly versions of secular (i.e., not-explicitly-Christian) forms of popular culture. Between the 1970s and 1990s, this increasingly came to encompass nearly every form of mass-mediated popular culture, ranging from television series, films and popular music to video games, comic books, and youth magazines, to name just a few (Hendershot 2004).

As Shawn Young reminds us, however, "American Protestants have often sought mass, commercial appeal, while simultaneously demonizing the culture it [*sic*] sought to imitate" (Young 2017, 104). It is this simultaneously accommodating yet distancing attitude that continues to underlie evangelical popular culture's ethos of evangelism through cultural infiltration, i.e., the notion that it is possible (and indeed desirable) for Christians to actively engage secular popular culture in its own vernacular for the purposes of transforming it and steering it into accordance with Christian values from within (Clark 2005, 32; cf. Luhr 2009, 5-8). The notion of infiltration also remains rooted in the concern widely shared by evangelicals that the present-day popular cultural environment constitutes a critical battleground in the Christian socialization of youth (Clark 2005, 32-41; Hendershot 2004, 34-39; Luhr 2009, 5-8). On the whole, producers and proponents of evangelical popular culture therefore tend to regard different forms of popular culture as "neutral forms that can be used to meet evangelical needs" (Hendershot 2004, 28). In a broader perspective, the development and expansion of evangelical popular culture thus also needs to be understood as part of a gradual and more general remaking of cultural perceptions among conservative and evangelical Christians towards the wider present-day cultural environment (Romanowski 2005, 104).

During the 1970s and 1980s, CCM developed into the fastest growing and arguably most visible part of the evangelical popular culture industry (Hendershot 2004, 36, 52-53; Romanowski 2005, 108-109; Stiles 2005; Luhr 2009, 193). Most commentators date the start of CCM to Larry Norman's *Upon This Rock* (1969), which is widely considered to be the first Christian rock album (Young 2017, 105). It is worth noting that, although the songs deal with a wide range of themes, they also include the popular and explicitly eschatological "I Wish We'd All Been

Ready." Like some other early Christian rock musicians, Norman's lyrical style was often blunt, provocative, and allegorical. For this reason, he frequently found himself at odds with parts of the evangelical establishment in the United States whose representatives questioned the proper "Christ-centeredness" of his music. But as a distinct Christian music industry was becoming established in the 1980s, "A new kind of [decidedly more "conformist"] Christian artist emerged /…/ contributing to a new way evangelical youth would engage the faith" (Young 2017, 105). These included solo artists such as Michael W. Smith, Amy Grant, and Stephen Curtis Chapman, and bands such as the Newsboys, Resurrection Band, and dc Talk, whom the increasingly solidified "gatekeepers of gospel music christened the standard-bearers of what counted as true CCM" (Young 2017, 105).

Since CCM in theory comprises all and any popular musical genres and styles, "true" CCM has conventionally been defined according to a set of criteria which are completely external to the music as such. One longstanding criterion posits that CCM needs to convey a clear Christian message, i.e., that the lyrics of music appropriately designated as CCM should deal with Christian themes or other social or cultural issues from a Christian perspective. Reflecting the prevalence of pre-millenarian teachings within the broader evangelical and evangelical popular cultural milieu, eschatological, apocalyptic, and other end-time related themes fit this requirement well and are extensively explored by numerous CCM artists and bands.

But the 1990s also saw the emergence of what Young (2012, 62) refers to as a "new breed of culture-savvy" CCM bands such as Jars of Clay and Sixpence None the Richer "who tended to avoid topics such as spiritual warfare and the End of Days," instead adopting a decidedly more "kinder, gentler approach." But as he goes on to note, "even though CCM has evolved over the years (now de-emphasizing eschatological immediacy) the apocalyptic impulse still remains" in the sense that the messages conveyed through the music remain decidedly "revelatory" (Young 2012, 63-64). According to another longstanding criterion, CCM should be produced and performed by people who are professed Christians and who openly lead Christian lives. A final third, and nowadays arguably less significant, criterion relates to the gatekeeping function of the evangelical popular culture industry. It holds that CCM should be produced on Christian record labels and be distributed through the channels of the evangelical popular culture industry. While

these criteria remain debated, the first two clearly continue to exercise a strong influence on the general ethos of CCM and how it continues to be understood among both its producers and audiences (Howard and Streck 1999; Young 2017).

Even though CCM has continued to grow, diversify, and reach ever larger audiences, Christian artists still often find themselves at odds with the world of secular popular music. As Christopher Partridge (2014, 5) reminds us, this is in no small part because "popular music is fundamentally transgressive. It may articulate faith, hope, and love in largely innocuous and mundane ways, but it often, though not always, tends to do this from within the contested spaces of the modern world." Indeed, as he goes on to point out, several post-1950s popular music genres have become so firmly associated with particular themes, values, outlooks, and attitudes that they have come to "carry certain meanings that are difficult to dispense with" (Partridge 2014, 47). In many cases, this extends to attitudes vis-à-vis the religious as well. In order to appreciate this point, one needs only to consider the close association between reggae and Rastafarianism; heavy metal's widely-known fascination for apocalypticism, Satanism, and sometimes strongly adversarial stance against Christianity in particular; and Psytrance music's often overt connections to various types of Neopaganism and Indian religion. These strongly entrenched meanings are not easily reconciled with an expressed evangelical agenda or explicit Christian lyrical content. But, as noted, Christian artists and bands that represent more aggressive styles of rock have nevertheless still typically strived to conform to the established lyrical and aesthetic conventions of the particular genres and styles they represent, and most evidently so in Christian metal music.

Apocalyptic Themes and Imagery in Christian Metal Music

Christian metal emerged in the United States in the mid-1980s as part of efforts by Christian musicians to rearticulate central heavy metal themes and aesthetics through an evangelical Christian frame. Pioneering early bands such as Stryper, Messiah Prophet, Bride, Saint, and Bloodgood fashioned themselves as "metal missionaries," intent on bringing the Christian message to "secular" metal audiences.

Their efforts, however, proved only marginally successful. Rather than achieving the results for which they aimed, they instead faced widespread ridicule and even active resistance among secular metal audiences. But Christian metal nonetheless managed to survive and to evolve into a largely independent type of Christian popular music. Christian bands not only wholeheartedly adopted heavy metal's distinctively provocative and aggressive rhetoric and lyrical style, but also its general aesthetic and live performance conventions, including practices such as headbanging and moshing (Moberg 2015, 53).

For this reason, one sometimes needs to look beneath the surface in order to distinguish Christian metal from its secular equivalents. Early on, Christian metal developed its own largely independent infrastructure of record labels and media and, soon enough, a small but distinct transnational scene had coalesced around it, mainly concentrated in the United States, the Nordic countries, and parts of Latin America (Moberg 2015, 83-119). At this point, Christian metal musicians and fans increasingly started to distance themselves from the label CCM, and sometimes even from the label "Christian metal" (for a more detailed discussion see Moberg 2015, 44-46). But the aforementioned criteria for Christian popular music have nonetheless persisted in Christian metal as well. Lyrics are often (although not always) careful to present a Christian perspective; bands are often vocal about their personal Christian faith; and Christian metal record labels and distribution channels continue to exercise important gatekeeping functions (Moberg 2015). The evangelistic impulse also remains strong, although perhaps more so in rhetoric than in actual attempts at outreach during concerts.

The world of Christian metal provides an abundance of examples of the explicit, both verbal and visual, employment of biblical apocalyptic themes and imagery (Brown 2005; Moberg 2015). Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that biblical apocalypticism has constituted a central source of inspiration for heavy metal bands ever since the initial development of the genre in the early 1970s (Moberg 2017). Indeed, some of heavy metal's most iconic songs explicitly deal with such themes. Examples include Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" (1970), Iron Maiden's "The Number of the Beast" (1982), Metallica's "The Four Horsemen" (1983), and Megadeth's "Symphony of Destruction" (1992).

Tying into this central genre convention as well as the predilections of the broader end-time focused evangelical milieu, many Christian metal bands have made apocalyptic themes a central staple of their entire musical production. Their exploration of such themes serves at least three main, closely related, functions. First, they provide a means of what could be termed "evangelism through warning." That is, though presenting the grim realities of the end-times and the battles of the apocalypse in harsh and uncompromising terms, Christian bands strive to compel listeners to accept Christ as personal savior and thereby to fulfill their evangelistic obligation. Second, such representations simultaneously hold an edifying function for both Christian and non-Christian listeners alike. Third, they provide Christian audiences with a particular, musical subculture-specific way of expressing and engaging their faith.

Although apocalyptic themes can be found throughout several parts of the Bible, Christian metal bands have displayed a special interest in its principal apocalyptic text, the New Testament Revelation of John. As we shall see in light of a set of concrete examples below, it is also possible to identify some main traits in Christian bands' treatment of apocalyptic themes. For one thing, when exploring Revelation-related themes, it is quite common for bands to *paraphrase* the biblical text while simultaneously using a language that conforms to heavy metal's rhetorical conventions. In other words, lyrics often strive to stay true to the original biblical narrative while clothing it in "metal-style" vocabulary. Indeed, in order to further underline the biblical basis of their lyrics, bands often include Bible references in their liner notes. It is also common for lyrics to focus on particular episodes in Revelation, such as the opening of the seven seals or the battle at Armageddon, or to single out particular characters, such as the Antichrist, the four "beasts," the Dragon or Satan, the Whore of Babylon, the Lamb of God, the archangel Michael, or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

To begin with a general and quite generic example, Theocracy's "Laying the Demon to Rest" (2008) provides the following lyrical rendering of the apocalyptic battles of Revelation:

> The angels counterstrike
> Their flaming swords slice through
> The fallen ones
> The demons reunite, attack again

The cycle has begun
Caught in the middle of this present darkness
With nowhere to run
We're in a holy war
As it is written, so shall it be done

While these types of general renderings of apocalyptic battles constitute a recurring feature of Christian metal lyrics, in this particular case, they are baked into a song that otherwise mainly deals with the importance of "spiritual warfare" and fighting one's own personal demons. Here we therefore also see an example of the addition of an "apocalyptic element" into lyrics that principally focus on another topic. But these seemingly separate themes are nonetheless related. Particularly for dispensationalist evangelicals, everyday life is often viewed in relation to a broader eschatological and apocalyptic frame of reference. Small and insignificant as they may seem, the everyday actions of individuals in the here-and-now are understood to be part of an all-encompassing biblical *telos* that will ultimately become consummated in the end of the world and the Final Judgment.

An illustrative early example of a more specific focus on the time of tribulation and the "Beast"/Antichrist can be found in Christian metal pioneers Saint's 1986 album *Time's End*, which is almost exclusively devoted to the end-times and Final Judgment. Although not entirely clear, the album cover artwork appears to depict the "first beast" of the Revelation of John (13:2) that is to rise out of the sea, which "resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion."[2] The lyrics for each of the songs on the album then combine to produce a narrative of the end-times, the rise of the Antichrist, and the Final Judgment as disclosed in Revelation. For example, the lyrics for the title song "Time's End" read, in part:

Roaming the streets he hears the people cry
There are the beastly banners flying high
Mass execution stage a bloody feast
Won't take the mark or bow down to the beast

[2] The ultimate biblical antecedent of this imagery is Daniel 7, in which Daniel describes his vision of four hybrid beasts that emerge, one by one, from the sea. The fourth beast is the most terrible of all.

These lyrics aim to convey the grim reality of living under the rule of the Antichrist. Written in colorful, metal-type language, the lyrics also prompt listeners to hold firm in their faith and refuse the mark of the Beast (understood as the Antichrist) when the time of tribulation is upon us. When speaking of the “Mass execution stage a bloody feast,” the lyrics draw on Rev 20:4, according to which all those who stay true in their faith and refuse the mark of the Beast will be beheaded in public mass executions. In a way that is typical for Christian metal music more generally, the lyrics for the song as a whole also function as a warning, providing listeners with no consolation, just the grim reality of tribulation.

Another illustrative example of lyrics on the theme of the tribulation, the mark of the Beast, and mass beheadings can be found in Christian death metal band Mortification’s “Apocalyptic Terror” (2002), which begins as follows:

> Apocalyptic terror, wars and evil lies
> Apocalyptic terror, the sign of the times
> Running, screaming!
> You’ve been left behind
> Running, screaming! Left behind
> Forsaken, not with us, beheaded to join us
> Christians are forgiven, taken up in rapture

Written in a particularly straightforward style, these lyrics aim to convey the experience of being “left behind” after the rapture and having to endure the terrors wrought by the Antichrist. While there is no explicit mention of the Beast or “the mark,” the lyrics make clear that, for those not raptured, it is by refusing the mark and welcoming beheading that one joins “us,” *i.e.*, the saved and truly faithful.

It needs to be noted, though, that in explicitly drawing on notions such as being “left behind” and the rapture, these lyrics are clearly primarily addressed to an evangelical audience already familiar with these notions. In spite of Christian metal’s often expressed aim to reach secular metal audiences with the Christian message, except for those who might have previously come

into contact with evangelicalism, most secular metal fans are unlikely to have ever even heard about the rapture. This applies especially to secular metal fans outside of the United States where pre-millennial dispensationalist teachings have been less influential in evangelical settings. In contrast to the Saint lyrics quoted above, while these lyrics also contain clear elements of warning and edification, they thereby also convey notions that one would not expect to find in the lyrics of 'secular' metal bands and which, by and of themselves, work to situate this song firmly in the *Christian* metal mold.

In 2006 Saint released yet another album exclusively focused on the exploration of apocalyptic themes, *The Mark*. This can be described as a concept album as it leads the listener on a step-by-step journey through the apocalyptic narrative of the Revelation of John. The album, then, clearly has both an educational and edifying aim. It opens with songs like "The Vision," then continues with songs like "The 7th Trumpet" (Revelation 10) and "Bowls of Wrath" (Revelation 16), closing with songs like "Reaping the Flesh" and "Alpha & Omega" (22:13). The third song of the album "Ride to Kill" opens as follows:

> Look behold a white horse rides
> To conquer and to curse
> A second seal a call to war
> The red horse rides the verse
> He's granted to take peace from earth
> And causes men to slay
> The broken seals are haunting man
> Prepare for judgment day

These lyrics mention the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse that will emerge as the Lamb of God (Christ) opens the first four of the seven seals of a scroll that God holds in his hand as related in Rev 6:1-8. While the lyrics clearly focus on retelling the narrative in Revelation, the style in which they are written nevertheless significantly departs from the linguistic features of the biblical text.

Another early example of lyrics mentioning the Four Horsemen can be found in Sacrament's "Testimony of Apocalypse" (1989) which opens:

> Darkness – descend
> Judgment day – terminal decay
> Bloody disarray – disfigure
> By the thunder of hoofbeats you're taken by surprise
> The wrath of God, apocalyptic riders will avenge

In comparison to the Saint lyric above, these are written in an even more blunt and simplified style, painting a general picture of a certain episode of the apocalyptic vision of Revelation rather than delving into specifics. While the Beast and the Four Horsemen count among the perhaps most frequently dealt with characters of Revelation, we can also find examples of lyrics dealing with the Whore of Babylon (Rev 17:1-6).

One particularly vivid example can be found in Saviour Machine's "Legion" (1993). Portions of the lyrics read as follows:

> Naked she lies on the crucifix crying
> The tears of the innocent die
> The dragon slides between her thighs
> The dragon breathes the fire
> As blood drips from her eyes
> Until delivered of the child
>
> And all the leaders of the nations follow single file
> As all the brothers of the legion drift upon the Nile
> To face the beast in all its ecstasy
> And dreams of our betrayal
> As love will die within the force
> That drains it from the grail
>
> She drinks the blood of prophets
> And she drinks the blood of saints
> Between her legs they crawl in torment

> For the souls they lay to waste

This provides another example of lyrics that, to a large extent, paraphrase the original biblical text:

> "Come," [the angel says] "I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk" … And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. (Rev 17:1-2, 6 NRSV).

But what truly makes these lyrics stand out is their inclusion of sexual undertones – something highly unusual in Christian popular music on the whole. Because of the third and the penultimate lines of the lyrics quoted above, the song ignited a major controversy in evangelical circles, leading to the banning of the album in US Christian bookstores. In a wider perspective, this whole affair is more broadly illustrative of a refusal on the part of Christian metal bands to conform to the rigid lyrical conventions and expectations of the evangelical popular music industry.

As noted, Christian metal's treatment of apocalyptic themes also extends to album cover and merchandise artwork. As I have analyzed in more detail elsewhere (Moberg 2015), a classic example can be found in Christian metal's pioneering and most iconic band Stryper's debut Extended Play (EP) album, *The Yellow and Black Attack* (1984). Its cover depicts four missiles (each carrying the initials of one of the then-members of the band) flying towards earth from outer space and directed by what appears to be the hand of God. Right under the band's logo on top of the cover, there is a reference to a passage (53:5)[3] from the biblical book of the prophet Isaiah that is central to Christian teachings of messianic expectation.

Another classic example is found in the album cover artwork for Bride's *Show No Mercy* (1986), a classical painting-style depiction of the defeat of the dragon/Satan by the archangel Michael as

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[3] But he was wounded for our transgressions / crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole/ and by his bruises we are healed (NRSV).

foretold in Rev 12:7-9. A more recent example of album cover artwork on the same theme can be found in War of Age's *Arise and Conquer* (2008), which depicts a powerful knight (presumably the archangel Michael) thrusting his lance down the throat of a dragon.[4] The knight's lance carries a lion's head banner – a reference to the Lion of Judah/Christ (Rev 5:5-6), another central symbol of messianic expectation.

Generally speaking, the latest generation of Christian metal bands, represented by acts such as The Devil Wears Prada, Skillet, As I Lay Dying, Underoath, and Norma Jean have not displayed an equal amount of interest in apocalyptic themes when compared to that exhibited by many earlier (although mostly still active) bands. The lyrics of this latest generation of bands tend to primarily focus on personal struggles and faith-related topics more centered on the individual. This might partly be reflective of a broader, gradual shift away from apocalyptic and end-time-related themes in Christian popular music more generally (Young 2012). But it most likely also has to do with the fact that the majority of this latest generation of bands represent the metalcore sub-genre (a combination of extreme metal styles with hardcore punk), which is mostly associated with lyrical subject matter such as personal struggles, distress, and social issues.

Concluding Remarks

This article has provided a general discussion and analysis of the explicit treatment of apocalyptic subject matter in Christian metal lyrics and imagery. The lyrics of popular music artists and bands, whether they be Christian or "secular," will obviously always be reflective the particular times and social and cultural context in which they were created. As we have discussed, a longstanding interest in apocalyptic themes among Christian bands partly stems from the broader end-time focused neo-evangelical milieu in which its musicians and audiences are embedded. In this view, when Christian metal bands explore apocalyptic themes, they merely tap into and give expression to themes and notions that already occupy central positions within the particular religio-cultural environment that they finds themselves in.

[4] The image of Michael slaying the Dragon is, of course, a common theme in Christian art.

However, while emanating from that same milieu, not all types of Christian popular music exhibit an equally strong interest in the end-times and the apocalyptic battles of Revelation. That Christian metal does so has just as much to do with the fact that such themes constitute a central staple of heavy metal's lyrical and aesthetic conventions more generally. A stronger preoccupation with grim and violent apocalyptic themes on the part of Christian metal bands also goes hand-in-hand with their spiritual warfare-emphasizing "metal missionary" approach. But, as noted just above, the prevalence of such themes is also partly dependent on the shifting popularity of particular sub-genres and styles and their associated main lyrical and aesthetic conventions.

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