It was only a matter of time—from electricity came amplification, from amplification came a whole new collection of instruments that could be used as accompaniment in large settings. Take, for instance, the guitar. Where once this instrument was relegated to being strolled through restaurants and occasionally accompanying only the slightest of voices in a parlor, now it thundered through a hall, competing easily with cymbals and drums. Where once it took an entire orchestra to fill a large theater with sound, now you could plug in four longhaired lads and drown out an entire stadium full of screaming females. Almost.

Amplification didn’t just transform instruments, it made a huge difference in public singing. Before microphones, to be heard in a large setting, your lungs, diaphragm, and vocal chords needed to cooperate efficiently. Vocal production was science/art. Now with 100,000 watts behind them, a crowd of thousands could hear the singer draw a breath (or hear Bob Dylan mumble).

So Thomas Edison is to blame for sparking a quantum leap of evolution in the world of music. What resulted was an entity known as the “Rock Band”—a configuration of trap set percussion, electric guitar, bass guitar, and give or take
electric rhythm guitar and/or keyboard/s. This creature is also known as the “basic rhythm section” and has been the standard accompaniment for 99 percent of American music that has been heard on the radio for the last fifty years.

So how did the proverbial nose of the contemporary camel get in the door of the tent of tabernacle?

Let’s be honest, this whole thing really started when we let those darn kids run the services on Sunday night every couple of months. We called them youth nights and back then it was kind of cute and endearing. Problem is, those kids grew up, started writing the checks, and turned into us. Nondenominational churches, using mostly contemporary music, grew and mainline church took notice of this new style of worship music that promised a more emotive atmosphere in which to experience the presence of God.

**Why Contemporary Music and Why a Praise Band?**

In the beginning of rock and roll music, the connotation of its very name was enough for the church to rightly keep it outside the sanctuary. However, no matter how lowly or deplorable its beginnings, given time, the stigma surrounding any style of music many times will fade. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Martin Luther, as a major part of the Reformation, changed the music of the church when he promoted chorale rather than contrapuntal-style singing. He used music to teach doctrine and theology rather than using it simply as an ornament of a Latin mass. In his time this was scandalous, and yet today chorale singing is the style of our traditional hymns.

Tradition is very powerful and will fight against any innovation—and it’s likely there will be people who won’t want anything but traditional music. One of my favorite Bible stories about the power of tradition is the account of Peter’s response to the vision where he was told to eat unclean food.
“Surely not, Lord” (Acts 10:13 [NIV]). Consider the irony of those three words.

A change can be opportunity

We may be able to understand why Martin Luther changed the style of music in his day, but why do we need to change the style of music in our churches? What can contemporary praise music bring to our congregations that is different and useful? Besides just simply being more relevant, it offers a more emotive and experiential opportunity for the congregant.

• Studies have been done that show the music we are exposed to in our emotionally formative years is likely the style of music that will most speak to us for the rest of our lives. Think about the “our song” phenomenon. When two people are creating a powerful emotional bond with each other, a particular song with its lyric, melody, harmony, and groove can come to embody that emotion. This is where the band or rhythm section comes in. For 90 percent of us in today’s culture it was that ensemble that created the soundtrack of our youth. It is a sound that people emotionally relate to, so using it as a vehicle to carry the gospel is only natural.

• Contemporary praise music is intentionally written to be less cerebral and more emotive. It is “praise and worship,” not doctrinal and theological, as many of our hymns are. Certain emotive lines are repeated to allow a single concept to “sink in” and give the worshiper the opportunity to feel and experience the concept rather than just mentally assenting to it.
• Contemporary music’s improvisational nature can give it more of an authentic feel. As an example, think of another worship expression that happens corporately—prayer. An improvisational prayer may seem more authentic than if someone stands and reads a prayer from two hundred years ago, even though the written prayer’s grammar, words, and depth may be more powerful. And, that type of authenticity is valuable in today’s culture.

The move to more contemporary music is truly inevitable, and now that the cat and genie are both out of their respective domiciles, there is no going back unless the electric power grids go down. So take a deep breath and exhale a prayer. I guarantee, God knows best, and the church is going to move forward.