

The History of Congregational Worship

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Who Cares?

Before we begin to take a brief look at the history of Christian congregational song, we should answer the question, “Why bother?” After all, doesn’t God give each new generation its own song to sing? In many churches, the face of corporate worship has been revolutionized in recent years. The organ has been replaced by the worship band, hymnbooks have been traded for PowerPoint presentations, and the “hymn sandwich” has given way to extended times of worship. What could we possibly learn from exploring how the church of Jesus Christ has worshiped God throughout the centuries? Here are four responses to that question.

First, studying the development of congregational song helps us appreciate God’s sovereign hand working throughout history. While certain worship traditions have remained unchanged for centuries, many of our present traditions came about as Christians sought to improve the worship formats and styles they had inherited from previous generations. Many time-honored practices are the result of extremely controversial attempts to establish a more biblical form of worship. We’ll see how God has always been faithful to guide his people into worship that is truly in spirit and truth. Studying the history of congregational song will also help us avoid the imbalances and overreactions of the past. If we’re all wrapped up in reacting to the problems of our day, we can lose perspective on how well our proposed solutions conform to Scripture. A knowledge of the past helps put things in proper context. We can examine the long-term fruit of changes that were made. We can detect patterns and tendencies, and see how they line up with Scripture. Most of all, we can avoid the mistakes others have made when they allowed the pendulum to swing too far when seeking to address then-current excesses or abuses.

Another benefit of a long-term perspective is the humility it produces. Many of us are prone to what one writer has labeled “temporal narcissism”—thinking that anything more than 30 years old is irrelevant or boring. It shouldn’t take us long to see that many who have gone before us were smarter, holier, more zealous for biblical truth, and more

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humble than we are. The hallowed halls of history are a powerful antidote to our usually narrow, self-focused viewpoint.

Finally, studying the history of congregational song can inspire us for the future. Most, if not all, of the writers of much-loved hymns from the past had no clue that the church would be benefiting from their labors hundreds of years after they were gone. They simply tried to be faithful to Scripture and their own generation. On the other hand, countless thousands of hymns which once seemed so relevant have drifted into obscurity. What makes a hymn timeless? How much of what we're doing will last beyond our own lifetime and truly serve generations to come?

I believe the answers to these and other questions will be revealed as we take a look at how congregational song has changed and developed over the years. Most of all, we'll be seeking to discover how congregational worship today can be more biblical, effective, and glorifying to God.

Congregational Song in the New Testament

There's no better place to begin a history of congregational song than the early church. Of course, the New Testament doesn't offer much information on the topic. What did worship sound like in the first century? How long did it last? Who were the composers? No one knows. Still, two things are certain—God has excellent reasons for withholding such specifics, and there is much we can learn from what he *has* shown us.

First, the singing of the early church was scriptural. The hymn that Jesus and the disciples sang before going out to the Mount of Olives was most likely from the Hallel section of the Psalter (Psalms 115–118), typically sung after the Passover meal. Paul encouraged believers in Corinth, Colossae, and Ephesus to sing psalms. The lyrical songs on the lips of Simeon, Anna, Mary, and others had clear Old Testament themes running through them. A new age had dawned in the coming of the Messiah, but a strong link to the eternal truths of the Jewish Scriptures remained.

The songs of the early church were also focused on Jesus Christ. In his excellent book, *Worship in the Early Church*, Ralph Martin says, “The Christ-centered nature of Christian worship is one of the most clearly attested facts of the New Testament literature.” Almost all the New Testament hymns refer directly or indirectly to who Christ was or what he did. We have the songs of Mary, Zachariah, and others at the birth of Christ. The book of Revelation includes songs extolling the Lamb who was slain. Paul's letters contain several unidentified quotations that focus on the Lord Jesus and are regarded by many as early Christian hymns (Php 2:6–11; Ro 11:36; Col 1:15–20; 1Ti

3:16). These songs, produced and inspired by the Holy Spirit, paved the way for theological and doctrinal stands the church would take centuries later.

Another characteristic of New Testament corporate song is the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:17–19 clearly implies that the singing of the early Christians was an overflow of the Spirit at work in their hearts. Corporate worship was never a lifeless, routine, or ritualistic event for the New Testament church. That may be one reason Paul says that we are those who “worship by the Spirit of God” (Php 3:3). It may also explain why the unbeliever who came into the Corinthian gathering declared, “God is really among you!” (1Co 14:25) Certainly, that which set apart the gatherings of the early Christians was the presence of him who promised, “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20).

Finally, congregational song in the New Testament was...congregational. We repeatedly find singing take place among people who had relationships, a shared joy, and a corporate purpose. “The thought that the Church at worship is an accidental convergence in one place of a number of isolated individuals who practice, in hermetically sealed compartments, their own private devotional exercises, is foreign to the New Testament picture.”² In the age of CDs, Walkmans, and headphones, it’s important to remember that worship songs are intended to be sung with others who “like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1Pe 2:5).

The First Thousand Years

Although the details are sketchy, there’s no question that the Christian church was, as Ralph Martin says, “born in song.” It would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a movement characterized by such energy, devotion, commitment, and joy *not* seeking expression in song.

Various sources give support to that belief. Soon after the turn of the first century, the pagan historian Pliny reported that Christians gathered at dawn to sing a hymn “to Christ as God.” Ignatius and Clement, from the same time period, encouraged the early Christians to sing with one voice as they met together. In the third century, Eusebius wrote about many sacred songs that had been written by the early church.

When Christianity was legalized by Constantine in 313, the church was beset by divisions from within. One of the most well-known heretics was Arius, born in 250. He was a public-relations expert who combined catchy tunes with lyrics that denied Christ’s divine equality with the Father. Devout Arians would blanket local communities at dusk with

² Ralph Martin

the sound of their hymns. Leaders like Ambrose of Milan and Ephraim Syrus countered with doctrinally accurate songs that exalted Christ as God. Some of these were set to Arian melodies. In this pre-cursor to the battle of the bands, biblical truth eventually won out.

By the fourth century, the power and usefulness of congregational song as a teaching tool had been established beyond question. But church leaders had growing concerns. Partly to counteract heresy, and partly to exercise greater authority in a rapidly expanding church, church leaders began to address specific practices of congregational song. The use of instruments was discouraged due to their worldly associations with the theater, immorality, and idolatry. Clement of Alexandria opposed songs in “chromatic modes” (whatever that means). There was a strong movement toward a professional clergy. Finally, in 367, the Council of Laodicea declared, “Besides the appointed singers who mount the ambo and sing from the book, others shall not sing in the church.” The vibrant voice of the early church received a severe blow. As a formal liturgy developed, the congregation increasingly shifted from active worshipers to passive spectators.

Over time, the Mass became the approved liturgical pattern, and most of the singing was delegated to trained choirs. Songs became more complex and foreign to the congregation. At the end of the sixth century, Pope Gregory attempted to centralize the authority of the church by specifying what music could be sung in churches. It was characterized by a unison melody with little rhythmic emphasis, embodying attitudes of awe, beauty, and transcendence. We know it today as Gregorian chant.

Unfortunately, during the Middle Ages the people were forbidden to sing it. Not surprisingly, congregations became less and less familiar with the truths that singing had been designed to reinforce! Corporate worship was no longer truly corporate. The song of God’s people was weakening.

You might guess that the restrictions imposed by the church didn’t completely stifle the song within the hearts of God’s people. Throughout this time, various expressions of song erupted as birth pangs of the cataclysmic changes to come.

Martin Luther and Congregational Song

By the eleventh century, Christian congregations had lost much of their official musical voice due to increased restrictions and regulations imposed by church authorities. The people’s part in the service had been reduced to a few simple responses. But God’s view of the role of song in the life of the church had not changed. God has given his people a new song that can never be silenced.

While an increasingly complex and ornate art form developed within the church, the common people found an outlet for their voice in carols, religious processions, medieval dramas, and folk songs. Music, often initiated and led by traveling musicians, provided a soundtrack for much of daily life.

Significant contributions to congregational song were also being made by monks of the medieval ages. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) penned timeless and passionate hymns of devotion such as “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” and “Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee.” In Italy, Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) often improvised songs of praise and devotion. Many churches still sing his adaptation of Psalm 145, “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Despite the efforts of the church to control the use of music among God’s people, song still flourished in the streets.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the stage was set for major changes in the church. Most importantly, crucial doctrines such as justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the authority of God’s Word were being restored. At the same time, Gregorian chant was being criticized as unintelligible, too elaborate, and overly theatrical—and the invention of the printing press had finally made it possible for printed music to be widely disseminated. The song of God’s people could be restrained no longer.

Among the many reformers who helped transform and establish congregational song, Martin Luther (1483–1546) may be the most noteworthy. He has been referred to as the “father of congregational song.” Although that claim is probably overstated, hymnologist Eric Routley states that it was Luther “who successfully propagated the idea that the communal singing of Christian songs could be an integral part of public worship.” Luther’s success was due to a combination of his musical proficiency, his passion for restoring true worship to the people, and his belief that “next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise.” He saw music as a gift from God intended to carry theological truths into our hearts. In a moment of extreme and colorful candor, he claimed that anyone who does not regard music “as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being.”

While that may not be the most persuasive way to win others over, Luther’s passion for congregational song was powerfully expressed in the 37 hymns he composed in his native tongue. Partly due to his influence, 60 German hymnals had been published by the time of his death in 1546. Sixty years later, nearly 25,000 German hymns had been written. Now *that* is a worship explosion!

Two More Perspectives: Calvin and Zwingli

While Martin Luther's influence was transforming congregational worship in Germany in the sixteenth century, two other men—Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) and John Calvin (1509–1564)—were having a significant impact elsewhere. While all three men were Reformers, none of them saw congregational worship in quite the same way. Paul Westermeyer, in his book *Te Deum*, comments that if “Luther recovered the congregations’ singing, Zwingli denied it, and Calvin restricted it.”

Ulrich Zwingli was a Swiss Reformer who, ironically, was most likely a better musician than Luther. However, he was steeped in rationalist-humanist thinking and believed that worship should be oriented more toward teaching than toward expressive devotion. Zwingli approved of using music as a means of refreshment and encouragement outside the church, but banned it completely inside the church.

Zwingli understood—and feared—the innate power of music to sway people's hearts. So, rather than use music to stimulate and promote godly passions, he ruled it out altogether. Zwingli's influence was so strong that in Zurich—just 30 miles from the German border—no vibrant congregational song existed until 1598, more than a half-century after Luther's death.

John Calvin came to Geneva, Switzerland, in 1536, not long after Zwingli had died. He believed strongly in the importance of congregational song, but mistrusted the practices of the institutionalized church. Part of the difference between Luther and Calvin stemmed from their response to the Mass. “Picture in your mind a huge kettle filled to the brim with Roman doctrine and worship practice. Luther reached in to remove whatever was unbiblical and kept the rest; Calvin dumped out the contents and started over again, placing in the pot only what the Scripture warranted. This was the beginning of the regulative principle of worship.”³

Whereas Luther believed that, in worship, God's people should sing hymns, and Zwingli thought they should not sing at all, Calvin took the middle ground: they should sing—but they should only sing directly from God's Word. Calvin saw “hymns of human composure” as unfit for the sacred assembly. What words then should be used in public praise and prayer? Why, the Psalms, of course. Thus began the practice of metrical psalmody that ruled the church for the next hundred years, and continues to this day.

To promote the singing of Psalms, Calvin enlisted the help of two poets (Clement Marot and Theodore Beza) and one musician (Louis Bourgeois). The result of their labor was the Genevan Psalter (1562). It took twenty years to compile, and inspired similar works in England and Scotland. Calvin drew a distinction between music for entertainment and

³ Lawrence Roff, *Let Us Sing*

music for public worship. He wanted his hymns to be monophonic (without harmony), with one note for each syllable of text, and without instrumental accompaniment. These restrictions, while well-intentioned, were not found in the pages of Scripture. Nevertheless, they greatly shaped the practice of congregational singing.

However imperfect, metrical psalmody brought immediate benefits to the church. God's people were being fed and encouraged by his Word. For the first time in centuries, congregations were singing together. However, at times the singing was languid and chaotic. Old Testament terminology and types were not always understood by the congregation. The poetry, especially in Scotland, was sometimes boorish and poorly constructed. The church seemed to have taken two steps forward and one step back.

However, in God's providence, these problems only set the stage for the dramatic changes to come in the seventeenth century.

Our Debt to Isaac Watts

By the end of the seventeenth century, many Christian churches were singing biblical Psalms set to verse. Because of the lack of general musical knowledge, the singing frequently involved the practice of "lining out." Andrew Wilson-Dickson, in *A Brief History of Christian Music*, describes it this way:

Each line of the psalm verse was recited—and often sung—by the leading voice, which the congregation would then follow.... Both leader and individual members of the congregation tended to take their own time (and a very long time indeed it was—perhaps half a minute for each line!). Where harmonization was attempted it was unsupported by any organ or instruments, probably improvised, and most unlikely to conform to the four parts of a printed book. The slow pace of the singing allowed the possibility of decoration and ornamentation of the melody by extra notes, though these might be spontaneously and simultaneously created by several singers at once. The result was a kind of semi-improvised chaos.

In response, it seems that a young Isaac Watts (1674–1748) came home one Sunday complaining that the hymns were dull and lifeless. In a moment of providential brilliance, his father challenged, "Then write something better!" He did. That following Sunday the congregation sang a hymn that began, "Behold the Glories of the Lamb amidst his Father's throne: Prepare new honors for his name, and songs before unknown." This became the first of more than 650 hymns Watts would compose for the church. His two most successful volumes were *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) and *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (1719). In the latter hymnal, Watts revised all but twelve of the 150 psalms "to make David speak like a Christian." Some of

these lyrics, including “Joy to the World” and “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” are still sung throughout the world today.

The extent of Watts’ influence on congregational singing is nearly impossible to overestimate. Watts believed that the songs the church sings should be based on Scripture but “freely composed,” including scriptural allusions and responses to the truths being sung. He believed that the Psalms, as valuable as they are in Christian worship, were insufficient to express the full range of Christian experience. Over time, his influence was dramatic. Within 150 years of his death a survey of 750 hymnals revealed that 40 percent of the songs were by Isaac Watts!

There are good reasons why the hymns of Isaac Watts have endured. He wrote in a style that was purposefully simple. His lyrics are appreciated and understood by the scholar and uneducated alike. He was also committed to New Testament truth. “He always directed attention to the person and work of Jesus Christ and was not content to speak in general terms about God and mercy.”⁴ He paraphrased Scripture frequently, and often used direct quotations. This gives his lyrics a timeless element that transcends cultural trappings. Despite his avoidance of complexity, he used vivid imagery and sought to touch the emotions. His hymns are full of wonder and awe. For these reasons and others, it was obvious that he wrote with the congregation in mind, often preferring plural pronouns over singular.

The legacy of Watts was carried on and amplified by another writer of the eighteenth century, Charles Wesley.

Our Debt to Charles Wesley

Hymnologist Eric Routley writes, “The gates that Watts had opened, Wesley joyously entered; and the field that Watts sowed he reaped, literally, a hundredfold.” These “gates” and “fields” Routley describes were the full expression of congregational song in the church. The effect of Charles Wesley’s songs can still be felt today.

One reason for Wesley’s continued influence is the staggering number of songs he produced. From his conversion in 1738 until his death 50 years later, he averaged almost three hymns a week—more than 6500 in all. Among them are “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” and “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.”

Volume alone, however, doesn’t create a legacy. Charles’ hymns are a wealth of biblical theology and sound doctrine. His brother, John, had one of the most significant preaching ministries in history. He viewed the “world as his parish” and often ministered to those in

⁴ Lawrence Roff, *Let Us Sing*

lower classes who were illiterate, simple, and unaffected by the traditional church. Both brothers viewed songs as a powerful tool for working the doctrines they preached into the hearts of their listeners. In *Jubilate II*, Donald Hustad writes, “Charles Wesley’s hymns were fundamentally a compendium of Methodist theology, covering every aspect of Christian spiritual experience.”

That emphasis on spiritual experience is another reason Wesley’s hymns retain their popularity. Prior to the eighteenth century, hymns had primarily functioned as restatements of objective scriptural truth. The fact that such truth might, or ought to, have an emotional impact on hymn-singers rarely entered the picture. However, both John and Charles had been profoundly influenced by their experiences with the Moravians, who sang with passion and focused on the more subjective aspects of the Christian faith. This resulted in Charles penning songs like “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” which John initially felt was too emotional for inclusion in their hymnals. Throughout his life, Charles attempted to draw out the present effects of truth upon the heart of the singer. His songs are also wonderful examples of evangelical zeal, often inviting the sinner to respond to the truths being sung.

Charles’ brother, John, served as editor for the 56 hymnals they produced in 53 years. He took great pains to ensure that hymns were wedded to specific tunes, which had not previously been the church’s practice. John also saw to it that the tunes he suggested were sung properly. In the introduction to a collection of hymns in 1751, he specified they were to be sung exactly, completely, modestly, lustily, in time, and in tune. Above all else, John counseled, “Sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continuously.” Sound counsel for any generation.

Watts and Wesley together had an immeasurable effect on congregational song in the church. “Between them they ensured...that the Christian faith should never be without songs for its full expression.”⁵ They also threw open the door to the role of emotions in Christian congregational worship. This was, in sum, surely a good thing, but not without risks.

Congregational Song in the Nineteenth Century

Congregational singing in the eighteenth century sprang from three primary sources: metrical psalmody (begun in the mid-sixteenth century), the hymns of Isaac Watts (written mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth century), and the hymns of Charles Wesley (written mid- to late-eighteenth century). All three shared a goal of placing the expression

⁵ Eric Routley

of rich theological truths into the mouths, ears, and minds of congregants. By the nineteenth century, however—partly in reaction to the uninspired singing of many congregations—an emphasis on the emotional impact of public worship emerged as pastors and songwriters sought to stir hearts and ignite affections.

While some seeds of emotional expression are found in Watts' hymns, Charles Wesley strengthened the connection between doctrinal truth and personal experience. He was deeply affected by the practices and singing of the Moravians, who sang with gusto, energy, and life. The Moravians were part of a group known as German pietists, who, unlike Wesley, tended to emphasize piety and personal experience with God over against doctrinal exactness. (Although few Moravian songs are in use today, the pietist approach to spirituality remains influential.) From them, Charles realized the significance of hymnody in expressing Christian devotion.

In the New World, other factors were contributing to the increasing emphasis on experience. Many immigrants had initially sought to maintain the worship traditions of their homelands (for example, the Bay Psalm Book was produced in 1640, giving embryonic churches their own rendition of metrical psalms). However, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelism and revivalism exerted a major influence in America.

As new communities sprang up and frontier borders expanded, newly converted settlers—poor, and often culturally naïve—tended to express their worship through simple, folk-like songs with repetitive lyrics involving salvation, heaven, and the effects of the Holy Spirit.

Then, in 1801, thousands of people gathered in Kentucky for the Cane Ridge “camp meeting.” Jointly sponsored by Presbyterians and Methodists, it lasted several days and was characterized by sighs, groaning, dancing, physical jerking, and trances. Such an event did not lend itself to the refined, doctrinally based hymnody of Watts and Wesley. Instead, music was used primarily to stir up emotions and stimulate a physical response.

The effects of the revivalism movement, spread by events such as Cane Ridge, included the writing of many “hymns” that were weak in content but strong in emotional expression, with tunes and words anyone could learn quickly and easily. The gap between songs that emphasized personal experience and those that expounded biblical truth continued to widen throughout the nineteenth century.

Asahel Nettleton (1783–1844) attempted to raise the standard of revivalistic hymnody by producing *Village Hymns for Social Worship*. On the other side, Joshua Leavitt (1794–1873) produced *The Christian Lyre*, an eclectic mix intended to provide immediate and expressive songs for evangelistic campaigns.

It would be hard to overestimate the impact on congregational song of Ira Sankey. He formalized revivalism by leading the music for D.L. Moody's evangelistic campaigns. Their meetings were dominated by expressive, emotional group singing, interspersed with the intensely personal voice and style of Sankey. Through his efforts, the "gospel song" becomes a model and outlet for many of the hymn writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No writer contributed more to the genre than Fanny Crosby, a blind composer who wrote more than 8,500 hymns including "Blessed Assurance" and "Jesus, Keep Me near the Cross."

Congregational Song in the Twentieth Century

The emotional model of revivalism developed in the nineteenth century continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century. Following in the footsteps of D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey, additional evangelist/song leader teams emerged. Homer Rodeheaver sang and played his trombone with athlete-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday. The preaching of R.A. Torrey was supplemented by the flamboyant style of Charles Alexander. Songs of this era were characterized by musical simplicity, sentimental value, and non-demanding content.

In fact, the century had barely begun when the famous Azusa Street revival broke out. This spontaneous outpouring of spiritual gifts and fervor was characterized by lively singing that was undirected and often unaccompanied. The influence of Azusa Street and emotional revivalism in general is still evident today.

Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, congregational song was deeply influenced by emotional revivalism. One development that had a huge impact on congregational song was the nationwide proliferation of religious publishing houses. Led by Christian entrepreneurs, these publishers produced collections of songs that were lighter, semi-sacred, and more commercial. Examples include "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," "The Old Rugged Cross," and "In the Garden." Suddenly, publishers, para-church organizations, and promoters were exercising a controlling influence over which hymns were being used in church services across the country. For the first time in the history of Christianity, commercial and financial motivations were playing a larger role than pastors and church leaders in defining congregational song. The result was a diminishing focus on theological content and a greater emphasis on entertainment and emotional impact.

As the century progressed, the influence on the church of Christians working within the communications revolution continued to expand. Visionaries like Jarrell McCracken, founder of Word Records, saw how Christian music could simultaneously be used to promote the gospel, serve the church, and build a viable company. "The mushrooming

new market for religious music (over the radio, on records, and in sheet music) created completely new and utterly baffling problems and tension.”⁶

The influence of the communications revolution upon the church cannot be overestimated. Even liturgical forms were being affected. Both in England and the United States, leaders sought to bring religion and relevance together in music. Probably the most common result was a folk style that pervaded many denominations.

In the late 1960s, a combination of crises in culture and the church served as a backdrop for what is now known as the “Jesus Movement.” Hundreds of thousands of young people were converted to Christianity as God sovereignly poured out his Holy Spirit throughout the world. Some broke away from their roots, while others remained in their churches and sought to bring change from within. While the theological implications can be debated, the musical results were undeniable and widespread. The songs produced during this time were typically short, easy to learn, and often Scripture-saturated (even if only brief passages were being utilized). Examples include “Seek Ye First,” “This Is the Day,” and “I Exalt Thee.”

The songs birthed in the Jesus Movement anticipated today’s “modern worship movement.” It’s hard to pinpoint exactly when the current phenomenon began, but it’s safe to say that we are still in the midst of it.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We’ve been taking a brief look at the first 2,000 years of Christian congregational song. I’ll be the first to acknowledge the vast amount of material we have not been able to discuss due to time and space constraints. We’ve limited our focus to some of the highlights of the Protestant Western world, leaving out other significant developments, including black spirituals, liturgical traditions, hymnody from other cultures and countries, and more.

There are a few lessons we can learn, even from our limited overview. First, nothing can stop the church from singing. Even when laws, opinion, or misinformed tradition dictate against it, congregational song will always be common among God’s redeemed people. Whether a cappella or with instruments, whether slow and reverent or up-tempo and celebratory, whether accompanied by a contemporary band or a pipe organ, one thing is certain: God’s people will sing.

Second, stylistic changes are a fact of life. As much as we’d like to hold on to our traditions and personal or corporate preferences, God’s Spirit consistently inspires fresh

⁶ Chuck Fromm

and meaningful ways to communicate unchanging truths to contemporary cultures. (Otherwise, our worship songs would probably sound a lot like modern-day Arabic folk music!) In fact, it seems that every time a scriptural truth or emphasis brings genuine spiritual awakening to the church, new songs are birthed that proclaim the message of renewal and unite God's people in worship.

Third, we have seen how composers can play a central role in shaping church history. John Calvin and others taught the church to prize the singing of God's Word, especially the Psalms. Isaac Watts opened the door for personal expressions of faith. The songs of Charles Wesley enabled the church to climb to new heights of freedom and passion. Because they combine sound doctrine with Godward devotion, the influence of these musical vehicles upon the church has continued long after their composers passed on. What an inspiration for today's songwriters!

Most songs composed for congregational worship provide a brief light for a single generation. Only a few stand the test of time, shining brightly decades or centuries after they were written. In light of this truth, those who love modern worship, with all its advantages and blessings, ought to exercise caution. A passion for the contemporary, the relevant, and the modern can cause us to forsake the rich store of powerful spiritual truth available in the time-tested music of our Christian heritage.

“While we should never say that popular music is out of place in Christian expression, we must protest when shallowness is the chief preference. The gospel is heavy and it is deep. The question is: How can CCM [or the modern worship movement] point beyond shallowness toward deeper engagement with deepening content?”⁷

On the other hand, those of us who look only to the distant past for congregational song will miss many opportunities to sing newer songs that can inspire worship with fresh, godly vigor. The great hymns of the church are invaluable, but they do not represent all that God has done or will do in the area of musical composition for congregational worship. No one culture says it all, past or present, sophisticated or simple.

May our gratitude to God for the hymn writers of the past be regular and profuse. May our appreciation for those he has given us today be equally as passionate.

⁷ Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, p 175