

THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHURCH MUSIC AND  
ITS EFFECTS ON THE EXPANSION OF THE CHURCH

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Perhaps the hottest issue the Christian church in America faces today is the issue of church music and worship styles. Many churches have split over the issue, and other churches continue to deal with the scars and bloodshed of the battle. Some Christians consider the older church music to be sacred, while they consider the newer music close to the level of blasphemy. Conversely, other Christians view the older music to be outdated, dry, and dead, while approaching newer music as if it is the Word of God itself. With such a sensitive issue, there are many arguments raised from both sides of the issue. Many of these arguments are based on preference issues, and are not informed arguments from the very outset. As a result, there is a need for informed answers to these arguments, so that genuine unity in the faith might be established.

As contemporary music is considered, there is such a wide variety of music to choose from that it is impossible to identify a single theme or philosophy that undergirds the vast array of music. There are both good and bad examples of Christian music on the market today. The Christian worshiper can only speculate as to which of these songs will survive the test of time and one day become a classic in the Christian faith.

In order to understand the dynamics of Christian music, a brief study of the history of church music will be quite helpful. Throughout church history, there has been an array of church music available, much like there is today. This variety needs to be narrowed for the present study. Therefore, a cursory overview of the philosophies behind church music from the reformation to present will be the basic theme of the study. Additional trimming will occur, as only those songs, writers, and philosophies that have stood the test of time will be used. Kenneth W. Osbeck is perhaps the leading figure in hymnology today, thus much of the information regarding specific hymns and writers is adapted from his work. As an understanding of the history of church music

is gained, the impact of the music on the expansion of the church will be included as a corollary to the study.

Before embarking on a survey of Christian music through recent centuries, a theological basis for worship music should be developed to inform the understanding of history. Throughout the Old Testament, music was an important part of the worship of God (1 Chron 23:-27).<sup>1</sup> Since the early Christians continued to worship in the temple and in synagogues, there is no reason to believe the historical musical heritage was abandoned in the early church. In fact, many hymn fragments can be identified in the New Testament text, suggesting that the early church relied on hymns and songs to help communicate the message of the Gospel, as well as to disciple believers in their faith.<sup>2</sup> As the Christian movement moved west through the Roman world, influences from other cultures increased. While the theological tenets would need to remain, the methodology would shift in accordance with local societies.<sup>3</sup>

Bob Russell suggests three essential purposes for Christian worship: first, to glorify God; second, to inspire, uplift, and transform the worshiper; and third, to draw visitors closer to an encounter with Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> Russell sets these three purposes up in order of importance. He makes clear that the primary purpose in worship is not to entertain the worshiper, but to glorify God both through a sense of awe and a sense of joy.<sup>5</sup>

The second purpose for worship is to uplift believers. Russell describes this purpose as

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<sup>1</sup>Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume 1, The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Nashville, TN: StarSong Publishing Group, 1994, 98.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 256-258.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>4</sup>Bob Russell, *When God Builds A Church*, West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2000, 41.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 42-46.

a result of glorifying God, and not a goal in itself. The four results the worshiper can expect from genuine worship are: a sense of God's presence, a conviction of sinfulness, a reminder of God's grace, and an inspiration to serve.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, as a by-product to genuine worship, the believer is built up and encouraged, therefore unbelievers are attracted and ultimately brought to Christ. Luke writes that the early Christians were "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).<sup>7</sup>

Joe Stacker contends that too much of worship has become a spectator sport and must be returned to the people of God. Stacker explains that since the act of worship is such a meaningful time, each believer should be actively involved.<sup>8</sup> In the same book, Wesley Forbis exclaims that whatever worship form is used, it "must help people see God."<sup>9</sup>

Tommy Walker of Christian Assembly Foursquare Church in Los Angeles comments that the "seeker sensitive movement" lends itself to the spectator model, whereas genuine worship speaks in the culture's language but reveals a "genuine, wholehearted relationship with God."<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, as Robert Webber explains, contemporary music should "express a cultural sensitivity to modern needs, without rejecting the best of our heritage."<sup>11</sup> As a result, an understanding of the heritage of Protestant Christian music is in order.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 46-51.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>8</sup>Joe R. Stacker and Wesley Forbis, *Authentic Worship: Exalting God and Reaching People*, Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1990, 11.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>10</sup>Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, 271.

<sup>11</sup>Webber, *Volume 1*, 261.

To begin a study of the history of church music in the Protestant era, the motivations of the father of the Reformation ought to be understood. Martin Luther's desire was not to create a new church that would be separate from the established Catholic church. Instead, his desire was to be a catalyst for reformation within the Catholic tradition. Luther's motivation for reformation was limited by the explicit tenets of Scripture. If there was a practice within the Catholic church that was in direct violation of Scripture, Luther sought to reform the practice. If a practice was not clearly rejected by Scripture, Luther did not consider it necessary to abandon the practice.<sup>12</sup>

One area of religious practice that Luther sought to reform was the use of the vernacular language within Christian worship. Luther considered music to be one of God's greatest gifts to men, and therefore sought to write hymns in the vernacular language in order to use them in Christian worship.<sup>13</sup> Without a doubt, the one song written by Martin Luther that has stood the test of time more than any other is, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Although the actual circumstances that inspired the writing of the hymn are unknown, the song became the great rallying cry of the Reformation, moving the believers to stand strong in the face of persecution, that God would win the victory by seeing His name carried forth, for His Word will endure forever.<sup>14</sup>

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is a song birthed out of the circumstances of persecution. The theological truths that are poetically rendered in the text are a great encouragement to the people who sang it first, driving them to persevere in the circumstances,

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<sup>12</sup>Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume 2, Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, Nashville, TN: StarSong Publishing Group, 1994, 75.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace, 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990, 326.

that they could see the Reformation through to victory. The first Protestant believers cherished the hymn and passed it on to their children as a reminder of the warfare that took place to return the priesthood to the believer. As a result, the hymn has stood the test of time and continues to be a reminder today of the battles fought so many years ago.

Jumping nearly two hundred years later, the next prominent hymn writer to be introduced is Isaac Watts. Isaac Watts was brilliant as a young boy, learning five languages by the age of twelve. Watts was troubled by the dry psalm singing in the English churches, which set him on course to produce over 600 hymns. His disdain for the existing church music drove him to comment, “The singing of God’s praise is the part of worship most closely related to heaven; but its performance among us is the worst on earth.”<sup>15</sup>

The impact of the hymns of Watts on the English churches rivals that of the contemporary music today. The battle waged between traditional church music and the sacred music of the day often split churches.<sup>16</sup> Despite the unharmonious beginnings, many of Watts’ hymns survive to inspire Christians today because they contain a sound theological basis overlaid with a lasting musical setting. The impact of his music may be greater than ever imagined. One of the greatest missionary hymns of all time, “Jesus Shall Reign,” was written by Watts in 1719, approximately 60 years before the modern missionary movement began with William Carey.<sup>17</sup>

A sibling pair of ministers overlapped the influence of Isaac Watts. John and Charles Wesley impacted both England and America during the mid-1700s. John Wesley was a profound theologian, but Charles was the better-known hymn writer. The brothers were raised in a strict

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 389.

Anglican form of worship. John responded to a limited view of worship by stating that worship “must engage our whole person.”<sup>18</sup>

Charles broke from the traditional Anglican form of worship. Despite his formal training and his missionary service in the colony of Georgia, Charles lacked peace and joy in his heart and life. After returning to London, Charles met with a group of Moravians. While meeting with this group, Charles realized that salvation is through faith alone. This experience brought a spiritual enthusiasm in Charles that reflected in every facet of his ministry.<sup>19</sup>

In all, Charles would write approximately 6,500 hymns. The motivation for his hymn writing was to communicate the many facets of the Christian life to church people in a theologically sound fashion. As Osbeck explains, Charles accomplished this by writing hymn texts and “fitting them to any popular tune that suited the meter and message of the lines.”<sup>20</sup> In reality, several of Wesley’s hymns were mariners tunes or even bar tunes with new lyrics, which led many lost sinners to sing along and be exposed to the Gospel during evangelistic meetings.

John Newton followed under the influence of John and Charles, also introducing “simple heart-felt hymns” into the services in lieu of the usual psalms. Newton’s most notable contribution to church music is the short, yet powerful, text of “Amazing Grace.”<sup>21</sup>

Following John Newton, the hymn writers contemporary to D.L. Moody are of significant note. Philip Bliss is perhaps the best-known of these writers. George Stebbins, a noted gospel writer, said of Bliss: “There has been no writer of verse since his time who has

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<sup>18</sup>Webber, *Volume 2*. 297.

<sup>19</sup>Osbeck, 51.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 170.

shown such a grasp of the fundamental truths of the gospel, or such a gift for putting them into poetic and singable form.”<sup>22</sup>

As with Bliss, most of the notable hymns of this time come out of the evangelistic meetings led by D.L. Moody, Major Daniel W. Whittle, Ira Sankey, and others. Beyond Bliss, other authors include Lydia Baxter, known for her song, “Take The Name of Jesus With You,” and Horatio Spafford, author of “It Is Well With My Soul,” an emotional hymn written in response to the tragic death of his four daughters.<sup>23</sup>

No history of church music is complete without the contributions of Fanny Crosby. Crosby composed the texts to at least 8,000 gospel songs. Although blind, Crosby was one of the most prolific hymn writers of all time. Crosby was a master at developing theological poetic verse to fit existing musical themes. A vast majority of Crosby’s texts are an expression of subjective testimony or Christian experience.<sup>24</sup>

Moving into the twentieth century, there seems to be a void of church songs with lasting significance. Many issues may contribute to this void. First, with the introduction of liberal and neo-orthodox theology, the church itself has begun to question the authority of the Word of God for the first time in history. Without the authority of the Bible to drive the writers, undoubtably the authority in hymn writers’ texts have suffered.<sup>25</sup>

Second, perhaps society’s shift toward an entertainment focus has so infiltrated the

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 347.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 39, 202.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 92, 109, 357.

<sup>25</sup>W.A. Criswell, *Why I Preach That the Bible Is Literally True*, Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995, 27.

church that those who would write great music to the glory of God have instead sought to exalt themselves with sacred music. Perhaps the increased speed at which society is changing has resulted in an abandonment of great ideas and hymns quicker than they should have been. Still another suggestion may be that Christians became selfish, losing sight of the evangelistic aspects of worship, and began to focus only on their own individual benefits. Whatever the reason, the prolific hymn writers of the early and mid-twentieth century have been few, and their influence has been minimal.

There have been a few sparks in the darkness. Several writers have written one or two songs that have survived the test of time. Perhaps the most well-known name in Christian music in the twentieth century is George Beverly Shea. Shea has been the primary soloist with Billy Graham since 1947. The two continue to lead evangelistic crusades together, even as Shea is into his nineties.<sup>26</sup> Shea's music often has an emotional flavor, inspired by comments from people he encounters. One example of this is: "The Wonder of It All."<sup>27</sup>

As a result of the increasing staleness of contemporary music, young Christians were restless to find a new identity with Christ. In the drug-infested sixties, the Jesus Movement began, and would eventually birth a reawakening of genuine worship. Throughout the seventies, hints of new worship music began to take shape from artists such as the Gaithers, Andre Crouch, and many others. This new music seemed to have a common thread: the texts were shorter and the music simple.<sup>28</sup> These songs would eventually ring in the Praise and Worship movement in the

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<sup>26</sup>*Billy Graham and Team*, Minneapolis, MN: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 2001, [on-line], accessed 20 April 2004, <http://www.billygraham.org/aboutUs/biographies.asp?b=4>; Internet.

<sup>27</sup>Osbeck., 52.

<sup>28</sup>*The Worshiping Church, A Hymnal*, Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1990, 36, 104.

eighties and nineties.

In the eighties, a few hymns in similar style to these in the seventies would continue to appear. Some would manage to become instant classics that would stand the test of time. Jack Hayford's "Majesty" was embraced by traditional church and contemporary church alike, even being printed in many hymn books.<sup>29</sup>

While these short contemporary hymns continued to appear, a new type of music was beginning to develop. Keith Green only walked this world as a Christian for seven years, but in that short time, he revolutionized the way Americans worship. Many consider Green to be the father of the contemporary Praise and Worship Movement. No one made a clearer call to return to a genuine heart of worship than Keith Green. Just a few days before his death, Green wrote an article entitled *Why YOU Should Go to the Mission Field*. In this article, he makes the case that genuine worship requires that people be actively involved in world evangelization.<sup>30</sup>

Following Keith Green, many other voices sounded the call to return to genuine worship. These leaders, like Green, were not quick to let go of the heritage in Christian music. Green often included contemporary renderings of old hymns on his albums. The contrast came with the writing of new songs. The new songs were intimate testimonies to the Savior of simple, childlike faith—a sharp contrast to the majestic traditional hymns.

Much of the music of Keith Green has stood the test of time, as it is as fresh in the minds of many believers today as it was twenty years ago. Perhaps this phenomenon is due to the vision of Keith Green. Now, almost twenty years after his death, the Christian community is

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 98.

<sup>30</sup>Keith Green, *Why YOU Should Go to the Mission Field, Keith Green's Final Message*, [on-line], accessed 11 May 2001, <http://www.lastdaysministries.org/nations/whyyoushouldgo.html>; Internet.

finally beginning to grasp the difficult message that Keith Green delivered. This reality is perhaps culminated in Matt Redman's song, "The Heart of Worship," published in 1999. This song is a paraphrase of the Old Testament Prophets' calls to genuine worship such as Amos (5:21-6:7), Joel (2:12-17), and Hosea (6:6).<sup>31</sup>

One other key leader in the development of the Praise and Worship movement was Rich Mullins. Mullins carried the movement through the late eighties and into the nineties until he died in a tragic automobile accident in 1997. Rich Mullins carried the Praise and Worship movement into the mainstream by bringing popular artists such as Amy Grant on board as he wrote some of the songs they sang.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the arguments against the Praise and Worship movement are related to musical quality or theological depth. When these contemporary songs are set up against the three criteria suggested by Bob Russell, most of the songs adequately fit within a definition of worship. In fact, with the tight connection to Scripture that many of these songs contain, they become theologically superior to some of the traditional hymns.

When the history of writing is compared between the traditional hymns and the hymns that have stood the test of time, the writing philosophies are extremely similar. As a result, any arguments against the contemporary songs is also an argument against many of the old hymns.

Does the contemporary music glorify God? Although the musical style preference may appear to some to fall short in this area, the lyric quality meets this requirement. Does the contemporary music draw the worshipers to a point where they are lifted up and edified? Again,

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<sup>31</sup>Matt Redman, *The Heart of Worship*, Kingsways Thankyou Music, 1999.

<sup>32</sup>*Rich Mullins Timeline*, [on-line], accessed 11 May 2001, <http://rwmullins.tripod.com/timeline6.html>; Internet.

this is limited only by the musical preference of the worshiper. If the worshiper chooses to work within the given musical style, and to reflect upon the message of the song, there is no limitation within most contemporary songs.

Does contemporary music draw unbelievers into a relationship with God? This third criteria, although seldom pointed out, is the one area where much of contemporary worship may fall short. However, this result is not the fault of the musical writers, but of the worshipers who use the music, and the pastors and teachers who are supposed to train the worshipers. The fact is, very few people are brought into a relationship with Jesus distinctly through watching believers worship. This phenomenon is not exclusive to contemporary worship styles, but is nearly universal in the Church today, from traditional to seeker-sensitive.

As Thom Rainer's research has indicated, very few churches are genuinely evangelistic. Those that are evangelistic are not of one particular musical preference, but are nearly equally divided between traditional, blended, and contemporary.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the issue in regards to church music is not related to musical preference, but in reflecting a genuine heart of worship, turned toward the will of God.

In conclusion, only songs that have met all three of the criteria suggested by Bob Russell to some degree or another have truly stood the test of time in Christian worship. Therefore, as new songs are written and introduced to the church, worship leaders must choose wisely, in order to guarantee the continuance of a great heritage of worship music in the Christian church. Without genuine worship, the church will become little more than a lifeless social club.

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<sup>33</sup>Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996, 103.

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