

## The Hymnody of the Church: Two Roads Diverged Scott Aniol

On the wall in my study I have three portraits. All three are portraits of theologians who were also heavily involved with music. They are Martin Luther, J.S. Bach, and Isaac Watts. All three men fought their battles in defense of high standards for worship music. All three had their share of controversy.

And all three are commonly compared to modern worship controversies, usually in defense of contemporary worship. “See,” the argument goes, “people in their day were afraid of new music, too.” “Luther used bar tunes, Bach borrowed from secular music, and Watts broke the mold by writing new songs.” I’ve also heard similar arguments like these:

“The Israelites used the same music as the cultures around them.”

“The organ was once just as controversial as the electric guitar is today.”

“Mozart was a terrible man; how can we say that his music is good?”

“Handel's *Messiah* was popular in his day, just like pop music is in our day.”

“Didn't Wesley say, 'Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?’”

Usually such assertions are based on ignorance or misunderstanding of the actual facts and just serve to cloud and confuse the discussion even further. It is for this reason that I think it is important that we take some time to survey the development of church music through history.

### ***The Cultivation of Form***

In the last chapter we discussed the importance of form in our hymnody; form shapes content. But the second important truth about form to realize is that forms are cultivated over long spans of time. No one gets up one morning and says, “I think I'm going to create a new musical form today.”

Art forms are part of what we call “culture,” and the very term “culture” illustrates the long-term, progressive cultivation of something over time, influenced and nurtured by the environment in which it grows. A cultural form is the natural product of the environment in which it was nurtured.

All cultural forms, then, are expressions of value systems. This means that whatever we create in our time and our culture is always built upon something that has come before. There is no such thing as inventing a new cultural form *ex nihilo*. Such a prospect is impossible. We create using materials that have already been developed and nurtured by people who have come before us. This does not mean that cultures cannot or should not progress and change over time. They do and they should. But everything we create starts somewhere, within already existing value systems. We call this “tradition.”

This is why it is absolutely essential that we understand how form has been cultivated throughout history, and specifically, how the forms of our hymns have been nurtured within

the Judeo-Christian tradition. We have at our fingertips a rich heritage of cultural forms that have grown within the biblical value systems of Judaism and the historic Christian Church—forms that were cultivated with the goal of expressing transcendent values.

What I am going to suggest in this chapter is that if we want to conserve biblical worship, we must continue in that Judeo-Christian tradition when we choose our hymnody. We must repudiate novelty for its own sake or cultural forms nurtured within paganism for the purpose of expressing pagan values to pagans. We need to choose forms that have been cultivated within the community of faith for the purpose of expressing transcendent values of truth, goodness, and beauty.

But before I can insist that we need to preserve and cultivate such a tradition, I must first prove to you that such a tradition exists.

## ***Hymnody in the Judeo-Christian Tradition***

### **The Beginning**

The first mention of music in the Bible is in Genesis 4. Verses 17–22 list Cain's descendants, and specifically those who began the development of various cultural and social skills. Jabal was “the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock,” Tubal-cain was “the forger of all instruments of bronze and silver,” and Jubal was “the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.”

There is an important truth in this revelation: man creates music; man nurtures cultural forms. Now it is true that music existed before man did. We read in Job 38:7 that “the morning stars sang together” when God created the earth.<sup>1</sup> So music, in and of itself, is something that God created and gave to man as a gift. But *songs* are not created by God; *people* write songs. And ever since the Fall of mankind, anything that people create is potentially an expression of sin. In fact, just after we read that Jubal was the father of music in Genesis 4, we find the first recorded song in Scripture. This song was not an expression of praise to God or even a wholesome folk song; it was a song of vengeance by Jubal's father, Lamech:

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
    you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:  
I have killed a man for wounding me,  
    a young man for striking me.  
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,  
    then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.

This only goes to demonstrate why we must evaluate all music—music is human expression and can therefore be expression of good or evil.

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<sup>1</sup> Whether “morning stars” refers to angels or actual stars does not change the fact that music existed before man.

## Old Testament Hebrew Hymns

We cannot consider the development of the Church's hymnody without first considering the music of the Old Testament Hebrews. Christianity began, of course, as an offshoot of faithful Judaism, especially in its worship forms. Understanding the roots of Hebrew music will help us understand the hymnody of the early Church.

In this consideration, we must be careful not to transplant our perception of Hebrew music today and simply assume that David's music sounded exactly the same. Hebrew music in Old Testament times was very different than what we know as modern Jewish music. Jewish music today is a complex mix of Western influences (because Jews were scattered all over the world until the early 1900s), Arabic traditions, and certainly some traditional folk influences. And our perception of Jewish music is usually filtered through pop culture and Hollywood.

The other important factor in our consideration of Hebrew hymnody that we must remember is that Israel was a Theocracy; that is, their religion, politics, and social life were all intertwined, unlike our separation of church and state today. This is important because not all of the music recorded for us in the Old Testament was intended for corporate worship. Music is used for all sorts of purposes in the Bible: there are work songs,<sup>2</sup> war songs,<sup>3</sup> love songs,<sup>4</sup> songs for entertainment,<sup>5</sup> and songs of derision, mourning, and lamentation.<sup>6</sup> Since religion and society were intertwined in Hebrew culture, the Old Testament relates many common uses of music in everyday life. So as we evaluate the hymnody of Hebrew worship, we are limiting ourselves to those songs intended to be sung as part of corporate worship.

Contrary to popular opinion, we do have a fairly accurate idea of what Hebrew hymns would have sounded like. By deciphering markings within the Hebrews Scriptures themselves, exploring the kinds of instruments the Bible tells us were used in the Temple, and by investigating various descendants from Hebrew tribes that left Israel prior to the Exile, scholars have been able to reproduce tunes that were used in Hebrew worship.

There are several characteristics to note when we consider the tunes, instruments, and character of Hebrew hymnody. First, Hebrew hymns were text-driven. The fact that the musical notation was part of the accents of the words themselves demonstrates this, along with the fact that the melodies follow the natural rise and fall of the text.

Second, Hebrew hymns were modest. Their melodies are simple and constrained, and the instruments used were of modest character, especially during vocal singing. For example, we know that while louder instruments like trumpets were used to signal various events in Hebrew social life and even occasionally in worship, when the Levites sang in corporate worship, they were accompanied only by softer instruments that would not cover up the

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<sup>2</sup> Num. 21:17-18; Isa. 16:10; 27:2; Jer. 25:30; 48:33; Hos. 2:17; Zech. 4:7.

<sup>3</sup> Num. 21:27-30; Ps. 68; 2 Chron. 20:21; Num. 10:35-36; Exod. 15:20; Judg. 5:1; 1 Sam. 21:12; Ps. 24:7-10.

<sup>4</sup> Ps. 45; Song of Sol. 2:12; Ezek. 33:32; Isa. 5:1; Gen. 31:27; Jer. 25:10; 33:11; Isa. 23:15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Job 21:12; Isa. 24:9; 2 Sam. 19:35; Lam. 5:14; Dan. 6:18; Amos 6:5.

<sup>6</sup> Job 30:9; Lam. 3:14, 63; Isa. 14:4; 2 Sam. 1:18-27; 1 Kings 13:30; 2 Chron. 35:25; Ps. 69:12; Job 30:31; Eccles. 12:5; Jer. 9:16-17; 22:18; Ezek. 27:30-32.

words.<sup>7</sup> Even their percussion was modest: “only one pair of symbols was permitted,”<sup>8</sup> and they were small instruments used to conduct the group, similar to a conductor's baton.<sup>9</sup> Today's usage of percussion instruments to mark an even beat would have been impossible in that day since Hebrew music did not have a steady beat like ours does.<sup>10</sup> Even their singing was modest, contrary to popular belief that their music would have been loud and noisy.<sup>11</sup>

Many people have assumed that Hebrew music was loud and raucous because they assume that it was similar to other Middle Eastern music. But our final observation of ancient Hebrew hymnody will clear up this misconception: Hebrew hymn forms were distinct from pagan musical forms. The first two features of Hebrew hymnody that we have already discussed stand in stark contrast to the pagan music of the day. Stapert explains:

. . . Jewish psalmody was word-oriented, a characteristic that set it apart from the music of the sacrificial rites of the Israelites' pagan neighbors. Pagan sacrificial music typically featured the frenzy-inducing sound of the loud double-reed instruments and the rhythms of orgiastic dancing. Words were superfluous. Temple music was different from pagan music in all these respects: words were primary in it, and they governed the rhythms; instrumental accompaniment was by stringed instruments that supported the monophonic vocal line, perhaps with some heterophonic embellishments,<sup>12</sup> but never covering or distracting attention away from the words; instruments were used independently only for signaling purposes, as when trumpets and cymbals signaled the beginning of the psalm and the places at the end of sections where the worshipers should prostrate themselves.<sup>13</sup>

The cultural forms nurtured for corporate worship would have influenced the non-worship music of ancient Israel as well. We can observe this by the fact that the poetic forms of worship hymns in the Old Testament and the tunes that accompany them are virtually indistinguishable from their work songs, war songs, and love songs. The difference is only in subject matter.

When Israel was taken captive in 586 BC, active cultivation of musical forms would have slowed considerably, especially with the high art music, but the culture of Israel nevertheless remained distinct from their pagan captors. With no Temple, the Hebrews worshiped in Synagogues, and since instrumental accompaniment was associated with Temple worship, singing in the Synagogue was unaccompanied.

Today, we enjoy singing many Old Testament Psalm texts, although you may not realize it. Many hymns by Isaac Watts, for example, are paraphrases of various Psalms. For example, “O

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<sup>7</sup> James McKinnon, “The Question of Psalmody in the Ancient Synagogue,” *Early Music History* 6 (1986), pp. 162–163.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), p. 256.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 376–377.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 253–255.

<sup>12</sup> In other words, melody was prominent, while there may have been some modest harmony.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 153.

“God Our Help in Ages Past” is from Psalm 90, “Jesus Shall Reign” is from Psalm 72, and “Joy to the World” is from Psalm 98.

## Early Church Hymns

The hymnody of the early church was naturally an extension of Hebrew hymnody.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we can expect the hymnody of the early church to have the same general characteristics of Hebrew hymns: Early church hymns were word-centered, modest, and distinct, and they continued to nurture the forms they inherited from Jewish worship. The only change would have been the addition of texts about Jesus Christ, some of which we have recorded for us in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Like Synagogue worship, New Testament worship had no instrumental accompaniment at all, a practice that would have certainly continued as persecution heightened and churches were forced underground.

As the Church spread after the closing of the New Testament Canon, churches continued to nurture the hymn forms that had been handed down to them. And as Christians continued writing new hymn texts and cultivating poetic and musical forms, the three characteristics of Hebrew hymnody remained.

First, early Church hymns were text-driven. Church leaders continued to praise the use of Psalms in corporate worship, and the new texts they wrote were filled with robust doctrinal truth. Here, for example, is an example of an early hymn written by Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35—ca. 107):

Very flesh, yet Spirit too;  
Uncreated, and yet born;  
God-and-Man in One agreed  
Very-Life-in-Death indeed,  
Fruit of God and Mary's seed;  
At once impassable and torn  
By pain and suffering here below:  
Jesus Christ, whom as our Lord we know.<sup>16</sup>

Their musical forms were borrowed from Hebrew forms and thus continued the tradition of melodies following the natural rise and fall of the text. Known as plain chant, this early form of singing was just a step above natural human vocal inflection. The forms would have developed little during this time however since the church was under considerable persecution.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Hoppin, *Medieval Music* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Examples include Philippians 2:6—11, 1 Timothy 3:16, 2 Timothy 2:11—13, John 1:1—18, Ephesians 1:1—11 and 2:14—16, Colossians 1:15—20, and Hebrews 1:3. See Wesley W. Isenberg, “New Testament Hymnody” in Carl Schalk, ed., *Key Words in Church Music: Definition Essays on Concepts, Practices, and Movements of Thought in Church Music* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978) p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> *Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth; revised by Andrew Louth, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 63.

Second, early Church hymns were modest. Church leaders were unanimous in their warnings against what they called “extravagant” music in worship. Consider this statement by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150—ca. 215), for instance:

But we must abominate extravagant music, which enervates men's souls, and leads to changefulness—now mournful, and then licentious and voluptuous, and then frenzied and frantic.<sup>17</sup>

Rather, Clement argued that the church's hymnody should employ “temperate harmonies.”<sup>18</sup>

This emphasis was in stark contrast to the culture in which the Church lived, and thus, early Church hymns were distinct from the pagan culture around them. Greek and Roman culture of the first few centuries was far from benign. Stapert describes the character of Greek and Roman culture:

But most of them featured ecstatic, even frenzied and orgiastic, rites. Ecstatic rituals were not uncommon in Greek and Roman societies, going back centuries before the Christian era. The rituals associated with the worship of Dionysus or his Roman equivalent, Bacchus, are the classic examples of this type. Drunken revelry, wild music, frenzied dancing, and flagellation and mutilation were their hallmarks.<sup>19</sup>

So like their Hebrew fathers before them, early church leaders soundly condemned the pagan musical forms of the culture in which they lived. This rejection of pagan musical forms also led most church leaders to renounce any instrumental accompaniment as well. Consider Clement:

When a man occupies his time with flutes, stringed instruments, choirs, dancing, Egyptian krotala and other such improper frivolities, he will find that indecency and rudeness are the consequences.<sup>20</sup>

They rejected instruments altogether for two reasons: First, they did not want to associate themselves at all with pagan worship practices. But even more importantly, they believed that the particular instruments used in pagan worship, for the most part, shaped the content in evil ways. Notice that Clement bases his argument not merely in associations, but in the fact that the sounds of such instruments intrinsically lead to “indecency and rudeness.” Remember, what Clement meant by “flutes” and other instruments should not be interpreted by our modern instruments or even the instruments of the Old Testament. These were instruments whose sounds, evidently, were incompatible with Christian affections. Nevertheless, these leaders did perhaps go a little bit too far in their rejection of all instruments whatsoever; yet we can understand why they did so with their pagan cultural conditions.

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<sup>17</sup> *Stromateis* VI 11, 89:4—90:2, trans. In Skeris, *Χρομα Θεου*, p. 78 in Quentin Faulkner, *Wiser Than Despair: The Evolution of Ideas in the Relationship of Music and the Christian Church* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Paidagogos* 2, 4 (GCS Clem. I 184 Stählin) in Johannes Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Stapert, p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> *Paidagogos* in Quasten, p. 61.

## Medieval Hymns

When Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 at the Edict of Milan, and Christianity soon became the religion of the entire empire, the cultural conditions within which the Church thrived changed into a situation that had not been enjoyed since before the Hebrew exile. Soon the Church gained prominence over all aspects of politics and social life, very similar to what Israel enjoyed during its Golden Age. This created an environment in which the Judeo-Christian tradition of hymnody thrived and developed. Yet the Church's hymnody never departed from the trajectory it had been on since it was handed the forms from Jewish worship, nor did its characteristic qualities change.

First, Medieval Hymns were text-driven. Hebrew plain chants now developed into more refined Ambrosian and Gregorian chant; yet these melodies retained an attention to the natural rise and fall of the doctrinally-rich hymn text. During this time, hymns were used to combat heresy and promote sound doctrine, as seen in this Christological example by Ambrose of Milan (ca. 337–397), the “Father of Christian Hymnody”:

O splendor of God's glory bright,  
Who bringest forth the light from Light;  
O Light of light, light's Fountain-spring;  
O Day, our days enlightening:

Second, Medieval Hymns were modest. Church leaders were against what they called “passionate” music. Stapert explains:

Many musical references deal with passion. For example, Isidor of Pelusium warned against misusing music “to arouse passion,” and Basil warned against being “brought down to the passions of the flesh by the pleasure of song.” Such statements sound very strange in a culture such as ours, which places such a high premium on passion, which values intense emotion and the music that stimulates it, and which prizes excitement and the music that provides a “high” or a “rush.”<sup>21</sup>

These Church leaders were not against expressions of affection to God. On the contrary, good hymns express our hearts to God as Augustine (354–430) articulates:

Sing to him in jubilation. This is what acceptable singing to God means: to sing jubilantly. But what is that? It is to grasp the fact that what is sung in the heart cannot be articulated in words. . . . To whom, then is this jubilation more fittingly offered than to God who surpasses all utterance? You cannot speak of him because he transcends our speech; and if you cannot speak of him, yet may not remain silent, what else can you do but cry out in jubilation, so that your heart may tell its joy without words, and the unbounded rush of gladness not be cramped by syllables? Sing skillfully to him in jubilation.<sup>22</sup>

Yet as I argued in the last chapter, the music should not *elicit* some kind of emotion; it is the *expression* of emotion that have already been elicited by an encounter with God in his Word.

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<sup>21</sup> Stapert, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> *Expositions of the Psalms* 8, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000-2004), p. 401 in Stapert, p. 91.

The latter is the kind of thing that these Church leaders were warning against—music that stirs up base passions.

Third, Medieval hymns were distinct from pagan forms. Again, like their fathers before them, medieval church leaders spoke out against the pagan music of their day. Consider this indictment of pagan music by John Chrysostom (347–407):

What can one say of the songs themselves, crammed as they are with all uncleanness, introducing monstrous amours, and unlawful connections, and subversions of houses, and tragic scenes without end . . . ? And, what is still more grievous, that young women are present at these things . . . and in the midst of wanton young men acting a shameless part with their disorderly songs, with their foul words, with their devilish harmony. Tell me then: do you still inquire, “Whence come adulteries? Whence fornications? Whence violations of marriage?”<sup>23</sup>

Again, notice that the argument against pagan music was more than merely associations, although it certainly included that, but an argument based in the fact that the music itself communicated evil messages.

Because the Medieval Church was so much against pagan culture, and since it progressively gained more and more influence and control over all aspects of Western culture, the Church eventually eliminated all pagan influence in the West for all practical purposes.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Christian Church nurtured the cultural forms, and those forms trickled down and influenced the non-sacred music of high culture and folk culture as well. Unfortunately, as the Roman Church began to err in its doctrine and practice, congregational singing began to wane until it was all but non-existent. Yet even while congregations were not singing, musical forms were still being cultivated consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition. This cultivation provided rich musical forms that spread throughout Western culture and created an environment ripe for ordinate expression of Christian affections.

There are many hymn texts and tunes from this period in the tradition that we still sing today.

- “Of the Father's Love Begotten” by Aurelius Prudentius is from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and its tune, DIVINUM MYSTERIUM is from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.
- “All Glory Laud and Honor” by Theodulph of Orleans was written around 820.
- “All Creatures of our God and King” by Francis of Assisi was written in 1225.
- “Be Thou My Vision” is an Irish hymn from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.
- “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” was written by Bernard of Clairvaux in 1153.
- The tune we sing to “When I Survey” (HAMBURG) is based on a Gregorian chant.

## Reformation Hymnody

When Martin Luther (1483–1546) sparked a Reformation of the Church by nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the Church door at Wittenberg in 1517, he challenged the Roman Church's

<sup>23</sup> *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. Talbot W. Chambers in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Faulkner, p. 71.

doctrine and practice, but never its musical forms. The musical forms of the Reformation continued to follow in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The most significant change Luther made for hymnody was in insisting that singing be brought back to the congregation in their language—he wanted the hymns to be text-driven. So Luther advocated the writing of new texts in the vernacular and tunes that fit those texts, composed using the Church's traditional musical forms. This led Luther to write and encourage rich doctrinal hymnody like his classic work, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;  
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

Even Luther's tune to this text was written in the Judeo-Christian tradition, “woven out of Gregorian reminiscences.”<sup>25</sup>

The second characteristic of hymnody in the Judeo-Christian tradition was also prominent during the Reformation: Reformation hymnody was modest. Those who wrote hymn tunes wanted their music to be ordered and refined. Consider this example from Michael Praetorius (1571-1621):

Equality of measure is indeed to be preserved, lest the harmony be impaired or confused; for to sing without rule and measure is to offend God himself, who arranged all things by number, weight and measure.<sup>26</sup>

John Calvin (1509-1564) especially insisted that hymnody be modest in character. Calvin understood the danger of music to stir the passions so well that he prohibited the use of instruments in worship. A musician himself, Calvin was not against using instruments *per se*—he even allowed that they be used in homes for example; but he so wanted to guard against immoderate music in worship that he took the safe way and banned instruments in corporate worship altogether.

Calvin also banned hymns of human composure in favor of singing the Psalms, but again, this had nothing to do with musical form. Calvin was simply trying to direct the Church back to the Scriptures for its direction instead of the damaging doctrines of the Roman Church. Therefore, Psalmody thrived in the Calvinist churches for years to follow.

Because the Church had eradicated any significant pagan influences in the West, the Reformation Church no longer had to worry about being distinct from pagan culture in the same way as previous times. The musical forms cultivated in the Church were passed down and used with the secular music of the day as well. Remember, by this time in Western history virtually all musical forms, whether in high culture or folk culture, had been cultivated from within the Judeo-Christian tradition. This meant that, similar to the situation of Old Testament Hebrews, the tunes used for folk love songs were of the same noble character as hymn tunes. As Peter Lutkin explains, “Even the love song of Luther's time was a serious and weighty

<sup>25</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach* (1908), trans by Ernest Newman, 2 vols (Neptune City, NJ: Paganiniana, 1980), 1:16.

<sup>26</sup> *Syntagma musicum* III, 1619 in Faulkner, p. 107.

affair.”<sup>27</sup> So-called “secular” culture was secular only in the subject matter of the text, not in the musical forms used.

I'll use this opportunity to dispel one popular myth about Martin Luther. People often argue that since Luther used “bar tunes,” we should be able to use the kind of music played in bars today. However, these people confuse the common medieval “bar form” that Luther used in many of his hymns with tavern songs. “Bar form” was a common musical form that was nurtured in the Church. It is a form consisting of two identical musical lines followed by a contrasting section: AAB. Many of Luther's hymns, like “A Might Fortress” are written in this form, which has nothing to do with taverns.

Yet even though no prominently pagan culture existed in the West during this time, Reformation hymnody was still distinct from segments of secular culture that expressed values contrary to the scriptures. Sometimes, because of distracting associations, Reformation church leaders stayed away from some folk tunes even though the musical form itself was compatible with Christian affections.

A prominent example of this is Martin Luther's use of a secular folk tune for one of his hymns. Contrary to popular belief, this was the only example of Luther using a secular tune, and even in this case, he eventually changed the tune because he “was embarrassed to hear the tune of his Christmas hymn sung in inns and dance halls.”<sup>28</sup>

Luther was also careful to avoid what he called “carnal” music—music that stimulated the base passions. He argued that good music could actually “wean [young people] way from carnal and lascivious songs, and interest them in what is good and wholesome.”<sup>29</sup>

The great English hymn writers, Isaac Watts (1674–1748) and Charles Wesley (1707–1788) fall loosely into this period of Judeo-Christian hymnody as well. Watts is often cited as a great innovator in that he was among the first in England to advocate the singing of hymns of human composure rather than just psalms. While this is true (English Christians had followed Calvin's example of singing only inspired psalms), Watts' “innovations” were nothing new—Christians had been singing hymns of human composure for centuries, and his work had nothing to do with musical form—all of his hymns were sung to the same tunes his church had always sung. Watts was working well within established Judeo-Christian tradition.

Most of the hymns we sing today from the Judeo-Christian tradition come from this period. No other period in church history has produced such a wealth of word-driven, modest hymnody, both in text and tune, that best express Christian affections distinct from the value systems of pagan culture.

## ***The Enlightenment***

This far in our journey we have witnessed an almost unbroken stream of Judeo-Christian tradition. From King David to Lutheran composer Johann Crüger (1598-1662) we find a slow and steady cultivation of poetic and musical forms. There were certainly bumps in the road

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Christian Lutkin, *Music in the Church* (New York: AMS, 1970), p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Forell, *Luther and Culture*, 167.

and many changes along the way, yet for around 1800 years the quality and character of hymnody remained consistent—word-driven, modest, and distinct from pagan culture.

Yet in the 18<sup>th</sup> century something changed that would forever alter this path: the people of God were once again exiled; only this time they didn't recognize it.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about what has come to be called “The Enlightenment” or “The Age of Reason.” This elevation of reason and science over faith was, in the words of Abraham Kuyper, “the expulsion of God from practical and theoretical life.”<sup>30</sup> The position that the Church had enjoyed as the dominant influence over all of culture was over. Reason was now in control.

What this meant for worship forms is that active cultivation virtually stopped. The Church still had the hymns that had been nurtured for thousands of years, but now talented poets and musicians stopped writing for the Church and began writing for money. They continued writing in the noble musical forms that had been handed down to them, but with high culture broken off from any moral direction, it eventually all but died away. Whatever high culture now exists is devoid of any Christian values.

Faulker summarizes Enlightenment views of music that are diametrically opposed to the Judeo-Christian tradition and that affected all of Western culture:<sup>31</sup>

- The goal of music is to excite human passions rather than to calm them.
- Music provides entertainment and diversion rather than the shaping of content.
- The best kind of music is characterized by constant variety rather than order and modesty.
- Individuality and originality are virtues in musical composition and performance rather than cultivating a noble tradition.
- The gauge of music's excellence is popular acclaim rather than its ability to shape content in an appropriate manner.
- The best kind of music is “natural” and unlearned rather than skilled and ordered.
- Music is purely scientific without any ethical dimension.
- Music is unimportant rather than that which orders men's souls.

Faulkner concludes,

Music (for that matter, all the arts) had become a theological orphan. In fact, no important theological movement, either in the nineteenth or twentieth century, has concerned itself in any profound way with the significance of harmony, order, or beauty in Christian life or [worship].<sup>32</sup>

With the creation of mass media as a result of the Industrial Revolution, savvy businessmen soon saw the potential of taking advantage of the power of music composed within this new tradition in order to make money. Certain music, for instance, because it created immediate

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<sup>30</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), p. 23–24.

<sup>31</sup> Faulkner, pp. 171ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

excitement and was intrinsically addictive, provided the perfect medium for making a considerable amount of money. They found that it was not difficult to hook the masses on passionate forms of music. Then, when the masses inevitably desensitized themselves to the immediate affects of such music, the entrepreneurs were always ready with more novelty and more stimulating forms. Such was the birth of pop culture.

Pop culture is essentially a sanitized version of paganism. It is an impostor that borrows liberally from Judeo-Christian tradition, Classical high art, and folk culture to create hybrid forms that slip in the back door and impose pagan values upon the listener without them recognizing them as such.

## **A New Tradition**

This left the Church in an awkward position. Its cultural influence was non-existent. As the culture around it plunged into sanitized paganism, the Church's traditional forms became foreign. The Church was in Babylon, yet it was free to worship as it pleased. So the question became, do we continue cultivating the Judeo-Christian tradition and become progressively more and more alienated from our surrounding culture, or do we “contextualize” and abandon our tradition for a new one that follows the lead of pop culture? The Church ultimately chose the latter path.

The leader to blaze the trail along that new path was 19<sup>th</sup> century Revivalist Charles G. Finney (1792–1875). Because Finney believed that conversion could be produced by human means,<sup>33</sup> he sought to create certain experiences in his services that would lead people to accept the claims of Christianity. In his Revival Lectures, Finney insisted that “there must be excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers.”<sup>34</sup> This desire for “excitement” was a significant break from Christian leaders before him.

Finney found pop music as the perfect tool for creating such experiences because it was immediate and it stimulated excitement. Finney urged those writing and leading music in his meetings to look to the advertisers of the day for inspiration. Those earliest forms of pop music may seem innocuous to contemporary ears, but that philosophy began a trend to use pop music to create emotional experiences in the Church that continues to this day.

At this stage making distinctions between kinds of sacred songs may be helpful. Up to this point I have been using “hymn” to describe any sacred song, yet we have already seen a need to distinguish between “psalms” and “hymns.” From now on, I will use the term “hymn” to describe only those sacred songs that were written within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The congregational songs written in this new tradition that followed the lead of pop culture are what have come to be called “gospel songs.”

The gospel song movement began with the camp meeting revivals of the early 1800s.<sup>35</sup> These meetings used this genre of music to create excitement and interest in the meetings:

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<sup>33</sup> “A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means---as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.” *Revivals of Religion* (CBN University Press, 1978), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Finney, *Revival Lectures*, (reprint, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Carlton R. Young, “Gospel Song” in *Key Words in Church Music* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), p. 174.

The tunes of camp-meeting songs were simple and folk-like in character. The improvisatory nature of these songs and the need for teaching them by rote demanded that the tunes be easy, singable, and instantly contagious. Under these circumstances, a popular, “catchy” repetitious refrain or chorus was invaluable.<sup>36</sup>

Soon thereafter, the Sunday School movement adopted these songs for use with children.<sup>37</sup> As these children grew to adulthood, they carried these same songs into the worship service. Hustad goes on to explain how this naturally led to this genre’s use by adults as well:

The same style of music appeared with somewhat more adult, vernacular texts 20 years later and came to be known as “gospel hymns” or “gospel songs.” It is impossible to overestimate the influence of these simple experience songs written by theological and music amateurs and the grips they had on the general public.<sup>38</sup>

Because the initial purpose of these songs was to create excitement and interest for those who were physically and/or spiritually immature, the use of popular music in the development of the gospel song was invaluable, and pop music’s influence is unmistakable:

The new gospel songs picked up the style of the popular songs of the Civil War era. Simple major-mode melodies, with the ever-popular refrain, were added to the older, still-useful, camp-meeting texts. . . . Whereas the older songs were largely sung in unison, the gospel songs had simple harmonies and rhythms that could be sung by quartets and choirs. Later, the use of some ragtime and jazz rhythms added more interest for young people. *Save for the words, popular sacred music was hard to distinguish from the secular.*<sup>39</sup>

Finney’s influence was kept alive in the revivalist tradition in the years to come. D. L. Moody and his famous song leader, Ira Sankey, were widely known for their emotional, experience-oriented preaching and music and helped to further ingrain this kind of music into the church’s worship.<sup>40</sup> “Moody and Sankey could be counted on to create those ‘feelings of spirituality.’”<sup>41</sup> Moody said, “It makes no difference how you get a man to God, provided you get him there.” Their criteria for good music was that it produced results:

Dwight L. Moody was musically ignorant as far as theoretical knowledge is concerned, but he did recognize the value of music in evangelism that resulted in a stirred congregation. Any song that did not produce a response was not good music to Moody’s way of thinking.<sup>42</sup>

This idea of a “stirred congregation” spread further with the revivalists to come:

The two men [Billy Sunday and Homer Rodeheaver] brought a new level of secularism and entertainment to evangelistic crusades with crowd-pleasing and

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<sup>36</sup> William J. Reynolds, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody* (Carol Stream: Hope, 1999), p.104.

<sup>37</sup> Hustad, pp. 455-456.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>39</sup> Leonard Ellinwood, “Hymnody, American” in *Key Words*, p. 221. Emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> Hustad, p. 138.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> William Loyd Hooper, *Church Music in Transition* (Nashville: Broadman, 1963), p. 97.

crowd-attracting mannerisms.<sup>43</sup>

This revivalist tradition slowly seeped into the churches, so that every service became an evangelistic revival meeting. This new way of thinking affected not only the content and style of worship and music, but it totally transformed the view of the church. This is not to say that nothing written in the gospel song tradition is good; some of it is. Yet the entire philosophy of hymnody shifted so that much of what comes out this tradition was a radical departure from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead of text-driven hymns, we now had hymns centered around a catchy text and tune. Instead of modest hymns, we now had hymns whose purpose was to create excitement and energy. And instead of hymns that were distinct from the pagan culture, pagan culture was supplying the musical forms. Like Israel, the Church was now in Babylonian captivity; but unlike Israel, the Church was allowing the culture of Babylon to drive its worship forms.

Just one seemingly innocent instance of this is with the gospel song, “It's a Grand Thing to Be a Christian.” This is a good example of a song whose text is shallow and enthusiastic and whose tune is based on a popular song from the World War II era.

At certain points along the way various groups believed that lines were being crossed with the newer music. Especially with Jazz and Rock, Fundamentalists rightly refused to follow the trend. We might insert a new designation here to describe sacred songs written with Rock forms: “praise and worship songs.” Praise and Worship music took the choruses of gospel songs, set them to more upbeat music, and developed a new form. But this left many Fundamentalists holding onto a tradition that was certainly better than the worse forms of pop culture, but yet was still far from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This leaves us with essentially three distinct Christian traditions: (1) The Judeo-Christian tradition that essentially halted with the Enlightenment, (2) the Fundamentalist tradition which split from the Judeo-Christian tradition with the rest of Evangelicalism but refused to go any further with Jazz, and (3) the New-Evangelical tradition which has progressively adopted virtually every form of pop music that has come along.

## ***What Do We Do?***

So where does this leave us today? I will conclude with several brief suggestions of we should be striving toward in our choices of hymns for corporate worship.

1. Recognize the importance of form. Form shapes content. As we evaluate the hymns that we sing, we must not be content that our hymns simply say the right things; we must also be certain that they say the right things in the right way.
2. Learn to distinguish between forms that nurture noble affections and forms that excite base passions. Excitement and enthusiasm is not what we're after in worship; rather, we should strive to encounter the True and Living God in the truth of his Word and then express ordinate affection to him through our hymns.

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<sup>43</sup> Hustad, p. 250.

3. Commit to cultivating the forms of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We cannot simply decide that we're going to work harder at producing better hymns. We have to start somewhere, and the wisest course of action is to start within a tradition that got it right. Only then can we look to the future and hope to cultivate new forms worthy of expression to God.
4. Commit to passing this tradition to our children. Where my greatest hope lies is with our children. Our children's affections are still developing, and we have the weighty responsibility to shape them. We must refrain from feeding our children trite Christian nursery rhymes and begin to nurture their sensibilities with the music of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We have to mold their malleable hearts from the earliest of ages to love the right way. Even before they are capable of believing the right things or living the right way or even loving the right things, they can learn *how* to love rightly and what reverent worship *feels* like. We must commit to nurturing our youngest children in the fear of the Lord. They are our greatest hope in the conservation of biblical worship.