

Mike Garman  
Church and Society  
Dr. H. Holloman  
Talbot Theological Seminary  
December 17, 1984

## A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

### EARLY CHURCH/MIDDLE AGE.

For the first one thousand years, music in the church was primarily used for corporate worship. During that millennium, much of everything was written for the church and so even the secular art and music was governed by the church.

It would be safe to say that music in the early church was mostly “*evangelistic*” in that its function was to extend doctrinal teaching. Later, when the church was opposed by heretical teachings of increased activity, more evidence is shown of didactic use for instruction to combat these teachings and movements.

The question everyone wishes to ask is what type of music was this. Grout, in his, *History of Western Music*, comments, “*It is likely that some of the hymns of the early church were sung to what could be called folk melodies, and it is possible that some of these melodies eventually found their way into the official chant repertoire.*” (Grout, *History of Western Music*, p. 13).

From the scriptures given to us in the N.T., the style would appear to be similar (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16). There is not much information given in the N.T. as to what style of music is acceptable in church worship, nor is there any indication of what it sounded like. However, we can be sure that they were spiritual songs, sung with melody in their hearts and to the Lord. For further support, it is interesting to note that in Revelation, singing and songs are mentioned and it is always in praise and honor to the Lord for His worthiness and greatness for all that He has done. Thus it would be safe to conclude that for music to be acceptable to the Lord, it must reflect praise and worship from the heart to the Lord.

We discover that by the fourth century music was used in evangelistic, street meetings such as those used by street preachers today, such as the Salvation Army. In these meetings the gospel would be presented to those who were ignorant of His message or to combat those who had perverted it. Edward Ninde writes, “*With the financial aid of the Empress Eudoxin, he (Chrysostom) organized splendid processions of the orthodox party, and they went forth carrying torches and crosses, and singing with imperial pomp the hymns of Christ. Often, gathered in the church porticoes, ‘glowing with the processional torches,’ they would spend the long quiet hours of the night in song. Not only was the enemy put to shame, but it led to a much freer use of hymns in the church services, both by day and by night.*” (E.S. Ninde, *Nineteen Centuries of Christian Song*, p. 24).

Other musical devices used by the early church was antiphonal singing. One of the purposes of antiphonal singing was to attract people to the orthodox congregation and to counter the current heresies. A common practice of this is noted by Gustave Reese, “*The Ascetics, Flavian and Diodoros are credited with having introduced it into the orthodox Christian practice of Antioch in the 4th century when, to combat the Arian heresy, they sought to make the services more attractive by assigning the chanting of the psalm verses to the congregation. Its members were divided into two semi-choruses, one of men, one of women and children, and the groups alternated with one another in the singing of the psalm-verses and combined in singing an alleluia at, perhaps, some new refrain. The intercalating of passages of song between psalm-verses became, in the course of time, an organized practice and was destined to be imitated with effect in the west.*” (Gustave Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages*, p. 68).

Later in the Middle Ages, everyone in medieval Europe was at least a nominal Christian, and therefore the need for music to evangelize (they felt everyone was Christian) lessened. However, many

in the congregation were illiterate so there was a need to communicate the truth of the gospel and further instruction. Out of this developed what was called “*liturgical dramas*,” or more accurately called “*ecclesiastical dramas*.” In these dramas medieval artists added both music and text to teach and instruct. Although we have no solid evidence that these were used for evangelistic purposes, we do know that they reminded the people of the important principles of their faith whether in drama or song.

## Conclusion

Early church music was primarily influenced by evangelism and dogma. The congregational participation was on the increase. It is obvious the stage is being set for the reformation and its great use of hymns by the laity. We will see later how the reformation built upon some of the some basic principles.

## THE REFORMATION PERIOD

Many of the reformers had a great love for music, and they themselves were musically talented. One of these men was Martin Luther. Donald Paul Ellsworth notes: “*Until the time of Luther, most of the non-liturgical music was for use outside the church; with the reformation, some of this music was brought into the church for purposes of worship. Whereas most of the secularized music of the Middle Ages was devotional or didactic, the music of the early 16th century was intended more to edify believers or attract non-believers. The trend of church music during the reformation was toward congregational participation and spreading of the gospel.*” (D.P. Ellsworth, *Christian Music in Contemporary Witness*, pp. 47-48)

Luther, being a musician and poet, loved German folk song and was well acquainted with music of the Roman Church. Often, he combined the two together, bilingual Latin-German hymns with folk hymns, written in a style the people could recognize. Luther was quick to see what a help this was by getting the people to sing their religious beliefs. This helped facilitate the whole process of the reformation. Hence, Luther felt that next to the word of God, music was the most moving thing. Today, many have used Martin Luther’s example of combining the music of the folk era with the music of the Roman church as grounds for today’s mix of Christian hymns and modern music (for example, Larry Norman). However, it should be pointed out that Luther’s music was not focused upon the sound as much as the content. Luther’s attitude was what have the people of God learned? Luther caught a stiff and firm reaction from many Romanites. These Romanites felt “*Luther’s songs have damned more souls than all his books and speeches.*” (Ninnes, *Nineteen Centuries of Christian Songs*, p. 62)

John Calvin briefly stated what he believed and felt music should be although he was not an artist himself.

1. Music is for the people, so it must be simple.
2. Music is for God, so it must be modest.
3. Simplicity and modesty are best attained by music of the unaccompanied voice.

By this time in history, we can discern a developing doctrine of “*sacred music*” or acceptable music. Later, Calvin crossed the path of musical artist Louis Bourgeois and produced some beautiful music using secular sources for some of these tunes.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the singing of psalms became quite popular. Bailey in his *Gospel in Hymns* notes, “*Singing thus became a powerful instrument of propaganda for the reformed faith, whether established Puritan or Dissenting. In Cromwell’s day when the Puritans were in power, the psalms were set to popular tunes and jiggs which were ‘too good for the devil’ and were sung everywhere at Lord Mayors’ dinners, by soldiers on the march and on parade, and by families who had windows fronting on the streets.*” (Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns*, p. 13)

The tunes though simple and popular in style had a very positive effect upon the people and were great for communicating the faith and refreshing themselves with the word of God.

## Conclusion

As we look at the reformers we can see that they used secular popular tunes of the day for spreading their doctrine. They also made music more popular and attractive. I think the most important note is they all felt that music is for man to be edified and God to be gloried.

However, there was a growing tension between what was acceptable and what was not. This tension was to grow and later to be felt in our society.

## 18<sup>TH</sup> & 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Again as stated, music played an important role in evangelism. In these centuries one of the most important leaders in hymnody was Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Watts firmly believed in the duty of singing in the worship of God and that singing should represent God's word to man. For the most part, Watts' hymns are rhymed theology and primarily from John Calvin. Bailey in his *Gospel in Hymns* sums up Watts' theological views.

*"1. God is an absolute and arbitrary ruler.*

*2. Man is totally depraved.*

*3. All children are supposed to fall under considerable conviction of sin.*

*4. The only relief from despair lies in the thought that Jesus has paid the penalty of sin and that if I am among the fortunate 'elect', I shall be rescued by Him."*

(Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns*, pp. 57-58) Other hymnists did not lean toward Isaac Watts' theology and followed the new evangelism movement begun by Charles Wesley.

The Wesleyan hymns were of a different nature in content and theology but nevertheless biblically sound. Charles Wesley authored nearly seven thousand hymns. Still, most feel that he was a better skilled theologian than a musician. His genius lies in the fact that he understood just enough music to recognize what kind of music was best for his purpose. Some of the melodies were derived from secular sources, but most of them were composed especially for the hymn texts by anonymous musicians. John, his brother, also played an important role. One of his chief desires was to bring hymn singing to America. He wished to bring this rather radical practice, though which he was converted with his contact with the Moravians, to America in order to spread the gospel and see the colonies converted.

Other names also fill this time period, although there are too many to list in detail. I shall list a few for the reader for further study:

Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791)

John Newton (1714-1807)

George Whitefield (1714-1770)

John Cennick (1718-1755)

Augustus Toplady (1740-1778)

The most criticized period in evangelical music was the 19th century. Many church musicians look back at this era with contempt for two basic reasons, as noted by Ellsworth:

1. Prevalent church music was merely a degradation of 19<sup>th</sup> century secular music.

2. The advent of the gospel song.

(Ellsworth, *Music in Contemporary Witness*, p. 81)

Most musicians object because it was the century of the amateur church musician. After the classical period ended, the talented secular musician and composer no longer wished to be identified with church music. Thus, the "gifted composers" played a smaller role in the life of church music. Yet, this century

is not without its importance, for there are several factors to consider. By the 19th century, the songs of camp meetings and, Sunday School were used and were greatly influenced by Negro spirituals and the minstrel music of the time. All this led to the most significant idiom of the 19th century, the “*gospel songs*” of Ira D. Sankey.

It was the term of Ira Sankey and Dwight L. Moody. Together, they made history in this field. Gospel music and mass evangelism began with the urban crusades of Moody and usually his music director was Sankey. Throughout his messages and crusades, music played a great role of importance. It has been said that Moody could not sing a note, and that his interest in music was based largely on the ability of the music to condition the crowd. This is what you would call a utilitarian view of music.

The strength in the music of Sankey was the melody. His tunes were simple and easily learned. Though Sankey and others throughout this period enjoyed great success in music, nevertheless, there are still some basic problems. Donald Hustad speaks to this issue in his book, *Spiritual Music for a Spiritual Church*:

1. *‘Gospel songs are too simple, too repetitious.’— The strength of the gospel song is its simplicity, artlessness, and repetition. To desire that the average worshiper’s understanding be increased does not change the fact that theological comprehension is approximately that of a twelve-year-old.*
2. *‘Gospel songs are too personal and selfish.’— Evangelicals (including Martin Luther) claim that the essence of salvation is a personal pronoun.*
3. *‘Gospel songs center more on personal experience than on Christ.’— While the truly worth gospel songs will emphasize the centrality of Christ in the Christian experience, the person who has experienced salvation must have a song to express the way he feels.*
4. *‘Gospel songs are anthropomorphic.’— But this is what Christ came to be – God in the flesh. The God who created the universe is also a close Friend. Both of these truths must be represented in sacred song.*
5. *‘Gospel songs are too sentimental.’— Although this may be true of some songs, the Christian is not to be robbed of a proper emotional response to God’s truth. Without emotion the human will does not respond. And one must realize that an individual’s emotional response frequently depends on his culture.*

(Donald Hustad, *Spiritual Music for a Spiritual Church*, p. 4)

## **Conclusion**

The gospel song was extremely popular in the last century through, commercialization and the improved means of communication. It would be easy to say that these two centuries were more influenced by great evangelism development than any era of history. This is good, yet it has its problems. We must keep a proper balance and not let the pendulum swing too far to one side as in this era. On the other hand, we mustn’t be too critical. Certain music meets the needs of certain people, in different periods of history. However, in this time period, music was for the need of man and not always for the glory of God. Music was used as a tool to move man rather than an expression of man’s love and feeling for his Saviour.

## **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Ellsowrth sums up this time of history perfectly;

*“In viewing the social conditions of America between 1865-1900, most historians agree that there have never before in our history been a period of such revolutionary change. Indeed obvious parallels can be drawn between those years and the twenty-five years beginning around 1950. Both were times of innovation and industrial or technological development. Both were times of political, moral, and religious chaos. The gospel music of these two periods offered some satisfaction for the*

*needs of the time, and there is an inescapable association between the satisfaction offered in the gospel songs and the deficiencies of the period.”*

(Ellsworth, Christian Music in Contemporary Witness, p. 105)

This century is filled with evangelistic music like that of Billy Sunday, Homer Rideheaver, and Billy Graham just to name a few. Yet, in recent years the controversy is over the style of music taken on by some evangelistic groups; groups like Youth for Christ who have used sacred and secular music in order to attract the teenagers and spread the gospel message. Through this they have featured a type of music that can be described as “*sacred folk*” or “*sacred folk-rock*.” The church has not known what to do with this music, whether to receive it or to condemn it.

However, the phenomenon of utilizing popular idioms in music didn’t start with evangelicals but with the liberal liturgical groups. In fact, for several years the evangelicals would have no part of it. Later, it was more accepted but hard to choke down. It is interesting to note the more you move to the right of the scale, the more difficult it is for those to accept anything new outside of their experience and music tradition in the church.

Of course, music in the 20th century did not start out as rock and roll. It started with the folk song movement and passed its way through into popular music following the advent of the Beatles in the early sixties. Traditional groups were horrified, claiming that this worldly music was unfit to carry a holy message. As a result, one would have thought that the revolution would have stopped, but the movement had just begun.

In 1968, Ralph Carmichael and Kurt Kaiser jointly created “*Tell It Like It Is*.” In 1969, they wrote “*Natural High*”, with even the title reflecting the drug culture so prevalent at the time. The sad thing was that most of the music written during this time was not to convey Christian doctrine, but rather the young people of America were into the sound. How it sounded was more important than what it said. What makes the issue difficult is that these sounds are difficult to define and difficult to categorize.

There are many different types of music, some are acceptable to some Christians whereas others are greatly offended. There are all kinds of combinations of music styles from classical to rock, country-western, jazz or blues, pop, folk, and now punk and new-wave. Not only have these sounds invaded the church but religion has invaded the secular music field with musicals such as “*Jesus Christ, Superstar*,” and “*Godspell*.” These musicals seldom found their way into the churches. Nevertheless, their influence was felt. And so the tension continues. Is this music okay? Pastors and parents both confused and caught off guard are faced with this question.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this century, there have been many pros and cons in regard to the different types of music. The debate is not always clear as to which direction in the right direction and the scriptural one. In this century, music has chosen to push the question by breaking with the traditional approach and using almost unlimited permissiveness. Obviously, this presents real tension for the church primarily because the church is conservative in nature and sees no need for change. The musicians yell and sing at the church and the church preaches against their music. The pendulum continues to swing back and forth. One important observation should be pointed out. Christian music in this century has never set the pace of the world around it but has always reacted to it. For example, if the world sings rock and roll then the church seems to follow. If punk rock is in then we follow. When will Christian set the pace instead of always following and reacting to the culture around it? It is time for the church to set the pace with new music, yet we must keep the real purpose of music behind it all.

## **Bibliography**

- Bailey, Albert E. The Gospel in Hymns : Background and Interpretations. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.
- Ellsworth, Donald. Christian Music in Contemporary Witness. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979.
- Grout, Donald Jay. A History of Western Music. New York: W.W. Norton, 1960; rev. ed. 1973.
- Hustad, Donald. "*Spiritual Music for a Spiritual Church.*" Church Music in Dimension 1 (Winter 1964-65):8-12.
- Reese, Gustave. Music in the Middle Ages. New York: W.W. Norton, 1940.
- Schaeffer, Edith. Hidden Art. Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, 1971.