

Module 12 – Hymns and Spiritual Songs

Under twelve headings, this module briefly covers the historical development of what has become our staple diet for singing in church, the hymn. This is an enormous subject that will reward further study for which a list of books is provided at the end.

1. Importance of Song

Singing has always played an important part in the life of the Christian community.

'Singing, however simply, and even on one's own, helps to deepen the worship. Singing can also unite a group or congregation, enriching their prayer and praise.'

Common worship – Daily Prayer

Ephesians 5;19

...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart...

Colossians 3;16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

It is unclear exactly what the distinction was between psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; however, we do know that psalms were often sung [antiphonally](#), spiritual songs tended to be rather more spontaneous (look up [jubilus](#)).

Old Testament references:

Exodus 15

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord: 'I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously...'

1 Samuel 2;1-5

Hannah also prayed and said, 'My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides the enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation...'

What New Testament song does this remind you of?

What do both of these songs have in common?

'HYMN':

Augustine of Hippo's (354-430) definition was "a song containing praise of God"

From the rhythmic pattern of the Greek we can assume that a number of New Testament passages were hymns, or sections of hymns, which were well known to the early Christians.

Read Philippians 2;6-11, and Colossians 1;15-20

Can you find any similar passages in Ephesians and 1 Timothy?

2. The Early Church

When the early Church met together, they sang hymns.

[Pliny the Younger](#) (62-113) talks of the Christians "assembling on a set day before dawn and singing a hymn to the Christ as to a god"

3. New English Hymnal 247

Phos Hilaron

This is the earliest known Christian hymn, described by St. Basil in 370 as "well-known" It was a lamp-lighting hymn, almost certainly sung in the catacombs by Christians under persecution. Notice the implied reference to Christ as the light of the world. Remember that to sing this hymn was a dangerous and radical act - almost a protest song. This is a translation from the Greek by [Robert Bridges](#). We also use the popular translation by [John Keble](#) (*Hail gladdening light*). Here you can contrast the Bridges (left) and Keble (right) settings, both writers having to produce a metrical version of the original hymn that makes both rhythmical and literary sense in English.

O Gladsome light, O grace
Of God the Father's face,
The eternal splendour wearing;
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Saviour Jesus Christ,
Joyful in thine appearing.

Now, ere the day fadeth quite,
We see the evening light,
Our wonted hymn outpouring;
Father of might unknown,
Thee, his incarnate Son,
And Holy Spirit adoring.

To thee of right belongs
All praise of holy songs,
O Son of God, Lifegiver;
Thee, therefore, O Most High,
The world doth glorify,
And shall exalt for ever.

Hail, gladdening light,
of his pure glory poured,
who is the immortal Father,
heavenly blest,
Holiest of holies,
Jesus Christ our Lord!

Now we are come
to the sun's hour of rest,
the lights of evening
round us shine;
we hymn the Father, Son,
and Holy Spirit divine.

Worthiest art Thou at all times,
to be sung with undefiled tongue,
Son of our God, giver of life alone;
therefore in all the world,
thy glories,
Lord, they own.

Of course, we don't have any record of what the melody for the original Greek text would have been. These ancient melodies were probably not written down but taught aurally and passed from one group to another.

4. New English Hymnal 33

'Of the father's heart begotten'

Again a sort of protest song - this time against the heresy of [Arianism](#) which denied the full divinity of Christ and that the Son of God did not always exist, but was created by - and is therefore distinct from and inferior to - God the Father.

How does the hymn counter that heresy?

Notice the multicultural layers here; a 4th century text, and an 11th century tune in a 16th century arrangement, translated and revived in the 19th century.

TASK - Find a hymn by [Ambrose](#) (339-397 sometime Bishop of Milan), which reaffirms the divinity of Christ, and concludes with the doxology. These endings, as the *Gloria Patri* tagged onto the endings of psalms and canticles, were also sung to reaffirm orthodoxy.

5. CONGREGATIONAL HYMNODY IN THE REFORMATION

Throughout the Middle Ages, music in worship was led by the monastic choir. The common people sang outside the liturgy - very often carols and popular songs, which often had connections with the dance. However there were many complaints about church music from church hierarchy.

When there are 40 or 50 in the choir, three or four proud and lecherous rascals perform the service with flourishes so that no one can hear the words.

John Wycliffe c.1370

While one sings "Sanctus", another "Sabaoth", still another "Gloria tua"...

Bishop Cirillo Franco 1549

Of the 3 great Reformers, in Switzerland, [Zwingli](#) (1484-1531) loved music, but saw no place for it in worship, where he felt it could only detract from the impact of the words.

With [Martin Luther](#) (1483-1546) and [John Calvin](#) (1509-1564) congregational hymn-singing as we know it really begins. Luther who, in addition to translating the Bible into German, was also a keen musician, wrote 37 hymns so that people might sing the Catechism "knowing that the Church's teaching can be best implanted in young minds if reinforced with hymns".



Zwingli

But the Lutheran hymn was far from straightforward. e.g. Find a modern version of *Ein Feste burg* (New English Hymnal 444). The original was rhythmically irregular and complex.

Calvin would only allow the singing of metrical psalms - and those by voices only; instruments, harmonies and organs were prohibited in worship.

New English Hymnal 229

Tune: 'Genevan Psalm 42'

Try singing this in unison; what are your impressions?

In England the Calvinist pattern became more popular than the Lutheran pattern. [Sternhold and Hopkins](#) published all 150 psalms in metrical version in 1562. These became popular for singing at home.

In churches, with an illiterate congregation, the practice of "lining-out" became the norm - the parish clerk singing a line slowly, the congregation repeating it even more slowly, and often with errors.

Sing the *Old Hundredth* in this way, to give you some idea of what congregational singing in England sounded like in the 16th and 17th centuries

Old 100th

Genevan Psalter 1551

88 88



v.1 *All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with fear, his praise forth tell,
Come ye before him, and rejoice.*

6. THE LIBERATOR OF ENGLISH HYMNODY

[Isaac Watts](#) (1674-1748) wondered why Christians should be permitted to sing only psalms - and not sing of Christ and his fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures.

Read Psalm 72- which Watts hymn did this become?

Read Galatians 6;14 - which hymn grew from this verse?

Watts allowed his imagination to roam, and took risks with his heartfelt, personal and passionate poetry. Look at his last verse of New English Hymnal 95;

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

7. THE WESLEYS

[John](#) (1703-1791), and [Charles](#) (1707-1780).

Like Luther, they saw the potential power of song, and described their hymns as "arrows which could pierce where preaching could not".

Also as key parts of the Church's mission - "Not only as a ministry to the devout but also to the lost - to contain not only a discipline but also an invitation"

Their hymns were sung at indoor meetings of the faithful, and also at open-air evangelistic meetings (often as solo songs). Whereas the singing of metrical psalms had generally been ponderous and very uninspiring, the Wesleys insisted on singing well to the glory of God. The following instructions were among John's advice to congregations;

1. Learn these tunes well
2. Sing them exactly as they are printed here
3. Sing lustily and with good courage - beware of singing as if you were half dead
4. Sing modestly - do not bawl
5. Sing in time
6. Sing spiritually

They very often used the music of the great composers e.g. Handel and Purcell.

Sing New English Hymnal 408 (Love Divine), to the original tune, Purcell's "Fairest isle". Notice the parody between the two texts.

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is in 3/4 time and G minor. The lyrics are printed below the staves. The first two lines of lyrics are: 1. Fair-est Isle, all isles ex-cel-ling, Seat of pleas-ure and of; 2. Gen-tle mur-murs sweet com-plai-ning, Sighs that blow the fire of

*Love Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.*

*Fairest Isle, all Isles excelling,
Seat of pleasure and of love,
Venus here will choose her dwelling,
And forsake her Cyprian grove.
Cupid from his fav'rite nation,
Care and energy will remove;
Jealousy that poisonous passion,
And despair that dies for love.*

Sing New English Hymnal 9 – *Lo he comes*
What impact does this make on you?
What theological elements do these two hymns have in common?

Wesley could also write more intimate hymns as in the following (NEH 350 verse 5).

*'Tis Love, 'Tis Love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear they whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
Pure universal Love thou art:
To me, to all, thy mercies move;
Thy nature and thy name is love.*

What is the key message here? This was a feature of many of their hymns.
This was sung at Charles' funeral, and when they reached the 4th line of verse 1, John broke down...

...and I am left alone with thee,

8. HYMN SINGING MADE LEGAL

Although hymn singing was not officially allowed in church until 1821, hymn singing became more and more popular. In the village of Olney, [John Newton](#) (1725-1807) was the curate in perpetuity. He had been a slave-ship owner, and his hymn "Amazing grace" describes his encounter with God. See NEH 374.

He formed a friendship with poet [William Cowper](#), who brought to hymn writing a new poetic sensitivity. (See NEH 365)

9. OXFORD MOVEMENT

The leaders of the [Oxford Movement](#), initiated in 1833, called for a restoration of the dignity and the beauty of worship, and a return to mediaeval practices. As a result, many early hymns were translated from the Latin, Greek, Syrian and even Russian by people such as [J.M. Neale](#) and a raising of standards in the use of texts and music was established. Neale's texts such as the following have become standard repertoire:

All glory, laud and honour

Sing my tongue, the glorious battle

To Thee before the close of day

O come, O come Emmanuel

Of the Father's heart begotten

10. HYMNS ANCIENT AND MODERN 1861

Finally in 1861 came the first hymn book; the ancient hymns being mediaeval hymns in translation, and the modern chosen from the vast number of contemporary hymns being written at the time.

e.g. NEH 331 and NEH 146 - Dykes and Heber were key figures.

For the first time, a tune becomes associated solely with a particular text.

We still find the concept of a hymn to address a crisis. See NEH 484 verse 3.

*Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore opprest,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distrest,
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, 'How long?'
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.*

This was [Samuel Stone's](#) protest at the liberal Bishop of Natal's suggestion that the Pentateuch may not have been written by Moses alone!

Also at this time a growing sense of worldwide mission. See NEH 252

11. ENGLISH HYMNAL 1906

The key task, as the editors ([Dearmer](#) and [Vaughan Williams](#)) saw it was to raise standards - and the quality of the hymns. They felt that *Hymns Ancient and Modern* had been too monochrome.

They admitted:

- Folksong
- Plainchant
- German chorales with the original harmonisation.
- Settings of some of the finest poetry e.g. Herbert.
- New hymns by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

[Robert Bridges](#), in the Preface, talked of making the hymn "high art".

Do you think this is what hymn singing should be?

What are the relative merits of enthusiasm and beauty/sophistication in worship?

12. CONTEMPORARY HYMNODY

In the past 40 years there has been another explosion of hymn writing, with enormous stylistic diversity. See if you can find copies of the following examples:

- a hymn by [Fred Kaan](#) (e.g. For the healing of the nations)
- a song by [Matt Redman](#) or [Graham Kendrick](#) (e.g. The Servant King)
- a [Taizé](#) chant (e.g. Confitemini Domino)
- a hymn by [John Bell](#) (e.g. Will you come and follow me)
- a hymn by [Canon Jeremy Davies](#) (Grant O lord, that while we rest)

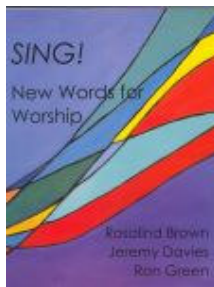
What are the differences of emphasis and intention in these very different expressions of congregational song?

Today, the number of hymn books for sale can be confusing to anyone trying to select one for their church. Publishers have produced large numbers of books that now include not only hymns but responsorial psalms and service settings. Many churches now use projections on screens and have reduced their dependence on hard copies in the pew. They have also increased the amount of texts available for use, having unlimited access to the internet and database libraries. At the click of a button, a biblical reference or phrase in a sermon can be cross referenced and an appropriate hymn sourced, ready to sing on screen!

*What are your feelings about the plethora of material now available?
Do you think much of what is available will last the test of time?
How will the lack of regular hymn singing in schools affect future worship styles?
Do you think we sing too many hymns, or not enough?*

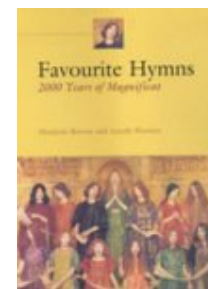
There are many questions that could be asked about our use of hymns and spiritual songs. Certainly this a subject that could run and run! You can study as much or as little as necessary on this and remember that sharing your findings and thoughts will always be useful to others, so use the website bulletin board.

When producing a written piece for this module, try to present your own worship situation and how hymnody is prepared, selected, rehearsed, written, presented, played, hated or loved in your church!



Geoff Weaver
2004

Updated 2007/2010
Robert Fielding



Further Reading

[The English Hymn](#), J.R. Watson, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1999.

[In Concert Sing](#), Bertram L. Barnby, Canterbury Press, 1996.

[The Music of Christian Hymnody](#), Erik Routley, Independent Press, London 1957.

[Let Justice Sing](#), Hymnody and Justice, Paul Westermeyer, The Liturgical Press 1998.

[Favourite Hymns](#), Reeves & Worsley, Continuum, 2001.