

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Music has played a tremendously important part in the history of Christianity. A study of its development through the past twenty centuries is intensely interesting and worthwhile. For clarity we shall divide this study into four periods--the early period, the medieval period, the Reformation period, and the modern period.

EARLY PERIOD

In the early period, beginning with the time of Christ, Christian singing was joyful and victorious. Paul and Silas sang in their prison cell, God accompanied their singing with a "thunderous bass," and the prison doors flew open! This account is found in Acts 16:25, 26.

On many occasions Paul enthusiastically recommended the exercise of Christian song. In Ephesians 5:19 Paul exhorts us to be filled with the Spirit, "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord." And again in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." James added his word of approval: "Is any merry? let him sing psalms." There is no doubt that the apostles and the first-century Christians possessed well-known hymns which they sang whenever they gathered together. It is believed that many of these early hymns may have been composed by the apostle Paul.

Ancient manuscripts discovered by Dr. Rendel Harris in 1909 included a collection of poems of praise to Christ, written in the Greek language and called Christian odes. Scholars have traced this collection to the last quarter of the first century.

Although Christians of the first centuries suffered hardship, persecution, and martyrdom, they maintained a spirit of victory and joy which their singing reflected. Although conscious of the fact that martyrdom was certain, they were not depressed or mournful, but marched into the face of death with joyous Christian songs in their hearts. The historian Josephus relates that often Christians in the Coliseum arena, awaiting death at the jaws of hungry lions, would sing so joyously and loudly that they were heard above the roar of the lions and the shouting of the blood-thirsty Romans.

In the third century there arose the beginnings of a controversy which lasted for 1600 years; a controversy involving the use of humanly-composed hymns as opposed to the Psalms of David. One faction believed that only songs which had been divinely inspired (the Psalms) should be used in Christian services. They insisted that it was as sacrilegious to attempt to write "another chapter to Isaiah" as to write another Christian song. The other faction believed that God could inspire men in the New Testament dispensation to compose hymns of Christian praise, just as He had inspired the Old Testament singers. They insistently pointed out that the Psalms were written before Christ, containing only prophetic references to Him--they insisted that the New Testament dispensation needed new Christian songs which were centered around Christ. The long and furious battle was marked by church trials, charges of heresy, church divisions, excommunications, and ceaseless wranglings.

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A man who played an important part in the development of Christian singing during the early Christian period was Ambrose. He was born in the year 340, became a lawyer and a judge, and was finally elected to the bishopric of Milan, although he had had no ecclesiastical training. As Bishop, he exerted a strong influence in the encouragement of congregational Christian singing. He wrote many hymns, and strongly favored the singing of humanly-composed songs. In the year 567, almost 200 years after his death, the church council at Tours defended Ambrose's style of singing. It was decreed that "the hymns of Ambrose and others are beautiful enough to deserve singing, and should be received."

#### MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Gradually, however, congregational singing became almost a lost art, and for hundreds of years through the Middle Ages, Christian singing was almost totally confined to the clergy. There were two principal causes: first, because of the official disapproval of the Church; second, because of the sharp decline in individual spirituality. As the Church became more formal, as worship became more liturgical, and as Christians lost the keen edge of their spiritual contact with God, singing passed into the hands of the clergy. Individuals lost their spiritual power, the song in their hearts died out, and Christian service became a mere ceremony.

#### REFORMATION PERIOD

With the coming of the Renaissance and the spreading of the Protestant Reformation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, religious music gradually attained again a place of importance. Christianity became a vital, throbbing, motivating, individual experience in the hearts of men, instead of merely a lifeless code of religious dogma. With the rebirth of vital Christianity came a revival of glorious Christian music.

Martin Luther played a tremendously important part in this rebirth of Christian music, although the way had been prepared before him by others. Even before the time of Luther, the "Minnesingers" (pronounced menna-zangurs) had thrilled all Germany with their lyric songs of love and beauty. The common people found their voices and were inspired by the Minnesingers to vocal efforts, after having allowed the clergy to do all the singing for many centuries.

John Huss, the leader of the Bohemian Brethren, strongly encouraged his followers to sing. Shortly before he was burned at the stake in 1415, he said, "We preach the gospel not only from the pulpit, but also by hymns." Incidentally, the Bohemian Brethren deserve the credit for circulating in 1504 the first congregational song-book.

As the great Protestant Reformation swept across Europe, spirited singing followed in its wake. As men found again a reality in Christian experience, there awakened within them a victorious song. The barriers between man and God were broken down; the priesthood of believers became a vital fact; the humblest disciple, without hindrance, might approach the Throne of Grace. No wonder there was an outburst of song; it was the natural expression of great joy!

Although singing was characteristic of the meetings of Protestants in every country, and under every reformer, it was in Germany that congregational hymnody received its greatest impetus. Luther was quick to see that German Christians

needed the Bible and also Christian songs in their own language. In the Catholic Church, ceremonies and singing had been confined to the Latin tongue. Luther was used of God in giving the Bible and the hymn-book to the people in their own language.

Most of the available Christian songs of that day were not suitable for Protestant singing, many of them being addressed to the Virgin Mary, or to the long-dead church dignitaries who had been sainted. Therefore, realizing his followers needed a musical outlet for their new-found Christian joy, Luther proceeded to compose new hymns and to encourage other Christian composers. In 1545 he published a collection of 101 Christian songs which was widely distributed. At that time he wrote: "What I wish, is to make hymns for the people, that the Word of God may dwell in their hearts by means of song also."

The songs of the Lutherans, in printed form, leaflets, and books, were scattered across Germany by student-peddlers. In some parts of the country the individual who was caught with one of Luther's hymn-books in his possession was subject to imprisonment, torture, and death. But in spite of this fact people were eager to obtain copies, and Martin Luther kept four printers constantly busy.

John Calvin, in France, was quick to realize, as did Luther, that his followers needed a vocal outlet for their new-found joy, and encouraged group singing. However, he sternly disapproved of Luther's humanly-composed hymns; he insisted that only the inspired songs of Scripture (David's Psalms) had a rightful place in Christian services.

When Calvin ascended to prominence he persuaded Clement Marot, a court poet, to arrange fifty of the Psalms metrically in the French language. This collection was published by Calvin in 1541. Under the title "Metrical Psalms" it received such wide distribution that sixty-four editions were necessary in the first four years.

After Marot's death Calvin persuaded another distinguished French poet, Beza, to finish translating the Psalms into French, metrically arranged. Gradually tunes were found for the 150 Psalms (although one tune was often used for several Psalms) and the entire collection was published, becoming known as the Geneva Psalter. Later this collection was translated into other languages, and hundreds of editions were published. Its use exerted a powerful influence on Christian singing in Europe (excluding Germany) for three hundred years.

Calvin's method of Psalm-singing (as distinguished from the Lutheran singing of humanly-composed hymns) crossed the Channel into the British Isles and became the foundation of the English and Scotch singing. In 1562 the first complete edition of versified songs in English was published, accompanied by melodies which were called "church tunes." It was arranged by two men, Sternhold and Hopkins. This psalter, through varying editions, was the leading Christian song-book for nearly a century and a half.

There were many English religionists who believed in the Lutheran theory of humanly-composed hymns, but the Church of England favored the Psalter, as did John Knox in Scotland. Confusion and discord resulted, and Protestant church music experienced considerable tribulation. During the reign of Charles the First, and also under Mary Queen of Scots, Psalm-singing and hymn-singing were banned. But

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official edict could not quiet the song in the hearts of multitudes of Christians; although they were prohibited for a time from singing in their churches they would often gather in public places and hold great Christian songfests.

The sentiment in favor of hymn-singing (versus metrical Psalms) received a new impetus under the influence of Isaac Watts. He firmly believed that God could inspire an eighteenth-century hymn-writer as truly as He inspired David. He wrote many new hymns, and in 1707 published his first volume of Christian hymns set to the old Psalm meters.

Another great stimulus to the cause of Christian singing was provided by John and Charles Wesley. The young brothers set sail for the new America; John to be an Anglican priest, and Charles to be secretary to Governor Oglethorpe. During the voyage to America, a group of Moravians on board exerted a profound influence on their lives, by means of their spirituality and joyous Christian singing.

In 1738 the Wesleys returned to England, and shortly thereafter were converted through the influence of the Moravians; Charles on May 21, 1738, and John three days later. Eager for more light, John crossed the Channel and journeyed to Herrnhut, the center of the Moravian's activities. He heard their enthusiastic singing, and became convinced that congregational hymn-singing merited an important place in Christian services.

When the Wesleys became propagators of the great Christian awakening that swept the British Isles, music was given a prominent place. John translated many of the German hymns into English, and Charles began writing original hymns which eventually numbered more than six thousand. The Wesleyan singing was as instrumental in attracting new converts as was Lutheran music in Germany.

The settlers who came to the new world were God-fearing people who were careful to bring their Bibles and Psalters with them. But as the years passed the Puritans' singing degenerated. Their Psalters wore out and were not replaced. Life in the wilderness prevented their children from receiving an adequate education. Following generations, singing largely from memory, gradually altered the songs that were in use, and the result was confusion. A decision was made to revise the Psalter and publish an American edition. Accordingly, a printing press was ordered from England, and upon its arrival in 1640, the Bay Psalm Book was printed--the first book of any kind to be printed in the New World! The first eight editions of the Bay Psalm Book were published without tunes; that is, words only. In 1698 the ninth edition contained fourteen tunes.

John Tufts published the first musical instruction book in the New World in 1712. A few years later he published a collection of thirty-seven tunes which was to be bound with future editions of the Bay Psalm Book.

Several years later, Thomas Prince, a noted Boston minister, revised the Bay Psalm Book and added fifty hymns, forty-two of them being Watts'. Combining Psalms and hymns was a bold undertaking!

Meanwhile the Wesleyan influence was sweeping the American colonies. Multitudes of Americans were breaking away from the lifeless Psalm-singing of many of the churches. In 1729 Benjamin Franklin published an American edition of Isaac Watts' Psalms and Hymns. The revivals under Jonathan Edwards, beginning in 1734, and Whitefield's visit to New England in 1740, lent a great impetus to the singing of Watts' hymns.

It is interesting to note the mournful nature of the hymns of the early American era. Life in the new country was harsh and bitter, and joys there were few. The Puritans looked with extreme disfavor upon anything that was pleasant or joyful. Most of the preaching concerned the awful doom of the hell-bound sinner; this was reflected in the hymns of the period. Puritan children were compelled to sing:

"Come, let us now forget our mirth,  
And think that we must die."

Instead of Watts' songs of joy, early American hymnals contained such of Watts' songs as the following:

"My thoughts an awful subjects roll,  
Damnation and the dead.  
Hark, from the tombs a doleful sound,  
Mine ears attend the cry,  
Ye living men, come view the ground  
Where you must shortly lie!"

William Billings, a tanner by trade, loved music, and was constantly composing new tunes. He looked peculiar--blind in one eye, one leg shorter than the other, and one arm partially withered. In 1770 he published the New England Psalm Singer. The colonists were tiring of the old English tunes and they needed new tunes for Watts' and Wesley's hymn-poems. They were attracted to the comparatively delightful and freshly original tunes of Billings. He was a splendid singer, and was partly responsible for the origination of the "singing schools" which became so popular during the following century. He was credited with many innovations in religious singing--some of which were sternly opposed. For example, he advocated singers joining actions to their words, like clapping their hands when they sang "O clap your hands" in Psalm 47. He favored the introduction of musical instruments, particularly the cello, into Christian services. He developed the fugue style in singing--various voice parts carrying various lines, one part holding a note while the others engage in repetition, and so forth.

The question of musical instruments was the basis of controversy for many generations. Early colonists objected to the use of the church organ, which was variously called "the Devil's Bagpipe" and the "kist of whistles."

#### MODERN PERIOD

By the early part of the nineteenth century Christian singing had gained decided momentum. Musical instruments gradually appeared in churches, the hymns of American composers were accepted, and many new hymn-books were published. It was during the nineteenth century that the gospel song came into more distinct use, and in religious circles there came a distinct cleavage between the use of hymns and gospel songs. Just as a century earlier Psalm-singers had objected to the use of hymns, now hymn-singers objected to the use of gospel songs. But the general Christian public, stirred by the revival fires of the days of Moody, Spurgeon, Torrey, and others, was delighted with the joyful revival songs of Bliss, McGranahan, Sankey, Stebbins, Crosby, and a host of others.

Around the turn of the century and in the earlier years, one of the most popular preachers was Billy Sunday. Sunday framed his great evangelistic campaigns in joy-ful singing, both in the ministry of his loyal choir, and in congregational singing.

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Music is the natural, spontaneous product of the Holy Spirit out-pouring of the twentieth century. Wherever the Spirit falls the people enter into singing of their new-found fountain of joy. In the past few years since the Spirit has been poured out in the denominations, the dry hymn singing has changed into joyous chorus singing in those churches that begin to move in things of the Spirit. God is truly blessing His people with anointed music in these last days. In reviewing the development of music in the churches through the ages we thank the Lord for the freedom we have to worship Him and sing of His glory through the songs He gives by His Spirit. God is continuing to give new songs with messages that are appropriate for the move of God in these last days. He will continue to do so until He comes again to take us home, where we can praise Him eternally!