

Music at A&P

What are hymns all about?



Every Sunday morning at St. Andrew and St. Paul, our service includes at least four hymns that the congregation sing, along with the choir and the organ. Why do we do this? Where do these hymns come from? Who wrote them, and why?

Prior to the Protestant Reformation of 1517, virtually all music and spoken word in Western church services was sung or said by clergy or the choir; these two groups in a sense spoke, prayed and sang “on behalf” of the assembled congregation—and did so in Latin, a language that was used only in scholarship and church, and not really spoken by anyone. That is not to say that lay people had no connection with their faith: on the contrary, every aspect of daily life was permeated by a sense of the universe’s divine order, the so-called Great Chain of Being. In practice there was a tradition of biblical stories being acted out in plays by lay people. The once-in-a-decade Oberammergau Passion Play, held in south Germany to this day, is a famous remnant of this. Lay people, even if illiterate, were known to memorise long passages of scripture, the creeds, or other sacred texts and poetry. Thus, even if church services proper remained the province of the clergy and musicians, daily life could be rich in matters of faith, and atheism would probably have been considered conceptually impossible.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and the other Reformers understood the power of symbols. The pre-Reformation church used symbols effectively: the monumental verticality of a Gothic cathedral makes the believer feel small in the presence of Almighty God, and draws her eyes heavenward; the mystery of the physical elements and choreography of the Mass (the bread and wine transforming into the physical body and blood of Christ) creates a sense of awe, wonder and uncertainty that can easily require some form of mediation between the believer and God; etc. A symbol whose strength the Reformers grasped to genial effect was the people’s voice: they took the clergy and musicians’ monopoly on speech and song in worship, and shared it with the congregation: congregational hymn-singing was the result.

To varying degrees, the Reformers felt that scripture (and preaching on scripture) was the only Word that belonged in worship services. For Calvin, Zwingli and Knox in particular, even ancient sacred poetry was inadmissible. From this doctrine of “Sola scriptura” (“Scripture alone”), only biblical words could be sung. And where are the best songs found in the Bible? In the Psalms of David, naturally! Calvin and company set about making rhyming, metrical versions of the psalms, and setting them to fairly simple, repetitive tunes that congregants with no musical training could learn fairly quickly. They also set key prayers (the Lord’s Prayer, the Songs of Mary and Simeon) and the creeds to music, so that lay people could readily learn and sing those as well. The 16th- and 17th-century Genevan and Scottish psalters, from which many of the metrical psalms in the first 69 numbers in our Book of Praise are drawn, are the product of their labours. These three Reformers saw no room for choirs in church or instruments either: only the people of God singing the Word of God would do.

Unlike his stricter contemporaries, Luther felt that the ancient musical, poetic and artistic traditions of the faith had a place in worship, so long as they could be justified scripturally and were relevant to the local context. He differentiated between the styles of worship that were appropriate for private devotions, village churches, city churches and university churches. The complexity of the music, preaching, ritual and languages used should rightly increase in each category. However, common to each is a strong emphasis on congregational song. Luther naturally approved of metrical psalm singing, but also fostered a flowering of original hymn-text writing that has never been equalled to this day. The great hymns of Philipp Nicolai, Johann Walther, Paul Gerhardt, Martin Rinckhardt and others are well-represented in our Book of Praise. In addition, Luther personally translated many of the great Latin hymns of the ancient church into German, often adapting the original irregular Gregorian chant melodies into more metrically strict forms for congregational singing. In this way, Luther looked to the past in order to enrich the future.

The Calvinists stayed the course in singing only psalms for a few centuries. However, eventually hymns slipped into use alongside the psalms. Interestingly, the hymns of Isaac Watts (later 18th century) were not officially sung in the Church of England during his lifetime. The Methodists under Wesley began singing Watts’ and others’ hymns around that time, and such was their popularity (and the draw of the Wesleys’ travelling ministry) that the Anglicans finally capitulated in the 1830s, and opened the door to non-scriptural hymn texts. Characteristically, many Presbyterians held out even into the late 19th century, and some especially conservative Presbyterian groups still to this day will only sing psalms without instrumental accompaniment.

Besides the democratic symbolism of giving the people a voice in worship, what motivated the Reformers to introduce congregational singing? Education was a key goal; to that end, the Reformers cleverly taught the new psalms and hymns to children first, and got them to teach their parents. Singing was a commonplace everyday activity in any case; the received repertoire of folk songs was enriched through the addition of new sacred texts, sometimes sung to well-known folk melodies. The new doctrines were thus internalised through repetition at home, at school, at work and at church.

The ideas of the Reformation came to northern Europe at the right time politically and socially, and the movement caught the imagination of key political leaders, who for various reasons were unhappy with the Roman church. The great structural changes that came from the ensuing conflicts laid the basis for much of what is our modern Western worldview, and the rights and freedoms that many of us take for granted. I would argue that the democratisation of theological knowledge that congregational hymn-singing represents is an apt metaphor for the transformation that the Reformation brought. It is a fundamental shift from the Medieval, epitomised by the Great Chain of Being—God, angels, demons, stars, moon, kings, princes, nobles, commoners, etc.—to the Enlightenment, neatly summarised in Calvin’s view of each believer as prophet, priest and king. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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