

The Church at Song

The history of Christian worship in seven movements: its hymns, its people, and its practice.



THE LUTHER SCALE

Rates each era's congregational voice, how much the gathered people themselves sang, from one to five mics.

I · BIBLICAL	II · 33–500	III · 500–1500	IV · 1517	V · 1549–1800	VI · 1730s–1950s	VII · 1940s–
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I · THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

God's People Given a Songbook

From the Red Sea to Revelation, Scripture both commands worship and supplies its words.

SING

- The Psalter** Israel's hymnal; foundation of all later church song
- Song of Moses & Miriam** Exodus 15 · the founding song of redemption
- The Lukan canticles** Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria, Nunc Dimittis
- The Christ-hymns** Phil. 2:6–11 · Col. 1:15–20 · 1 Tim. 3:16
- Songs of Revelation** "Worthy is the Lamb" · Rev. 4–5

NAMES

- David** psalmist-king
- Moses & Miriam** song at the sea
- Mary** the Magnificat
- Paul & Silas** singing in prison

PRACTICE

- Temple worship with appointed Levitical musicians (1 Chr. 25)
- Synagogue pattern of Scripture read, prayed, and expounded
- Two ordinances given: baptism and the Lord's Supper
- "Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19)

II · C. 33–500 · THE EARLY CHURCH

The Church Learns to Sing

Before it builds anything, the church sings: new hymns in Greek and Latin carry its doctrine.

SING

- Phos Hilaron** 3rd c. or earlier · oldest hymn still in use
- Oxyrhynchus Hymn** c. 250 · earliest hymn with musical notation
- Te Deum Laudamus** 4th c. · attributed to Niceta of Remesiana
- Aeterne rerum conditor** Ambrose, late 4th c.
- Trisagion** "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal"

NAMES

- Clement of Alexandria** c. 150–c. 215 · first theology of music
- Ephrem the Syrian** c. 306–373 · "Harp of the Spirit"
- Hilary of Poitiers** c. 315–367 · Latin hymnody's pioneer
- Ambrose of Milan** c. 339–397 · its popularizer

PRACTICE

- House church to basilica after Constantine
- Word and Table joined weekly on the Lord's Day
- Catechumenate before baptism and the Table
- Hymns as doctrinal weapons against Arianism

III · 500–1500 · THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The Congregation Falls Silent

Latin liturgy and soaring chant, and a laity that watches more than it sings.

SING

- Gregorian chant** the plainsong repertoire of Mass and office
- Veni Creator Spiritus** 9th c. · Rabanus Maurus
- Of the Father's Love Begotten** Prudentius, c. 400 · Divinum Mysterium
- Pange Lingua Gloriosi** Aquinas, c. 1264 · for Corpus Christi
- Dies Irae** 13th c. · the sequence of judgment

NAMES

- Gregory the Great** c. 540–604 · name on the chant
- Hildegard of Bingen** 1098–1179 · abbess-composer
- Bernard of Clairvaux** 1090–1153 · devotional warmth
- Thomas Aquinas** 1225–1274 · doctrine as poetry

PRACTICE

- Latin-only Mass understood as sacrifice; transubstantiation defined 1215
- Monastic hours order daily prayer
- Choirs and clergy carry the music; congregational song nearly vanishes

IV · 1517–1600 · THE REFORMATION

The Song Returns to the Pew

Vernacular worship restores the congregation's voice: Luther the chorale, Calvin the psalter.

SING

- A Mighty Fortress Is Our God** Luther, c. 1529 · Psalm 46
- From Depths of Woe** Luther, 1524 · Psalm 130
- All People That on Earth Do Dwell** Kethe, 1561 · Old Hundredth, 1551
- The Genevan Psalter** completed 1562 · all 150 psalms

NAMES

- Martin Luther** 1483–1546 · the chorale
- John Calvin** 1509–1564 · metrical psalmody
- Ulrich Zwingli** 1484–1531 · removed music entirely
- Thomas Cranmer** 1489–1556 · Book of Common Prayer, 1549

PRACTICE

- Liturgy and Scripture in the language of the people
- Congregational singing restored as the church's common voice
- Regulative principle (Calvin) vs. normative principle (Luther)
- Preaching moves to the center of Protestant worship

V · 1549–1800 · BRITISH HYMNODY

From Prayer Book to Hymn Explosion

England fights over worship, and out of the argument come Keach, Watts, and the Wesleys.

SING

- The Lord's My Shepherd** Scottish Psalter, 1650
- When I Survey the Wondrous Cross** Watts, 1707
- O God, Our Help in Ages Past** Watts, 1719 · Psalm 90
- And Can It Be** Charles Wesley, 1738
- Amazing Grace** Newton, 1772 · Olney Hymns, 1779

NAMES

- Benjamin Keach** 1640–1704 · Baptists begin to sing
- Isaac Watts** 1674–1748 · father of English hymnody
- Charles & John Wesley** 1707–88 & 1703–91 · ~8,000 hymns
- John Newton** 1725–1807 · slave trader turned hymnwriter

PRACTICE

- Prayer Book order vs. the Dissenters' regulative principle; 1662 ejections
- Keach leads Baptists into hymn singing over fierce objection
- Watts's "hymns of human composure" break the psalter's monopoly
- The Great Awakening carries the new hymns into the open air

VI · 1730s–1950s · REVIVALISM IN NORTH AMERICA

Worship Reordered Around Decision

One story from Whitefield to Graham: camp meetings, the altar call, and the gospel song.

SING

- Blessed Assurance** Crosby & Knapp, 1873
- It Is Well with My Soul** Spafford, 1873 · Bliss, 1876
- Swing Low, Sweet Chariot** African American spiritual, 19th c.
- The Old Rugged Cross** Bennard, 1913
- How Great Thou Art** Hine's English text, 1949 · the crusades

NAMES

- George Whitefield** 1714–1770 · First Great Awakening
- Charles Finney** 1792–1875 · "new measures"
- Moody & Sankey** 1837–99 & 1840–1908 · preacher-and-singer model
- Fanny Crosby** 1820–1915 · ~8,000 gospel songs
- Graham, Barrows & Shea** Graham 1918–2018 · crusades at global scale

PRACTICE

- Camp meetings and the altar call reorder worship toward response
- The gospel song: simple, subjective, refrain-driven testimony
- Spirituals voice suffering and hope in the enslaved church
- Radio, recording, and stadium crusades scale revival to millions

VII · 1940s–PRESENT · CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

The Screen Replaces the Hymnal

Five tributaries converge, and the worship band leads the room.

SING

- Seek Ye First** Lafferty, 1972 · the Jesus Movement
- Shout to the Lord** Zschech, 1993 · Hillsong goes global
- In Christ Alone** Getty & Townend, 2001
- How Great Is Our God** Tomlin, 2004
- 10,000 Reasons** Redman, 2011

NAMES

- The Jesus Movement** Maranatha! Music, 1970s
- Jack Hayford** 1934–2023 · "Majesty"
- Darlene Zschech / Hillsong** b. 1965 · megachurch sound
- Getty & Townend** b. 1974 & b. 1963 · modern hymn movement

PRACTICE

- Five tributaries: youth ministry, Bible translation, boomers, church growth, Pentecostalism
- Praise & worship theology: sung praise as encounter
- Bands, screens, and production values reshape the room
- CCLI (1988): worship becomes a global industry

Explore the interactive edition, with sources, quiz mode, and listening links, at www.christianworship.today

Dates and periods are approximate, and eras overlap. Most information follows a graduate course in the history of Christian worship and song, and its course texts, Eskew & McElrath, Sing with Understanding, and Ross & Lamport, eds., Historical Foundations of Worship (Baker Academic). Other information is cited in the web edition of this study aid. The Luther Scale is an interpretive device, not a scholarly metric. Any errors are the author's own.