

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 the coursework of SBTS 40605WW, The History of Christian Worship and Song (Dr. Matthew Westerholm), 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.