

OBSERVATIONS ON THE HISTORY OF PSALMODY AND HYMNODY IN CHRISTIAN CHURCH MUSIC

by Tony Cowley

Tradition is the living voice of the dead; traditionalism is the dead voice of the living - Pelikan.

An unbiased study of the history of music in Christian worship is nearly impossible. Exhaustive research is more than the work of a life time. A study of musicology, liturgies and hymnology issues in many surprises, no matter where one places himself on the spectrum of today's Christian music scene. The history of Christian worship music is the history of a series of revolutions and then the solidification into a traditions. Then, a new revolution, often tied to new technologies. Each generation tends to assume that what they grew up doing is ancient, but usually it is not more than a few hundred years old. So it is with our practice of continuous singing, acapella exclusive metrical psalmody. Our generation has much to learn from previous generations. How we employ the information of past generations ought to reflect a fresh appreciation of unchanging Biblical principle and an understanding of the times in which we live and minister.

The use of rock groups, jazz ensembles, punk, rap, hip-hop, heavy metal, bands, etc. are very recent innovations in the worship of God, having arisen in the last 40 years, starting with folk-style singing with guitar. The lyrical content of the songs is often not only Scriptural, but Bible passages directly set to music, including Psalms. Sometimes the content is heretical, or not particularly edifying. Often it is repetitive, but so was Bach.

Full orchestral presentations, concert cantatas, High Masses in the classical mode and various types of special Sacred music go back to the Reformation and Enlightenment periods, with some precedents in the Catholic High Middle Ages. Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, and other great composers have set both Protestant and Roman Catholic Liturgies and Masses into quite ornate and beautiful presentations, such as Handel's "Messiah," or Mendelshon's "Elijah." Less ornate presentations are developed for regular congregational use, by the choir and congregation. Indeed, the sacred music industry has multiple products for just about any style or taste, and copyright laws to be carefully observed whether using an overhead projector or printing a hymnal. Often what is seen as high culture and classical music today is a stylized revision of the folk culture of yesteryear. Art and culture are deeply influenced by cult, i.e. worship. (Werner, 1984)

The use of the Choir is very ancient, having antecedents in the Jewish Temple's choirs of priests and Levites. However, instruments were not involved in Christian sacred music until the seventh century, and that only in the West, and not regularly until around the time of Aquinas at the turn of the Millennium. The style of the chapel and church was *a capella*. So, the use of the organ, and other instruments, while having O.T. Temple precedent, is still to be seen as an innovation in Christian music, dating to the early Middle Ages. The Reformers mostly rejected instruments, but not the Lutherans, Anglicans and some German Reformed. Zwingli was not sure that any singing was warranted for public worship, though it worked its way into his churches after a short hiatus.

The congregational singing of Hymns and Psalms as was preponderant until the recent "worship wars" goes back to the Reformation. Congregational singing as we know it was not possible until the publication of hymnals and psalters, with the printing press and near universal literacy. The Covenanters resisted "continuous singing" until the 1840s and beyond. The practice prior to that was "lining out the Psalm," in which the precentor either sang or gave out the words to the congregation, which then repeated the line(s) given out.

The cantor or pre-cantor/precentor is an ancient usage, probably referred to even in the Septuagint Psalm

titles and the Hebrew final edition of the canonical Psalter, “to the chief *musician*,” *eiv ton tel on* (LXX). While this probably referred to the song leader in the Second Temple (Ezra-Nehemiah) it might later have been understood with reference to the cantor in Synagogue, if such existed.

Psalms singing was early incorporated into the worship of the Christian Church. It has often been assumed that this was carried over from the singing of the Synagogue (*True Psalmody*, 1859; Lawson, 1879). However, there is no clear evidence that anything was sung in the Synagogue before the Christian era. An elaborate liturgy has been preserved, but the evidence of the readings and lessons is also all post New Testament. Ironically, the earliest evidence we have for what took place in the Synagogue is given in the New Testament itself. And, this is rather spotty:

Many of the prayers [in Synagogue] contained phrases from the Psalms; but the introduction of Psalm singing in synagogue worship is a matter of dispute. Some authorities believe that from early times Psalms appointed for certain days and festivals in the Temple services were used in the synagogue and from this custom the use of psalmody in the services of the early Christians was derived. Others believe that psalmody in Christian worship ante-dated its introduction in the synagogue. (Shepherd, 1976, 26).

However,

By the fourth century the memorization of the Psalms by many Christians and their habitual use as songs in worship by all Christians about whom we know were matters of long standing tradition. (Holladay, 1996, 165).

The earliest Christian witnesses show us that the Psalms were used between the reading of the three lessons (Old Testament, Gospel, Epistle) in the Liturgy (later reduced to two readings). Similar usage was common to East and West. The Psalms were also chanted in their entirety in the Christian Daily Offices, and in some seasons of the Church year (Shepherd, 1976, 27). The monasteries developed the discipline of chanting through the whole Psalter every week in their eight Daily Offices (Holladay, 1976, 175; 372), but this also included the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 (*ibid.*, 176). Secular Priests and literate laymen in the Holy Roman Empire often followed this practice as well. At times the only portion of Scripture allowed to the laity under Rome was the Psalter. “A Layman may not read a lection in the church nor sing the alleluia but only the psalms and responses without the alleluia,” says an early eighth century Frankish book of Church Discipline (Holladay, 177-8). Luther had the Latin Psalter memorized due to his Augustinian training.

The early evidence regarding singing of the congregation is discussed by McKinnon:

...The reader will note numerous clear examples of responsorial psalmody ranging chronologically from Tertullian to Augustine. Responsorial psalmody is understood here in the conventional sense of chanting of the psalm verses by a soloist with the congregation adding a single verse, or an exclamation like Alleluia, in response to each verse. The abundance of references makes it clear that this is the normal manner of psalmodic performance. And what of the other type of psalmody generally mentioned in the same breath as responsorial psalmody - the so-called antiphonal psalmody? In the early medieval sources this type appears in its commonly understood meaning of two choirs singing psalm verses in alternation. There is, however, just one example of dual choir psalmody given...from Basil's Epistle 207, and it fails to use the term antiphonal. The term does begin to appear, generally as a noun, in late fourth century monastic circumstances like those described by Egeria and Cassian, but here there is nothing suggesting a dual choir performance. In short, antiphonal psalmody in the early Christian period is one of those ‘perplexities’ referred to above, for which this volume can serve at best only as a starting point.

Turning finally to Eucharistic psalmody in the fourth century, one observes unambiguous references to just two places in the service - the communion and the gradual. There is a small number of late fourth century reference to a communion psalm - John Chrysostom, Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem and the *Apostolic Constitutions* - which make up in explicitness for their paucity. References to the gradual psalm, conversely, are plentiful but offer difficulties of interpretation.... Most references...suggest the following hypothesis: the gradual psalm was originally simply one of the Old Testament readings of the pre-eucharistic ‘service of the Word’. Thus prior to the fourth

century it would have figured occasionally, perhaps even frequently, among the readings, but in the late fourth century - that period of singular enthusiasm for psalmody - it was singled out and made a discrete musical event at every Eucharist. ... Augustine in his *Retractationes* [mentions] that eucharistic psalmody was looked upon by some of his contemporaries as an objectionable innovation. (McKinnon, 1987, 10-11).

The earliest description of Sunday liturgy of the church is related by Justin, a teacher and apologist at Rome in the second century, but he does not mention psalm-singing specifically. In the Latin church the psalm sang between the various lections came to be called the "Gradual" because it was sung from the step (*gradus*) of the ambo or pulpit where the lesson was read or intoned (Shepherd, 1976, 37). "The Gradual is the earliest form of psalmody we can trace in the Eucharist. It was chanted by a cantor, with a refrain by the congregation, or later by the choir.... The president of the liturgical assembly chose whatever selections he desired..." though the Hallel Psalms (113-118) were assigned to Easter has they had been by the Jews to Passover (*ibid.* 38).

Another characteristic of antiphonal psalmody was the use of a doxology, the *Gloria Patri*, at the end of the psalm. Its origins go back to the beginnings of antiphonal psalmody at Antioch. Though its purpose was to give a Christian ending to the Psalms, its earliest forms were a matter of dispute with the Arian heretics, who preferred, "Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit." In order to stress the equality of the three Persons of the Trinity the orthodox form in the Eastern Churches came to be:

*Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
Now and always and to the ages of ages.* (Shepherd, 43).

Going back further, there is no evidence of congregational singing as we know it in the Old Testament. The Levites and Priests had assigned duties, among which were instrumentalists and singers (1 Chr. 6:31ff.; 9:33; 15:16; ch. 16; 25:6-7ff.; 2 Chr. 5:12; 29:25-26; Ezr. 2:41; 7:24; 10:24; Neh. 7:1, 44, 67 [N.B. *female* singers!]; 10:39; 11:22-23; 12:29-47). The people occasionally responded to the singers with a shout:

Ezra 3:10-13 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel. And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, *saying*, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' *households*, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away. (NASB)

The song of Miriam and the women (Ex. 15), "Spring up O Well!" which seems a unique instance in the desert (Num. 21:17), the song of Moses (Dt. 31:19-32:44) are the only songs clearly sung, or to be sung, by the congregation, or even by large numbers of women. And the song of the women, and other songs reported, such as "whom they sing in the dances, saying, 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands?'" (1 Sam 29:5) seem to be more in a civic celebration than public worship, or cultic, context. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, the Song of the Bow, also seems to have been religious, but not cultic (2 Sam. 1:17; cf. 2 Chr. 35:25). It may appear that the N.T. instance of the triumphal entry, the congregation, or throng, was singing - but this would fit as much a civic enthronement theme as a public worship setting:

Matthew 21:9 And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (NASB)

Congregational singing in the early church was, therefore, not much like what we find today, outside of some liturgical churches, which both in sung and spoken liturgies, often employ a response, such as "Lord incline our hearts to keep thy law" during the recitation of the 10 Words. Chanting the Psalms in in public worship was a job given to the cantors and later to choirs of monks and boys, who often were given to the monasteries for this purpose.

What was the content of the earliest Christian worship song? Old summarizes:

The Psalms formed the core of the praises of the New Testament church; nevertheless the earliest Christians sang praises other than the one hundred fifty canonical psalms and the occasional psalms or canticles found elsewhere in Scripture. In the first place we find a number of Christian psalms such as the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), the Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79), and the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). These are clearly Christian psalms written in the literary genre of the Hebrew votive thanksgiving psalms. There is a sense in which these Christian Psalms complete the Old Testament Psalms. ... The canticles in the Gospel of Luke are the core of Christian praise. From these Christian psalms Christian hymns rapidly developed. Yet these Christian hymns went beyond the Hebrew literary forms and took on Greek poetic features more familiar to the new Gentile congregations which were springing up over the whole Mediterranean world. ... (Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20)... There is little question but what the first Christians did write hymns to Christ and sing them in their worship side by side with the psalms which they sang as fulfilled prophecies of the coming Messiah. In fact very shortly after New Testament times we read in one of the letters of the Roman governor Pliny to the Emperor Trajan a short description of a Christian worship service. It clearly says that the Christians sang hymns to Christ. (Old, 1984, 44-45).

Schaff concurs:

The SONG, a form of prayer, in the festive dress of poetry and the elevated language of inspiration, raising the congregation to the highest pitch of devotion, and giving it a part in the heavenly harmonies of the saints. This passed immediately, with the psalms of the Old Testament, those inexhaustible treasures of spiritual experience, edification, and comfort, from the temple and the synagogue into the Christian church. The Lord himself inaugurated psalmody into the new covenant at the institution of the holy Supper, ^{Comp. Matt. 26:30; Mark 14: 26} and Paul expressly enjoined the singing of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," as a means of social edification. ^{Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16}. But to this precious inheritance from the past, whose full value was now for the first time understood in the light of the New Testament revelation, the church, in the enthusiasm of her first love, added original, specifically Christian psalms, hymns, doxologies, and benedictions, which afforded the richest material for Sacred poetry and music in succeeding centuries; the song of the heavenly hosts, for example, at the birth of the Saviour; ^{The "Gloria," Luke 2:14.} the "Nunc dimittis" of Simeon; ^{Luke 2:29} the "Magnificat" of the Virgin Mary; ^{Luke 1:46 sqq} the "Benedictus" of Zacharias; ^{Luke 1:68 sqq.} the thanksgiving of Peter after his miraculous deliverance; ^{Acts 4:24-30. Comp. Ps. 2.} the speaking with tongues in the apostolic churches, which, whether song or prayer, was always in the elevated language of enthusiasm; the fragments of hymns scattered through the Epistles; and the lyrical and liturgical passages, the doxologies and antiphonies of the Apocalypse.

Schaff's footnote: Eph.5:14; I Tim.3:16; II Tim.2:11-13; I Pet.3:10-12. The quotation is introduced by *dio legei* and *postos o logos*. The rhythmical arrangement and adjustment in these passages, especially the first two, is obvious, Westcott and Hort have marked it in their Greek Testament (in meter). (I Tim.3:16) is undoubtedly a quotation. I Pet. 3:10-12, which reads like a psalm, is likewise metrically arranged by Westcott and Hort. Js.1:17, though probably not a quotation, is a complete hexameter. (Schaff, Vol. I, 369-70).

William H. Russell in his paper, "Historical Evidence of the Praise of the Early Church" concludes, in a very conservative reading of the evidence:

It seems that evidence is lacking to support the use of non-Scriptural songs in praise until the fourth century, after the church gained legal standing in the Roman empire. During the fourth and fifth centuries, many other doctrines and practices came into the church which we would not accept as Scripturally warranted. However, the question of exclusive Psalmody cannot be solved from historical evidence alone (p. 4).

Metrical Psalm-singing *almost* as we know it arose with the Reformation among the French, British and Swiss Reformed, as well as Psalms and Hymns by Lutherans and others outside of Church. The Hymns and Psalms were sung in Family worship and in the fields, and during battles (e.g. on both sides between Cromwell and the Covenanters). Luther wrote, "The whole Psalter, Psalm by Psalm, should remain in use,

and the entire Scripture, lesson by lesson, should continue to be read to the people” (Holladay, 1996, 195). Luther’s people learned to sing. Practices were set during the week for the entire congregation, and in the home after the catechetical hour singing was commended to the family. A Jesuit testified that “the hymns of Luther killed more souls than his sermons.” (*ibid*).

Calvin and Bucer provided complete Liturgies, which included the Psalms. Calvin did not attempt a reprintinization based merely upon the New Testament, but ordered his worship according to the pattern of the early Church. The Calvinist movement was the primary source for the adaptation of psalms for congregational singing. “The Psalms were their songs which they sang as the elect people of God in a covenant relationship with Him.” (Holladay, 1996, 198). Calvin’s people completed the French Psalter in 1562, which was “a notable achievement both in its literary and musical qualities, especially the varieties of poetic meters and melodic rhythms” (Shepherd, 1976, 50). The Sterhold and Hopkins Psalter of the English reformation was printed with the Book of Common Prayer. The Scottish adopted the practice of exclusive Psalmody with the Covenanted Uniformity of the Second Reformation, when they legislated the use of the “Rouse” Psalter, developed mostly in England and thoroughly checked and corrected by members of Synod (c. 1650). However, the Scots had been using their own Psalter since 1564, directly stimulated by the Genevan Psalter. The first thing printed in the new world was the Congregationalist “Bay Psalm Book,” at Harvard in 1640 - which was the Psalter of New England thenceforth, with various revisions. (Holladay, 1996, 201-204).

It appears with Calvin’s Geneva Psalter that the practice of preponderant Psalmody arose. A few canticles were sung, along with the 10 Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. The Dutch Church reduced their practice to nearly exclusive Psalmody in 1619 at the famous Synod of Dordt. However, some scripture songs and prayers, and one hymn were preserved. Practically speaking, no one practiced Exclusive Psalmody the way Reformed Presbyterians do until the time of the Westminster Assembly. There was a willingness on the part of the Scottish church to develop paraphrases of other Scripture songs (see Hemphill’s paper). It appears that no one articulated our present position confessionally /officially until 1980. The historic practice of EP is a modification on a broader stream of preponderant Psalmody and essentially Inspired Praise, which goes back to Calvin and has some precedents in the early church and her councils.

But the Early Church never articulated the position of Exclusive Psalmody as we know it. At times it rejected uninspired songs practically, but for reasons other than the exegetical ground we give today. Uninspired Hymns were accepted in the fourth century, at times and in certain places. But seem to have been excluded from public worship by Church courts for practical reasons, and because of the intrinsic superiority in most all respects, of the Inspired Word of God.

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