

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4-7-2021



Dear Friends in Christ,

How did we end up with different styles of worship music? The answer to that can be found by looking at how Christian music has changed in America and why. There have been four major shifts in American worship music influence and needs that has resulted in these various types of music. These developments have also led to a wider diversity of people coming to church as they found music that spoke to them.

When the first immigrants came to America, especially those seeking religious freedom, they brought with them music with which they were familiar. Much of this music had been written in the 1600's and 1700's—pretty modern for their time. A good example of this music is that of Isaac Watts, the English composer. Watts' father was a pastor and Isaac grew up with the only worship music being the singing or chanting of the psalmody which he found quite boring. His father encouraged him to write new music. During his life he composed more than 750 sacred pieces including some very familiar ones to those who like traditional Christian music. Examples are “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (in our hymnal Evangelical Lutheran Worship or ELW 632), “Give to Our God Immortal Praise” (ELW 848), and “Joy to the World” (ELW 267). This music was different from the psalmody and reflected the greatness of God the Father, creation, and God's mighty saving acts. But, remember that when these pieces were first performed, they were new and not always well-received, whereas today, they are dearly loved.

In the mid-to-late 1800's, a new style of Christian music was born. The time was post-Civil War, there was a depression in America with great poverty, and churches kept their doors open for people to come in and rest or sleep or shelter. Open-door revivals sprang up under the likes of D. L. Moody, along with a new style of music that was more personal, testimonial, that reflected an individual connection with God, and presented Jesus as friend. A prolific hymnwriter of the time was Fanny Crosby who wrote over 8,000 of these new hymns like “Blessed Assurance” (ELW 638), “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross” (ELW 335), and “Closer

to Thee.” A number of these hymns are also loved by many today, without realizing that they come from a different musical genre than those of the previous period.

In the 1920’s, the birth of radio ushered in another new era of Christian music. In the roaring 20’s, jazz was popular and now many Christian worshipers wanted to sing songs that told the gospel stories or that reflected the scriptures. Because worship services and religious shows were now broadcast on radio, religious leaders asked composers to create songs that were repetitive and easy to learn and remember during the week, like “Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.” Gospel spirituals also found their place in this period. Hymns from this time that might be familiar are “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” by Tommy Dorsey (ELW 773), “Can the Circle Be Unbroken” by the Carter Family, and “Great is Thy Faithfulness” by Thomas Obadiah Chisholm (ELW 733) based on Lamentations 3:22-23.

From the 1970’s forward, new worship music arose whose composers were influenced by jazz, folk, country and western, soul, and rock and roll. Originally it was called “Jesus Music.” Often performed with guitar accompaniment, it could be sung around campfires, on street corners, in prisons, schools, and at youth gatherings, as well as in church, meaning that worship could now be offered practically anywhere. Often this music is accompanied by hand clapping, swaying, and even dancing. The music is free-flowing with great passion and feeling. It reflects personal experience, genuineness, and authenticity. Amy Grant was the first successful Christian crossover performer with the same songs ranked on both the Christian and Contemporary sales charts at the same time. Praise songs from this period that you may even hear in our congregation are “How Great is Our God” by Chris Tomlin, “Better is One Day” by Matt Redman, “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High” by Rick Founds (ELW 857), and “Here I Am, Lord” by Daniel Schutte (ELW 574).

There are many more pieces in our hymnal that were written recently, yet fit into older styles. Though unfamiliar to some, these hymns have the same presentation of God’s love and mercy, and reflect our commitment to the Lord as do those from decades or even centuries ago. Remember, at one time, all the of the songs written in the time periods above were once new, but many have become cherished by worshipers today. Though uncomfortable to sing at first, learning new hymns can broaden the ways by which we can praise God and understand God’s love and grace. As our familiarity with them increases, these newer hymns may become for us and for those who come after us as dearly loved as those we today consider classics.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey