

# Ministers of Music:

Clergy Set to Music

Chapter 7

“The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform.”

-JOHN STOTT, TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH MINISTER AND BIBLE SCHOLAR

“The real trouble is not in fact that the church is too rich but that it has become heavily institutionalized, with a crushing investment in maintenance. It has the characteristics of the dinosaur and battleship. It is saddled with a plant and a programme beyond its means, so that it is absorbed in problems of supply and preoccupied with survival. The inertia of the machine is such that the financial allocations, the legalities, the channels of organization, the attitudes of mind, are all set in the direction of continuing and enhancing the status quo. If one wants to pursue a course which cuts across these channels, then most of one’s energies are exhausted before one ever reaches the enemy lines.”

-JOHN A. T. ROBINSON, TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR

WALK INTO ANY CHRISTIAN CHURCH service and you'll find it will usually begin with the singing of hymns, choruses, or praise and worship songs. One person (or a team of people) will both lead and direct the singing. In more traditional churches, it will be the choir director or the music minister. (In some churches, this role is even played by the senior pastor.) Or it may be handled by the choir itself. In contemporary churches, it will be the worship leader or the praise and worship team.

Leading up to the sermon, those who "lead worship" select the songs that are to be sung. They begin those songs. They decide how those songs are to be sung. And they decide when those songs are over. Those sitting in the audience in no way, shape, or form lead the singing. They are led by someone else who is often part of the clerical staff-or who has similar stature.

This is in stark contrast to New Testament teaching and example. In the early church, worship and singing were in the hands of all of God's people. The church herself led her own songs. Singing and leading songs was a corporate affair, not a professional event led by specialists.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE CHOIR

This all began to change with the rise of the clergy and the advent of the Christian choir, which dates back to the fourth century. Shortly after the Edict of Milan (AD 313), the persecution of Christians ceased. During Constantine's reign, choirs were developed and trained to help celebrate the Eucharist. The practice was borrowed from Roman custom, which began its imperial ceremonies with processional music. Special schools were established, and choir singers were given the status of a second-string clergy.

The roots of the choir are found in the pagan Greek temples and Greek dramas. Will Durant states it beautifully: In the Middle Ages, as in ancient Greece, the main fountainhead of drama was in religious liturgy. The Mass itself was a dramatic spectacle; the sanctuary a sacred stage; the celebrants wore symbolic costumes; priest and acolytes engaged in dialogue; and the antiphonal responses of priest and choir, and of choir to choir, suggested precisely the same evolution of drama from dialogue that had generated the sacred Dionysian play.

With the advent of the choir in the Christian church, singing was no longer done by all of God's people but by clerical staff composed of trained singers. This shift was partly due to the fact that heretical doctrines were spread through hymn singing. The clergy felt that if the singing of hymns was in their control, it would curb the spread of heresy. But it was also rooted in the ever-growing power of the clergy as the main performers in the Christian drama.

By AD 367, congregational singing was altogether banned. It was replaced by music from the trained choirs. Thus was born the trained professional singer in the church. Singing in Christian worship was now the domain of the clergy and choir.

Ambrose is credited for creating the first postapostolic Christian hymns. These hymns were modeled on the old Greek modes and called by Greek names. Ambrose also created a collection of liturgical chants that are still used today in some Catholic churches. The liturgical chant is the direct descendant of the pagan Roman chant, which goes back to the ancient Sumerian cities.

Papal choirs began in the fifth century. When Gregory the Great became pope near the end of the sixth century, he reorganized the Schola Cantorum (school of singing) in Rome. (This school was founded by Pope Sylvester, who died in AD 335.)

With this school, Gregory established professional singers who trained Christian choirs all throughout the Roman Empire. The singers trained for nine years. They had to memorize every song that they sang-including the famous Gregorian chant. Gregory wiped out the last vestiges of congregational singing, believing music was a clerical function and the exclusive right of trained singers.

Trained choirs, trained singers, and the end of congregational singing all reflected the cultural mind-set of the Greeks. Much like oratory (professional speaking), the Greek culture was built around an audience-performer dynamic. Tragically, this trait was carried over from the temples of Diana and the Greek dramas straight into the Christian church. The congregation of God's people became spectators not only in spoken ministry, but in singing as well. Regrettably, the spirit of Greek spectatorship still lives in the contemporary church.

Christian boys' choirs also go back to the days of Constantine. Some still exist. Most were created by orphanages. The Vienna Boys Choir, for example, was founded in Vienna, Austria, in 1498. The choir sang exclusively for the court, at Mass, and at private concerts and state events. The first boys' choirs were actually established by pagans who worshipped Greco-Roman gods. These pagans believed that the voice of young boys possessed special powers.

## **THE FUNERAL DIRGE AND PROCESSION**

Another form of music with pagan roots is the funeral dirge. It was brought into the Christian church in the early third century. As one scholar put it, The pagan cult of the dead was too much a part of the past lives of many Christians, formerly pagans, for them simply to be able to replace pagan dirges and funeral music with Psalmody.

During the days of Constantine, Roman betrothal practices and funeral processions were adapted and transformed into Christian “funerals.” This was borrowed from pagan practice. The so-called funeral dirge that is observed and accepted by Christians also came out of paganism. It was brought into the Christian church in the early third century. Tertullian was opposed to Christian funeral procession simply because it had pagan origins.

Not only did the funeral procession emerge out of paganism; so did the funeral oration. It was the common practice of pagans in the Roman Empire to hire one of the town's eloquent professors to speak at the funeral of a loved one. The speaker followed a little handbook for such occasions. He would work himself up to a passionate pitch and then say of the deceased, "He now lives among the gods, traversing the heavens and looking down on life below. It was his job to comfort the loved ones of the deceased. This role is filled today by the contemporary pastor. Even the words of the oration are strikingly similar!

## **THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE REFORMATION**

The major musical contribution of the Reformers was the restoration of congregational singing and the use of instruments. John Huss (1372-1415) of Bohemia and his followers (called Hussites) were among the first to bring both back into the church.

Luther also encouraged congregational singing during certain parts of the service. But congregational hymn singing did not reach its peak until the eighteenth century during the Wesleyan revival in England.

In Reformation churches, the choir remained. It both supported and led congregational singing. About 150 years after the Reformation, congregational singing became a generally accepted practice. By the eighteenth century, the organ would take the place of the choir in leading Christian worship.

Interestingly, there is no evidence of musical instruments in the Christian church service until the middle Ages. Before then, all singing during the service was unaccompanied by musical instruments. The church fathers took a dim view of musical instruments, associating them with immorality and idolatry. Calvin agreed, viewing musical instruments as pagan. Consequently, for two centuries, Reformed churches sang psalms without the use of instruments.

The organ was the first instrument used by post-Constantinian Christians. Organs were found in Christian churches as early as the sixth century. But they were not used during the Mass until the twelfth century. By the thirteenth century, the organ became an integral part of the Mass.

The organ was first used to give the tone to the priests and the choir. During the Reformation, the organ became the standard instrument used in Protestant worship-except among the Calvinists, who removed and demolished church organs. The first organ to be purchased by an American church was in 1704

The first Protestant choirs began flourishing in the mid-eighteenth century. Special seats were assigned to choir members to show their special status.

At first, the function of the choir was to set the pitch for congregational singing. But before long, the choir began to contribute special selections. Thus was born special music by the choir as the congregation watched it perform.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the children's choir made its appearance in American churches. By this time, it became customary for the choir in nonliturgical churches to play special music. (This practice was eventually carried over to liturgical churches as well.)

The location of the choir is worth noting. In the late sixteenth century, the choir moved from the chancel (clergy platform) to the rear gallery where a pipe organ was installed. But during the Oxford Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the choir returned to the chancel. It was at this time that choir members began wearing ecclesiastical robes. By the 1920s and 1930s, it was customary for American choirs to wear these special vestments to match the newly acquired neGothic church buildings. The choir in their archaic clerical clothes were now standing with the clergy in front of the people.

## **THE ORIGIN OF THE WORSHIP TEAM**

In many contemporary churches, whether charismatic or noncharismatic, the choir has been replaced by the worship team. Such churches have sanctuaries that boast few religious symbols (except possibly banners or flags).

At the front of the stage is a simple podium, some plants, amplifiers, speakers, and lots of wires. The dress is usually casual. Folding chairs or theater seats typically are used in place of pews. The standard worship team includes an amplified guitar, drums, keyboard, possibly a bass guitar, and some special vocalists. Words are usually projected onto a screen or a bare wall by an overhead (or video) projector or by PowerPoint slides. The songs are typically selected before the worship service. There are rarely songbooks or hymnals.

In such churches, worship means following the band's prescribed songs. The praise and worship time typically lasts from twenty to forty minutes. The first songs are usually upbeat praise choruses. The worship team will then lead a lively, hand-clapping, body-swaying, hand-raising, (sometimes dancing) congregation into a potpourri of individualistic, gentle, worshipful singing. (Typically, the focus of the songs is on individual spiritual experience. First-person singular pronouns-I, me, my-dominate a good number of the songs. In some contemporary churches, the trend is moving more toward corporate, first-person plural lines-we, us, our. This is a wonderful shift.)

As the band leaves the stage, ushers pass the offering plates. This is usually followed by the sermon, and the pastor dominates the rest of the service. In many churches, the pastor will call the worship team to return to the stage to play a few more worshipful songs as he winds up his sermon. "Ministry time" may ensue as the band plays on.

The song liturgy just described works like clockwork in the typical charismatic and nondenominational church. But where did it come from?

In 1962, a group of dissatisfied British church musicians in Dunblane, Scotland, tried to revitalize traditional Christian songs. Led by Congregational minister Erik Routley, these artists were influenced by Bob Dylan and Sydney Carter. George Shoney Jr. of Hope Publishing Company brought their new style to the United States. These new Christian Hymns were a reform, but not a revolution. The revolution came when rock and roll was adapted into Christian music with the coming of the Jesus movement. This reform set the stage for the revolutionary musical changes to take root in the Christian church through Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard.

The origin of the worship team goes back to the founding of Calvary Chapel in 1965. Chuck Smith, the founder of the denomination, started a ministry for hippies and surfers. Smith welcomed the newly converted hippies to retune their guitars and play their now redeemed music in church. He gave the counterculture a stage for their music-allowing them to play Sunday night performances and concerts. The new musical forms began to be called "praise and worship." As the Jesus movement began to flourish, Smith founded the record company Maranatha Music in the early 1970s. Its goal was to distribute the songs of these young artists.

The Vineyard, under the influence of musical genius John Wimber, followed suit with the worship team. Wimber, a former Calvary Chapel pastor, became head of the Vineyard movement in 1982. Since that time, the Vineyard has probably had more influence on establishing worship teams and worship music than Calvary Chapel. Vineyard music is regarded as more intimate and worshipful, while Calvary Chapel's music is known for its upbeat, praise-oriented songs.

In due time, the guitar replaced the organ as the central instrument that led worship in the protestant church. Although patterned after the rock concert of secular culture, the worship team has become as common as the pulpit.

## SO WHAT'S THE GRIPE?

Perhaps you are wondering, *What's wrong with having a choir leader, a worship leader, or a worship team to lead the church's singing?* Nothing...if every member of the church is content with it. However, many Christians feel that it robs God's people of a vital function: to select and lead their own singing in the meetings-to have divine worship in their own hands-to allow Jesus Christ to direct the singing of His church rather than have it led by human facilitator. Singing in the early church was marked by these very features.

Listen to Paul's description of a New Testament church meeting "Every one of you hath a psalm" (1 Corinthians 14:26). "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19). Consider the words "Every one of you." Song leaders, choirs, and worship teams make this impossible by limiting the headship of Christ-specifically His ministry of leading His brethren into singing praise songs to His Father. Of this ministry (which is little known today), the writer of Hebrews says, "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation [Ekklesia] I will sing you praises'" (Hebrews 2:11-12)

When worship songs can only be announced, initiated, and led by the talented, this element of the service becomes more like entertainment than corporate worship. And only those who “make the cut” are allowed to participate in the ministry of leading songs. We would argue that according to New Testament principle, the ministry of singing belongs in the hands of all God’s people. And there should be an outlet for this ministry to be expressed.

I (Frank) am no theoretician. For almost twenty years I have gathered with churches where every member has been trained to start a song spontaneously. Imagine: Every brother and sister free to lead songs under the headship of Jesus Christ—even to write his or her own songs and bring them to the meeting for all to learn. I have met with numerous churches that have experienced this glorious dynamic. Someone starts a song and everyone joins in. Then someone else begins another song, and so worship continues without long pauses and with no visible leader present.

This is exactly how the first-century Christians worshipped, by the way. Yet it is a rare experience in the modern-day institutional church. The good news is that it is possible and available for all who wish to experience Christ's headship through song in a church meeting. The singing in such churches is intensely corporate rather than individualistic and subjective.

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?” ... “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them in that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them” (Psalm 137:1-4; 126:1-2).