

# Music in Worship – Lesson 12

## The Best Songs

- Last week I said that hymnals ought to try to include the best songs from the entire Christian tradition (from all denominations & time periods). This implies, first, that some songs are better than others and, second, that we can rank or grade songs in some way (e.g. bad, mediocre, great).
- Within the collection of all music written for worship, there are songs that are of great quality, the best songs. But there are also songs that are terrible, even heretical. In the middle are songs that may be of poor quality, mediocre quality, or decent quality.
  - Heretical song – “If You Could Hie to Kolob”

If you could hie to Kolob In the twinkling of an eye, And then continue onward With that same speed to fly, Do you think that you could ever, Through all eternity, Find out the generation Where Gods began to be?	Or see the grand beginning, Where space did not extend? Or view the last creation, Where Gods and matter end? Methinks the Spirit whispers, “No man has found ‘pure space,’ Nor seen the outside curtains, Where nothing has a place.	The works of God continue, And worlds and lives abound; Improvement and progression Have one eternal round. There is no end to matter; There is no end to space; There is no end to spirit; There is no end to race.
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- On the other end of the spectrum we have great hymns such as “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”
- We can see from these extremes that there are songs that are better than others. But how do we rank them? The second implication was that it is possible to rank songs but songs are, in many ways, subjective.
- A poem which wonderfully expresses Scriptural truth might be paired with a tune that changes the emphasis of the poem and weakens the words. Does this make the song a poor song or do we call it a good song?
- In light of this, what method(s) can we use to determine the quality of a song?
- For this lesson, we will not be answering this question so much prescriptively as descriptively.
- It can be observed that the Church throughout time has a tendency to preserve certain songs and discard others. This can happen for any of several reasons.
  - Theological reasons – is a song true or does it contain doubtful teaching?
  - Aesthetic reasons – is the song beautiful or ugly
  - Contextual reasons – is a song couched in language that speaks to all humans everywhere, or does it use language specific to one time or culture?
  - Practical reasons – how easy or difficult is the song to sing?
  - There are likely many other reasons as well.
- This tendency generally leads to the best songs being preserved while the worst and even many decent-but-not-great songs are forgotten.
- But even this tendency doesn’t compare any one song against any other songs. And there are still thousands of songs that are in use across the whole of Christianity.
- (Much of the material past this point is adapted from Dr. David R. Breed’s “The History and Use of Hymns and Hymn-Tunes” (1903).)
- In attempting to determine specific rules by which we can judge a particular song, Dr. Breed noted that hymnody is distinct from other kinds of literature and therefore cannot be judged by the same rules. He

proposed that, if we can determine what qualities are common to the songs that are most accepted or adopted by all Christians, we can then build a criteria for grading songs.

- But this requires us to determine which songs are most accepted. What does it mean for a song to be adopted?
- Breed gave four criteria for determining adoption.
  1. “It must obtain a hold upon the great Christian community. It must not be partisan or sectional. . . [or] it is not ‘adopted.’”
  2. “Its hold must be permanent. If its spirit accords with but a single juncture or a single generation. . . it is not adopted.”
  3. “It must find a place in the solemn and stated worship of the great congregation. If it is used only in the camp-meeting, the Sunday school, [etc], it cannot be said to be adopted.”
  4. “It must be embodied in some authorized body of sacred song, put forth or sanctioned by some recognized organization of Christians. If it never emerges from the publication of some irresponsible person or firm, it cannot be called ‘adopted.’”
- These criteria suggest a particular method for determining song adoption – compare various hymnals.
- Breed mentions three separate attempts to determine the best songs on the basis of publication in hymnals.
- The first study is limited in that it explicitly only examined hymnals from the Anglicans and Episcopalians. It examined 52 hymnals and gave a song one vote for each hymnal it was found in. The study then ranked each song as *First Rank*, *Second Rank*, or *Third Rank* depending on how many votes each received. Interestingly, there was no song that was present in every single hymnal.
- The second study Breed mentions is significantly better in that it used hymnals from a multitude of American denominations: “Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Reformed and some others. . .” Strangely, the authors of this study gave the hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church veto power – if a song was not found in that hymnal, the song was simply not ranked. Therefore this study was also significantly stilted.
- The final study, published 1898 by Louis F. Benson, is the best of the three. It examined 105 hymnals from across the spectrum of Protestant denominations and included the previous two studies as one hymnal each.
- Benson decided that a song must be included in 80% of the hymnals in order to be considered “the best church hymns.” This gave him a list of 32 songs he considered to be the best songs of the Christian Church. (See last page for list.)
- This specific list is now fairly dated. It was published in 1898. I am not aware of any more recent similar studies.
- This method is quite useful in that it does appear to give us an objective ranking of songs as determined by the Church catholic (the entire Church). But it is not without its limitations.
- Perhaps most obviously, and as explicitly noted by the authors of each of the studies mention, more recent songs are at a disadvantage. Some songs may be truly great but simply not have had time to be included in hymnals.
- On the other hand, this method appears to also favor somewhat more recent songs. I didn’t look up each song, but I noticed only 3 songs on the list which predate the Reformation; one from Bernard of Clairvaux, and two from Bernard of Cluny.
- These specific comparisons also do not include any Psalters and so, apparently, only non-psalms are compared. This drawback is specific to these studies but also presents difficulties if a new study were to

include them – should the songs be ranked by which Psalm they are drawn from or by specific metrical version?

- While not entirely a negative, this method also does not allow for songs that are denominationally distinct. For instance, a distinctly Baptist song could never rise to the first rank, even if that song were truly a great song.
- Despite these limitations, this is the best method of which I am aware that is available for deciding song rankings.

## 16th Century English Hymnody – AD 1500-1600

- Review
  - In our last lesson, we primarily discussed the development of the Genevan Psalter. We mentioned Martin Bucer, Clément Marot, John Calvin, Louis Bourgeois, and Theodore Beza who all contributed to the Reformed Psalmody in one way or another.
  - We also briefly mentioned Ulrich Zwingli who discouraged singing in worship.
  - Note about Calvin & Servetus.
- English hymnody is rooted in the carol. By the 13th century, imported Continental carol tunes were being replaced by distinctly British adaptations. The influence and adaptation of continental songs can be seen in songs which are primarily English but still retain Latin (or sometimes French) endings.
- The earliest hymns in English were translations from Latin or of German chorales. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) translated *Salve festa dies* into English and sent a copy to King Henry VIII.
- Myles Coverdale (ca. 1488-1536) translated 36 chorales which he published along with 5 original English hymns in 1535 or 1536. Coverdale was the first author (as opposed to translator) of English hymns. He also was the first to translate Luther's *Ein Feste Burg* into English.
- The fourth major influence on British hymnody was the psalmody of the continental Reformation. While the texts of the Genevan Psalter did not play an important role in English musical development, the concept of translating the Psalms into English songs as well as the tunes of the Genevan Psalter quickly became a driving force in English Christian song.
- Queen Elizabeth I disliked the Genevan tunes and called them "Genevan jigs." As a result, the Genevan tunes were generally altered to make them less lively.
- In the English Reformation, Psalmody was dominant from the mid to the late 1500s. However, English hymns did appear in the various psalters from time to time.
- 1535/36 – "Goostly Psalmes and Spirituall Songes drawn out of the Holy Scripture" – published by Myles Coverdale.
- 1542 – Clément Marot published his French metrical psalms in France.
- 1547 (or later) – "Certayne Psalmes Chose Out of the Psalter of David" – published by Thomas Sternhold contained 19 metrical psalms.
- 1549 – Reprint of Sternhold's psalter with 18 more metrical psalms added by John Hopkins. It was published under the same title as Sternhold's but became known as Sternhold & Hopkins English Psalter.
- 1553-59 – "Bloody" Mary was crowned Queen of England and began persecution of the Reformers. Many English Protestants fled England to Frankfurt, Germany. While there, a disagreement over church liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer caused a division among the exiled English. John Knox, who

had come from Geneva to Frankfurt to pastor the exiles, returned to Geneva with some of the exiles and formed an English church there.

- 1556 – While in Geneva, the English could overhear the Genevans singing and envied the Genevans’ happy tunes. They published a book of worship which included a partial psalter, the Anglo-Genevan Psalter. It had 51 metrical psalms, most of which were revisions of Sternhold & Hopkins’ work. Two Genevan tunes were included while the rest were English tunes. The English tunes were dull and blocky by comparison.
- 1558 – Another edition of the Anglo-Geneval Psalter which now included 62 psalms. Also, “Bloody” Mary died and Elizabeth succeeded her.
- 1559 – The English exiles returned to England and Scotland.
- 1561 – The completed edition of the Anglo-Genevan Psalter was published. It included metrical versions of all 150 psalms and more Genevan tunes. 25 of the metricizations were provided by William Kethe, one of which was Kethe’s version of Psalm 100 – “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” – which was paired with the Genevan tune for Psalm 134.
- 1562 – An updated publication, “The Whole Booke of Psalmes” (known as The English Psalter), was published with many new metrical versions of psalms. Most were in common meter (8.6.8.6) and therefore the Psalter is considered to be inferior to the Genevan which used a variety of meters. The English Psalter was immensely popular and was virtually unchallenged in England until the end of the 17th century.
- 1564 – Drawing from the Anglo-Genevan Psalter of 1561 and the English Psalter of 1562, the Scottish Church published the Scottish Psalter. This psalter was heavily influenced by John Knox and was more dependent on the Genevan tunes than was the English Psalter.
- 1567 – Bishop Matthew Parker published a complete psalter which was made up of entirely his own versifications. He had commissioned tunes from Thomas Tallis, one of England’s greatest composers; one of the tunes published here was the TALLIS CANON.
- 1579 – John Bull asked his friend, William Daman, to harmonize several psalm tunes for Bull’s personal use. Daman did so but also published the tunes as “The Psalms of David.” The harmonizations were in four parts. This collection included SOUTHWELL, one of the earliest English SM (short meter) tunes.
- 1592 – Thomas Este produced a choir-book psalter which included harmonized tunes along side the texts for each song. It was also the first psalter to give names for tunes. Three names were given, each of which was the supposed geographic source of the tune.
  - GLASSENBURIE (Ps 88), KENTISH (Ps 92), & CHESSHIRE (Ps 146)
  - WINCHESTER OLD
- North American Developments
  - 1562 – Huguenot immigrants arrived in modern day South Carolina and Florida. They brought the French metrical psalms and tunes with them. They taught some of the Native Americans some of the French tunes.
  - 1565 – The Spanish destroyed the Huguenot settlements. The Native American’s began to whistle pieces of the tunes for Psalm 130 and 138 to determine if arriving Europeans were friendly or not.
  - 1579 – Sir Francis Drake landed in California and camped on shore while making repairs to his ship. Friendly Native Americans there were fascinated by the English hymn singing; they called it “gnaáh.”

# This list taken from Louis F. Benson's "The Best Church Hymns" (1898) as found in David R. Breed's "The History and Use of Hymns and Hymn-Tunes" (1903)

Numbers in parentheses represent number of hymnals each song was found in (out of 107 compared).

1. Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me (106)
2. When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (104)
3. Jesus, Lover of My Soul (104)
4. All Praise to Thee, My God This Night (103)
5. Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken (103)
6. Sun of My Soul, Thou Savior Dear (103)
7. Awake, My Soul, and With the Sun (101)
8. Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (101)
9. Abide With Me; Fast Falls the Eventide (101)
10. Jerusalem, My Happy Home (101)
11. How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds (101)
12. Nearer, My God to Thee (100)
13. From Greenland's Icy Mountains (100)
14. O God, Our Help in Ages Past (100)
15. Jerusalem the Golden (99)
16. Lo! He Comes With Clouds Descending (94)
17. Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun (94)
18. Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken (93)
19. Hark the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes (92)
20. Come, Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs (92)
21. All Hail the Power of Jesus Name (92)
22. Hail to the Lord's Anointed (91)
23. O Worship the King (91)
24. Christ the Lord is Risen Today (90)
25. Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah (90)
26. Just As I Am, Without One Plea (90)
27. God Moves in a Mysterious Way (90)
28. Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee (89)
29. Children of the Heavenly King (87)
30. There Is a Land of Pure Delight (87)
31. Thou Whose Almighty Word (86)
32. Brief Life is Here Our Portion (86)