

Music

Baptist Worship in the South: Then and Now

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If you were to walk into a Baptist church today, you might experience a variety of different worship services. You may find yourself in a by-the-book, liturgical, traditional service with pews full of saints in suits and dresses. You may experience a loud, visually-engaging and less-structured contemporary service with a sea of believers in goatees and skinny jeans. You may experience anything in between. Doctrinal beliefs such as the inerrancy of Scripture and baptism by immersion remain the same. Yet the way congregations engage in worship is constantly changing; it always has and most likely always will. Comparing traditional and contemporary worship services in today's Baptist churches of the South with a worship service from the eighteenth-century gives us a clearer picture of just how much change has occurred in the past 300 years.

From its roots in the seventeenth-century, Baptist worship in the South first evolved from focusing primarily on scripture to incorporating congregational singing. In approximately 1639, America's first Baptist church was founded in Providence, Rhode Island. Around fifty years later, the first Baptist church in the South emerged: First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina (Eskew 15). By this time, music was a prominent part of the worship service. However, that was not always the case. The Baptist History and Heritage Society contains what is believed to be the oldest record of a Baptist worship service from 1609. The following letter from Hughe and Ann Bromhead describes their worship experience:

The order of the worshippe and government of
oure church is we begynne wth A prayer, after
reade some one or tow chapters of the Bible
gyve the sence thereof, and conferr vpon the
same, that done we lay aside oure bookes, and
after a solemne prayer made by the speaker, he
propoundeth some text owt of the Scripture,
and prophecietieth owt of the same, by the space
of one hower, or thre Quarters of an hower.
This Morning exercise begynes at eight of
the clocke and continueth vnto twelve of the

clocke the like course of exercise is observed in
the afternowne from .2. of the clock vnto .5. or
.6. of the Clocke. (qtd. in McBeth)

A few things are made clear in this account from the Bromheads. We see that the services were very lengthy, focused primarily on the exposition of Scripture, and lacked instrumental accompaniment and congregational singing. When music was finally introduced into the church setting, it was through the lining out of the Psalms. Through this practice, the leader would chant a line of the psalm and the congregation would repeat it by singing. This was the common tradition of singing in the worship setting until Isaac Watts provided the Church with a different method.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) has appropriately been referred to as the Father of English Hymnody. Surprisingly enough, his hymn writing career initiated from an argument with his father. Watts believed that the church was lacking New Testament truth and theology in its worship service by only singing the Psalms. His father offered him a challenge: if he thought he could write something better, go ahead and try. Isaac fervently accepted the challenge. At fourteen years old, Isaac Watts composed the first English hymn to actually be used in church. According to pastor and religion professor Robert Cottrill, this hymn began Watts' pattern of weekly composing a new hymn for his congregation. In *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, author and seminary professor William J. Reynolds writes of the transition from psalms to hymns in America as "a very gradual process which hinged on the psalm versions of Isaac Watts. The poor manner of singing and the controversy of 'regular singing' as opposed to 'common singing' did not provide fertile soil for the immediate transplanting of Watts' psalms and hymns" (84). Although Isaac Watts was persistent and passionate in his writing of hymns to create a better worship experience in the American church, the first American edition of Watts' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* was not published until 1739, fifty years after he wrote his first hymn (84). However, once hymnals such as Watts' began to circulate in Baptist churches, they became an integral part of the Baptist worship experience for years to come. The use of hymns in the church spurred on the singing school movement in the early eighteenth-century which led to the emergence of choral singing in the worship context. In a typical Baptist worship service in the South, it is probable that choirs would assist in leading the congregation in song with an organ most likely accompanying.

Although there are no available records of an actual order of worship from this time period, scholars believe it to be similar to the following:

18th Century Baptist Worship Service in the South

Short Prayer

Scripture Reading

Long Prayer

Hymn

Preaching

Prayer

Hymn

Lord's Supper

Offering

Benediction

In just over 100 years, the congregations of Baptist churches in the South set a precedent for how worship would continue in the Baptist tradition for years to come by introducing the art of congregational singing into their worship services.

When comparing eighteenth and twenty-first-century traditional Baptist worship in the South, it is clear that once the format for worship was set, not much changed in the following 300 years for the conservative Baptists. The twenty-first-century traditionalists maintained a similar order of worship only making slight adjustments in length and components for the service. The modern traditional Baptist service in the South is much shorter than the 1609 service. However, it includes more elements, such as instrumental music, children's sermons, choir specials, etc. Most traditional services today use both piano and organ accompaniment and highlight these instruments through preludes and special music during the offering. The choir is usually featured in a special number as well. These changes are minor additions to the structure of the service. However, the genre of music featured - hymns and anthems - has remained the same.

Hymnody remains a vital part of the Baptist worship experience in the South. Publishers continue to produce new hymnals, adding more modern hymns with each edition. In *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, Reynolds describes the 1975 edition of the Baptist Hymnal as "the most eclectic hymnal ever compiled for

Southern Baptists" (108). This hymnal included plainsong melodies, tunes by Ralph Vaughn Williams, Erik Routley, and Eric H. Thiman, Moravian and Lutheran hymn tunes, sacred folk songs from other countries and cultures, and songs of the folk and pop culture of the 60's. Therefore a modern traditional service is most likely to include both older and more modern hymns. The point is, hymnody remains the focus, as exemplified in this order of worship representing a typical traditional Baptist church in the South during the twenty-first-century:

21st Century Traditional Baptist Worship Service in the South

Prelude

Welcome

Hymn

Children's Sermon

Choir Special

Hymn

Doxology

Offering Prayer

Special Instrumental Music

Message

Invitation Hymn

Announcements

Though the culture has shaped new additions to hymnals and traditional worship services, the general atmosphere and presentation remains the same as established in the eighteenth-century.

The stark contrast comes when the modern contemporary service is brought into the conversation. The differences in musical style are numerous and evident. Most contemporary worship utilizes some configuration of a full band, comprised of a lead singer, back-up singer, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, keyboard, and drums. This increase in instruments has aided the contemporary church in their attempt to emulate the sound and volume of pop culture. In an article out of the *Choral Journal* on contemporary worship, music professors Ronald and Gary Matthews point out that "an aspect of this style is the

use of amplification to ensure that no individual is exposed or uncomfortable in community” (97). James F. White, Professor of Liturgical Studies at Drew University, also makes a similar statement in his book, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, supporting the idea of comfort through volume: “Much of the effectiveness of congregational song depends upon acoustics. A building that absorbs sound too well embarrasses every member out of singing by reinforcing the fear that he or she is singing a solo” (115). Both Matthews’ and White’s statements reinforce the truth that contemporary worship puts a major emphasis on amplification and acoustics that make the worshippers feel comfortable in expressing themselves through song.

With the exception of the lyrics, the music of contemporary Christian artists is very similar to that of the music found outside the church in pop culture. This connection with the secular culture is defended as a way to bring in people that are turned off by the structure and rules of traditional worship. Syncopation, drum-led beats, and middle-ground vocals are just a few characteristics of contemporary worship that composition teacher Lawrence Mumford points out in his article in *Christianity Today* (42-43). This new genre of music named “Praise and Worship” is the face of the new millennium Christian church, as Leon Neto supports in an article from the *Journal of Singing* (196). This face represents a radical evolution from its Baptist worship roots in the eighteenth-century.

Here is an example of the order of worship for a typical twenty-first-century Baptist contemporary service in the South:

21st Century Baptist Contemporary Service in the South

Praise Song

Welcome

Announcements

Praise Song

Praise Song

Offering

Video

Message

Praise Song

Closing Prayer

Many modern worshippers are strong proponents of this type of service that brings in the addition of contemporary musical and aesthetical aspects. However it has been a topic of disagreement and dissent amongst traditionalists.

By contrasting early forms of Baptist worship in the South with twenty-first-century contemporary and modern worship, it is plain to see that the act of worship has evolved into a different species since its birth. From services that include little to no instrumentation or congregational singing, to an acceptance of hymnody and focus on choral leadership, to an integration of secular and sacred music, these changes challenge the worshippers of today to decide how to keep heading down this evolutionary road. Our change must be fueled by a passion that is deeper than the mere desire for something different. As Liturgics professor, Thomas Schattauer, describes in an article from *A Journal of Theology*, any future change must be aimed towards “a constructive re-imagining of the Christian assembly and its purpose in present circumstances” (144). Baylor University religion professor, D.H. Williams, asks what kind of Christians our worship services are producing (46). Minister of Worship, Greg Scheer, reminds us “worship styles define Christian communities” (95). If these cautions hold true, what kind of communities are our churches creating? Perhaps it is time to pause and reflect on which valuable elements have been gained and which have been lost throughout the years.

18th Century Southern Baptist Worship Service

Short Prayer

Scripture Reading

Long Prayer

Singing - “The 2nd hymn, page 17” “Old Hundred”

Preaching

Prayer

Singing - “The 338th hymn, page 128” “Coronation”

Lord’s Supper

Offering

Benediction

21st Century Traditional Southern Baptist Worship Service (piano, organ, choir)

Prelude

Welcome

Hymn - How Firm a Foundation

Children's Sermon

Choir Special - Come Thou Fount

Hymn - Victory in Jesus

Doxology

Offering Prayer

Special Instrumental Music

Message

Invitation Hymn - Just As I Am

Announcements

21st Century Southern Baptist Contemporary Service (full band)

Song - God is Able

Welcome

Announcements

Song - In Christ Alone

Song - 10,000 Reasons

Offering

Video

Message

Song - God I Look To You

Closing Prayer

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