

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 75*

### History of Christian Music – Part Two

In our Church history journey, we have traveled chronologically through time beginning with the biblical era in an effort to arrive at our practices today. During the journey, we have consistently sought the insight that comes from understanding our heritage, as well as the illumination of how others have walked before God, both individually and collectively. In this process, we have highlighted certain subject matters in an effort to make best sense of those areas with more intense focus. For example, when we reached the Anglican Church and King James, we took three weeks to consider the development of English scriptures, using the King James translation in 1611 as our springboard. In the area of church music, we are interrupting the chronological journey of Church history at the time of Charles Wesley to delve more deeply into the history of Church Music.

Charles Wesley (brother of John, see Lessons 71-73) is a natural place to pause and consider music, for he was one of the church's most prolific songwriters. In fact, we sing many of Charles's songs today. By interrupting the story at a time when we have discussed not only Charles and John Wesley, but also George Whitefield<sup>1</sup> (see lesson 73), we glean some extra morsels from the feast before us. One year after Charles and John Wesley's "conversions,"<sup>2</sup> Charles wrote a hymn that began,

Hark, how all the welkin<sup>3</sup> rings,  
"Glory to the King of Kings..."

Charles was a bit persnickety about anyone changing his lyrics. He wrote with purpose and care, and was nervous about anyone altering the theology or poetry behind his songs (and he wrote over 6,000!). Still, when George Whitefield published a hymnal for his church usage in 1753, he chose to alter the words of this mighty hymn. Whitefield made slight changes in the hymn so it published as,

---

<sup>1</sup> A brief refresher – George Whitefield was a member of the original Oxford Holy Club (called "Methodists") and was a close friend of John and Charles Wesley. It was Whitefield who first convinced John Wesley to preach outdoor revivals. It was also Whitefield that charmed Benjamin Franklin such that Franklin wrote of him extensively in Franklin's autobiography.

<sup>2</sup> "Conversion" was their term for what occurred through the influence of the Moravian missionaries at the meetings in Aldersgate in 1738 (see lessons 71-72).

<sup>3</sup> "Welkin" is an ancient English word for "heavens".

Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King...”

It is not likely many others could have gotten away with changing Charles’s hymn so easily! (The hymn would need to wait until the 1800’s to have the melody we know today. It was fashioned by Felix Mendelssohn.)

Although Wesley wrote his hymn nearly 300 years ago, it is still popular and sung during today’s Christmas season. Yet, when we consider the sounds of early church hymns, we hear things that seem alien today. When did the changes happen? Were they immediate turns of corners that presented an entire new scenario almost immediately? Or, were they gradual changes that day by day seem no different than the growth of a tree, and only when a time has passed do you look back in wonder and remark “how different” things have become.

That is the chore before us in this lesson. We seek to find the changes that took place between the church in biblical times and the church of Wesley. Last week, we started by looking at the music of the Old and New Testaments. We also began studying the writings of the church fathers, going into the 4<sup>th</sup> century. We will briefly review those concepts, and then launch into the major signposts along the journey’s way into modern times.

## **CHURCH FATHERS**

Often, we lose sight of the global nature of today’s world compared to 1,500 years ago. We teach this class on Sunday mornings in Houston, Texas, and often within hours, the class is on the WORLD WIDE web where people around the globe can download it. Yet 1,800 years ago, something might happen to the church in Alexandria, Egypt, and the news might never make it to Ephesus, or if it did, it might not make it for some time. We also know that the churches in certain parts of the world had different approaches to scripture and worship than churches in other locales. Still, there were councils and gatherings of Church bishops working toward unanimity on core issues of doctrine and practice. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the area of church music, we find certain aspects of both commonality and distinction as we consider the geographical boundaries of the churches.

For example in Alexandria (coastal Egypt), there was a growing revulsion for instrumental accompaniment of church music. Yet, we have a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century church hymn from Oxyrhynchus (deep inland Egypt) that contains musical notations for

instrumental accompaniment.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the Cappadocia area of Turkey, we find a lot of emphasis on hymn singing among the monasteries, but Basil the Bishop (c.329-379A.D.) is quick to plead for using “old melodies” citing the new sounds as foreign to godliness. One hymn that Basil considered old and a cherished tradition in his church was the Φως Ἰλαρον (*Phos Hilaron*), considered by many to be the first Christian hymn that has fully survived today (the Oxyrhynchus hymn referenced in footnote 4 above is a fragment, we are missing its beginning). The hymn, in English is:

*O Jesus Christ the Joyful Light, of the Holy Glory. Of the Immortal, Heavenly Holy Blessed Father. Now that we have come to the setting of the sun, And behold the light of evening, we praise God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For meet it is at all times to worship you, with Voices of Praise O Son of God, and giver of Life. Therefore all the world glorifies You."*

### **HYMN USAGE**

Songs and music filled many roles in biblical times. Once we leave the pages of scripture and consider music in Church history, we see the roles becoming a bit more focused and limited. An immediate usage of song was scripture and liturgy memorization. At a time where books and scrolls were expensive and hard to come by and literacy was growing more and more limited, songs became vehicles for learning and retaining scripture.<sup>5</sup>

We have extensive writings emphasizing the usage of music as a monastic tool for committing the psalms to memory. We also have liturgical usage of melody from very early times. Liturgy itself is a foreign concept to many who do not attend a more formalized or “high church” which is structured around a specified liturgy or plan of worship.<sup>6</sup> For many centuries, however, liturgy was one of the aspects of

---

<sup>4</sup> Most scholars date this hymn in the late 200’s, although some date it as much as 100 years earlier. Scholars label it by the papyrus number and location of discovery. It is called “Oxyrhynchus papyri 1786.” The lyrics translate: “Let it be silent; Let the luminous start not shine; Let the winds (?) and all the noisy rivers die down’ And as we hymn the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, let all the powers add, ‘Amen Amen’. Empire, praise always, and glory to God, the sole giver of good things, Amen Amen.” Nicolaos Ioannidis, a University of Sussex graduate student, reconstructed a sound recording of the song, and it is available from his website at [http://homoecumenicus.com/Ioannidis\\_Musicand\\_Religion.htm](http://homoecumenicus.com/Ioannidis_Musicand_Religion.htm).

<sup>5</sup> We are not that much different today! Many people still recite the books of the bible by virtue of a song they learned as children!

<sup>6</sup> “Liturgy” comes from the Greek word λειτουργία (*leitourgia*) translated “service, ministry; offering, sacrifice.” The root Greek word means a “duty” or “service to the state undertaken by a citizen.” In Christian usage, it has taken on a more particular meaning of a worship ceremony

churches that saw slight variation and adherence to a form that pervaded most of the Christian world.<sup>7</sup> For many centuries, the history of church music is the history of liturgy.

We are not able to assign a date and place where liturgy first became “fixed” and regulated in form. Certainly, the apostolic church was not fixed and we have no Biblical mandate that sets out a form for services. Still, we have in the New Testament certain beginnings of a fixed liturgy in the Lord’s Supper itself. Christ instructed us to partake in the Supper in his memory. We also see Paul setting out certain measures to be taken in the process of the Eucharist. From these beginnings, time added other measures of worship to the service so that in the times of the Apostolic Fathers, we are aware of a more definite form of service, although we do not know exactly what it was and it likely varied a good bit from church to church.<sup>8</sup>

---

(a service to God undertaken by His children!) or the public rites and sacraments of the church as opposed to private ones. Typically, it is used for the more formalized rites rather than informal spontaneous ones.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are multiple liturgies in Christendom and throughout history. Still, in light of the billions of worship services throughout the nearly 2,000 years of the church, the number of liturgical forms we can trace before the reformation are surprisingly few.

<sup>8</sup> Justin Martyr does give us a good outline of a Eucharist Service in the mid 150’s. In his I Apology 65-67 he writes:

We lead him who believes and is joined to us, after we have thus baptized him, to those who are called the brethren, where they gather together to say prayers in common for ourselves, and for him who has been enlightened, and for all who are everywhere....We greet each other with a kiss when the prayers are finished. Then bread and a cup of water and wine are brought to the president of the brethren, and he having received them sends up praise and glory to the Father of all through the name of his Son and the Holy Ghost, and makes a long thanksgiving that we have been made worthy of these things by him; when these prayers and thanksgivings are ended all the people present cry 'Amen'...And when the president has given thanks and all the people have answered, those whom we call deacons give the bread and wine and water for which the 'thanksgiving' (Eucharist) has been made to be tasted by those who are present, and they carry them to those that are absent.

This food is called by us the Eucharist"....

On the day which is called that of the Sun a reunion is made of all those who dwell in the cities and fields; and the commentaries of the Apostles and writings of the prophets are read as long as time allows. Then, when the reader has done, the president admonishes us in a speech and excites us to copy these glorious things. Then we all rise and say prayers and, as we have said above, when we have done praying bread is brought up and wine and water; and the president sends up prayers with thanksgiving for the men, and the

By the time we consider the 300's, we have many more writings and sources for understanding the Liturgy. We are able to trace various rites or Liturgies to central places of Christian development like Antioch, Alexandria, Milan, Rome, etc.

Once Rome fell in the West in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century and we enter medieval times, the Liturgy became more important in its role in the cultural and educational life of the masses. Throughout this time period, most everyone who attended church (save the wealthiest, the monks, and the church clergy) was unable to read. The service and liturgy served as the opportunity for the Church to teach the basics of faith and morality, as well as it being a time of worship. The liturgy was in place to best facilitate those goals. It was there to teach the masses what to believe and how to behave.

In the Middle Ages, liturgy was mainly a celebration of the "Mass."<sup>9</sup> The Mass was comprised of the prayers and ceremonies that attended the service of the Eucharist. The evolution of the Mass varied differently in East and West, but still followed a similar path. We can read the Mass with its variations put into place from very early times. We find the first clear use of the word (Latin *missa*) by St. Ambrose in 397 when he recounted an attempted arrest of him by soldiers that were thwarted while he stayed in the basilica to "say Mass."

By the year 1000, the Mass had a fairly stable form that incorporated many of the elements of the preceding centuries.<sup>10</sup> The Christian liturgy throughout the Middle Ages had parts that were constant from service to service, while other parts varied depending upon the church calendar. The services would typically begin with an introductory section, followed by a section on scripture (the "Liturgy of the Word") and ending with the Communion (the "Liturgy of the Eucharist"). At the time, these services were held in the churches that were the largest structures most people would ever see from the inside. Most of these structures had high ceilings with stone walls and floors. The spoken word would never carry well in these

---

people acclaim, saying 'Amen', and a share of the Eucharist is given to each and is sent to those absent by the deacons.

<sup>9</sup> "Mass" is a term that comes from the Latin "*Missae*," meaning "dismissal." It was most anciently used in the church to refer to the end or dismissal of the service and gradually took on the meaning of the whole service itself.

<sup>10</sup> Burkholder, J. Peter, *et al.*, *A History of Western Music*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Norton and Company 2006). Burkholder sets out the 11<sup>th</sup> century Mass elements dissected in this paper in great detail along with a good reconstruction of the elements of chant.

cavernous halls, but chants actually carried quite nicely. So, song (chant at the time) was a natural vehicle for communicating the message of the Mass.

The introductory section would typically begin with the choir singing a psalm as the “*Introit*” (from the Latin for “entrance”). After everyone was in their place, the choir would sing the “*Kyrie*” (from the Greek for “Lord”). The *Kyrie* was a three-fold plea for God’s mercy, with the three reinforcing the concept of the Trinity. The words to the *Kyrie* are as follows:

*Kyrie eléison. Kyrie eléison. Kyrie eléison. Christe eléison. Christe eléison.  
Christe eléison. Kyrie eléison. Kyrie eléison. Kyrie eléison.*<sup>11</sup>

These words mean:

Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Christ have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy.<sup>12</sup>

After the *Kyrie*, the “*Gloria*”<sup>13</sup> would be sung on most Sundays and certain feast days. The *Gloria* was:

*Gloria in excelsis Deo.  
Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.  
Laudamus te.  
Benedicimus te.  
Adoramus te.  
Glorificamus te.  
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.  
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens.  
Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe.  
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris,  
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

---

<sup>11</sup> These words are actually a Latin translation of the Greek for “Lord, have mercy.” The prayer figures prominently in Greek Orthodox services throughout history. The Greek is: κυριε ελεησον, Χριστε ελεησον, κυριε ελεησον. The Coptic Church has also chanted the *Kyrie* from the earliest time using the Greek as well.

<sup>12</sup> Since the Anglican revisions to their prayer book in 1549, the Anglican church has sung or said the *Kyrie* in English.

<sup>13</sup> The *Gloria* is used in many Christian churches. It is considered the “Great Doxology” and is in the Lutheran Divine Service, the Orthodox Churches (as part of a fuller Great Doxology) and many others. The form in the Greek Churches dates back to at least the 300’s. Within the Roman tradition, Pope Symmachus (498-514) ordered the *Gloria*’s use each Sunday.

*Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram.  
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.  
Quoniam tu solus Sanctus.  
Tu solus Dominus.  
Tu solus Altissimus, Jesu Christe.  
Cum Sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.*

These words mean:

Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace to men of good will.  
We praise You.  
We bless You.  
We adore You,  
We glorify You,  
We give thanks to You for your great Glory.  
Lord God, Heavenly King, God the Almighty Father.  
Lord Only, begotten Son, Jesus Christ,  
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,  
You who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.  
You who take away the sins of the world, hear our prayer.  
You who sit at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.  
For You alone [are] holy,  
You alone [are] the Lord,  
You alone [are the] Most High, Jesus Christ,  
With the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Some scholars believe that the *Gloria* was a private psalm composed in the 100's to 200's taking Biblical verses and parsing them together with personal compositions to make a unique psalm. The exact beginning of the *Gloria* is unknown. Following the *Gloria*, the introductory section ended with the priest intoning a prayer on behalf of those present (the "Collect").

The Liturgy of the Word would vary daily. The chants for this section are (save the "Credo") therefore labeled by their function in the service as opposed to those chants that stay the same service to service which carry their title by the first word of the chant.<sup>14</sup> This section would begin with a priest intoning the "Epistle," which would be bible readings appropriate for the service. The Epistle was followed by the "Gradual" (from the Latin for "stair step" because the chant was

---

<sup>14</sup> The terminology is "Proper" for those chants where the text varies from day to day and "Ordinary" for those chants with a constant text.

sung from there) and the “Alleluia” (from the Hebrew for “praise God”). Both the Gradual and the Alleluia would be texts from the Psalms. At times, this order changes. There are “Tracts” and “Sequences” which might be used (a collection of verses from different Psalms). An intoning of the Gospels (an appropriate selection from one of the four gospels) follows with a sermon on certain days. This section of the liturgy would typically end with the “*Credo*” (Latin for “creed”), which taught and affirmed the core Christian doctrines of faith.

The final section was the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This section included a number of spoken and intoned portions as well as chants/songs. It began with a chant on a Psalm that varied service-to-service termed an “Offertory.” Following a dialogue between the Priest and choir (the “Preface”), the choir would sing the “*Sanctus*” (from the Latin for “Holy,” the first word of this chant). The Priest would then speak the “Canon” where he consecrated the bread and wine, followed by intoning the Lord’s Prayer. The choir then sang the “*Agnes Dei*” (Latin for “Lamb of God,” the first words of this chant). During the Medieval Ages, the Priest would then consume the communal elements on behalf of all assembled after which the choir would sing the “Communion” which varied daily but was based on a psalm. The priest would then intone a “Post communion Prayer,” and the congregation was dismissed by the choir singing “*Ite, missa est*” (Latin for “Go, you are dismissed”).

As we listen to these songs/chants, we fairly ask, “Where did they come from? Who wrote them?” Those questions are lost in the pages of history, but we are not without some important signposts of their development.

We know that Pope Sylvester started a singing school in Rome in 330 to better teach and learn the music of the church. (The school, however, did not last too long). St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan (see Lesson 24) actually wrote new hymns and chants that his church used. Ambrose used four musical scales for his singing that often emphasized antiphonal responses.<sup>15</sup>

After the fall of Rome with the medieval ages, western civilization began what scholars call the “Dark Ages.” That term comes from the recognition that much of the knowledge and culture of the classical age of Greece and Rome was lost. Part of the loss included riches of music. Boethius (see lesson 35) tried to stem the tide of this erosion, writing a classic work on music that tried to secure the Greek and Roman understanding and teachings.

---

<sup>15</sup> Antiphonal singing involved the cantor singing a line followed by the choir or congregation singing a response.



Gregory the Great (pope from 590-604; see Lesson 38) re-established a music school as part of the church. Four more scales were added to the four that Ambrose delivered to the church's repertoire. The school also started a crude form of musical notation to keep track of the chanting used for songs. Ultimately, these chants would get named after Gregory and become known as "Gregorian Chants," even though he did not actually write them.

The emperor Charlemagne (768-814) was a careful follower of Gregory's music system. As Charlemagne sought to bring some restoration of classical culture to his barbarian empire, he founded music schools throughout his kingdom. At this time, the "Gregorian chants" hit their stride and became universal in the Western Church. That is not to say that chants were not around since the early church, for they were. To musicologists, "Gregorian Chants" carry a special meaning referencing the form and scale of the chant itself. To the untrained ear, absent some instruction, one chant can sound much like another. A number of scholars trace the time of Charlemagne as the crude beginnings of harmony in song. Harmony likely began with "polyphony" where voices would sing together different parts.

During the reign of Charlemagne, an Italian named Paolo Diacono wrote a hymn to John the Baptist. His hymn was a Latin praise that went:

*Ut queant laxis  
Resonare fibris  
Mira gestorum  
Famuli tuorum,  
Solve polluti  
Labbii reatum,  
Sancte Joannes.*

The hymn's greatest historical significance is not from the meaning of the lyrics, but from the melody and Latin beginnings of each phrase.<sup>16</sup> About 200 years after Paolo wrote this song, a monk interested in trying to write and teach music and musical notation named Guido of Arezzo took the melody and lyrics and used them to develop the system of scaling notation we now use as "Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do." You can see that the first syllable has changed over time from "Ut" to "Do," and time has also finished the scale adding "Ti" and a final "Do." Otherwise, we have the origination of our scales we sing today.

---

<sup>16</sup> The lyrics translate as: "So that these your servants may, with all their voice, sing your marvelous exploits, clean the guilt from our stained lips, O Saint John."

Into this world came Martin Luther. We see him shake up not only the theology of the church, but also its worship, Liturgy, and music. We start to find more of the modern hymn with Luther and his religious offspring. But, that will have to wait until next week!

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. The New Testament uses many words for “worship.” The word we derive “liturgy” from is a great place to start! It is our service to God, as more than citizens of his kingdom, but as children of his household. To sing praise to God our Father and Jesus our Savior is to take our rightful part in the whole of creation. When Jesus entered Jerusalem en route to the crucifixion, the people lined the streets singing for him to save them (“*Hosanna*” means, “Save us, we pray thee”) and blessing Jesus as the One who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel. As Luke records the story, “some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’” Jesus responded that if the crowd kept silent, the stones would cry out! (Luke 19:28-40). We adore the King of Kings, we owe all to Him, and to God the Father and Holy Spirit. Why not also praise God in song and service?!
2. There is something special to the Eucharist. The Lord, on the very night he was betrayed, took bread and broke it, and giving thanks, he gave it to his Apostles telling them this was something they were to do repeatedly in his honor and memory. The ritual is as old as the Church itself, yet it imparts a freshness in the dining with the Lord each time we partake of his body and blood. In it, we should see a central focus for our fellowship and time with our Savior.
3. Song plays a role in this worship. It draws our participation beyond that of listener or consumer. It makes us a verbal and spiritual addition to the praise of creation to our God. Our hearts and minds join in concert with those of the church to lift up and honor Him who is over all, who alone is worthy of our praise and adoration. So, let us continue to sing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts to God!” (Colossians 3:16).