

from **The English Hymn**
by Louis Benson
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Chapter 2: The Evolution of the English Hymn

2. CONGREGATIONAL SONG AS A CHURCH ORDINANCE

The Congregational Hymn is thus distinctively the child of the Reformation, and indeed its paternity is quite commonly ascribed to Luther himself. Such ascription is not in accordance with the facts. The singing of religious songs by the people began to play its part in different localities on the continent of Europe, with the first stirring of the new life in the Western church that culminated in the Reformation of the XVIth century. With the gathering of the followers of John Hus in Bohemia into congregations, popular song becomes definitely Congregational Song. A vernacular Hymnody of considerable proportions was created by the Hussites, and provided with suitable melodies. These hymns and tunes were embodied in books designed for the worshippers' hands rather than for the choir. Thus the congregational hymn-book of the modern type had its origin, and congregational singing of hymns took its place as a recognized part of the new kind of worship.²

The foundations of Congregational Song as a church ordinance were therefore laid before the beginnings of the Reformation in Germany under Luther and in Switzerland under Calvin. Congregational Song must be regarded as the liturgical expression of principles common to Protestantism, that were embodied in Lutheranism and Calvinism alike. It is of course true that Congregational Song received a great impulse and development from Luther's hands, and that his work in establishing it claims the priority over Calvin's, upon whom Luther's success doubtless exercised marked influence. But Congregational Song cannot be rightly regarded as the distinctive possession of either system, nor can it be fairly claimed that the one reformer showed more zeal in establishing it than the other.

3. PSALMODY AND HYMNODY AS RIVAL SYSTEMS OF CONGREGATIONAL SONG

We have now to note and to explain the fact that while congregational singing was as much a feature of the new Protestantism in England and Scotland as in Germany, it nevertheless happened that German Protestantism proceeded at once to develop a rich German Hymnody, whereas there was no English Hymnody in any effective sense until the XVIIIth century. It happened so in brief because the Churches in England and Scotland in arranging for the participation of the people in the service of praise, adopted the model set up by Calvin in Geneva as over against that set up by Luther. The practical effect of this was, in a word, that both the English and Scottish Churches became psalm singers as distinguished from hymn singers. The Metrical Psalm was thus the substitute for the Hymn in England and Scotland, and became the effective obstacle to the production and use of English hymns.

To understand the ground of this supremacy of the Psalm, and the suppression of the Hymn involved in it, we must go back to the minds of the two great leaders of the Reformation, antagonistic as they were in temperament and taste and divided in many matters of principle. Their diverse points of view are nowhere more conspicuous than in their conceptions of Protestant worship; and among other issues thus raised was one regarded by each as of great practical importance,—What shall the people be permitted and encouraged to sing in public worship?

In reconstructing the musical side of church worship, two proclivities of his own strongly influenced Luther. One was his love for the old German folk-song, for social singing and for the music of the household and family. The other was his affectionate regard for the ritual of the old Church, especially the Latin hymns which for many centuries had made a part of the Daily Office. The utility of their metrical form was obvious. And the fact that hymns were free compositions, not confined to Scriptural paraphrase, constituted no objection to them in Luther's mind, but on the other hand suggested an opportunity of filling the Hymn-Form with the doctrines and inspirations of the new evangel. Luther adopted without hesitation the Metrical Hymn of human composition as a permanent element of his cultus. And he provided German hymns set to suitable tunes, and put the hymn books into the hands of the people. From the beginning, therefore, Lutheran song became Hymnody in the narrower sense of the word. This Lutheran Hymnody was based indiscriminately on Scripture, the Latin and Hussite hymns, popular songs, and the thoughts and feelings of the writer. And from Luther's time to the present the composition of German hymns has proceeded without a break, and their congregational use has continued to be a characteristic feature of Lutheran worship.

Calvin on the other hand was impressed with the frivolity of current French song, and impatient of any melody in any wise associated with it. To the music of the old Church and its elaborate ritual he was possibly indifferent by temperament, but certainly hostile through a conscientious conviction that it was a purely human contrivance and the scaffolding of a merely formal religion. In arranging a worship for the Reformed Church he proposed to ignore the historical development of worship in the Latin Church, and to reinstate the simpler conditions of the primitive Church. He would have nothing in the cultus which could not claim the express authority of Scripture. He found Scriptural precedent for the ordinance of Congregational Song, and saw the advantage of the metrical hymn-form. But the Church's imprimatur on the "Hymn of human composure" gave it no sanctity in his mind. And the *Breviary* itself showed how readily the Hymn served as the embodiment of false doctrine. And so, without denying the breadth of St. Paul's allowance of "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," and without denying the Church's right to make its own hymns, he rested upon the proposition that there could be no better songs than the inspired songs of Scripture. He established the precedent of Church Song taken from the word of God itself, and practically confined to the canonical Psalms. The authority of Calvin's opinion and example was such that the usage of singing metrical psalms as instituted at Geneva followed the spread of Calvinistic doctrine through the world as a recognized feature of church order. It became as characteristic of the Reformed cultus as hymn singing was of the Lutheran cultus.

The new Protestant Church Song was thus from the first divided into two separate streams, having Luther and Calvin as their respective sources, and differing in their actual contents. If we attempt to put this new Protestant song in relation to the service of praise in the historic cultus of the Latin Church which it replaced, it appears that the Lutheran Hymnody and the Reformed Psalmody agree in taking the service of praise out of the hands of the choir and restoring it to the congregation, and, with that end in view, in rendering it in the vernacular tongue. But the Lutheran Hymn must be regarded as the lineal successor of the Latin hymns of the *Breviary*, and as carrying forward the usage of hymn singing without a break. The Calvinistic psalm, on the other hand, would have to be regarded as the lineal successor of the old church Psalmody,—that rendering of the Latin prose Psalter in stated portions which constituted the main feature of the Daily Office. It is true that the Calvinistic psalm was run into the mould of the metrical hymn, and being a metrical formula of congregational praise, it may be called a hymn, in the larger sense of that word. But in reality it marked a breach with the extra-biblical Hymnody of the Western church, and of the Hussites and Lutherans. It represented a popularization of the old church Psalmody that offered itself as a substitute for Hymnody, whether old or new. Henceforward, for two centuries and half at least, the Hymn and the Metrical Psalm stand side by side as representing clearly differentiated and even opposing systems of congregational Church Song.³

²The earliest recorded hymn book of the Bohemian Brethren bears the date 1505. For their Hymnody see Edmund de Schweinitz, *The History of the Church known as The Unitas Fratrum*, 2nd ed., Bethlehem, Pa., 1901; and J. T. Mueller in Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, art. "Bohemian Hymnody."

³The necessity of marking this distinction is the justification of the word "Hymnody," even though objected to by purists as lacking the highest sanction. Philologically "Hymnody" would seem to be the analogue of "Psalmody," and practically would seem to be a necessity to express the practice of singing hymns, and also the body of the hymns thus sung. The current employment of "Psalmody" to express these things simply ignores the history of two centuries, and obscures the facts: and when, as by some recent writers, the word "Psalmody" is actually applied to the body of the tunes to which hymns are sung, we seem to reach a point at which the article exhibited and the label attached to it have no obvious connection. English writers in general, dealing specifically with hymns, have used the word "Hymnology" to describe the collective body of them or some part of it. Thus James King gathers the body of hymns in widest use in the Church of England under the title *Anglican Hymnology* (London, 1885); and, as if to prove that we have not misunderstood him, entitles his first chapter "History of Ancient and Mediaeval Hymnology." When Mr. Courthope tells us (*A History of English Poetry*, vol. v, London, 1905, pp. 328, 336), that "Hymnology had its rise among the Nonconformists," and that "the style of English Hymnology reaches its highest level" in certain hymns of Dr. Watts, we may not question the lawfulness of his use of the terms but we must affirm its inexpediency. When we have gathered our specimens from the quarry or mine, we have not gathered its "mineralogy" but its minerals, from which the brain and not the hand must construct their mineralogy. Just so, dealing at present with the English Hymn and its liturgical use, it would appear that the word "Hymnody" describes the materials for our study; and that the word "Hymnology" expresses rather that ordered knowledge of hymns to which a study such as ours may be expected to contribute.