

Worship as Divider and Unifier: A Comparison of the Reformation with Contemporary Evangelism

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Abstract: Differences over worship philosophy and practice were central in preventing full unity among sixteenth-century Reformers, even while they were united in many central theological convictions. Traditional psalmody, hymnody, and liturgy, however, helped promote appropriate unity across denominational lines. Contemporary evangelical practice blurs important denominational distinctives through the Praise and Worship movement and the Church Growth movement. Praise and Worship theology and seeker-sensitive worship theology contribute toward minimizing important doctrinal matters, partly because they elevate musical style as being central to church identity.

Key Words: Evangelicalism, Reformed, Praise and Worship, Church Growth, liturgy, denominationalism, psalmody, hymnody

Differences in Worship Theology as Key Denominational Distinctives

Church historians have suggested different ways of understanding denominations that emerged in the wake of the Reformation. I will suggest here that one plausible way to understand them is, in the words of David Dockery,

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“through the window of liturgy and worship.”² Indeed, a brief examination of how denominations developed during the Reformation reveals that worship theology and practice played a much more significant role in denominational divisions among emerging Protestant groups than other core theological beliefs. Although the Reformers generally agreed concerning central doctrines of justification and biblical authority, their disagreements about worship issues such as the Lord’s Table, baptism, and how Scripture regulated worship practice were what ultimately led to irreconcilable divisions.

The Lord’s Table

This tendency to division is perhaps no more true than with understanding and practice of baptism and the Lord’s Table. In the early years of the Reformation, differences over the Lord’s Table presented one of the most divisive issues. For example, although the Reformers agreed in their repudiation of transubstantiation, Luther and Zwingli could not come to a consensus on the meaning of “this is my body” (Luke 22:19), the only one of fifteen articles at the 1529 Marburg Colloquy the Zwinglians could not sign. Zwingli insisted that Christ was present only at the Father’s right hand and that the elements of the Lord’s Supper were a memorial only, while Luther argued that Christ could also be literally present in sacramental union with the elements.³ Calvin maintained his own unique understanding of the presence of Christ in the Supper, asserting that Christ was not actually present in the elements but that “all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed” to believers through

² David S. Dockery, “So Many Denominations: The Rise, Decline, and Future of Denominationalism,” in *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 10–11.

³ Details of the Marburg Colloquy between Luther and Zwingli are described in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 38 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 15–89.

the Spirit of Christ at the Supper,⁴ a view that prevented him from fully unifying with the others as well.

Baptism

Luther and Zwingli agreed on the matter of baptism at Marburg, but this ordinance has created denominational division with others. Tom Wells cites four separate categories of disagreement on the matter of baptism: mode (immersion, affusion, and aspersion), proper candidates (paedobaptism vs. credobaptism), proper administration (an issue for groups like Landmark Baptists and Churches of Christ), and effect.⁵ Each of these categories became significant matters over which various groups coalesced into denominations. Most of the early Reformers agreed with Rome on candidates for baptism (infants) but disagreed over its effects. Rome taught that a baptized infant was forgiven for both original and actual sin. According to a Papal Bull of 1439,

The effect of this sacrament is the remission of all sin, original and actual; likewise of all punishment which is due for sin. As a consequence, no satisfaction for past sins is enjoined upon those who are baptized; and if they die before they commit any sin, they attain immediately to the kingdom of heaven and the vision of God.⁶

Lutherans believed that faith was a prerequisite for baptism but insisted that infants could exercise faith. He claimed,

[The infant] comes to Christ in baptism, as John came to him, and as the children were brought to him, that his word and work might be effective in them, move them, and make them holy, because his

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.14.12.

⁵ Tom Wells, "Baptism and the Unity of Christians," *Reformation and Revival* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 100-08.

⁶ Pope Eugene IV, in the Bull "Exultate Deo" (1439). See Charles George Herbermann, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 2 (New York: Appleton, 1907), 259.

Word and work cannot be without fruit. Yet it has this effect alone in the child. Were it to fail here it would fail everywhere and be in vain, which is impossible.⁷

Calvin taught that “infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit.”⁸ Baptists, however (as Anabaptists before them), differed most significantly from other groups by insisting, to quote the London Confession of 1644, that baptism “is an Ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith. . . . The way and manner of the dispensing of this Ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water.”⁹

The Regulative Principle of Worship

In addition to differences over theology and practice of the ordinances, disagreements over the authority of Scripture upon worship practice also led to denominational division. As with the Lord’s Supper, Luther and Zwingli could not agree on this point. Luther taught

whatever is free, that is, neither commanded nor prohibited, by which one can neither sin or obtain merit, this should be in our control as something subject to our reason so that we might employ it or not employ it, uphold it or drop it, according to our pleasure and need, without sinning and endangering our conscience.¹⁰

Zwingli disagreed, insisting that worship practices must have explicit biblical warrant, leading him to denounce images, other ceremonial adornments, and even music from public worship since he could find no warrant for them in the New Testament.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan; Oswald Pelikan, vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 244.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.20.

⁹ *London Confession* in H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 50.

¹⁰ Luther, *LW 38*, 38:319.

He insisted, “Show me that it is good and I will believe it to be good. God alone is good and the sole source of all good things.”¹¹ Calvin agreed in principle with Zwingli’s regulative principle of worship, arguing that “a part of the reverence that is paid to [God] consists simply in worshipping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own.”¹² Calvin did, however, allow unaccompanied, unison psalm singing, since he found support for such practices in Scripture. He insisted,

The psalms incite us to praise God, to pray to Him, to meditate on his works to the end that we love Him, fear, honor and glorify Him. What St. Augustine says is quite true, one can not sing anything more worthy of God than that which we have received from Him.¹³

The regulative principle of worship also came to define Reformed denominations, perhaps best seen in the well-known statement from the Westminster Confession:

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

The principle likewise served as a distinctive of early English Particular Baptists, whose 1689 Confession repeated the Westminster statement almost verbatim.¹⁴ Denominations such as the Church of England ascribed to a position more closely resembling that of Luther.

Thus, today one could explain the differences between the Reformers by irreconcilable disagreements in specific areas of

¹¹ Quoted in Charles Garside, *Zwingli and the Arts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966), 38, 44.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.23.

¹³ From the preface to the Genevan Psalter, quoted in Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, Revised and expanded (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 45.

¹⁴ See Matthew W. Ward, “Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive” (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

worship theology and practice. Roman Catholics hold to baptismal regeneration, to the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Mass, and to a normative principle of worship. Lutherans reject transubstantiation in favor of sacramental union, practice a non-regenerative paedobaptism, and are governed by a normative principle, with Anglicans holding to very similar views with differences in polity. Presbyterians affirm a spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, practice a non-regenerative paedobaptism, and shape their worship according to the regulative principle. Baptists ascribe to the Zwinglian/Anabaptist memorial view of the Table, practice credobaptism by immersion, and traditionally followed the regulative principle.¹⁵

Traditional Worship as Cross-Denominational Unifier

Psalmody and Hymnody

One specific matter of worship practice that was not mentioned in the previous section is music. On the one hand, music does present another example of an issue that historically divided the Reformers. For example, Luther promoted the liberal use of psalms and hymns in worship, Zwingli prohibited music altogether, and Calvin limited singing to psalms without instrumental accompaniment.

However, this division can be interpreted primarily as a result of the more significant matter of the regulative principle vs. the normative principle, as discussed above. All three Reformers agreed concerning good music's spiritual benefits and cautioned against the degenerating influence of some music.¹⁶ What separated them is whether they believed they had biblical warrant for particular musical practices (or, in Luther's case, whether biblical warrant was even necessary).

Furthermore, even though differences over the governing principle of worship did lead to distinctions in practice with worship music, groups springing from these early Reformers

¹⁵ I use the past tense here because the regulative principle of worship is not characteristic of a majority of American Baptists today.

¹⁶ See Robert Loman Harrell, "A Comparison of Secular Elements in the Chorales of Martin Luther with Rock Elements in Church Music of the 1960's and 1970's" (Bob Jones University, 1975).

shared their songs across denominational lines. For example, many of the earliest Lutheran hymns were translations of Latin texts from the Roman Church. Examples include “*Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr*” (Nicolaus Decius, 1523) from the Latin “*Gloria in excelsis*,” “*Komm, Heiliger Geist*” (Martin Luther, 1523) from “*Veni, Sancte Spiritus*” (Pope Innocent III, thirteenth c.), and “*Christum wir sollen loben schon*” (Martin Luther, 1524) from “*A solis ortus cardine*” (Caelius Sedulius, fifth c.). Lutheran chorale texts, in turn, were brought to the Anglican tradition, first through Myles Coverdale’s *Goostly Psalmes and Spirituall Songes drawen out of the Holy Scripture* (c. 1535–1536). According to Reynolds and Music, “Of its 41 hymns, 36 were translations from German sources, one of which was the first English version of *En’feste Burg*.”¹⁷ Other Lutheran hymn texts were delivered to other denominations through the translations of those like Methodist John Wesley. An example is “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness” (1740) from “*Christi Blut und Gerechtigkeit*” by Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1739), Anglican Catherine Winkworth, whose translations include “All Glory be to God on High” (1863) from “*Allein Gott in der Höh sei Her*,” “Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord” (1855) from “*Komm, Heiliger Geist*,” “Now Thank We All Our God” (1858) from “*Nun Danket Alle Gott*” (Martin Rinkart, 1636), and “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty” (1863) from “*Lobe den Herren*” (Joachim Neander, 1680). Additionally, the Genevan Psalter arose out of the psalmody-only Calvinist tradition, but “within little more than a decade it was translated into several other European languages,”¹⁸ which at that time would imply transdenominational influence.

This transdenominational use of traditional psalms and hymns continued well into later centuries. For example, in 2002 Stephen Marini conducted a study of 86 of the most significant American evangelical hymnals from 1737 to 1860 and compiled a list of those hymns that were published in at least one third of the hymnals. Marini comments on what he discovered:

¹⁷ William J Reynolds and David W. Music, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, 5th ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 2010), 63.

¹⁸ Reynolds and Music, *Survey*, 50.

The most popular evangelical hymns cited in this essay were transdenominational, all of them published outside their original denominational family as well as within it, and published more times than can be accounted for by that family's hymnals alone. Their inclusion on the most popular list indicates precisely that they circulated beyond the confines of editorial opinion or denominational identity. Therefore although actual use of hymns cannot be empirically determined, transdenominational hymns with high frequency of publication can reasonably be assumed to have been genuinely popular and used more generally than any others.¹⁹

Similarly, in 2011 Robert T. Coote surveyed 4,905 hymns in the 28 hymnals of six mainline Protestant denominations from 1883 to 2006, and analyzed the 13 hymns that appeared in every hymnal, 9 that appeared in 27, and 5 that appeared in 26, observing that the hymns manifested transdenominational popularity.²⁰

Yet, this unity across denominational lines through the sharing of hymns did not blur the important theological and practical distinctions between the denominations. In other words, the use of hymns from outside a particular denomination did not cause those in the denomination to weaken their denominational loyalty. This is largely due to the fact that the psalms and hymns that crossed denominational boundaries were catholic in doctrine and thus avoided expressions that were unique to the denomination of the author. Coote in particular notes that the most used hymns "focus on such foundational themes as the enduring triumph of the Cross, assurance in the ultimate rule of Jesus, and prayer for the continuing experience of God's love."²¹

¹⁹ Stephen Marini, "Hymnody as History: Early Evangelical Hymns and the Recovery of American Popular Religion," *Church History* 71, no. 2 (June 2002): 279.

²⁰ Robert T. Coote, "The Hymns That Keep on Going," *Christianity Today* 55, no. 3 (March 2011): 30–32.

²¹ Coote, "Hymns that Keep on Going," 32.

The other factor that influenced the transdenominational nature of traditional psalmody and hymnody is the fact that tunes were exchanged liberally between psalm/hymn texts and thus across denominational lines as well. For example, Luther borrowed tunes from Gregorian chant and other Roman Catholic office hymns for his early German hymns. Examples include *All Ehr' Und Lob Soll Gottes Sein* (*Kirchengesangbuch*, Strassburg, 1541) from the tenth-century *Gloria tempore paschali* and *Kyrie, Gott Vater In Ewigkeit* (c. 1541) from the tenth-century *Kyrie fons bonitatis*. Further, many tunes originally composed for Lutherans were transplanted when their corresponding texts were translated and brought into other denominations. Likewise, tunes from the Genevan Psalter made their way into the Anglican Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter, primarily through the Anglo-Genevan Psalter. This Psalter, which contained English versifications for all the Genevan tunes, was created while English Protestants lived in exile in Geneva during the reign of Queen Mary (reigned 1553–1558).²² The lasting influence of Genevan psalm singing upon Anglican practice can be seen in the use of several common tunes such as OLD 100TH by Louis Bourgeois (originally Psalm 134 in the Genevan Psalter).

This practice of borrowing traditional tunes from other denominations continues to this day. Paul Westermeyer notes this when in 2005, after surveying hymn tunes in fourteen denominational hymnals from 1978 forward, he observed that “the tunes we use cross our confessional divisions, and their number is small enough to form a common core. In spite of our fractures, we still tend to sing a common song.”²³ He found 179 tunes common to 9 or more of the hymnals and 147 texts common to those tunes that “come from the fourth to the twentieth centuries and from across the whole gamut of the church's liturgical year, occasions, and themes.”²⁴

²² Reynolds and Music, *Survey*, 51–52.

²³ Paul Westermeyer, *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005), 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Liturgy

Another worship element that has encouraged transdenominational unity while preserving denominational distinctives is traditional liturgy. While each of the Reformers reshaped their liturgies to greater or lesser degrees in response to Roman Catholic abuses, most post-Reformation denominational groups traditionally preserved a similar shape to their worship services. For example, in his 1523 *Formula Missae*, Luther retained most of the pre-Tridentine Roman liturgy, the only substantial change being in the language of the Canon, stating, “It would be good to keep the whole liturgy with its music, omitting only the canon.”²⁵ He explained, “It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use.”²⁶ Even in his 1526 *Deutsche Messe*, Luther preserved much of the shape of the liturgy, simply replacing Latin elements with vernacular hymns and readings. Likewise, John Calvin, despite his strict adherence to the regulative principle, nevertheless also reflected the shape of the pre-Tridentine liturgy, though much simplified, in his Genevan liturgy.

As Bryan Chappell notes, “where the truths of the gospel are maintained there remain commonalities of worship structure that transcend culture”²⁷ and, I would add, denomination. Groups with various denominational identity have traditionally shared a liturgical shape of revelation, adoration, confession, assurance, thanksgiving, petition, instruction, charge, and blessing.²⁸ As

²⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 54: Table Talk*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 361.

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 20.

²⁷ Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 8.

²⁸ Others have made this observation including Robert B Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church*

with traditional psalmody and hymnody, this common worship structure allowed Christians of various denominations to share an appropriate unity while maintaining their important distinctiveness.

Worship Movements that Have Contributed to Denominational Decline

As the previous sections have shown, while differences over worship theology and practice have been one of the most significant dividers between post-Reformation denominations, traditional psalmody, hymnody, and liturgy provided a means by which distinct denominations were able to enjoy an appropriate catholicity while at the same time maintaining necessary theological and practical boundaries.

This delicate balance between healthy unity and appropriate diversity among denominations has been diminished, however, in more recent worship trends. Indeed, as the following section will show, contemporary worship movements have significantly contributed to denominational decline,²⁹ primarily due to the emergence of music style as an essential feature in church identity.

Praise and Worship

The first contemporary worship movement to contribute to denomination decline I will explore is the Praise and Worship movement, which emerged out of the Charismatic movement of

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); Constance M Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); Robbie F. Castleman, *Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

²⁹ By “denomination decline,” I am less concerned with denominational organizations as I am with diminishing the key theological and practical distinctives that have traditionally defined denominations.

the 1960s.³⁰ Whereas Pentecostalism had produced its own denominations,³¹ the Charismatic movement infiltrated traditional denominations, largely due to the rising popularity of the contemporary music styles of charismatic Praise and Worship, which some saw as a force that would end denominationalism altogether in the name of ecumenical unity.³²

Christopher J. Ellis observes that charismatic worship contributed to “what we may call a ‘pan-evangelical culture’ with its contemporary expression in music and informal worship.”³³ Randall Bradley agrees:

In recent decades, as denominational lines have blurred, Free Churches have been most influenced by music that finds its origins in the charismatic stream, of which “Praise and Worship” is the best known.³⁴

The importance of contemporary music styles in this movement flows directly from its theology of worship. Breaking from a more confessional liturgical structure, Praise and Worship instead aims to bring the worshiper through a series of emotional stages from rousing “praise” to intimate “worship.”³⁵ This progression through which worshipers are helped to experience “the manifest presence of God” is engineered primarily through musical style.³⁶ Judson Cornwall encourages worship leaders to

³⁰ Brian D. Walwrath, *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 14.

³¹ Examples include Foursquare and Assemblies of God.

³² See Margaret M. Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement: Is There a New Pentecost?* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 202.

³³ Christopher J. Ellis, “Duty and Delight: Baptist Worship and Identity,” *Review & Expositor* 100, no. 3 (June 1, 2003): 337.

³⁴ C. Randall Bradley, “Congregational Song as Shaper of Theology: A Contemporary Assessment,” *Review & Expositor* 100, no. 3 (June 1, 2003): 353.

³⁵ See Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 70. “By contrast, the worship of the charismatic renewal movements lost some of its gospel shape and became more distinguished by the emotional flow of the service.”

³⁶ Judson Cornwall, *Let Us Worship* (Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Pub., 1983), 146.

begin with enthusiastic songs of thanksgiving, leading the worshipers to an emotional “soulful worship,” and then bringing the mood to an intimate expression where “a gentle sustained chord on the organ and a song of the Spirit on the lips of the leaders should be more than sufficient to carry a worship response of the entire congregation for a protracted period of time.”³⁷ This change in theology of worship led to a new understanding of worship music perhaps best described by Ruth Ann Ashton’s 1993 *God’s Presence through Music*.³⁸ This raised the matter of musical style to a level of significance that Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth describe as “musical sacramentality,” where music is now considered a primary means through which “God’s presence could be encountered in worship.”³⁹ As Chapell notes, “In this modern tradition, contemporary praise music has been the prime instrument to lead worshipers from celebration to contemplation to preparation for preaching. In fact, what many think of as ‘contemporary worship’ is defined only by the style of music.”⁴⁰

Because of the transdenominational influence of charismatic theology and the Praise and Worship movement, this philosophy and method of worship that places a high emphasis on musical style to bring people to an experience of worship has influenced many non-charismatic churches as well. According to a 2010 study by Faith Communities Today, the percentage of Protestant churches characterized by contemporary Praise and Worship rose from 29% in 2000 to 43% in 2010. The percentage change was even higher when they factored out mainline denominations and focused exclusively on Evangelical Protestants (from 35% to 51%).⁴¹ Today, the worship in a majority of evangelical churches is more characterized by Praise and Worship philosophy and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁸ Ruth Ann Ashton, *God’s Presence through Music* (South Bend, IN: Lesea Publishing, 1993).

³⁹ Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017), 18.

⁴⁰ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 70.

⁴¹ Marjorie H. Royle, “Facts on Worship: 2010” (Faith Communities Today, 2010), 12.

contemporary music than by traditional practices rooted in the Reformation or earlier.

Church Growth

The church growth movement built off this tendency to define a church's identity by musical style and recognized it as a technique to grow a church.⁴² Church growth leaders such as Ed Dobson insisted that musical style was an essential element of church growth:

We wanted a musical style that would elicit a response. Unchurched people come to a service hesitantly. Their mind-set is "you're not going to get me." Their defenses are up. We felt that a style of music that would get them moving in a physical way (nodding heads and tapping feet) would help break down their defenses.⁴³

Rick Warren agrees:

The style of music you choose to use in your services will be one of the most critical (and controversial) decisions you make in the life of your church. It may also be *the* most influential factor in determining who your church reaches for Christ and whether or not your church grows. You must match your music to the kind of people God wants your church to reach.⁴⁴

Randall Bradley notes the similarity between the Praise and Worship Movement and the church growth Movement in their emphasis upon music style as central to church identity:

In addition to "Praise and Worship," other elements that have significantly influenced congregational song include the increasing

⁴² Walwrath, *Message in the Music*, 14.

⁴³ Edward G. Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service: How Traditional Churches Can Reach the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 42–43.

⁴⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 280. Emphasis original.

popularity of Contemporary Christian Music, the influence of the Church Growth Movement with its emphasis on “user friendly” worship.⁴⁵

This has further contributed to the blurring of denominational distinctives in favor of nondenominational churches. John P. Dever notes that megachurches, even though they often remain part of a denomination, nevertheless tend to form a new kind of church that is its own denomination.⁴⁶

Both the Praise and Worship and church growth movements emphasize musical style as a predominant feature of a church above traditional doctrinal and ecclesiastical distinctives⁴⁷ such that an increasing number of evangelical Christians today choose their church based on worship style over traditional confessional reasons. As David Holeton observes, “When people move from one region of the country to another or even to another part of the city, denomination is less and less their first criterion in finding a new parish.” Instead, people choose their church more based on the style of worship and programs the church has to offer.⁴⁸ In a 2009 study of megachurches, researchers found that worship style was the number one factor that attracted attenders to megachurches, with denominational affiliation eighth on the list under the church reputation, music/arts, and adult programs.⁴⁹ Likewise, a 2016 Pew Research study demonstrated that 74% of Americans searching for a church based their decision on

⁴⁵ Bradley, “Congregational Song as Shaper of Theology,” 354.

⁴⁶ John P. Dever, “Fading Denominationalism: New Concepts of Church,” *Review & Expositor* 90, no. 4 (September 1, 1993): 511–12.

⁴⁷ These are not the only two factors that contributed to a new focus on the importance of contemporary worship. Lim and Ruth list five factors including youth culture, Pentecostalism, the baby boomer generation, the Jesus People, and the church growth movement (Lim and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*, 16–22).

⁴⁸ David R. Holeton, “‘Religion Without Denomination? The Significance of Denominations for Church and Society’: Some Reactions,” *Communio Viatorum* 44 (January 1, 2002): 40.

⁴⁹ Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Not Who You Think They Are: The Real Story of People Who Attend America’s Megachurches” (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2009), 15.

worship style,⁵⁰ and a 2017 Gallup poll showed music to be a major factor in choosing a church, more important than any doctrinal or denominational concerns.⁵¹

Conclusion

Since the Reformation, worship theology and practice has always been central to denominational distinctiveness. Yet psalmody, hymnody, and liturgy have traditionally provided a means for appropriate unity across denominational lines without diminishing the importance of theological matters. Contemporary worship trends, however, have raised musical style to a place of prominence that tends to make style more important for a church's identity than doctrinal issues.

What distinguishes traditional songs and liturgy from contemporary Praise and Worship songs and liturgy in this study is not the transdenominational character of their lyrics or tunes; this is a characteristic feature of most successful congregational songs throughout history. What distinguishes them is the importance placed upon the contemporaneity of musical style in each category. On the one hand, traditional psalms, hymns, and liturgy were both transdenominational and transcultural. Westermeyer describes this characteristic after noting the traditional hymns that have been used in multiple denominations:

That song, from Baptists to Roman Catholics, relies on a common core that has not been coopted by cultural fads, but sings out the subversive message of liberation in Christ in spite of all the forces—no matter how large—that are arrayed against it.⁵²

Contemporary worship songs and structure, however, reflect current culture rather than transcend it, and thus “relevant”

⁵⁰ Pew Research Center, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, August 23, 2016, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2016/08/Choosing-Congregations-08-19-FULL-PDF-for-web-2.pdf>.

⁵¹ Lydia Saad, “Sermon Content Is What Appeals Most to Churchgoers,” Gallup News Service, April 14, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/208529/sermon-content-appeals-churchgoers.aspx>.

⁵² Westermeyer, *Let the People Sing*, 8.

stylistic matters and appealing to particular cultural demographics have become central to a church's identity rather than important confessional matters that have historically defined denominations in the wake of the Reformation.

Music is often blamed as the cause of division within the body of Christ, yet what this study has demonstrated is that contemporary worship movements have actually blurred necessary confessional divisions, creating a form of unity, but not around doctrine—this new unity is around style of music. The Reformation example of necessary division due to legitimate differences and appropriate unity through the use of universal psalms, hymns, and liturgy should serve as a lesson for Evangelical churches today. As John Calvin insisted, even as one who attempted to foster unity among the disparate Reformation churches,⁵³ “Those who wish to build the church by rejecting the doctrine of the Word build a pigsty, and not the church of God.”⁵⁴

⁵³ See W. Stanford Reid, “The Ecumenicalism of John Calvin,” *WJT* 11, no. 1 (November 1948): 30–43.

⁵⁴ Cited in Joel R. Beeke, “The Church's Unity,” *Reformation and Revival* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 69.