

Why We Sing What We Sing? — Liturgy of the Early Church
“Eternal Light”

The Rev. Nancy A. Conklin

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Before we launch into worship in the early church, you will notice two things that will resonate throughout this summer series — two truths we’ve come to believe: that history really does repeat itself and that the more things change, the more they stay the same. That is true of church history, and especially true of the history of church music.

There has been a pendulum swing, as I like to call it, between assuring the church does things “decently and in order” in worship on one end and an emphasis on the free-flowing movement of the Holy Spirit in worship on the other. We began this summer exploration of the history of why we sing what we sing by remembering how our ancient Jewish ancestors were moved with such profound joy that they danced in worship.

Following Jesus’ resurrection, the early followers of the Way worshipped much more sedately in the tradition of the synagogue. That is, until they experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Filled with the Spirit, they, too, couldn’t help dance and sing in praise to the God who raised Jesus from the dead. But then, something happened. Celebration and dancing gave way to dignity and order. The power of music became subject to the power of the spoken word. That said, the transmission of the Gospel from one generation to the next is not just the transmission of the written word, but the absorption of a message. The taking in of that same word by people of different mentalities, of different cultures, living in distinct communities. And so, with each new generation, the church undergoes a transformation as it engages the culture of the day. That same challenge confronted the early church in the fourth century.

As I said, at the beginning of worship, during the Roman persecution of the first and second centuries, the church was basically an underground operation, existing as a private collective in the shadows of society. But then, Emperor Constantine was accosted by the Holy Spirit, causing him to confess his faith in Jesus and declaring Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman empire — the birth, if you will, of the church as an institution. Which meant for the first time those followers of the Way of Jesus had to learn how to be in the world, but not of the world. Their worship of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe had to be distinguished from all of the pagan rituals of the Greco-Roman world.

Those ancient Greeks were a fun-loving bunch. The Greeks gave us theater, the circus, and, at the time, a whole host of pagan festivals. Unfortunately, the early church began to associate instrumental music with those worldly forms of entertainment. Tertullian, one of the church’s earliest theologians, called secular music “a spectacle of lust which produced spiritual agitation, strong excitement, and passionate desire.” (We all know the institutional church hasn’t ever been all that comfortable with anything that evoked “passionate desire.”) Bishop Clement of Alexandria warned his churches, “movement and dancing is altogether uncouth and indecent and instruments are banished from the sober symposium.” Yet, somewhat ironically, it was good that even in those early formative years of the church there was significant disagreement over what was appropriate music for the praise and worship of God.

St. Basil the Great, another early theologian, took a more moderate stance. He, actually believed that the singing of hymns made scripture palatable. In his own words:

“What did the Holy Spirit do when He saw that the human race was not easily led to virtue. He mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of words through gentleness and ease of hearing just as clever physicians frequently smear the cup with honey when giving the fastidious some rather bitter medicine to drink.”

Singing for Basil was, in reality, food for the soul. And so, in the end, the early church fathers condemned instruments, handclapping, and dancing, but they encouraged congregational singing, because, as Basil said, “here the grace of the Spirit pours forth sound, using instead of flute or lyre or pipes, the lips of the saints.” Nevertheless, the line had been clearly drawn between secular worldly music that was lascivious and the sacred music of the church that was spiritual.

But then, along came Ambrose, one of the greatest hymnographers of the church who is now known as the “father of church song.” Ambrose was born in Trier, the oldest city in what is now Germany. He was the son of a Roman prefect, meaning he was raised in a house of privilege. He studied law in Rome and became a lawyer in Milan. When the bishop of Milan died, Ambrose was elected his replacement by pure happenstance. Legend has it a young child spotted him in the crowd and yelled, “Bishop Ambrose! Bishop Ambrose!” The crowd, however, thought the child’s chant was of divine origin, so they joined in and Ambrose became bishop — undoubtedly to his great surprise, since he hadn’t even yet been baptized a Christian.

At that time, new converts to Christianity underwent a year of instruction after which they were examined to their understanding of the faith, now expressed in the Nicene Creed. After passing the examination, they were baptized and welcomed at the Lord’s Supper for the first time. Baptism was by total immersion, a drastic sign of washing away sin and emerging into a new life. But total immersion was also a sign of enlightenment. When the person rose from the water, they were said to have been made “keen to see the divine.” Spiritual illumination is the gift we receive from our baptism into our new life in Christ who is the Light of Life — the True Light that enlightens everyone.

As you can tell by our hymns this morning, this theme of spiritual illumination marked this period of church hymnology. The great theological debate within the church at the time: Was Jesus truly God if he was truly human as well? Ambrose was a great defender of the doctrine of the Trinity, that God the father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are three separate persons consisting of one substance. As Ambrose wrote in our first hymn, that substance is Light. As we sang, Jesus is “the Splendor of God’s glory bright from light eternal bringing light. Thou light of life, light’s living spring. True day, all days illumining.” Jesus, the second person of the Triune God, is the Light which comes from the source of Life itself.

We sing of the Advent — the coming of that Light. We sing of the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World, the Light that no amount of darkness shall overcome. We sing, affirming our faith and trust that Jesus is the Light of Life that illumines who God is and the path under our feet. As we make our way through life, we are not meant to grope around in the darkness, but to seek the Light, to live in the Light, and to reflect the light that others might find their way to the one true God.