

George W. Truett Theological Seminary  
Baylor University  
Waco, Texas

**To What Extent Has Baptist Hymnody in North America Changed  
Since the Eighteenth Century?**

*Roy A. Bradley*

The Baptist Identity  
David Bebbington, Ph.D.  
Fall 2009

Because music is so deeply rooted in the human experience, it plays an especially important role in the spiritual life of Christian believers--this has certainly proved true (though in different ways over time) for Baptists. The main form of musical type that has been used by Baptists for worship until recent times is the hymn. A hymn is a type of song written specifically for the purpose of praise, adoration, or prayer. Hymns are usually addressed to deity or speak of human response to deity. For Western Christians, the hymn eventually took on the musical characteristics typical of the Classical period. They normally were arranged in four-part vocal harmony and were accompanied (in time) by an organ and choir. The more “contemporary” forms of music increasingly used in today’s worship settings are not regarded as hymns by most Evangelicals. The distinction is not clear, but it probably has to do with the influence of the “Rock and Roll” genre and the thought forms of the Jesus Movement. In many cases there is an explicit difference in the music and the text between the hymns described above and the “praise and worship” music that is now enjoying increasing popularity. The hymn will be the main subject of this paper but it will be necessary to address briefly the historical significance of the most recent trends in the musical life of Baptists. The story of Baptist hymnody in North America, like most other facets of Baptist history, has its similarities and differences through time. When the whole scope of the history of Baptist hymnody in North America is in purview, interesting details arise that serve to accentuate the rich character of the Baptist story.

Major changes have occurred in Baptist hymnody in North America since its beginnings. That Baptists sing at all in worship is evidence of drastic change, since our earliest Baptist forefathers seldom ever legitimately sang in church; those who did were the exception. This was certainly true for the earliest English Baptists but it was also true for the earliest American

Baptists. This fact is not surprising since most early Baptist churches in America were founded by immigrants from Britain. Little detail is known about the early singing practices of Baptists, especially before 1700. It is only because of the controversies spawned by this subject that we have some (though sparse) historical evidence to work with--after all, controversy usually results in written correspondence.

The first Baptist church founded on American soil in Providence, Rhode Island in 1639 conveniently serves as a brief example for the controversies over singing in early Baptist life in America. One historian claims that psalmody was initially present at the First Baptist Church, Providence, but was eliminated probably with the adoption of the Six Principle tenants in 1652, thirteen years after its founding.<sup>1</sup> The church did not reintroduce singing until 1771 under the leadership of pastor James Manning; the church astonishingly remained songless for 119 years. Other churches, like the First Baptist Church of Newport, Rhode Island, followed this pattern as well. The church split in 1656 over the issue of singing, with those opposed to hymnody breaking off and starting their own church. The original church evidently abandoned singing as well not long after the split. Singing at the first church was not revived until 1725 under the pastorate of John Comer who said that it was the “blessing of heaven” that allowed him to reintroduce it.<sup>2</sup> The second church did not begin singing until 1765. Isaac Backus records this fact in a diary entry dated 19 January 1765 and says that the church was “now introduceing [*sic*] singing into their worship.”<sup>3</sup> There are many other Baptist churches about which nothing is

---

<sup>1</sup> David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1813) 1:467,480; in Music and Richardson, “*I Will Sing the Wondrous Story*”, 72.

<sup>2</sup> John Comer, *The Diary of John Comer*, ed. C. Edwin Barrows (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892) 58; in Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence: Brown University Press, 1979) 2:589; in Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 73, cit. 6.

known as to whether or not they were a singing church during their beginnings due to loss of records and other data deficiencies. What is known, however, is that many churches denied singing as appropriate in worship at some point in their early period of existence and that controversy over the issue was virtually universal. In the contemporary setting, music in worship is still very controversial but the nature of the controversy is different. There is hardly any dispute about whether or not music should be used in worship--this is universally accepted and practiced. Now the question is what *kind* of music should be used and *how* should it be presented. Regardless of the current debate, music in the American Baptist experience now plays a vital role in worship practices and indeed, in all of church life. Baptists began as music prohibitionists but have become known as a “singing people.” This is clear evidence of change.

One of the most drastic changes that have occurred in regard to Baptist hymnody is the presence and employment of choral singing and musical instruments to lead and accompany the congregational singing of hymns in worship. Early American Baptists (if they sang at all) almost universally rejected the use of instruments and choirs in worship until the mid-1700s.<sup>4</sup> To modern Baptists, this is perplexing and foreign to their experience, since for them, the worship experience probably includes at least a vocal or instrumental ensemble of some sort, or a combination of the two. The logic is clear, however, for the early Baptists. The only mention of musical instruments in worship present in the New Testament is found in the book of Revelation. Because the Revelation is highly figurative by nature as a form of Jewish apocalyptic literature, it is easy to allegorize the text. Because of this, Baptists found no prescriptive doctrine regarding instruments in the New Testament and thus set themselves against that practice. Furthermore,

---

<sup>4</sup> David Music, *Music and Worship*, 10.

according to rare historical evidence for eighteenth century practices among congregations, it is apparent that Baptists generally tended to follow the Calvinistic trends in singing, which included the tenant that God was not to be worshipped vicariously through other people.<sup>5</sup> This meant that choirs and soloist were excluded from worship and that all songs had to be sung in unison so that all could participate. This is significant because if the “priesthood of the believer” was to be maintained, then the individual was responsible for singing his or her own praise to God. Other Calvinist characteristics included the selection of a song leader, called a “precentor” (usually a deacon), and the practice of lining out. The earliest reference of lining out is found in the records of the First Baptist Church of Boston. On 8 September 1728, the church voted that Skinner Russell, a Boston shopkeeper, should “Set the Psalm [another form of lining out] in Publick.”<sup>6</sup> Lining out essentially entailed the precentor reading a line of the psalm (setting the psalm) or hymn and the congregation singing it back. This method became commonplace, since hymn books were not readily available to members of the congregation during this time. If someone desired a hymnal, they had to provide their own, but most people could not afford them. However, this method did not prove beneficial in the long run. This is due in part because the precentors often had little or no musical training and the churches sang *a cappella*, which meant that there were no instruments aiding in the rhythmic and melodic structures of the tune. One observer noted that it was “an horrid Medly [*sic*] of confused and disorderly Noises,” as one could only imagine.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 87.

<sup>6</sup> The Records of the First Baptist Church of Boston; see Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* (Boston: J. Franklin, 1721) 2; in Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 88.

The introduction and acceptance of choirs into Baptist worship services during the middle of the eighteenth century was largely the result of locally held singing schools. These “schools” were designed to improve congregational singing and they were generally successful. The positive musical results of the schools eventually led to the abandonment of the problematic method of lining out that had been the normal practice before. As musical training was gained by some congregants, there was a natural desire to utilize their newfound skills by singing together as a choir in worship. Baptist churches in the North proved more willing to introduce choral singing into their worship than those in the South; the Southern churches in general were much more skeptical about the practice. The first known Baptist church in North America to include choral singing was the First Baptist Church of Boston. A reference is given about the singing of three anthems “by a select Company” at the dedication of the enlarged meetinghouse recently constructed.<sup>8</sup> Their performance is said to have given “great Satisfaction to a crowded Audience.”<sup>9</sup> Whether or not this one instance was indicative of an already present practice of choral singing at the church, or an inaugural or one-time performance for a particular situation, is not clear. What makes it difficult to tell is that there is no further evidence of choral singing in that church until the 1790s. But it is clear that choirs were being used in other Northern Baptist churches concurrently, so the practice was steadily becoming more widely accepted during the latter half of the eighteenth century. According to David Music and Paul Richardson, the First Baptist Churches of Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, were some of the first Baptist churches in the South during the first few years of the nineteenth century to maintain choirs.<sup>10</sup> Some of the other early references for choirs in the South date back to the 1830s; those

---

<sup>8</sup> Boston *Evening Post*, 23 December 1771; in Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 97, see cit. 82.

of the First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tennessee and Court Street Baptist Church, Portsmouth, Virginia.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of choirs happened relatively peacefully among some congregations, but others found it to be a hotbed for controversy. This is not altogether surprising given the other tumultuous ecclesiological disputes plaguing Baptists throughout their history.

If choirs proved controversial for some congregations, then the introduction of musical instruments was even more controversial than the choir. Even if singing is not expressly prescribed in the New Testament and if choirs tended to supplant song from the congregation, choirs and singing, at least, use the human voice. Musical instruments, on the other hand, had neither soul nor voice and were seen as a violation of the Apostle Paul's teaching on the "unknown tongues" in worship.<sup>12</sup> But Baptists were not alone in their negative convictions about musical instruments in worship. The majority of the early church fathers objected their use. Calvin and Zwingli, the English Puritans and Separatists, and the Pilgrims and Puritans who came to America also condemned the utilization of musical instruments in worship. Baptists, thus, stand in a long line with a broader religious heritage on this issue.<sup>13</sup> A representative example of early Baptist attitudes about instruments can be found in a letter written by Philadelphia Baptists to an Anglican minister. In its list of objectionable offices, the "organists" position is included.<sup>14</sup> Baptist sentiments against the use of musical instruments in worship endured throughout the eighteenth century and in some places, into the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Music, "*I Will Sing*", 98.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in Pennsylvania Both British and German*, vol. 1 of *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists* (Philadelphia: Joseph Crukshank and Isaac Collins, 1770) 101-102; facsimile reprint: Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1980; quoted in Music, "*I Will Sing*", 101.

<sup>15</sup> Music, "*I Will Sing*", 101.

The “bass viol,” an instrument that is comparable to the modern violoncello (cello) was one of the first musical instruments used in nineteenth century Baptist worship. It was almost exclusively used as an accompaniment instrument to singing. Like choral singing, it was probably due to the influence of the singing school that this instrument was introduced. In the singing school, the bass viol was there to set the pitch for a song and to keep the singers in tune. It was first used in the North probably by the First Baptist Church of Newport, Rhode Island, just after the turn of the nineteenth century. Other churches subsequently adopted the instrument for worship, like the First Baptist Church of Providence in 1804, the First Baptist Church of Haverhill, Massachusetts in about 1810, and the First Baptist Church of Boston by 1818. In every case where the instrument was accepted, it was met with opposition.<sup>16</sup> It was a practice of some to demonstrate their opinion about the use of the bass viol by leaving during the singing and returning for the sermon.<sup>17</sup> In one church, a visiting preacher reprimanded the congregation for “playing and singing to the Bass Viol,” which “disturbed the Singers” who apparently became accustomed to the practice.<sup>18</sup> In the South, few churches used instruments of any kind before the 1830s. Jeremiah B. Jeter, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, was a leading example of an opposer of musical instruments in worship. He said that he was “not favorable” to instrumental music for worship purposes and that there is “little difference” regarding this view among Baptists in the South.<sup>19</sup> Because of this opposition, the bass viol was rarely used in a Southern church during the nineteenth century. But the growing acceptance of

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* 4 vols. (Salem, MA: Essex Press, 1905-1914) 3:434, reprint: Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962; in Music “*I Will Sing*”, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Clark Measels, “A Catalog of Source Readings in Southern Baptist Church Music: 1828-1890,” 2 vols., D.M.A. Dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986, 2:101-102; in Music, “*I Will Sing*”, 103.



the bass viol on behalf of the Northern churches led to the formation of gallery orchestras, which consisted of any instrument that was available at the time. The First Baptist Church of Boston's orchestra is probably representative of the common instrumentation. It consisted of a bass viol, a flute, a clarinet, and a violin.<sup>20</sup> Over time, the presence and use of instruments in worship broke down Baptist prejudices against musical instruments and eventually culminated in the acceptance of the organ. The organ was especially disliked by early American Baptists because it was associated with "cathedral pomp and prelatical power."<sup>21</sup> But with the breakdown of traditional objections to musical instruments, the growth of Baptist prosperity, and the influence of other denominations came the wide acceptance of the organ into Baptist worship.<sup>22</sup> The North/South pattern proved true in this regard as well. Churches in the South, unlike their more northern counterparts, took, in many cases, much longer to adopt the organ for church use; but by the end of the Civil War, the organ's approval was virtually universal.<sup>23</sup> By 1875, there is hardly any evidence of opposition to musical instruments in the South. By the end of the nineteenth century, almost every Baptist church in America used some type of musical instrument in worship and for those that did not, the reason was economic, not theological or cultural.<sup>24</sup>

Comparatively speaking, the musical aspects of a North American Baptist church service in the late seventeenth century were almost nothing like those of a service held in 1850. The earlier service may have included an untrained song leader who led the congregation in *a cappella*, unison, lined-out metrical psalm singing. By contrast, in 1850, congregational singing would mainly include Isaac Watts' paraphrased psalms and hymns led by harmonizing choirs

---

<sup>20</sup> Music, "*I Will Sing*", 104.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict, *Fifty Years*, 282-283.

<sup>22</sup> Music, "*I Will Sing*", 104-105.

<sup>23</sup> Music, "*Music and Worship*", 11.

<sup>24</sup> Music, "*I Will Sing*", 109.

who were accompanied by instruments, all led by well-trained directors. Music and Richardson explain that this would be the standard format for the next 150 years.<sup>25</sup>

One other noteworthy change occurring in Baptist hymnody in North America is its function at different times in history. During the earliest periods of congregational singing, Baptist psalmody and hymnody was used exclusively for the worship and praise of God. That is, its express purpose was to convey theological truth's about God as taught in Scripture so that God could be worshiped in light of them. In the case of psalmody, the purpose was to set Scripture itself to music, as it was done originally with the Psalms. When the Sunday School was introduced into Baptist life prior to the Civil War, it's focus on children required a different style of church music that included a simple text, catchy melody, and basic harmony, with a refrain, such as the song by William B. Bradbury, "Jesus Loves Me," illustrates. As these children grew into adults, they took their songs with them and incorporated them into the worship services.<sup>26</sup> Following the Civil War, the culturally eminent gospel song appeared on the scene during the revivalism of the era and would have a lasting impact on Baptist hymnody for decades. They were aimed at adults primarily and the tunes were often borrowed from the popular song style of the time (waltz, march, operetta, etc.).<sup>27</sup> This new form of hymnody was adopted as wholesale by Baptists in the North and South; in some cases, churches completely replaced whatever they had sung before with the gospel song. In the twentieth century, Baptists modeled their worship services after the revival meetings of the previous century. This meant that worship virtually became synonymous with evangelism and the revival music (mainly gospel songs) was adopted as the standard repertoire for the "worship" service and still holds

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>26</sup> Music, "Music and Worship", 13.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

sway, in some places, today. The primary impetus of the music became evangelism, not worship. During the cultural revolution in America in the 1960s and 1970s, newer styles of music began to emerge among Baptists, most notably youth musicals and the “rock anthem.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the gospel song still thrived during this period. The past two decades, however, have seen the most significant changes in Baptist hymnody in the twentieth century. A move back to a more worship-centered church service has become the trend among Baptists in North America as well as other Evangelical denominations. This movement has left behind the gospel song and taken on the form of the more contemporary music styles, much like the gospel songs did in their genesis. But rather than being evangelistic in nature, or being concerned about conveying propositional truth about God, the music of today seeks to focus on the (many times celebrative) experience of worship and the human response to God.<sup>29</sup> Thus, hymnody has served in a multi-functional way throughout the history of Baptists in North America, being used as a tool for the church and being adapted to its convictions at each stage of its historical development.

Although there have been numerous and significant changes in Baptist hymnody in North America since the eighteenth century (some of which have been mentioned here), there are also points of uniformity in the history. If one thing is certain about the homogeneity of Baptist hymnody, it is that it has always created controversy among congregational and denominational assemblies--and does still to this day. Controversy is the one thing that links Baptist hymnody together over the past three centuries. A look at any period since the establishment of the Baptist tradition in North America will reveal evidence of dispute over the appropriate use of music in worship. More specifically, other similarities over time can be noted. For instance, the hymnal

---

<sup>28</sup> Music, *Music and Worship*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> See Music, *Music and Worship* and “*I Will Sing*”, ch. 10.

was a rarity in early Baptist life for different reasons but saw an influx with the introduction of singing schools and choirs. More and more congregants came to have a Bible in one hand and a hymnal in the other. Hymnals have been an extremely important resource for Baptist since the nineteenth century. Yet, as a new season dawns in the musical life of the church, it is witnessing a rapid decrease in the use of hymnals during worship. Contemporary music encourages more technological means of displaying the text of songs through mediums such as the projection screen. This shift parallels the decrease in musical skill among congregations and music leaders at large and the notion that being in possession of a printed piece of music can distract one from true worship. These elements ring with familiarity in comparison to the nature of early Baptist hymnody. Printed texts were discouraged and musical skill was minimal. Interestingly, the current trends in Baptist music are in some ways more congruent with the earliest periods of Baptist hymnody in North America than with the methods of the immediately preceding generations.

That Baptist hymnody has gone through drastic change in North America since the eighteenth century is indubitable; change is clearly attested. However, among the changes can be seen striking similarities that provide a small, yet significant, clue to the elusive Baptist identity.

## Bibliography

- David Benedict. *Fifty Years Among the Baptists*. New York, NY: Sheldon & Co., 1860. reprint, Little Rock, AK: Seminary Publications, 1977.
- Eskew, Harry, David W. Music, and Paul A. Richardson. *Singing Baptists: Studies in Baptist Hymnody in America*. Nashville, TN: Church Street Press, 1994.
- Ewing, George W. *The Well Tempered Lyre: Songs and Verse of the Temperance Movement*. Dallas, TX: SMU Press, 1977.
- McBeth, H. Leon. *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990.
- Miller, Kiri. *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008.
- Music, David W. and Paul Richardson. *"I Will Sing the Wondrous Story": A History of Baptist Hymnody in North America*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008.
- Music, David W. *Music and Worship: The Emerging Experiences of Baptists*. Atlanta, GA: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2008.