

Blended Worship and Congregational Singing: A Historical and Theological Analysis

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Abstract

Debates over congregational singing have persisted throughout Christian history, especially concerning the relationship between traditional hymnody and modern worship music. In recent decades, “blended worship” has emerged as a way to combine historic hymn traditions with contemporary musical styles. Proponents argue that this blended approach promotes unity across generations and respects different cultural preferences within churches. However, critics warn that mixing styles could weaken theological depth, compromise musical integrity, or overlook deep cultural and generational divides. This article examines how to integrate traditional and modern congregational music, focusing on practical ways to use it for ecclesial benefit. Through historical and theological analysis, it traces the development of congregational singing from the Reformation to today’s worship movement, emphasizing how theology, culture, and congregational context influence musical choices. The article concludes that while blended worship seeks to bridge different traditions, it faces ongoing challenges from rapid cultural shifts, generational gaps, theological disagreements, and practical limits in local churches. Acknowledging these barriers doesn’t mean abandoning the goal of musical unity; instead, it calls for a more thoughtful and historically aware approach to church singing. By identifying the underlying tensions that challenge blended worship, this study adds to ongoing conversations in liturgical theology and church music about creating sustainable, theologically sound practices for congregational singing.

Keywords: Blended Worship, Contemporary Worship Music, Hymnody, Congregational Music, Liturgical Theology.



Introduction

Questions surrounding the nature and form of congregational singing have long occupied Christian communities. Debates concerning musical style, liturgical structure, and theological expression have repeatedly surfaced throughout church history.¹ In modern discourse, these disagreements are often described as the “worship wars,” a term scholars such as D. A. Carson use to describe the ongoing tensions between advocates of traditional hymnody and proponents of contemporary worship music.² Within this study, traditional congregational singing refers to the historic forms of Protestant worship music rooted primarily in Reformation hymnody, established liturgical practices, and the theological emphasis on active congregational participation through hymns.³ Contemporary congregational singing, by contrast, refers to modern worship music that emerged prominently during the late twentieth century and is characterized by musical styles influenced by popular culture, amplified instrumentation, modern praise songs, and more flexible liturgical practices.⁴ While such debates are frequently portrayed as a recent phenomenon, conflicts over musical expression in Christian worship can be traced to much earlier periods in ecclesiastical history.

At the heart of these disputes lies a complex interaction between theology and culture.⁵ From the early church onward, Christian communities have continually negotiated how to express theological convictions within changing cultural contexts, a tension already evident in Acts 15 and later intensified during the Reformation. Congregational music is one arena where these tensions are especially visible. The development of Protestant hymnody during the Reformation, influenced by figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, emphasized the entire congregation’s

¹ Everett Ferguson, “Congregational Singing in the Early Church,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 15, no. 1 (2004): 144–159; Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther’s Wittenberg* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 1–12.

² D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002), 181.

³ Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 145–168; Edith L. Blumhofer and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: Hymnody in the History of North American Protestantism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3–18.

⁴ Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 1–25; Monique M. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20–42.

⁵ Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 17–25; Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 27–39; Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 3–18.



participation in sung worship.⁶ Over subsequent centuries, hymn traditions became deeply embedded within the liturgical life of many Protestant communities. By the late twentieth century, however, contemporary worship music introduced new musical forms influenced by popular culture, amplified instrumentation, and evolving liturgical practices. This development generated both enthusiasm and resistance within many congregations.⁷

In response to these tensions, many churches have adopted what is now known as “blended worship.” Broadly defined, blended worship refers to integrating historic hymnody with contemporary praise and worship music within a single service.⁸ Advocates argue that this approach promotes unity by accommodating diverse musical preferences and generational identities.⁹ Critics, however, question whether such integration genuinely resolves the underlying tensions between the two traditions.¹⁰

This article examines the feasibility of blended congregational singing. Specifically, it asks whether local church contexts can sustainably realize a synthesis of traditional and contemporary worship music. The study argues that while blended worship represents a well-intentioned effort to reconcile divergent musical traditions, its implementation encounters persistent challenges rooted in cultural change, theological disagreement, generational diversity, and practical constraints within congregations.¹¹ The study traces the historical development of congregational singing, examines the rise of contemporary worship music, identifies theology, culture, and congregational context as formative principles, and evaluates the primary challenges facing blended worship practices.

⁶ John Calvin, Preface to the Genevan Psalter, trans. Elsie Anne McKee, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 98–105; Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 1–15.

⁷ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 146–170; Ruth and Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 1–25; Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 45–60.

⁸ Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 27.

⁹ Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 52–58; Webber, *Blended Worship*, 40–45.

¹⁰ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 67–89; Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 123–130.

¹¹ Willie S. Moody, "Worship and the Generational Divide: A Study of Inclusive Worship in the Church" (2023). *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*. 5110, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/5110>; Angelia Weide McLeroy, "Seeking Biblical Clarity Through Blended Worship in Georgia Baptist Churches" (2023). *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*. 4463, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/4463>; Joseph Roso, The Churches they are a Changing: Processes of Change in Worship Services, *Sociology of Religion*, Volume 84, Issue 2, 2023, 190–221, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srac025>



By situating contemporary debates within a broader historical and theological framework, this study seeks to clarify the challenges surrounding congregational singing and contribute to ongoing discussions on forming faithful and sustainable practices of corporate worship. The study also employs a qualitative historical-theological methodology to examine the development and feasibility of blended congregational singing within Christian worship. Drawing on biblical texts, historical writings, scholarly books, journal articles, and liturgical studies, the research traces the evolution of congregational music from the early church through the Reformation, the rise of hymnody, revival movements, and the emergence of contemporary worship music. The study also utilizes theological and sociocultural analysis to explore how theology, culture, and congregational context shape worship practices and influence attempts to integrate traditional hymnody with contemporary worship music. Rather than relying on empirical surveys or fieldwork, the article takes a conceptual and interpretive approach, synthesizing historical, theological, and sociological perspectives to evaluate the possibilities and challenges of blended worship in contemporary Christianity.

The Historical Development of the Traditional Approach

Although the precise character of congregational singing in the 1st to 5th centuries of Christianity is difficult to reconstruct, scriptural evidence suggests that communal singing was part of the early church's worship life.¹² The Gospel accounts note that Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn following the Last Supper (Matt 26:30). Likewise, the Apostle Paul exhorted believers to address one another in "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16), suggesting that sung worship functioned as a means of mutual edification within Christian gatherings. These passages suggest that congregational singing was already part of early Christian worship, even if the musical forms themselves remain largely undocumented.

Early Christian Chant (1st–5th Centuries)

Early Christian writers also reveal ambivalence about using instruments in worship. For example, Clement of Alexandria expressed skepticism about instrumental accompaniment, associating many instruments with pagan festivities and moral excesses. In his *Paedagogus*, Clement suggests

¹² Jade B. Weimer, "Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 265–281.



that the human voice alone is the most appropriate instrument for Christian praise.¹³ While these statements do not necessarily reflect universal practice in the early church, they show that debates about musical form and propriety existed long before the modern period.

Gregorian Chant and Medieval Liturgical Music (6th–15th Centuries)

By the medieval era, however, congregational participation in liturgical music had largely diminished within Western Christianity. As the church became increasingly formalized and institutionalized, the congregational role in the gathering was relegated. Gregorian chant became a dominant musical form in Western Christianity, especially in the Roman Catholic.¹⁴ Named traditionally after Pope Gregory I, Gregorian chant consisted of monophonic, unaccompanied melodies sung in Latin and designed to support the liturgy. Because Latin remained the liturgical language and chant required specialized musical training, ordinary worshippers often became passive participants in worship.¹⁵ Increasing liturgical complexity and the rise of polyphonic music further professionalized church music within ecclesiastical institutions.¹⁶

Trained clergy, monastic communities, and church choirs became the primary performers as medieval liturgical music grew more specialized and institutionally regulated.¹⁷ As musicologist Nicholas Temperley further corroborates, professional musicians within ecclesiastical institutions controlled much liturgical music before the Reformation, leaving little opportunity for ordinary congregants to participate directly in singing.¹⁸ The recovery of congregational song therefore became a significant liturgical development of the Protestant Reformation.

Protestant Reformation and Vernacular Congregational Singing (16th century)

The Protestant Reformation marked a decisive turning point in the history of congregational singing. Reformers challenged many aspects of medieval worship, including the limited role of

¹³ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, in Clementis Alexandrina Paedagogus, ed. Miroslav Marcovich and J. C. M. van Winden (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 2:4.

¹⁴ Nathan Hood, “Metrical Psalm-Singing and Emotion in Scottish Protestant Affective Piety, 1560–1650,” *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 23, no. 2 (2021): 151–169.

¹⁵ Cho Eun Young, Hayoung Wong, and Zong Woo Geem. 2021. "The Liturgical Usage of Translated Gregorian Chant in the Korean Catholic Church" *Religions* 12, no. 12: 1033, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121033>.

¹⁶ Szymon Bajon, “Gregorian Chant Ordinary Rediscovered: Examples of Using Gregorian Melodies of the Ordinary of the Mass in the 20th and 21st-Century Liturgical Compositions,” *Pro Musica Sacra* 20 (2022): 29–48, <https://doi.org/10.15633/pms.2002>.

¹⁷ Marta Crispí, “Liturgical Spaces and Devotional Spaces: Analysis of the Choirs of Three Catalan Nuns’ Monasteries during the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Arts* 13, no. 4 (2024): 112, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13040112>.

¹⁸ Nicholas Temperley, “The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34, no. 3 (1981): 511–44.



ordinary believers in liturgical participation. Central to Reformation theology was the conviction that worship should involve the entire congregation's active participation.¹⁹ Figures such as Martin Luther encouraged composing and translating hymns in the vernacular so the entire congregation could sing together. Luther's theological commitment to the priesthood of all believers extended to musical practice, resulting in numerous German hymns intended for congregational use.²⁰ Other reform movements similarly promoted congregational singing, though their approaches varied considerably. Some traditions emphasized metrical psalmody sung without instrumental accompaniment, while others permitted the continued use of instruments such as the organ.²¹ The Reformed tradition associated with John Calvin adopted a more restrained musical philosophy. Calvin emphasized singing only biblical Psalms, believing that inspired Scripture provided the most appropriate content for worship. This conviction contributed to the development of metrical psalmody and the publication of psalters designed specifically for congregational use.²²

The widespread adoption of congregational singing in Protestant worship represented a significant innovation in Christian liturgical history. Many reformers, in contrast to Calvin, adapted existing musical materials—including folk melodies familiar to the populace—to facilitate participation.²³ In doing so, they effectively incorporated elements of contemporary musical culture into church practice. The Reformation transformed congregational singing into a participatory practice involving the entire worshipping community while also establishing enduring differences between hymn-centered and psalm-centered Protestant traditions.²⁴ Ironically, practices now regarded as “traditional” resulted from contextual adaptation in earlier periods.

¹⁹ Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 1-12, Andrew Poxon, “The Institutionalization of the Congregational Singing of Metrical Psalms in the Elizabethan Reformation,” *Studies in Church History* 57 (2021): 120–141. <https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2021.7>; Yudha Thianto “The Significance of Psalm Singing in Calvin’s Liturgy of The Lord’s Supper and its Relevance Today”. *Verbum Christi: Journal of Reformed Evangelical Theology* 8, no. 2 (October 28, 2021). Accessed May 14, 2026, <https://verbum.sttrii.ac.id/index.php/VC/article/view/154>.

²⁰ Martin Luther, discussed in Walter Blankenburg, “Church Music in Reformed Europe,” in *Protestant Church Music: A History*, ed. Friedrich Blume (New York: Norton, 1974), 13.

²¹ Poxon, “The Institutionalization of the Congregational Singing of Metrical Psalms in the Elizabethan Reformation,” 120-141

²² Thianto, “Significance of Psalm Singing,” 154.

²³ Temperley, “The Old Way of Singing,” 514–520.

²⁴ John A. Witvliet, “The Spirituality of Worship in the Protestant Reformation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 418-432.



Rise of English Hymnody (17th–18th Centuries)

The rise of psalter traditions became a defining feature of Reformed worship by enabling congregations to sing biblical Psalms in metrical form. Its development from the 16th to 17th century helped worshipers sing Scripture collectively, memorably, and musically.²⁵ One of the most influential Psalters was the Geneva Psalter developed by John Calvin. Completed and published in 1562, the Genevan Psalter set the 150 Psalms to distinctive melodies. It was widely used in Europe and significantly shaped Protestant worship music.²⁶ English-speaking Protestants developed their own psalteries for their contexts. For instance, the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalters became prominent within the Church of England.²⁷ The Psalters reinforced the authority of scriptures and fostered congregational participation in singing.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Protestant communities began moving beyond exclusive psalm singing toward broader hymn traditions. This development reflected changing theological emphases, evangelical revival movements, and growing interest in personal religious experience.²⁸ Isaac Watts emerged as one of the most influential figures in English hymnody. Dissatisfied with strict metrical psalmody, Watts argued that Christian worship should reflect the fullness of New Testament revelation rather than relying solely on Old Testament Psalms. His hymns incorporated themes such as Christ's life, salvation, grace, and personal faith.²⁹ Charles Wesley further expanded hymnody through the Methodist revival movement. Together with John Wesley, he produced thousands of hymns emphasizing conversion, holiness, assurance, and Christian discipleship. Wesleyan hymnody played a major role in shaping evangelical worship across Britain and beyond.³⁰

The rise of hymnody significantly transformed congregational singing. Hymns offered greater thematic flexibility and emotional expression than traditional psalmody, making them especially effective within revivalist and evangelical contexts. Despite this development in congregational song, the period was not without controversy. Resistance to musical reform often

²⁵ Michael Morgan, "Singing the Psalms," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 569–582.

²⁶ Elsie Anne McKee, *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 105–108.

²⁷ Poxon, "The Institutionalization of the Congregational Singing of Metrical Psalms in the Elizabethan Reformation," 120–141; Hood, "Metrical Psalm-Singing and Emotion in Scottish Protestant Affective Piety, 1560–1650," 151–169.

²⁸ Erik Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymnody* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1981), 95–112.

²⁹ David W. Music, *Studies in the Hymnody of Isaac Watts* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 45–61.

³⁰ S. T. Kimbrough Jr., *The Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley: A Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 23–41.



came from congregants deeply attached to established singing traditions. Historical accounts reveal that attempts to introduce new methods of psalm singing in eighteenth-century England frequently provoked strong opposition. John Chetham observed that many rural congregations strongly resisted alterations to familiar tunes when new methods of congregational singing were introduced.³¹

Such resistance illustrates that conflicts over worship music often arise not merely from theological concerns but also from cultural and communal attachments. Thomas Moore recounts a similar example in which an elderly parishioner protested changes to the congregation's singing practices, lamenting that she had been "put out of her tune" after singing it for forty years.³² This anecdote highlights the deeply formative role that musical traditions play within congregational identity. Furthermore, debates concerning instrumentation were not limited to later centuries but also occurred among Reformation leaders themselves. For example, Ulrich Zwingli advocated a more austere liturgical approach, leading Zurich to remove organs and choirs in 1527. In contrast, Luther permitted the continued use of instrumental accompaniment in congregational singing.³³ These differing perspectives show that even within the Reformation movement, no single consensus existed on the appropriate musical form of Christian worship.

Nineteenth Century Hymn Book Expansion

The nineteenth century witnessed the widespread expansion of hymnbooks and denominational hymnals. Churches increasingly compiled hymn collections reflecting their theological emphases, liturgical traditions, and revivalist influences. These hymnals became important tools for shaping congregational identity and worship practice.³⁴ The period also saw the rise of gospel songs and revival hymns associated with evangelical movements in Britain and North America. Composers such as Fanny Crosby and Ira Sankey produced accessible songs characterized by memorable melodies and emotionally expressive texts. These compositions were particularly effective in evangelistic campaigns and revival meetings.³⁵ Musically, congregational singing became

³¹ John Chetham, *A Book of Psalmody* (Sheffield: William Nevill, 1718), Preface.

³² Thomas Moore, *The Psalm Singer's Compleat Tutor and Divine Companion*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: J. Eddowes, 1750), iv.

³³ Walter Blankenburg, "Church Music in Reformed Europe," *Protestant Church Music: A History* (1974): 507–90.

³⁴ Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 87–103.

³⁵ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Her Heart Can See: The Life and Hymns of Fanny J. Crosby* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 143–67.



increasingly associated with four-part harmony, organ accompaniment, and choir leadership. Advances in printing technology made hymnbooks more widely available, helping standardize congregational repertoire across denominations.³⁶

Taken together, these historical developments suggest that what is commonly labeled “traditional worship” was itself a product of ongoing adaptation. Congregational singing evolved through complex interactions among theological convictions, cultural influences, and local congregational contexts. The assumption that contemporary traditional practices represent an unchanging continuation of earlier forms therefore oversimplifies the historical reality. Instead, the tradition of congregational song has continually been shaped by both continuity and change.

Recognizing this historical dynamism is essential for evaluating current debates about worship music. The conflicts often described today as “worship wars” are not unprecedented innovations of modern Christianity but rather reflect a long-standing pattern within the church’s musical life. Understanding this historical continuity provides an important framework for assessing the contemporary relationship between traditional hymnody and modern worship practices.

The Contemporary Worship Music Approach

While traditional congregational singing developed gradually through the liturgical reforms of the sixteenth century and subsequent centuries of Protestant practice, contemporary worship music emerged more recently in the history of Christian worship. Although the two approaches are often presented as fundamentally opposed, a closer examination reveals shared underlying dynamics, particularly in their engagement with culture and their theological motivations. Understanding the rise of contemporary worship music therefore requires attention not only to musical style but also to broader sociological and theological developments within twentieth-century Christianity.

Twentieth Century Liturgical Renewal and Ecumenical Influence

The twentieth century brought significant changes to Christian worship through liturgical renewal movements and growing ecumenical engagement. Many churches sought to recover earlier traditions of active congregational participation while also adapting worship to contemporary

³⁶ Sylvia Iman Santoso, “The Rise of Lutheran Congregational Singing in Sixteenth-Century Germany: The Contribution of Lucas Osiander to Chorale Singing,” *Studia Liturgica* 55, no. 2 (2025): 262–276, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00393207251369547>; Gillian Ruth Warson, *From Psalmody to Hymnody: The Establishment of Printed Hymnbooks within Hymn Singing Communities* (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2001).



cultural contexts.³⁷ Liturgical scholars and church leaders encouraged restoring congregational singing as a central feature of worship rather than a performance led primarily by choirs, while revised hymnals incorporated both ancient hymns and newer compositions drawn from global Christian traditions.³⁸ Ecumenical movements also helped share musical resources across denominational boundaries, leading churches to adopt songs from diverse traditions such as Taizé chants, African hymns, and contemporary liturgical music.³⁹ This broadened the scope of congregational singing while preserving many traditional hymn forms.

Emergence and Development of Contemporary Worship Music in the Late Twentieth Century

Contemporary worship music began to gain prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period marked by significant cultural transformation in Western societies. During this time, many young people associated with the era's countercultural movements experienced religious conversion. They sought to express their newfound faith through musical forms that reflected popular culture.⁴⁰ As theologian John Frame notes, many individuals emerging from counterculture lifestyles turned to Christianity in search of meaning and stability. Their musical expressions often adopted the stylistic elements of contemporary popular music while incorporating explicitly Christian themes.⁴¹

This 1960s movement, sometimes associated with the “Jesus People” revival in the United States, contributed significantly to the development of what would later become Contemporary Christian music (CCM). Scholars frequently interpret this development through several overlapping frameworks, including secularization theory, cultural adaptation within evangelicalism, and the broader expansion of charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of worship.⁴²

In contrast to traditional hymnody, which often emphasized doctrinal instruction through carefully structured poetic texts, contemporary worship songs frequently adopted simpler lyrical

³⁷ Teresa Berger, *Worship: Liturgical Practices and Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 112–15.

³⁸ Bert Groen, “Liturgical Renewal and Congregational Singing,” in *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 87–90.

³⁹ John A. Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), 56–58.

⁴⁰ Monique M. Ingalls and Amos Yong, eds., *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015); Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 45; Ruth and Hong, *History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, 27.

⁴¹ John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 115.

⁴² Monique M. Ingalls and Tom Wagner, eds., *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity, and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 13.



structures and repetitive musical forms. These songs were designed to encourage emotional engagement and direct expressions of devotion toward God. As a result, many congregations shifted from didactic hymnody—songs about God—to praise and worship songs addressed directly to God.⁴³

Global Expansion and Cultural Influence of Contemporary Worship Music

The rapid growth of contemporary worship music was also facilitated by developments in media technology and the expansion of the Christian music industry. Recording labels such as Maranatha Music and Sparrow Records began producing and distributing worship music for both congregational settings and in private devotional contexts. Through recordings, radio broadcasts, and later digital media, contemporary worship songs spread quickly across denominational and geographic boundaries.⁴⁴

Beyond technological developments, the growth of megachurches and large evangelical congregations contributed significantly to the institutionalization of contemporary worship practices. These churches often adopted band-based musical ensembles, amplified sound systems, and stage-centered worship leadership models. Congregational singing increasingly took place in carefully produced environments featuring professional musicians, lighting systems, and multimedia presentations.

By the early twenty-first century, contemporary worship music had become a global phenomenon. A relatively small number of influential churches, artists, and worship collectives began shaping the musical repertoire congregations worldwide used. Groups associated with churches such as Hillsong, Bethel Church, and Elevation Church produced widely distributed songs that churches across denominational and cultural contexts adopted. Scholars of contemporary worship have described this phenomenon as a form of cultural concentration in which a limited number of influential producers disproportionately shape the global worship repertoire.⁴⁵

This pattern reflects what sociologists sometimes describe as a “power-law distribution,” in which a small group of highly visible creators generates content consumed by a much larger

⁴³ Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 13.

⁴⁴ Igor Jurekovič, “Migrating Melodies, Migrating Spirituality: Initial Findings from a Slovenian Study of Contemporary Worship Music,” *Religions* 17, no. 3 (2026): 321, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030321>; Jim Y. Trammell, “Look Up on Me: Analyzing Worship Media Technologies,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 22, nos. 2–4 (2024): 68–77; Ruth and Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, 76.

⁴⁵ Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 13.



audience.⁴⁶ In contemporary worship music, this concentration has produced a relatively standardized repertoire of songs that circulate internationally through conferences, recordings, and digital platforms.

Another significant factor contributing to the rise of contemporary worship music is its close relationship with popular musical culture. Contemporary worship frequently draws upon genres such as rock, pop, rhythm and blues, reggae, and other forms of urban music. As Matthew Olugbemi observes, urban musical styles historically developed within commercial environments designed to appeal to diverse audiences in rapidly expanding urban contexts.⁴⁷ When such musical forms are incorporated into church settings, they help worship practices resonate more immediately with congregants already familiar with these styles in their everyday cultural environment.

From a missiological perspective, this cultural adaptation is often justified as a means of effective communication. Anthropologist and missiologist Paul G. Hiebert argues that cultural forms such as music function as powerful carriers of meaning within societies because they engage both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of human experience.⁴⁸ Consequently, adopting contemporary musical styles in Christian worship may be understood as an attempt to communicate theological truths through culturally intelligible forms.

Nevertheless, incorporating popular musical styles into church worship has not been without controversy. Critics argue that contemporary worship music risks prioritizing emotional experience over theological depth or encouraging performance-oriented worship environments in which congregants become passive spectators rather than active participants. Supporters, on the other hand, contend that contemporary musical forms allow the church to communicate the gospel effectively within changing cultural contexts.⁴⁹

Despite these disagreements, contemporary worship music, like the traditional hymnody that preceded it, developed through contextual adaptation. Just as Reformation hymn writers drew upon familiar folk melodies to encourage congregational participation, contemporary worship leaders have utilized modern musical idioms to connect with present-day congregations. The

⁴⁶ Ingalls and Wagner, *Christian Congregational Music*, 26.

⁴⁷ Matthew A. Olugbemi, “How Urban Music Affects Church Music,” accessed February 13, 2026. https://www.Academia.Edu/4236621/How_Urban_Music_Affects_Church_Music_by_matthew_olugbemi.

⁴⁸ Paul G. Hiebert. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 183.

⁴⁹ Chee Man Tang, “When Songs Replace Scripture: Contemporary Worship Music and the Transformation of Congregational Formation,” *Theology* 129, no. 1 (2026): 31–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X251401161>



central question, therefore, is not merely whether contemporary forms are culturally influenced—since all worship music reflects its cultural context—but whether these forms can be integrated meaningfully with historic traditions of congregational singing.

Understanding the historical and sociological development of contemporary worship music provides an essential foundation for evaluating attempts to integrate it with traditional hymnody. This integration, often described as blended worship, raises complex questions about theology, culture, and congregational identity. The following section examines these underlying dynamics by exploring several principles that have historically shaped the development of congregational music.

Binding Principles in the Development of Congregational Singing

The historical survey of both traditional and contemporary congregational singing reveals that, despite their apparent differences, several underlying forces consistently shape the evolution of church music. These forces help explain why musical forms change across historical periods while certain patterns persist. Three principles in particular emerge as influential across the development of congregational singing: theology, culture, and congregational context. These principles function both as points of convergence between traditional and contemporary worship practices and as sources of tension that complicate attempts to synthesize the two traditions.

Theology as a Formative Principle

Theological conviction has historically served as one of the primary motivations behind changes in congregational music. Throughout church history, discussions regarding worship practices have rarely been framed purely in aesthetic terms. Instead, debates about church music have often rested on broader theological arguments about the nature and purpose of Christian worship.⁵⁰

The Protestant Reformation provides a clear example of theology shaping musical practice. Reformers such as Martin Luther promoted congregational singing partly as an expression of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.⁵¹ By encouraging the entire congregation to sing, Luther sought to emphasize the gathered community's active role in worship rather than reserving musical

⁵⁰ Franklin Hutabarat, "History of Church Music: A General Overview," *Jurnal Koinonia: Fakultas Filsafat Universitas Advent Indonesia* 15, no. 1 (June 2023): 57–70, <https://doi.org/10.35974/koinonia.v15i1.3108>.

⁵¹ Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 18–27; Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 35–44; Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1975), 267–70.



leadership exclusively for clergy or trained choirs.⁵² Similarly, other reform movements—including the Calvinists, Anabaptists, and various Protestant traditions that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—developed distinct approaches to congregational song that reflected their theological priorities.⁵³ These theological motivations continued to shape church music in later centuries. For example, traditions influenced by the regulative principle of worship—often associated with John Calvin’s theology—emphasized singing biblical psalms and discouraged elaborate musical instrumentation.⁵⁴ In contrast, Lutheran traditions retained instrumental accompaniment and developed rich hymn traditions. These differences show how theological interpretation directly shaped the musical practices of particular communities.

The rise of contemporary worship music in the twentieth century likewise reflects theological motivations. Many proponents of contemporary worship emphasize the evangelistic potential of culturally accessible musical forms. According to D. A. Carson, advocates of contemporary worship often view musical adaptation as a way to remove cultural barriers that might prevent unchurched individuals from engaging with Christian worship.⁵⁵ In this sense, contemporary worship practices may be understood as attempts to fulfill the church’s evangelistic mandate within changing cultural contexts.

While the theological assumptions underlying traditional and contemporary worship may differ, both approaches ultimately derive their legitimacy from theological reasoning. This shared reliance on theological justification represents an important point of continuity between the two traditions.

Culture as a Catalytic Principle

Alongside theology, cultural context has consistently shaped congregational music. Although some advocates of traditional worship have expressed concern about secular culture’s influence on church music, historical evidence shows that cultural adaptation has long been part of Christian worship.

One notable example is the use of vernacular language during the Reformation. Reformers sought to replace Latin liturgical texts with translations in the common languages spoken by local

⁵² Blankenburg “Church Music in Reformed Europe,” 13.

⁵³ Temperley, *The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development*, 511–44.

⁵⁴ John Barber, “Luther and Calvin on Music and Worship,” *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 8, no. 26 (June 2006), thirdmill.org.

⁵⁵ Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 14.



congregations. By doing so, they aimed to make worship more accessible and participatory. As scholars have noted, Luther himself composed hymns in German so that ordinary believers could engage more directly with the theological content of the songs.⁵⁶ Similarly, the development of metrical psalms enabled biblical texts to be sung to familiar melodic patterns, many of which were influenced by contemporary folk music traditions.⁵⁷ As demonstrated, congregational singing has consistently developed through interaction with surrounding cultural environments.

Contemporary worship music represents another stage in this ongoing process of cultural engagement. Modern worship songs frequently incorporate musical styles drawn from popular genres such as rock, pop, reggae, and rhythm and blues. These styles often reflect the musical preferences of the communities in which churches are located. From a missiological perspective, such adaptation can be understood as an attempt to communicate the message of the gospel through culturally intelligible forms. Hiebert argues that cultural forms—including music—play a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpret and internalize religious messages.⁵⁸ Music, in particular, engages emotional and symbolic dimensions of human experience that are deeply embedded within cultural frameworks. As a result, the musical language used in worship inevitably reflects the congregation's cultural context.

African Christianity offers a key example of how congregational singing develops through interaction with local culture. In many African societies, music is communal and participatory, often involving call-and-response singing, rhythmic movement, clapping, drumming, and dance. As Christianity spread across Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many churches adapted worship music to reflect indigenous cultural expressions rather than relying solely on European hymn traditions.⁵⁹ Local languages, traditional rhythms, and indigenous instruments were increasingly incorporated into Christian worship, demonstrating how congregational singing evolves within particular cultural settings. Scholars such as John S. Mbiti argue that African religious life traditionally integrates music, spirituality, and community participation in ways that strongly shape worship practices.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ John Swarbrick, "Martin Luther: Music and Mission," *Holiness* 3 (2020): 235–56.

⁵⁷ Temperley, "The Old Way of Singing," 520–530.

⁵⁸ Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 183.

⁵⁹ Ezra Chitando and Lovemore Togarasei, *Music and Healing in African Christianity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 34–36.

⁶⁰ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2015), 87–89.



African congregational singing also illustrates the ongoing relationship between tradition and adaptation in Christian worship. Many African churches continue to sing missionary-introduced hymns while also embracing contemporary African gospel music and locally composed choruses. This blending of inherited Christian traditions with indigenous musical forms reflects the broader historical pattern through which church music changes across time and cultures. Furthermore, African worship traditions challenge strict distinctions between traditional and contemporary music because many modern worship expressions are rooted in long-standing African communal practices of rhythm, storytelling, and collective participation.⁶¹ Attempts to isolate worship music from cultural influences have long been unrealistic. Throughout Christian history, musical practices have continually been reshaped through interactions with surrounding cultural environments.

Congregational Context as a Determining Principle

A third principle influencing the development of congregational singing is the particular context of individual congregations. Even within shared denominational traditions, local churches often exhibit significant variation in their worship practices. Factors such as geographic location, demographic composition, and institutional history can affect how congregations practice singing.

Historical examples illustrate the diversity that can emerge within shared theological traditions. During the Reformation, different Protestant communities adopted distinct musical practices despite sharing many theological convictions. Some congregations embraced instrumental accompaniment, while others prohibited it entirely.⁶² These variations demonstrate that theological agreement alone does not guarantee uniformity in worship practice.

Similar patterns appear in contemporary church life. Churches within the same denomination frequently adopt different approaches to congregational music depending on the cultural and social characteristics of their surrounding communities. For instance, congregations in urban centers may incorporate contemporary musical styles more readily than those in rural areas, where traditional hymnody may remain more prominent.

⁶¹ Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 142–145; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate: From Mythical to Modern Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2022), 201–205.

⁶² John A. Dalling, “Calvinism and the Practice of Psalm Singing in Reformed Worship,” *The Hymn* 73, no. 2 (2022): 12–15; Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther’s Wittenberg*, 115–18.



Even within a single denomination, congregational singing practices can vary significantly. The Baptist tradition offers a good example. Some Baptist churches still focus on traditional hymn singing with an organ or piano, while others use contemporary worship bands and modern praise music. These differences often stem from demographics and cultural preferences rather than doctrinal disputes.

Consequently, congregational context mediates between theology and culture. Local churches must negotiate how they express theological convictions within particular cultural environments and communal traditions. This negotiation process inevitably produces diversity in worship practices across congregations.

Implications for Blended Worship

The principles of theology, culture, and congregational context together explain both the continuity and diversity of congregational singing. While theology provides a shared foundation, cultural dynamics and local contexts generate differing musical preferences. The challenge of blended worship, therefore, is not merely stylistic combination but negotiating theological conviction, cultural identity, and congregational tradition. These principles also clarify why integration, though appealing, remains difficult in practice.

Cultural Dynamism

Rapid cultural change presents a major challenge because contemporary musical styles remain inherently unstable. Efforts to sustain a balance between traditional and modern forms often struggle to keep pace. As Monique Ingalls demonstrates, contemporary worship frequently mirrors developments in the global music industry, creating pressure for continual adaptation.⁶³ By contrast, traditional hymnody draws from a stable repertoire that supports familiarity and participation. However, introducing new songs without repetition or teaching can reduce engagement and shift congregants toward passive listening. Churches are thus caught between preserving tradition and adapting to change.

Generational Diversity

Generational diversity further complicates integration. Musical preferences often form during formative years, creating strong emotional attachments. Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong argue that music associated with revival or cultural transition becomes embedded in generational

⁶³ Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 15.



identity.⁶⁴ Consequently, what resonates with one group may alienate another. In many contexts, younger members gravitate toward contemporary music, while older members remain attached to hymnody, undermining unity.

Theological Disagreements

Theological differences also shape these tensions. Traditional hymn advocates emphasize doctrinal depth, while contemporary songs may prioritize emotional expression. Conversely, proponents of contemporary worship highlight its immediacy and experiential engagement. D. A. Carson notes that such disagreements reflect differing assumptions about whether worship should prioritize teaching, proclamation, or experience.⁶⁵ These convictions influence whether blended worship is perceived as faithful or problematic.

Musical Resources and Compatibility

Practical limitations further hinder integration. Blended worship requires musicians who can navigate both traditions, yet many congregations lack that versatility. Traditional hymnody depends on organ or piano, whereas contemporary worship relies on band-based instrumentation. Integrating these forms requires technical skill and careful planning. Smaller churches, in particular, may lack the financial resources or personnel to sustain such diversity.

Traditional hymnody and contemporary worship developed within different musical frameworks, making integration difficult. While creative arrangements can bridge the gap, they demand expertise that is not always available.

Spectator-Oriented Worship

Another concern is the emergence of performance-oriented worship. Contemporary settings often incorporate amplification, lighting, and professional musicianship, which may shift focus from participation to performance. Lester Ruth cautions that maintaining congregational singing requires balancing musical excellence with accessibility.⁶⁶

Conclusion

This study examined the historical, theological, and cultural development of congregational singing to evaluate the feasibility of blended worship within contemporary Christianity. It argued

⁶⁴ Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 138.

⁶⁵ Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 11.

⁶⁶ Ruth and Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, 45.



that debates concerning church music are not unique to the modern period but have accompanied the church throughout its history. From the communal singing practices of the early church, through the liturgical formalism of the medieval era, to the congregational reforms of the Protestant Reformation and the rise of English hymnody, congregational music has continually evolved through interaction between theology, culture, and local church context. The study also showed that practices now regarded as “traditional” were themselves products of adaptation and reform in earlier historical settings.

The article also traced the emergence of contemporary worship music in the twentieth century, emphasizing the influence of evangelical revivalism, globalization, media technology, and cultural change. Contemporary worship developed as an attempt to communicate Christian faith through culturally accessible musical forms, much as earlier reformers employed vernacular language and familiar melodies to encourage congregational participation. Although traditional hymnody and contemporary worship music are often portrayed as opposing traditions, the study showed that both are shaped by similar underlying dynamics, particularly theological conviction and contextual adaptation. The study identified three major principles that consistently shape congregational singing throughout history: theology, culture, and congregational context. Theology informs the purpose and content of worship, culture shapes the musical language through which worship is expressed, and congregational context mediates how worship practices are implemented within particular communities.

At the same time, the study showed that integrating traditional and contemporary worship within blended worship practices faces substantial challenges. Rapid cultural change continually reshapes musical preferences, while generational diversity creates strong emotional attachments to differing worship traditions. Theological disagreements concerning doctrinal depth, emotional expression, and the purpose of worship further complicate integration. Practical limitations such as financial resources, musical expertise, instrumentation, and technological demands also hinder successful implementation, particularly within smaller congregations. In addition, the increasing tendency toward performance-oriented worship environments risks weakening congregational participation by shifting attention from communal singing to musical presentation.

Ultimately, this study concludes that blended worship represents a sincere effort to reconcile differing traditions of congregational singing. Yet, its success depends on more than simply combining musical styles within a single service. Sustainable congregational worship



requires theological clarity, historical awareness, pastoral wisdom, and careful attention to congregational context. The historical evidence presented demonstrates that congregational singing has always been both dynamic and adaptive, continually negotiating the relationship between continuity and change. The enduring challenge for the contemporary church, therefore, is not merely choosing between traditional and modern music, but cultivating worship practices that preserve theological integrity, encourage active congregational participation, and foster ecclesial unity within an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing cultural environment.

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