

The Convergence of Music within Christianity

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The “Bible Belt” is a term used to describe an area of the Southern United States which is known for its numerous religious communities. These populations primarily consist of Protestant Christians.¹ According to a religious landscape survey conducted by Pew Research Center, Christians make up 76% of adults in the South. More specifically, Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants make up 34% and 14% of adults in the South, respectively.² Three denominations of immense popularity within the Bible Belt are the Church of Christ, Methodist, and Baptist faiths. These faiths differ from each other in numerous ways, but still share many common factors. To begin, they are all Protestant Christian denominations commonly found in the Southern United States. They share a relatively similar belief system, but if one goes to a worship service for these denominations, they will notice that the music within worship itself differs a great deal on the surface.

The Church of Christ is a branch of Christianity that is “made up of non-denominational, autonomous congregations that base their beliefs and activities directly on the authority of the Bible.”³ It is known for its conservative nature, as its members believe in worshipping as it is described in the New Testament. This faith emerged in the United States during the Restoration Movement, after disagreements struck in an earlier form of the denomination.⁴ One of these disputes was over the use of musical instruments in worship services. The Church of Christ does

¹ Christianity.com Editorial Staff. “What Is the Bible Belt? Know the States, History, and Beliefs.” Christianity.com. Accessed 2023. <https://www.christianity.com/church/the-bible-belt.html>.

² “Religious Landscape Study.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, May 12, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/region/south/>.

³ “Churches of Christ in Alabama.” Encyclopedia of Alabama, March 30, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/churches-of-christ-in-alabama/>.

⁴ Ibid.

not usually use instruments during worship services. The music in their worship consists almost exclusively of a cappella hymns.⁵ Some examples of common hymns sung in the Church of Christ are *The Old Rugged Cross*, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, and *How Great Thou Art*. While some congregations are incorporating the singing of more modern worship music, the singing of a cappella music has been remained a constant in the Church of Christ. It is typical for a hymnal found here to include shape notes, though many of the congregants learn the music by ear. Additionally, Churches of Christ do not typically have a choir. The congregation sings each song together, all led by a male conductor. This conductor is known as a “song leader.” The song leader typically conducts the entrances of each vocal line and makes sure that the congregation stays at the same tempo throughout the hymn. The song leader will sing the melody to support the congregation’s singing of the melody, as well as to help the harmonizing members stay in the right key. The songs are spread throughout the worship service, interspersed between prayers, communion, and the preacher’s lesson.

Church of Christ congregations place great importance on the selection of songs performed in their worship services. As stated previously, their faith leads them to sing a cappella hymns during times of worship. One source states that a cappella singing in the Church of Christ “enables a connection to God in a way that instruments cannot.”⁶ The lack of instrumentation serves to heighten the congregation’s awareness of the text. It is common for Church of Christ hymns to have many verses, and to sing all of the verses each time they are included in a service. This also leads to a heightened emphasis of text, as the melodic line is

⁵ Dodson, Robert. “Why Does The Church Of Christ Not Use Mechanical Instruments Of Music In Worship?” Northwest Church Of Christ. Accessed 2023. <https://www.northwestcofc.org/why-does-the-church-of-christ-not-use-mechanical-instruments-of-music-in-worship.html>.

⁶ Long, Mary Cate. “How to Worship: Church of Christ Style.” Pepperdine Graphic, December 11, 2019. <https://pepperdine-graphic.com/how-to-worship-church-of-christ-style/>.

often repeated while the text changes. The music in a Church of Christ service also encourages the congregation to trust and rely on each other. One way this is shown is through the common vocal divisions. The hymns are often vocally arranged in two-part or four-part harmony. This allows for the audience to find a harmony that they would like to sing and support the other members with their voice. In addition to their biblical views, Church of Christ congregations sing their hymns all together to provide a sense of unity and fellowship to its members.

The Methodist faith was founded in the 18th-century by John Wesley. It began as a way to reform the Church of England, but eventually separated and became its own denomination. In 1939, different forms of the Methodist faith joined together, and the Methodist Church as it is known in America today was formed.⁷ One source states that, due to the Methodist faith being so widespread, it “no longer has a hymn heritage that identifies and unifies us. Rather, we have a collection of national, regional, and local hymn heritages. We are as diverse in our hymn content and singing as we are in our languages, cultural, races, and geographical locations.”⁸ A Methodist Church worship service often includes both congregational singing and the singing of an anthem by a choral ensemble. The congregational singing is generally a well-known hymn, while the choral anthem is a more elaborate, occasionally modern, piece. At a separate time in the worship service, there is often a congregational singing of the doxology. This is a “beautiful, powerful, and diverse song”⁹ that is normally sung around the time monetary offerings are

⁷ Davies, Rupert E. “Methodism.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, May 25, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism/America>.

⁸ Westermeyer, Paul. “What Is the United Methodist Church Hymn Tradition?” *Discipleship Ministries*, August 15, 2008. <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/what-is-the-united-methodist-church-hymn-tradition>.

⁹ McBrayer, Rev. Dr. Joseph. *Doxology: Reclaiming a post-offering hymn*, July 26, 2010.
<https://jmcbray.com/2010/07/26/doxology-musicvideothoughts/>.

collected. It is sung to praise and honor God. The music within a Methodist Church worship service is commonly accompanied by an organ or piano. The instrument will sometimes lead the congregational singing, while a conductor leads the choral ensemble.

John Wesley provided detailed instructions for singing in the Methodist Church. These include singing the music as it is written, singing modestly, and singing spiritually.¹⁰ Many of the instructions Wesley left serve to unify the congregation when singing. He did not want anyone to stick out or detract from the congregation's united sound. Wesley's emphasis for the congregation to know the music as written supports this. He wanted all the congregation to sing together, with clear pitches and rhythms, as a form of praise. The unity in melodic line serves to unite the members and inspire the worship service. Above all, John Wesley instructed the congregation to sing spiritually. This encourages the congregation to focus on the text of what they are singing. It also reinforces previous instructions by encouraging the members to sing as a form of worship, instead of singing for anyone around them to hear. The anthems sung by choral ensembles in Methodist Church worship services are often an opportunity to make a connection to that Sunday's lesson. Themes of thankfulness, love, and forgiveness are common in these songs. An organ or piano accompaniment often supports the choral ensemble and the congregation. An accompanist plays many preludes, interludes, and postludes during a Methodist Church service. The rich timbre of an organ is helpful for guiding the congregation through the emotions of the worship music. It is regularly played while the service begins and ends, as well as during communion, to assist the congregation in maintaining a deep focus on the worship service.

¹⁰ Baber, Charlie. "Wesley's Directions for Singing." United Methodist Insight, September 19, 2017. <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/local-church/wesley-s-directions-for-singing/>.

The Baptist faith is a category of Protestant Christians that, while not a single denominational structure, all follow a similar form of organization within their churches. Despite some debate, scholars generally acknowledge it to have originated as a result of Congregationalism in the 17th-century.¹¹ Most Baptist congregations practice similar orders of worship. These can include hymns of adoration or psalms, the main lesson in the service, and a closing meditation.¹² Most Baptist congregations have a choral ensemble and instruments. Traditional churches may have a choir and small orchestra, while more modern churches are likely to involve a praise team and worship band during their service. There has been conflict in the Baptist faith regarding music since the beginning. This conflict over worship styles is known as “worship wars.” Some Baptist pastors opposed congregational singing and the singing of hymns, whereas some believed congregational singing was valuable.¹³ This constant debate led to the formation of many branches of the Baptist Church. In 1941, the Baptist Church Music Department was officially formed. This allowed for more hymnals to be published. Over time, more attention became focused on church music programs. This paved the way for modern Baptist church choirs and popular-style worship groups, and eventually led to the increased popularity of Contemporary Christian music.¹⁴

¹¹ Hudson, Winthrop S. “Baptist.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Accessed 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baptist/History>.

¹² “What Does a Worship Service Look like and Why?” Free Grace Baptist Church. Accessed 2023. <https://www.freegrace.ca/order-of-worship/>.

¹³ Durso, Pam. “LEARNING FROM BAPTIST HISTORY: The Long History of Baptist Worship Wars.” Good Faith Media, March 17, 2009. <https://goodfaithmedia.org/learning-from-baptist-history-the-long-history-of-baptist-worship-wars-cms-8314/>.

¹⁴ “Turning Points in Baptist Church Music.” The Free Library. Accessed 2023. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Turning+Points+in+Baptist+Church+Music.-a0515126034>.

As previously mentioned, there are a variety church branches that fall under the category of Baptist. The faith encompasses many styles of worship, especially in regard to music. Some Baptist congregations hold multiple services in order to allow the members of the congregation to choose what is the best fit for them. A more contemporary service includes popular-style music, often compositionally simpler than the hymns found in a traditional service. It is commonly accompanied with a mixture of a guitar, drum set, and keyboard. A vocalist leads by singing the melody while the congregation sings along. In the Church of Christ, contemporary music has primarily remained a cappella. The modernity of it springs from the source of the music itself, as a large number of contemporary Church of Christ music is merely Contemporary Christian music that is sung as a cappella during the service. This is most commonly introduced first to only the youth of the congregation. Once the younger congregants know a piece, it is slowly incorporated in the primary worship service. In the Methodist faith, contemporary worship music is often incorporated through the performance of modern anthems. Many times, the instrumentation will rely on an organ less. This could be due to an accessibility issue, as organs are sometimes expensive to purchase and maintain, but it has certainly led to a modern style of Methodist worship music. There has not much been much research done to survey the percentage of churches that employ contemporary services as opposed to traditional services, but a study conducted by Barna Group in 2020 showed that 62% of elders prefer a traditional worship style. In the same study, it was found that only 38% of millennials prefer a traditional worship style.¹⁵ This is a significant decrease, which will likely lead to a shift in modern worship music. Despite criticism of contemporary music, one source states that, “the Psalms show a full

¹⁵ “Christian Millennials Are Most Likely Generation to Lean Toward Charismatic Worship.” Barna Group, June 28, 2023. <https://www.barna.com/research/worship-preferences/>.

range of purposes for singing in worship including praise, thanksgiving, petition, confession of sin, testimony, exhortation, consecration, self-commitment, etc. The music in our church should be allowed to serve all of these Biblical purposes.”¹⁶ Both the traditional worship hymns and the contemporary worship music can be emotive and deeply intricate in music and text. This is highly important in the each of the aforementioned faiths, as it serves as a reminder to the congregation of their purpose for worship.

While “Bible Belt” is a term used to describe an area of the Southern United States which is known for its closely related religious communities,¹⁷ the ways they go about worship often starkly contrast. On the surface, the music within worship services differs a great deal. The Church of Christ worships with a cappella music, while the Baptist faith may worship with many instruments played in the style of popular music. The Methodist faith showcases many musical forms in their worship service, whereas the Church of Christ will only sing as a congregation.

These faiths certainly differ a great deal in practice, but after reviewing worship music used in the Church of Christ, Methodist, and Baptist faiths, I have noticed many similarities amongst the differences. With a common goal, the faiths incorporate different aspects of music into their services. They wish to share their beliefs and support their congregations as much as possible with their music. All three use music to strengthen the connection to their worship and increase their awareness of their faiths. As leader of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, said, “In these, we may think and let think; we may 'agree to disagree.' But, meantime, let us hold fast

¹⁶ “TBC’s Traditional & Contemporary Style of Music.” Triad Baptist Church. Accessed 2023. <https://www.tbcnw.org/contemporary-christian-music-philosophy>.

¹⁷ Christianity.com Editorial Staff. “What Is the Bible Belt? Know the States, History, and Beliefs.” Christianity.com. Accessed 2023. <https://www.christianity.com/church/the-bible-belt.html>.

the essentials.”¹⁸ There is nothing wrong or bad about the differences in the use of worship music within these three faiths.

The Church of Christ allows rich harmonies and the absence of instruments in their service to reinforce the text that is being sung. The Methodist Church uses a mixture of musical styles to encompass the multi-faceted intentionality in their worship. The Baptist faith incorporates a range of genres to welcome as many people as possible to their worship, while conveying a message according to their beliefs. Though the faiths are all different, their members agree that music making in worship must be conducted primarily on a personal level. It is intended to be moving to each member, so that each member will then go and share the experience. Music in worship is intended to have an effect.

¹⁸ Crosswalk.com Editorial Staff. “10 Things Everyone Should Know about the Methodist Church.” Christianity.com, May 21, 2018.
<https://www.christianity.com/church/denominations/what-is-methodism-10-things-to-know-about-methodists.html>.

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