

Lyrics in Congregational Song  
A Biblical and Historical Survey

Michael May

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Dr. Paul Rumrill, D.M.A.  
Thesis Chair

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Dr. John Gabriel Miller, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Monica Rose Brennan, D.Min.  
Committee Member

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Dr. David Schweitzer, Ph.D.  
Assistant Honors Director

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Date

## Abstract

Is there a standard as to what constitutes biblical, God-honoring congregational song lyrics? In this paper, I will seek to address this question through a review of relevant biblical principles and positions of prominent leaders throughout church history. The Bible provides a language of worship in the Psalms and includes some information regarding singing in the New Testament. Biblical principles have been applied throughout the centuries by various church fathers. The synthesis of biblical principles and historical contributions will produce a set of guidelines by which congregational song lyrics may be evaluated for the purpose of contextual application in modern services.

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**Introduction**

The people of God have always been singing. From the song of Moses in Exodus 15 to the most contemporary praise choruses today, God's gathered people have expressed their corporate praise, devotion, lament, and joy to the Lord through song. Congregational songs of worship have looked vastly different throughout various times and cultures, expressing God's truth in their own context.

Within the American church context today, the focus seems to be more on musical style than biblically accurate lyrics. The various opinions by pastors and musicians favoring certain styles of worship music are sometimes well-intentioned, but often misleading. The most important aspect of congregational song is what one says to God about God, not what style the accompanying music is.

Is there a standard as to what constitutes biblical, God-honoring congregational song lyrics? Through a study of relevant biblical passages and positions of church fathers, some guidelines for effective congregational song lyric choices may be applied to current church practices. The Psalms provide a language of praise by which the people of God express worship to God. Scripture as a whole provides source material for congregational song. History points to the need for orthodox theology (specifically Christology), the consideration of aesthetics, and the precedent of basing worship lyrics in Scripture. When these guidelines are applied, worship leaders and congregants alike will learn to think

critically about what they sing, resulting in churches singing songs that accurately express the truth of God.

### **Rationale**

It is vital for the church to survey the biblical and historical data regarding the topic of congregational song lyrics. In this section, two preliminary topics will be addressed. The first topic deals with the purpose of congregational song. Does congregational singing primarily serve the purpose of focusing our emotions on God, or our intellects as well? Does it serve the purpose of merely preparing the hearts of the congregation for the sermon, or does singing corporately have an edification factor of its own? After engaging the purpose of congregational singing, subsequent research can address the importance of what we sing – specifically: what function do the lyrics of a song have in the life of the believer?

### **The Purpose of Congregational Song**

For what purpose does the body of Christ gather together and sing? Hustad (1993) argues that congregational song “serves the purposes of God in the church, especially in... worship... proclamation of the gospel... Christian education... pastoral care... and fellowship” (p. 23). We sing because it is a method chosen by God to accomplish the purposes of God for His church.

Hustad (1993) provides a broad definition of the various purposes of congregational song. The primary purpose of congregational song is worshiping God by singing to Him about Him. This includes the proclamation of the gospel as its material. As the congregation sings the truth of God, they learn and internalize this truth. All of

this is done in the context of fellowship, which “emphasizes the unity of the church” and acts as “a significant agent of building community” (p. 25).

Ashton and Davis (2002) argue that the “purpose of the whole service [including singing] is not the precise statement of doctrine; it is edification and evangelism” (p. 90). We sing corporate songs of praise because, in doing so, believer and unbeliever alike are exposed to the Word of God. The Word, whether sung or preached, “brings the church about, builds it up, and increases its numbers” (Ashton & Davis, 2002, p. 90). The goal of congregational singing, in Ashton and Davis’ minds, is to communicate the Word of God and allow the Spirit of God to use it in the lives of those present.

This is a strong definition because it is heavily focused on the One to whom our praise is due. Churches are to sing songs based in the Word of God, communicate that truth faithfully and fervently back to God, and, in doing so, allow the Spirit of God to work in their hearts and lives. Ashton and Davis (2002) also make it clear that congregational song is meant to be more than a mere reciting of doctrine. While biblical truth must be the foundation of congregational song, it is only a means to the end of passionate praise to the one true God.

In *Worship Old and New*, Webber (1994) argues that “music is the means through which the church in worship joins the heavenly song, offers otherwise unutterable praises, and experiences the unity of the body of Christ” (p. 202). We sing to acknowledge the spiritual, transcendent aspect of God’s character and work. We sing to praise God in a manner that is otherwise impossible. We sing to enjoy the presence of God with the fellowship of believers.

Webber (1994) also addresses the effect of congregational singing on the worshiper's attitude. Corporate praise "expresses the worship of proclamation, meditation, and praise and therefore affects the attitude of the worshiper" (p. 202). The act of congregational singing draws the worshiper's emotions and attitudes toward the adoration of God.

If one were to synthesize the definitions above, one could define the purpose of congregational song as worship, edification, and fellowship. Foundationally, the body of Christ gathers each week to express its corporate devotion to the Lord in song. This can take on a variety of expressions, including "praise, thanksgiving, confession, dedication, and petition" (Hustad, 1993, p. 24). The body of Christ corporately sings the Word of God to allow the Spirit of God to work among those who are present. Unbelievers are called to faith, new believers are called to internalize gospel truths, and mature believers are reminded of their salvation and the hope they have in Christ. All of this is done in the context of fellowship, where the members of the singing body of Christ lift one another up in unity.

### **The Importance of Lyrics in Congregational Song**

If the purpose of congregational song is worship, edification, and fellowship, then what role do the lyrics of the songs play? How can the lyrics of congregational song help or hinder the accomplishing of these purposes? Are there any preliminary guidelines regarding song lyrics that can be gleaned before a thorough investigation of the biblical and historical data is completed?

It has frequently been said in a variety of ways that “more Christians’ basic beliefs are formulated by singing hymns [or, by extension, all congregational song] than by preaching or Bible study” (Eskew and McElrath, 1995, p. 63). This has been true from the time of Ambrose, who used hymns to combat the Arian heresy, to Luther, who used hymns to teach Protestant doctrines such as justification by faith, to today. The preaching of the Word historically has been and rightly should still be the central aspect of the church service. That being said, music implants the truth of God into our souls in a way nothing else can. Webber (1994) rightly comments that “music proclaims the Scriptures in a heavenly language and provides a means through which the mystery of God in Christ is approachable” (p. 195).

Congregational song has the power to form the core beliefs of the church. What a church believes about who God is and what He has done is reflected in the lyrics that are being sung each week. Therefore, it is important to evaluate congregational songs based on their lyrical content. There are some preliminary principles to glean from the above purposes of congregational singing.

First and foremost, it appears that to fulfill the purposes of congregational song, there is a need to source lyrical material in the Word. Lyrics should be biblical because the Bible is God’s chosen method to communicate to His people regarding His character and acts. This deals with the purpose of worship.

Another consideration is that to fulfill the purposes of congregational song, there appears to be a need for the lyrics to have a sense of depth. This deals with the purpose of edification. In her guidelines of selecting pieces for use in congregational song, Cherry



(2010) asks, “is the text constructed well... Does the text use understandable words... is there a logical flow of thought... are the lyrics clear or vague?” (p. 184). While complex theological language is not necessary, a vagueness or lack of coherence may not accomplish the purposes of worship and edification among the body.

A final consideration is that to fulfill the purposes of congregational song, lyrics must be selected that are accessible to the culture of the local church. This deals with the purpose of fellowship. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and English Reformer, listed accessibility as one of three most important aspects to a worship service (Ashton & Davis, 2002). It is important to note that the congregation must comprehend what is being said or the lyrics will have no effect. When more learned people of the church employ high theological vocabulary to the detriment of the less learned people, it threatens unity.

It is evident that these three considerations are highly interrelated. As the church sings of biblical themes and quotations, it is to treat the themes at a level that is comprehensible and edifying, while understanding the vast diversity of people that come into the fellowship of the church. The result is a quest for balance between the three purposes of congregational song: the Word (worship), depth (edification), and accessibility (fellowship).

The purpose of congregational song can be succinctly defined by the three-fold values of worship, edification, and fellowship. We sing to worship the Lord, internalizing His truth as we sing, doing so together as one body with one voice (Romans 15:5-6). What we sing is important because it greatly influences what we believe about various

aspects of the Christian experience. With all this in mind, the focus will move to the biblical and historical data. What does Scripture itself say about this topic, and how have church fathers dealt with this issue throughout church history?

### **Biblical Foundation**

The Bible is far from silent on the topic of singing. In the Old Testament lie three entire books of nothing but song, with the Psalms being especially noteworthy – the longest book in the Bible by number of chapters. The book of Psalms contains 150 songs of praise to God, addressing various themes and concepts. The New Testament has far less references to singing, yet still a considerable amount. Jesus sings, Paul and Silas sing, and the twelve elders of Revelation sing. Does any of this content, however, provide guidance as to what Christians should be singing today?

### **Psalms**

The content of the Psalms includes both descriptive and prescriptive material. Among the descriptive material are the various themes of the Psalms, including praise, lament, and thanksgiving. These thematic elements in addition to recurring word usage provide a language of praise to Old Testament believers. Among the prescriptive material are the commands to complete various actions and to assume various postures. The Psalms frequently command singing, shouting, and celebration, as well as bowing and lifting hands. How much of this material is valid for congregational song today?

**Descriptive material.** While the Psalms were written in a vastly different time period in a vastly different cultural context, the basic use of the Psalms is not too different than the use of congregational song today. Wilson (2002) notes that “scholars generally agree today that most of the psalms (some say even all) were composed... for public performance in the temple worship of ancient Israel” (p. 23). They were largely written with corporate worship in mind.

The Psalms can be sorted into approximately three major thematic categories: praise, lament, and thanksgiving. Praise psalms “contain an appeal... to praise God, coupled with descriptions of his praiseworthy name, deeds, attributes, and character... for the most part praise psalms admit no hint of suffering or disorder” (Wilson, 2002, p. 65). A prime example of this is Psalm 33, which speaks of God’s creative power, sovereignty, and faithfulness. Lament psalms “direct their appeal to God himself, seeking deliverance from trouble and distress” (p. 65). An example of this is Psalm 74, which deals with God’s apparent silence during affliction and man’s cry for help. Thanksgiving psalms exist in between praise and lament psalms thematically. They recognize suffering in the world, but also “reaffirm a confidence in the saving power and grace of a God who has entered the life of the psalmist to redeem and transform” (p. 66). An example of this is Psalm 116, which is a recounting of a story of God’s deliverance from the snares of death. The major themes of the psalms cover the major categories of the Jewish religious experience.

The Psalms as a whole serve to rightly teach who God is and who man is. Read or sung as a whole, the result is a right understanding of God, praise to Him, and an

understanding of who man is. The themes and concepts that run through the Psalms as a whole can be described as a language of praise. It provides an example and source content for what God desires of His worshipers today: a sincere heart and genuine praise.

**Prescriptive material.** The descriptive material in the Psalms show the themes of Old Testament worship and the language of praise developed by the Jewish people. There are also prescriptive elements to the book of Psalms: various commands to perform certain acts and postures.

Among the various action commands in the Psalms, many are as commonplace today as they were in the Old Testament period. Israel is commanded to “sing praises to God, sing praises” (Psalm 47:6a, English Standard Version). They likewise are commanded to “be glad in the Lord, and rejoice” (Psalm 32:11). The righteous are commanded to “shout for joy in the Lord” (Psalm 33:1). The majority of these commands have to do with the outward expression of an inward posture of praise.

In addition to outward expressions of action, there are also outward expressions of posture commanded in the Psalms. Psalm 95 is a praise psalm, demanding nothing short of vertical praise to the King of all kings. The Israelites are commanded to “worship... bow down... [and] kneel before the Lord” (Psalm 95:6). Bowing in reverence to God appears to be normative in the Old Testament worship experience. The Israelites are also commanded to “lift up [their] hands to the holy place and bless the Lord” (Psalm 134:2). This is one of the six references in the ESV to lifting up hands in the Psalms alone. Clearly lifting hands was a normative part of Old Testament worship as well.

**Contemporary value.** It is clear that the Psalms are full of insight into the practices of Old Testament worship and content of congregational song. The three major themes in the psalms show the three main ways praise is expressed to the Lord in Old Testament worship. The language in the Psalms leads to a right understanding of God and man. The various actions and postures commanded in the Psalms shed light on how the Old Testament believers were to conduct their worship. What of this is relevant to congregational singing today, and what insights can be gathered?

The Psalms were the source of congregational song of the Old Testament. They are inerrant, inspired songs of praise, and some may go so far to say they are “the main biblical medium for the expression of human emotion” (Aston & Davis, 2002, p. 83). If nothing else, the major themes of the Psalms (praise, lament, and thanksgiving) provide categories for the church today to express praise to the God of the Old and New Testament. The rich language by which these themes and concepts are expressed provides a treasure trove of source material for the contemporary songwriter. While church fathers and reformers alike have debated over the necessity of Psalms in congregational song, it is clear that they are of great value to a worship service today.

As for the actions and postures commanded in the content of the Psalms, there are a few things of note. Upon a cursory review of these elements, one may retort that since we are not under the Mosaic Law, these actions are no longer binding commands. If one looks more closely, however, it seems that these are not forced commands, but natural expressions of praise to the God who is worthy. It is not a rule that must be followed, but an invitation to be accepted. Therefore, while we are not under the Old Testament law

anymore, it nevertheless appears that things like bowing, raising of hands, and shouting to the Lord are valid worship expressions today.

### **New Testament**

The New Testament does not contain as many references to singing as the Psalms. There are some references of note, however. Jesus sings at the Last Supper. Paul and Silas sing hymns when in jail at Philippi. The elders, angels, and saints all sing various songs throughout the book of Revelation. In addition to examples of singing, Paul gives commands regarding congregational singing in the quintessential worship passages of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. What, if any, of the New Testament content should be considered in the context of congregational song today?

**Descriptive material.** Singing is not a concept that is foreign to the New Testament. There are twelve unique references to the act of singing or the concept of song in the ESV. What do the descriptions of singing in the New Testament afford to us as we seek to qualify congregational song today?

At the end of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus sings hymns with his disciples. Kauflin (2001) states that it is likely these hymns were “from the Hallel section of the Psalter (Psalms 115-118), typically sung after the Passover meal” (para. 2). Jesus sang the Psalms. This is useful because it shows that Jesus had a high view of the Psalms. It is important to note, however, that this event occurs before the official formation of the Christian church and may not have been intended to be taken as normative Christian practice.

Paul and Silas are described as “singing hymns to God” while in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25). Their practices of prayer and singing were their chosen means of worshiping God even in times of trouble. While it is not clear as to what they were singing, it appears that singing was a normal part of daily life for Paul and Silas.

While the account of Jesus singing took place before Christian worship practices began, and the account of Paul and Silas singing took place in the infancy of the church, the references to singing in Revelation take place at the end of the church age. While the purpose of Revelation is not to illustrate heavenly worship practices, it nevertheless gives some interesting material regarding how singing is conducted in the coming age.

There are three references to singing in Revelation. Revelation 5 references the four living creatures and the elders singing a new song of worship to Christ. Revelation 14 describes the 144,000 singing a new song as well. Revelation 15 records the song of Moses and the Lamb, which “consists largely of excerpts from the Old Testament psalms” (Dowley, 2011, p. 29). The feature of note here is that in Revelation the church is described as singing both old and new songs in worship.

It is clear that singing is a normal practice throughout the New Testament. Jesus and the disciples sing what was likely the Hallel psalms during the Last Supper (Kauflin, 2001). Paul and Silas sing as a deliberate act of worship in the Philippian jail. The songs in Revelation show that the saints in heaven will be singing both new and old songs.

**Prescriptive material.** There are few prescriptive references to singing or congregational song in the New Testament. The two most obvious references, Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, offer insight into Paul’s ideas of musical worship in the church.

The gathered body of believers are to sing a variety of themes and genres in their congregational worship time. As the fellowship of believers recognize the grace of God, they express their gratitude through song. This appears to be the core of Paul's philosophy of worship.

The first aspect dealt with in these verses is what the church should sing. What Paul meant by the terms "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" is a debated topic to this day (Ephesians 5:19). A fair definition has been put forth that "psalms" describe Old Testament songs, "hymns" describe New Testament hymns focusing on Christology, and "spiritual songs" describe either wordless expressions of praise or spontaneous song (Hustad, 1993, pp. 147-148). This would provide a balanced thematic diet on which the new church would ground its theology and Christology. The Old Testament psalms provided a link to their Jewish heritage, the hymns provided a new way to praise their Savior, and spiritual songs provided yet another outlet of praise.

What is possibly more important to Paul in these parallel passages than what the church sings is how the church sings. In reference to Colossians 3:16, Getty and Getty (2017) write,

Thankfulness is more than saying the words with your lips. In fact, you are not singing Christianly if you are singing only with your lips. The root of true thankfulness is the gratitude in our hearts for the unmerited benefits of God's goodness in our lives. (p. 18)



Paul makes it clear that a thankful heart leads to the desire to sing, which in turn leads to more thankfulness. The prescriptive aspects of the New Testament point to the provision for a variety of worship expressions and the command to sing with gratitude.

**Contemporary value.** It is clear that the New Testament provides some principles that can be applied to congregational song today. At its most basic level, congregational song is a normative practice in the New Testament church. Jesus sang with the disciples, Paul commands singing amongst the fellowship of the church, and the saints will sing heavenly songs to Christ when He returns. Beyond this basic truth, the New Testament also details the variety of expression and source material, as well as making clear the foundational attitude of worship. How may the principles contained in these two ideas be applied to congregational song today?

The New Testament describes and commands various forms of worship. The songs in Revelation include Old Testament material as well as entirely new material. Likewise, Paul commands the singing of both Old Testament psalms and New Testament hymns in the parallel passages in Colossians and Ephesians (Hustad, 1993). This can be applied to the church today in the necessity of using the whole counsel of God in worship.

Possibly the most important principle to take from the New Testament material is the foundational attitude of worship. Paul describes worship as the result of thankfulness and resulting in more thankfulness. This is a non-quantifiable trait that must be considered. No matter what the church sings lyrically, its heart must be aligned with what it is singing. If the church is singing all the right things with the wrong heart, it is simply

hypocrisy. It is important to note, then, that the heart attitude with which one sings is just as important as the truth that one sings.

### **Conclusion**

Taken as a whole, the biblical data has much to say regarding the content of congregational song lyrics. The Old Testament provides the basic themes of worship song. It also contains a language of praise by which the people expressed their praise to God. The New Testament shows that singing is still a normative practice in the church age. New songs are added to the Old Testament songs to account for the new truths of the faith brought about by Christ. This act of singing new songs will continue forever even until the return and reign of Christ. The biblical data has been interpreted and applied in various ways over the years by various church fathers and leaders.

### **Principles in Historical Practice**

At this point, the purpose of congregational song has been addressed. The church gathers to sing for the purposes of worship, edification, and evangelism. The biblical data has also been addressed. The Old Testament Psalms and New Testament examples of singing each give important information to the topic of what should be sung during congregational worship. This is not a new topic, however. This has, in various ways, been discussed by various church fathers throughout church history. What do they have to say about lyrics in congregational song?

### **Ambrose of Milan**

Ambrose was the bishop of the Italian city Milan, and was greatly involved in the writing of hymns. He lived during the fourth century, during which “furious debates

raged within the church concerning such vital questions as the nature of the incarnation and the Trinity” (Dowley, 2011, pp. 40-41). Ambrose’s hymns were a strong polemic against the heresy of the Arianism with which he fought, and his focus on orthodox lyrics have much to teach the church today.

Arius was an influential leader in the church in the late-third and into fourth centuries. His most famous and controversial teaching was that Christ was a “creature and therefore not fully divine” (Eskew & McElrath, 1995, p. 85). His denial of the deity of Christ eventually got him removed from the church. His influence continued in the church, however, “by means of appealing hymns” (p. 85), which led some Christians away from an orthodox Christology.

Ambrose set out to eradicate these heretical ideas, and he did so by writing original hymns that professed orthodox Christology. In writing these anti-Arian hymns, Ambrose introduced “a valuable method of instructing Christians in theology, and taught his congregation simple but moving compositions to reinforce orthodox belief” (Dowley, 2011, p. 42). Just as Arius swayed people away from the truth with hymns, Ambrose used hymns to internalize the truth of God in those who sang them.

The hymn-writing of Ambrose lends itself to two important notes regarding congregational song lyrics today. Ambrose was a leading figure in one of the major doctrinal battles of church history, and his chosen weapon to battle this heresy was song. This reinforces the idea that what the church sings matters, specifically in what it sings about concerning the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Ambrose also “played an important role in helping to make the singing of newly composed hymns a respectable feature of worship” (Williams, 2013, p. 111). The idea of humanly composed songs of praise (as opposed to the Psalms) in worship was not a common practice even in the time of Ambrose. The anti-Arian power that his simple songs brought, however, legitimized hymns as an option for congregational song.

### **Luther and Calvin**

The next time period of note occurs about one millennium after the battles of Ambrose and the Arians. By the time of the Reformation, congregational song had all but ceased in the Catholic church. Church music was dominated by clergy, and was performed in languages unintelligible to the parishioners. The Reformers reintroduced the church to congregational song, although there was disagreement among them as to what the church should be singing. Two major streams of thought emerged from this time period: Martin Luther represented the normative principle, while John Calvin represented the regulative principle.

Martin Luther believed that “next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in this world” (Anton, as cited in Buszin and Luther, 1946, p. 83). Luther had an exceedingly high view of music and the arts, and this shaped his view of congregational song lyrics as well. He believed that man should use his God-given creativity in the creation of songs that praise Him, and this entailed a great deal of creative freedom with regard to lyrics and source material.

Luther’s ideas became known as the normative principle, which Dyck (2009) defines this way: “whatever is not forbidden in the Scriptures is permitted in worship as

long as it promotes the peace and unity of the church” (p. 35). Luther wrote hymn texts that did not derive themselves from Scripture directly. In fact, out of all of his hymns “only two are psalm paraphrases” (Hustad, 1993, p. 189). While all of his hymns were aimed at praising God and teaching about Christ, they often did so through a fresh expression of man’s creation. Those adhering to the normative principle were encouraged to create and express their praise to God in fresh and new ways, sometimes with the aid of a Scripture text, sometimes without.

John Calvin represented a much more conservative position than Martin Luther. Whereas Luther sought to reform the church in its current practice, Calvin’s “purpose was to return to the simple worship practices of the early church” (Hustad, 1993, p. 192). This led to many reforms in worship practice, especially with regards to congregational song. Calvin believed that “only God’s Word is worthy to be sung in God’s praise” (p. 194). This restrictive position sought to worship God the way He lays out in His Word.

Calvin’s ideas came to be known as the regulative principle, which is “the theory of church government and worship that not only church doctrine but church practice must be based on clear Scriptural warrant” (Cairns, as cited in Ritchie, 2007, p. vii). Whereas Luther permitted anything unless it was forbidden in Scripture, Calvin would not allow anything unless it was commanded in Scripture. This was applied to congregational song in the exclusive singing of the Psalms. The Word was the center of the service, and must be the source of everything within it.

Each of these traditions developed and gained followings in different circles. In Lutheran, Anabaptist, and Methodist circles, the normative principle was utilized. In

Reformed circles, such as that of the Genevan Calvinists, Scottish Presbyterians, and Puritans in the United States, the regulative principle was utilized. The ideas contained in these two principles influenced the next stage of church music: hymn writing.

### **Watts and Wesley**

Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley were the two men primarily responsible for popularizing the singing of hymns as the primary method of worship music in the Protestant church at large. Though they differed on theology, they used the same medium to create new songs for their tradition and the universal church alike.

Isaac Watts is sometimes referred to as the “Father of British Hymnody.” He is referred to as this not because he was the first to write or even use hymns in congregational worship. The unique contribution of Isaac Watts to the history of congregational song is that the separated hymn traditions of the Lutheran normative principle and the Calvinist regulative principle “converged and blended in the person and work of Isaac Watts” (Eskew & McElrath, 1995, p. 131). Watts took the best of the two principles and applied them to new forms of congregational song.

Watts came from a tradition where the regulative principle was standard practice in congregational worship. At the turn of the eighteenth century, metrical psalmody remained the primary form of worship. Following after the ideas of John Calvin, many if not most British churches believed that the Word of God should be the primary source for lyrics in worship.

Watts challenged this, however, with a different philosophy of congregational song. He believed:

1. Truly authentic praise for Christian folk had to go beyond the mere words of Scripture to include original expressions of devotion and thanksgiving.

2. If the Psalms were to be used in Christian worship, they must be renovated by giving them Christian content. (Eskew & McElrath, 1995)

If the goal of congregational singing is worship, and worship is expressed personally, the lyrics of congregational song must deal with topics of personal praise and gratitude. One way he did this was *Christianizing* the Psalms. The Psalms are accurate expressions of praise to God, but they do not directly address Christ. Watts took the language of praise provided in the Psalms and applied it to the New Testament reality of Christ.

Though Watts took considerable “normative” liberties with his hymn writing, he nevertheless based the majority of his hymns off of Scripture. One of the most famous is the Christmas hymn “Joy to the World,” based off of Psalm 98:4-9 (see Figure 1). The Psalm itself addresses the command to worship Yahweh with singing and shouts of joy, the recognition of God as King, and the reality of God as a righteous judge.

“Joy to the World” shows evidence of Watts applying his philosophy of congregational song. This fresh take on Psalm 98 both recaptures the original intent of the Old Testament author while applying it to the New Testament reality of Jesus Christ’s birth. The real event of Christ’s birth, the recognition of Him as King, and submission to Him as righteous judge calls for as much joy and praise as it did when the psalm was originally written about God the Father.

## Psalm 98:4-9

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
 break forth into joyous song and sing praises!  
 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
 with the lyre and the sound of melody!  
 With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
 make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
 the world and those who dwell in it!  
 Let the rivers clap their hands;  
 let the hills sing for joy together  
 before the LORD, for he comes  
 to judge the earth.  
 He will judge the world with righteousness,  
 and the peoples with equity.

## Joy to the World

- 1) Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
 Let earth receive her King;  
 Let every heart prepare Him room,  
 And heav'n and nature sing.
- 2) Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!  
 Let men their songs employ;  
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and  
 plains  
 Repeat the sounding joy.
- 4) He rules the world with truth and grace,  
 And makes the nations prove  
 The glories of His righteousness,  
 And wonders of His love

*Figure 1.* Psalm 98:4-9 compared to “Joy to the World,” Verses 1, 2, and 3.

The Christianizing of psalms was a common practice for Watts. Another key example is his hymn “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun,” which is based off of Psalm 72. Whereas the hymn appears to be a blessing on the human kings of Israel, Watts applies it to the saving power of the gospel among the Gentiles. It is a proclamation that the name of Jesus will be honored across the world. Some of Watts’ hymns were less explicitly Christianized. “O God Our Help in Ages Past” is a paraphrase of Psalm 90. While Christ is not mentioned by name, the Old Testament truth of God’s faithfulness to Israel is applied to the New Testament *Israel*, God’s saints across the world. Watts took the emphasis on Scripture from the regulative principle and took the call to apply it to the Christian context through the normative principle.



Charles Wesley was the musical genius behind the Methodist movement. He was greatly influenced by the pietistic and Lutheran practices of the Moravians. In the 1730's, his brother and ministry partner John edited a hymnal, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, consisting mainly of pieces by Isaac Watts (Dowley, 2011). Charles Wesley, like Watts, was exposed to church traditions representing the normative and regulative principle and sought to create congregational hymns that were somewhere in the middle.

Wesley, whose practices and background in the Moravian tradition favored the normative principle, wrote hymns that took the best from each tradition. Wesley's hymns were "full of scriptural allusion... disciplined by biblical truth" while also being "expressive of passionate Christian experience" (Eskew and McElrath, 1995, p. 139). Charles Wesley showed the Christian world that just because hymns expressed personal devotion to the Lord did not mean they did not have to be biblical. Wesleyan hymns were valid forms of congregational song because they engendered personal worship, taught Christian doctrine, and encouraged passionate corporate singing.

Wesley, like Watts, skillfully combined the emphasis on creativity with the foundation of biblical reference in his hymn writing. A primary example of this is in his Christmas hymn "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" (see Figure 2). Wesley takes the text of Luke 2:13-14 and expands its meaning. While the first verse largely parallels the praise and singing coming from the angelic host, the subsequent verses are praises meant to come from the congregation praising God for the reality of the birth of Christ. This hymn serves as an opportunity for praise while simultaneously rehearsing orthodox doctrine.

Wesley masterfully takes a biblical text and expands it through related themes and doctrine in many of his hymns. “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” is based off of Matthew 28:5-6, when the angels announce that the tomb is empty and Christ has risen. This idea of resurrection is expanded to mention ideas such as Christ’s victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:55-57) and the federal headship of Christ (Romans 5:12-6:11), all expressed in a way that engenders authentic praise to God. “And Can It Be?” is based off of Romans 5:8, which states “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This idea of awe at the grace of God is expanded to treat ideas such as Christ’s humiliation (Philippians 2:4-11) and the believer’s freedom from condemnation (Romans 8:1). Wesley utilized the normative principle to write songs that covered a variety of topics covering doctrine and the Christian experience, basing them all in biblical text.

Watts and Wesley differed greatly on the particulars of theology. Watts’ beliefs were thoroughly Calvinist, while Wesley’s beliefs were thoroughly Arminian. Nevertheless, they both were passionate about expressing the truth of God personally and corporately in fresh, biblical ways. They each took the best of the normative and regulative principles passed down to them through the Reformation, and produced a balanced position that sought to worship God passionately and biblically.

### **Contemporary Value**

The survey of select church fathers provides some principles that can be applied to congregational song today. The Ambrosian battle against Arianism revealed congregational song’s didactic function. Songs and hymns should be written and selected today that handle rightly the Word of God and the doctrine it professes. The church does

<p>Luke 2:13-14</p> <p>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,</p> <p>“Glory to God in the highest,</p> <p>and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”</p>	<p>“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” Verses 1 and 2</p> <p>Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King; Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” Joyful, all ye nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies; With th’angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”</p> <p>Christ, by highest Heav’n adored; Christ the everlasting Lord; Late in time, behold Him come, Offspring of a virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail th’incarnate Deity, Pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.</p>
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*Figure 2.* Luke 2:13-14 compared to “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” Verse 1 and 2.

not sing primarily to protect itself from false doctrine, but a function of congregational song is the teaching of doctrine.

The complementary normative and regulative principles emphasize specific truths about singing to the Lord. The normative principle emphasizes the creative freedom that God gives to man in the singing of His praise. We are created to creatively sing praise to God. The regulative principle emphasizes the importance of Scripture in the worship of God. Scripture is invaluable because it is a source book from which songwriters can take the words of God and sing them back to Him in praise.

The hymn revolution led by Watts and Wesley represents the marriage of these two principles. In addition to taking the best of these principles, Watts and Wesley are

highly concerned with the heart of the worshiper. Paul exhorts the Colossians to sing “with gratitude” in their hearts (Colossians 3:16). All of these guidelines are useless if the primary purpose of personal worship is not achieved.

Taken as a whole, the principles gleaned from the historical examples have much to add to those gleaned from the rationale and biblical sections. At this point the relevant biblical and historical principles have been surveyed, and the research will be synthesized.

### **Conclusion**

Is there a standard as to what constitutes biblical, God-honoring congregational song lyrics? In the rationale section, the purposes of congregational song were found to be worship, edification, and fellowship. This provided a valid framework by which to interpret the research that followed. The Old Testament Psalms serve as a sourcebook for today’s congregational song, and intrinsically include a language of praise. In the New Testament, singing is seen to be normative, and congregational song is commanded.

In the history section, three major periods were discussed. Ambrose’s battle against Arianism showed the value of didactic elements in congregational song. Luther and Calvin’s normative and regulative principles emphasized creative elements and a strict reverence of Scripture, respectively. Watts and Wesley showed that the marriage of these two principles, coupled with a passionate heart of praise, produces congregational song of great quality.

So does the biblical and historical content produce any specific, explicitly stated principles by which one may evaluate congregational song lyrics? Unfortunately, the

answer appears to be no. That being said, all is not lost. There nevertheless are some guidelines that can be abstracted from the whole of research completed.

First, the use of Scripture to some extent is foundationally important to congregational song. The Psalms are a great place to start when writing about the character and works of God, but the whole counsel of God is open to use. This does not require direct quoting such as metrical psalmody. This can include paraphrases or even writing about Scriptural themes. History points to the universal characteristic that Scripture is either the source material off of which a text is written, or the very text of the song itself. Worship leaders today should consider the use of Scripture.

Second, the expression of orthodox theology (specifically Christology) is foundationally important to congregational song. It is vital that what is being sung to the Lord is actually true. Singing Scripture or scriptural themes greatly aids in this endeavor. The church internalizes what they sing, so there is a call to sing of who God really is. History points to the universal characteristic that congregational hymns and songs are used to teach. Worship leaders today should consider the intentional use of orthodox theology within congregational song.

Finally, the expression of a genuine heart of praise is foundationally important to congregational song. It is vital that what is being sung engages the heart as much as it does the mind. Paul did not exhort the Ephesians to sing with correct theology in mind, but rather “with your heart” (Ephesians 5:19). Watts and Wesley recaptured this with the reintroduction of the hymn to congregational worship in the English-speaking world. History points to the universal characteristic that congregational hymns and songs are

meant to engage the heart as much as they do the mind. Worship leaders today should consider language that engenders personal, passionate worship.

The people of God have been singing praise since God called them out of Egypt. For millennia, the forms of these songs have evolved to reflect the time and culture of the worshipers. Even the content has changed, as God has progressively revealed more and more of Himself to His people. Among this change, two things have remained true. God's Word has always and will always continue to guide his people into all truth. The call is for man to respond to this with whole-hearted surrender and praise. As the people of God begin to think deeply about how God desires to be praised, they will continue to learn that God only desires these things: that we would worship Him in spirit and in truth.

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