

Leadership of the Church Choir: An Examination of the Connection to Biblical and Historical Models with Implications for 21st Century Ministry

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Introduction

“Nobody listens to choirs anymore.” So said an extremely talented musician who was being asked to help a smaller church in our community a few years ago. They were trying to make a transition from a traditional music ministry to a more contemporary model and the pastor wanted at least to keep the choir going while building a praise team. The musician I was talking to honestly did not understand why they wanted even to bother with a choir. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. Having a church choir was just taken for granted. If you did not have a choir at your church, it was assumed that a choir would be one of the first things you would work to organize after getting a handle on your congregational music. For this church musician a choir was an antiquated liability, something to be left behind. The question of a choir’s relevance did not go away. A couple of years later I was brought up short again in a seminary class when one of the students asked me, “Why do we have a choir?” After a brief offended breath, I gave a partial answer. That question helped to spur on the writing of this article. It may be that a generation of ministers has arisen that knew not the choir. Yes, we find choirs in Scripture, but is having a choir a biblical mandate? Is there a historical precedent we ought to follow, or have we passed beyond all choral tradition in this day of praise teams and contemporary Christian music? Are today’s choirs even connected to the biblical and historical models? In addition, are there practical and administrative reasons to have a church choir? Can choirs ultimately survive the transitions of 21st century music ministry and continue to have a place of leadership? Perhaps it is time for music ministers, worship leaders, and pastors to grapple seriously with the reasons to have a choir.

There is a need to define some terms and focus the purpose of this article. By “choir” I am referring to the choir that leads in worship in regular worship services, not necessarily every choir of any age group a church can organize (commonly known as graded choirs, preschoolers through high school). Though there are examples where regular worship choirs contain both youth and adults, most groups will be adults. In the majority of evangelical churches today these choirs will be composed of volunteers. Historically and in Scripture, however, that has not always been the case. The dynamics of the paid versus volunteer choir may appear to be something of a peripheral issue but must be discussed, since many church choirs have been compensated throughout history. While volumes have been written on choral music, much of the literature has focused on the history of the organization of the choir, choral technique, or choral music and its composers. Implications for the development of the choir’s role as a worship leader are less obvious in the literature. The focus of this article will be the leadership of the choir in worship.

Therefore, I shall approach the subject with two surveys. First, there will be a quick review and discussion of what the Scriptures can tell us about choirs. Secondly, I will attempt to pull together the high points of the activities and status of choirs throughout the history of worship. Finally, armed with the perspective of Scripture and history, we will come back to our original question (“Why have a choir?”) and see if there is a connection between what is happening currently and the record of Scripture and history. Based on those conclusions I will discuss implications for the choir in music ministry in the new century ahead.

Biblical Survey

The Choir in the New Testament

If the mere mention of a worship tool in Scripture could be seen as a command, then choirs as worship leaders would appear to be required for the church to worship. There are several clear and obvious references to choirs in worship settings in the Old Testament. In fact, the Lord himself gave King David detailed instructions for setting up Temple worship, including the Levitical choir and instrumentalists (1 Chronicles 28:11-19). In the New Testament, however, references to choirs are almost non-existent. From this lack of material the complete opposite might be inferred, that choirs are part of the old sacrificial system and should be done away with or marginalized as worship leaders. Of course, there is the account in Luke 2:13-15 of the angel chorus which announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds. They were proclaiming a message from God to men, a function often assigned to choirs today, especially in evangelistic settings. There is another angelic choir or quartet in John’s vision where he sees the four living creatures engaged

in praise around the throne of God (Revelation 4:6-9). They seem to be singing their own unique song while the wider group of worshipers, the twenty-four elders, sings a different song (Revelation 4:10-11). This time the choir is engaged in direct praise to God. Another New Testament example is the spontaneous praise of an implied children's choir in Matthew 21:15-16 when Jesus came to Jerusalem at His triumphal entry. This group of children echoed what the multitude had been crying in verse nine. They were not likely a formal choir but did function in an act of direct praise to God, again similar to an expectation of worship choirs today. The apostle Paul told the Colossians to sing *to* one another (Colossians 3:16). While this is probably congregational and may even imply the use of antiphonal singing as a technique, it is possible this could apply to choral singing as well. This fellowship aspect of exhortation is a function that choirs often serve in today's churches. Barry Liesch calls this "*koinonia* worship" and considers it a major Pauline doctrine. "It is body-life worship in action. The church as a body was Paul's dominating, overarching metaphor."¹ In this role, the choir sings both to the congregants and to themselves, being simultaneously part of the body and a leader of the worship for the body.

The Choir in the Old Testament

Old Testament references concerning choirs are more specific and detailed than those in the New Testament. There are several organized choirs and instrumental ensembles: David's Tabernacle choir of ten men and a director (1 Chronicles 15:12-22; 16:4-5); Solomon's Temple choir of 4,000 voices including 288 teachers and directors along with an orchestra (1 Chronicles 23:5, 27-32; 25; 2 Chronicles 5:11-14); the Levitical choir which marched before the army (2 Chronicles 20:14-22); King Hezekiah's choir used in the restoration of Temple worship (2 Chronicles 29:25-30); Zerubbabel's Temple choir of 200 men and women returned from exile (Ezra 2:65, 70; 3:10-13; 7:7); and Nehemiah's Temple choir of 245 men and women returned from Babylon (Nehemiah 7:1, 44, 67, 73; 12:27-30, 45-47). There are other examples of group singing that might also be classified as choral music, such as Miriam's group of ladies leading an antiphonal response to the song of Israel (Exodus 15:20-21), the women praising David's victory (1 Samuel 18:6-7), and Saul prophesying with the band of prophets (1 Samuel 10:5, 10). While it is uncertain whether this was an organized choir, Solomon apparently collected men and women to sing for him

¹ Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, with foreword by Donald P. Hustad (exp. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 167.

(Ecclesiastes 2:8), perhaps simply for entertainment.² One scholar, commenting on Miriam's choir, felt that there must have been some sort of choral tradition kept alive among the Israelite slaves. It seemed doubtful that the terrified slaves who fled the Egyptians simply made the song up on the spot.³ The most unusual of these accounts is the one found in 2 Chronicles 20 where the choir preceded the army into battle. In response to the promise of God's help, Jehoshaphat fell down and worshiped while the choir stood to sing God's praises. The next day, the king ordered the Levite choir out in front of the battle lines "in holy attire" where they sang, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (vv. 20-22). When the choir sang, the Lord ambushed the invaders and they were routed.

With the notable exception of the song in praise of David and perhaps Saul with the prophets (depending on what they actually prophesied about), Old Testament choirs were mostly engaged in praise of God or of God's activity and directed to God rather than in proclaiming a message from God to the community of faith. Miriam's choir responded to the praise of God voiced by the congregation, thus aiding and supplementing congregational worship. The choir in battle is often touted by evangelical choir leaders as something of a spiritual example for the choir. While interesting and perhaps inspiring parallels can be drawn from this passage, it must also be remembered that this was a response to a specific and unique prophecy. There is no other choral event like this one in Scripture. The highest musical form of choral work found in the Old Testament is that of the Levitical choir at the dedication of Solomon's Temple. Not only was the choir massive in size, but it obviously performed complex musical works which had to be rehearsed. This created something of a natural division between the people and the choir, both in function and in membership. "The highly artistic structure of levitical singing excluded *a priori* the extensive participation of a non-Levite. Therefore, the role of the people at large was confined to a passive listening."⁴ 1 Chronicles 23:3 says that levitical singers entered into their special service at age thirty, at which time they were considered "skillful." Alfred Sendrey believes this implies significant training before that time, "otherwise they could easily start their professional career at the age of twenty-five or even sooner."⁵ 1 Chronicles 15:22 says that Chenaniah, a chief Levite skilled in singing,

² I. E. Reynolds, *The Choir in the Non-Liturgical Church* (Fort Worth, TX.: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1938), 15-16.

³ Edmunds Lorenz, *Music in Work and Worship: a Discussion of Church Music as an Applied Art* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1925), 214.

⁴ Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (London: Vision Press Limited, 1969), 219.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

set up a school of instruction. It may have been that some of the young men or boys apprenticed to the levitical choir were allowed to sing with the group.⁶ Based on references in the Mishnah, Sendrey concludes that since the levitical singers had no known musical notation, all of their music had to be memorized. Training for such a choir might have indeed started in childhood, and children may have sung with the choir at times.⁷

All of this training and the need to be from a certain tribe made the levitical choir an exclusive group. Participants had to be qualified by both virtue of their birthright and their innate skill as a musician. In addition, these choirs of Levites were compensated, both in the provision of training and in their personal incomes (Nehemiah 10:38-39; 13:5, 10). Other examples of Old Testament choirs seemed to be more spontaneous, less organized, and more open for participation. However, they were not as consistent or long lasting as the Levite choirs.

Did the exclusivistic structure of the Levite choir and the presence of compensation contribute to abuse or sinful attitudes as worship leaders? They indeed stood condemned along with the other priests when the Lord declared through the prophet Amos, "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies . . . take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps" (Amos 5:21, 23-24, NASB). The Scriptures do not specifically equate the problems of the Levite priests to their status, and certainly volunteerism is no guarantee of righteous worship leadership by choir members. However, as the review of history will show, church choirs that operate out of a sense of entitlement or special privilege can become something less than a spiritual activity. The Temple Choir of the Old Testament may have eventually struggled with the pitfalls of a paid choir.

Historical Survey

The Choir Prior to the Reformation

Most worship scholars agree that the New Testament church borrowed from the worship of the synagogue to build its own worship traditions.⁸

⁶ James G. Smith, "Chorus—Antiquity and the Middle Ages," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (29 vols.; 2nd ed.; London: Macmillan, 2001), 5: 767-69, 768.

⁷ Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 171.

⁸ Sources on this subject run from the scholarly to the popular. Representative resources include: Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1993); Barry Liesch, *The New Worship*; W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1925; reprinted by Oxford University Press, 1965); Franklin M. Segler, *Understanding, Preparing For, and Practicing Christian Worship* (2nd ed.; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996); Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: the Interdependence of Liturgy and Music in Synagogue and Church during the First*

Synagogue and Temple worship existed side-by-side. There may have been as many as 394 synagogues in Jerusalem when the Temple was destroyed by Titus. As the transition was made from Temple to Christian worship, the importance of those synagogues cannot be underestimated.

Right at the outset it should be remembered that it was not the Temple but the synagogue that set the pattern for the divine service of the Christian community. The monopoly of the Temple, its festivals of pilgrimage, its minutely regulated sacrificial rituals were the jealously guarded prerogative of the aristocratic hierarchy of Priests and of the nationalistic Zealots.⁹

Few references can be found regarding the role and function of the choir during this transition. While some pieces of the Jewish liturgy can be traced with some reasonable certainty to the emerging Christian liturgy, links to choral function in the synagogue are far more difficult to make. Psalm singing was an important part of the synagogue. There are some talmudic sources which list various lections, benedictions, and other prayers. The Babylonian Talmud gives a description of the musical portion of a synagogue service which seems to intimate the use of a choir.¹⁰ It is not inconceivable that levitical singers who had either served their time or who found themselves cut off from Temple worship may have brought some of their experience and skill into the more intimate synagogue community. Jewish choral music was monophonic with a single melodic line but was often performed antiphonally or responsorially in worship. Nehemiah 12:31-39 describes the use of antiphonal choirs (which, incidentally, also engage in some choreographed pageantry). Whether such elaborate performances were used on a regular basis in the Temple or even transferred to the synagogue is not known for certain. However, Philo of Alexandria describes congregational antiphony in the worship of one Jewish sect.¹¹

Due to persecution and the underground nature of the early church, singing was likely limited to the congregation. Like the Levite choirs in exile, the formation of choirs for the early church was probably difficult. The Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 ceased the persecution of the church and allowed public Christian worship. This event gave impetus to the training of choirs. Special schools were set up almost immediately. St. Sylvester, pope from A.D. 314 to 336, established the first *schola cantorum* to prepare musicians for musical service in the church. This type of school existed for centuries and had a significant impact on choirs and choral

Millennium (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

⁹ Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 2.

¹⁰ Sendrey, *Music*, 192.

¹¹ Smith, "Chorus," in *The New Grove Dictionary*, 5: 768.

music. Gradually, trained choirs of clergy began to take over more of what later became the Mass.¹² I.E. Reynolds, the first director of the school of sacred music at Southwestern Seminary, described the development of choirs from the fourth and fifth centuries:

The Council of Laodicea (367 A.D.) [*sic*] voted to confine the musical execution of the services chiefly to the clergy and choir. This was done because the congregational singing had drifted into a type of singing and character of music which the church fathers believed unworthy of use in the service. Since the rise of the Papacy in the fifth century it has continued to be the policy of the Roman Catholic churches to have the clergy and choir render the music program. From the fourth century on the practice of evening and morning prayers became customary and these had their choral parts.¹³

Reynolds was writing before the influence of Vatican II in 1965 opened up Catholic worship by allowing the use of the vernacular, thus enabling more congregational ownership of worship. However, the domination of clerical choirs in the Mass did persist through the Reformation. The training and support of these choirs was, so to speak, a cost of doing church business. Elwyn Wienandt well summarized the situation which existed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance:

In the *schola cantorum*, we see a church-fostered, church-nurtured organization whose numbers are entirely supported by and dependent upon the Church. We see singers who are singers primarily, but not marketing their talents freely. Instead, their abilities are entirely directed to the organization that supports them - they are resident members, students, priests, and monks.¹⁴

Wienandt also indicates that “secular singers” (laymen singers looking for employment) also sought musical opportunities with the churches. St. Peter’s Basilica attracted paid singers not only from Italy, but also from around Europe. A study of papal patronage by Christopher Reynolds also suggests that the ornate style of polyphonic music, which had developed by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, encouraged the employment of skilled musicians, particularly those from musically influential northern Europe.¹⁵ Paid choral positions at important venues were highly coveted

¹² Edwin Liemohn, *The Organ and Choir in Protestant Worship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 8-9; see also Smith, “Chorus—Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” in *The New Grove Dictionary*.

¹³ I. E. Reynolds, *The Choir in the Non-Liturgical Church*, 19.

¹⁴ Elwyn A. Wienandt, *Choral Music of the Church* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 16.

¹⁵ Christopher A. Reynolds, *Papal Patronage and the Music of St. Peter’s, 1380-*

and were sometimes requested by fellow church musicians when their colleagues died. They used a document called the *perobitum* to make the request, and the earliest date on the petition to Rome received the position. Indeed, this is the most common form of supplication found in the archives of the Vatican. Due to the slow communications of the time, some enterprising clerics badly second-guessed the deaths of their colleagues. Such was the case for Johannes Vincenetius who had to write a petition of his own in 1443 to tell the Pope that rumors of his death had been exaggerated.¹⁶

In addition to the dynamics of the paid choir, the choral music itself had an effect on the function of the choir as worship leader. Early medieval choral music moved from monody to crude polyphony. Composers of the time were more concerned with the technical and theological organization of the composition than with its actual sound. This produced choral music that, to twentieth-century ears, might sound both discordant and confusing. Church music of the early fourteenth century began to be unified using isorhythms, rather esoteric rhythmic patterns assigned to the various texts of each vocal line.¹⁷ Occasionally choral pieces were organized around a *cantus firmus* (i.e. “fixed melody”), a predetermined melody that could be from the chant, a secular piece, or even another choral composition. Sometimes only a fragment of this melody was used, its notes augmented and stretched out so as to render them unrecognizable to the ear. Other voices were piled on top of the *cantus firmus* in free counterpoint or imitative writing.¹⁸ The textual overlap and the introduction of music from secular sources into liturgical music became elements of concern that were eventually addressed in the Counter-Reformation.

Conservative leaders of the Church became increasingly disturbed by such developments, for in the one case, the text was made largely unintelligible because of the text-phrase overlappings, and in the other, the sanctity of worship was diluted by the presence of popular tunes and secular fragments in the sacred forms.¹⁹

1513 (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1995), 5-8.

¹⁶ Pamela F. Starr, “Strange Obituaries: the Historical Uses of the *Perobitum* Supplication,” in *Papal Music and Musicians in the Late Medieval and Renaissance Rome*, ed. Richard Sherr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 177-79.

¹⁷ Wienandt, *Choral Music*, 79-83.

¹⁸ Homer Ulrich, *A Survey of Choral Music* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 3-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

The Protestant Reformation challenged the Catholic Church to revise some of its own practices, including the problems of its choral music. The result was the Council of Trent.

In 1545 a general council of the Church was called at Trent to deal with these problems. The Council lasted, with numerous long interruptions, until 1563, the relationship between music and sacred texts coming under discussion in its final year. Although the recommendations that resulted were very general and went no further than calling for greater intelligibility of the text and the avoidance of impure (that is, secular) influences in the music, they did hasten the development of a restrained, pure, and balanced style, introduced by Jacob Kerle (1531-1591) but carried to its highest point by Palestrina.²⁰

If the vehicle used by the choir to lead (i.e., the music sung to communicate the text) proved to be ineffective, then the ability of the choir to actually lead the congregation in worship would be impaired. Many of the choral composers of the Renaissance were godly men, but they were also musical products of their day. While this is a rather sweeping generalization that may border on oversimplification, it is a reasonable conclusion that many church choirs prior to the Reformation, particularly from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, struggled with their role as worship leaders due to the general fascination of the composers with the mechanics of the music. The communication of the message had been subjugated by the music itself. This does not even deal with the question of setting Latin texts instead of the vernacular. I do not mean to say that the music is not beautiful or cannot be meaningful to those who appreciate its form and construction. Since this early choral music *was* the music of the church (instrumental forms had not really developed yet), there is a sense that we still stand on the musical foundations laid down then, and church musicians today should study it. As far as secular influences are concerned, centuries removed from the context of the late Renaissance, the secular tunes used at that time would not offend today. However, the concern over worldly influences was significant to both Catholics and Protestants of the sixteenth century and continues to be something of a hot topic.

The Choir in Europe after the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was something of a double-edged sword to choirs in worship. Cutting one way, it freed them to plainly declare biblical truth and God's praise in the language of the people. Slicing back the other direction, the Reformation cut choirs off from worship entirely, leaving them with no leadership role. Much has been written

²⁰ Ibid.

about the influences of the Reformation on church music in general, and congregational music in particular. However, a brief summary dealing with its effects on choirs in leadership is in order.

Martin Luther was a champion of the church choir, including it in a trinity of church music techniques—the choir, the unison chant, and the congregational hymn. Choirs and chant were holdovers from the Roman Rite. For Luther, the choir served two purposes: to lead congregational singing (mainly because he felt the organ was not well suited to the task) and to add beauty through music to the worship. He required that the choral music itself be appropriate for worship, and he did not want the choir to monopolize the service.²¹ Despite Luther's good intentions, his use of the choir as an aid to congregational music was initially somewhat hampered by his insistence on using the German chorale melodies, which were always placed in the tenor part. "What was needed was a new type of music in which each note of the chorale melody would have its own harmonic structure and the movement of the various parts would for the most part coincide with that of the melody."²² This new music did eventually come, resulting in a more homophonic structure that was the precursor of the hymnic format still used today.

In sharp contrast to Luther's Germany, both church choirs and organs became practically non-existent in Protestant churches in Switzerland and the Netherlands under the influence of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli was himself a talented musician but maintained the conviction that no music at all should come into worship. He railed against the polyphonic choral music of his day. "Since church music, as Zwingli knew it, was inseparably connected with the Roman liturgy - of which he wanted no part - and since the choral texts were in Latin, which made them unintelligible to the people he served, he suspended choir singing in 1525 and two years later had the Zürich Cathedral organ destroyed."²³ Calvin was also a musician, favoring its use at home, but "fearful that its seductive and distracting charm would be harmful to pure, public worship. Consequently, he disregarded the choir and its literature completely."²⁴ This harsh view of choral music in worship did not mean that the art and beauty of the music itself was not appreciated. It was removed so as to avoid any temptations of idolatry, to avoid proclaiming any doctrinal error, and to remove any possible distractions from the worshiper. After the abuses of choral music and choirs that had been experienced leading up to the Reformation, this view was not totally unreasonable. It did moderate with time, however. Liemohn

²¹ Liemohn, *Organ and Choir*, 14-15.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22-26.

²⁴ Hustad, *Jubilate II*, 193.

believes that, had Zwingli lived longer, he might have restored music to his worship services.²⁵ Later in England, eighteenth-century dissenting congregations eased their restrictions on choirs in worship, resulting in the creation of the fusing tune to help country choirs elaborate metrical psalmody.²⁶

The Choir in England after the Reformation

The Anglican Church or Church of England made much more extensive use of choral music, borrowing heavily upon the Catholic sources it closely mirrored. Choir members in the city churches made a living as church musicians. In 1679 when Henry Purcell, the renowned English composer, was organist at Westminster Abbey, “the music staff consisted of 4 singing minor canons, 12 lay-clerks - one of whom was the Master of the Choristers - and 10 boys.”²⁷ The system for training boys for church choirs, which had started in the *schola cantorum* of the fourth century, was still alive in England. The patronage system for choirs was beginning to wane, though. Phillips reports that

under the Stuarts the choir at St. Paul’s [Cathedral] which had contained thirty “gentlemen” was whittled down to contain only six vicars-choral, and Bumpas²⁸ quotes an anonymous manuscript in the British Museum showing that choirs were depleted so that the existing singers could obtain a living wage by compounding salaries or to line the canon’s pockets.²⁹

Since the Anglican country parishes could not afford to pay for the upkeep of a choir, “rude gallery choirs” were enlisted from the congregation, sometimes regardless of musical skill. They sang in the upper gallery (balcony) of the church where the organ was located.³⁰ “The unsatisfactory state of congregational singing by the late 17th century, particularly in provincial parish churches, resulted in the formation of amateur, initially male, choirs. Unfortunately, their increasing skill and desire for more elaborate music silenced the very congregations they were supposed to encourage.”³¹

²⁵ Liemohn, *Organ and Choir*, 23.

²⁶ Richard Crawford, “Fuging Tune,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 9: 317.

²⁷ C. Henry Phillips, *The Singing Church: an Outline History of the Music Sung by Choir and People*, (new ed. Arthur Hutchings; London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 147.

²⁸ Bumpas, *A History of English Cathedral Music*, Vol. I, 92; quoted in Phillips, *The Singing Church*, 142.

²⁹ Phillips, *Singing Church*, 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

³¹ Henri Vanhulst, “Gallery Music,” in *The New Grove Dictionary*, 9: 445-46, 445.

From 1649 to 1660 England endured the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell and a Puritan-controlled government. During this period both choirs and organs were considered an abomination and practically disappeared. What vocal music there was at the time circled around metrical psalmody and the hymn tune.³² As with the followers of Zwingli and Calvin, most Puritans did not object to music itself. For example, while John Cotton forbade instruments in worship, he did not forbid their use at home. Puritans primarily objected to elaborate church music, particularly that music which did not seem to edify the congregation as a whole. Objections were even raised to antiphonal choral singing of a psalm, not on musical grounds but theological, fearing that the tossing back and forth of the words would somehow mock God and puff up the singers with pride. As Horton Davies commented, "It was not that they disliked art, but that they loved religion more."³³ While choral music and choirs suffered badly during the Commonwealth, they returned during the Restoration when Charles II took the throne after exile in Europe. Charles brought back with him European musical influences introducing instrumental music and florid opera style to the cathedral music. The older style of polyphonic church music based on the old Catholic style fell out of fashion.³⁴

The Choir in America

Church choirs began to proliferate in America in the mid-eighteenth century. Development was slow. "It must be remembered that although each county in England supposedly had its professional cathedral choir, there were never any such choirs brought over to this country. Individual musicians migrated, but wherever choirs were established they began with untrained, amateur voices and proceeded to build their own traditions with no professional models for comparison."³⁵ Most American choirs of the early 1800s were located in galleries in the rear of the church. Sometimes congregations would actually stand and turn around to face the singers.³⁶ Liemohn described the functioning of a typical American church choir of the time:

While special seats were assigned to the choir, their only function at first was to "set the tune" and to lead the congregation in singing the psalms.

³² Phillips, *Singing Church*, 116-17.

³³ Horton Davies, *The Worship of English Puritans* (Dacre Press, 1948; reprint, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 268-72.

³⁴ Liemohn, *Organ and Choir*, 55-56.

³⁵ Leonard Ellinwood, *The History of American Church Music* (New York: Morehouse Gorham, 1953), 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

Before long, however, they were beginning to contribute special selections on their own. Hymn books published in the second half of the century would frequently include a few anthems for the choir.³⁷

There was still much dissent about even using a choir to lead versus a solo precentor. Some churches held out long against choirs, singing congregational psalms only. Trained choir directors were indeed scarce. Sometime they had to enlist whoever was willing from the congregation or even the town.³⁸

In the 1770s the concept of the fugo tune came over from England and influenced a group of so-called Yankee tunesmiths, some of the earliest true American composers. William Billings was perhaps the most well-known of these composers whose influential tune books contained some of the first printed choral music in America. Due to the influence of European music and musicians, the rather musically primitive fugo tunes fell out of fashion and church choirs began to sing more sophisticated music. The melody moved from the tenor to the soprano part (which was a point of controversy for some) and some choirs even began to wear robes. The appearance of choir robes was an outgrowth of the Oxford Movement in England which started in 1833 and spread to American churches by mid-century.³⁹ Also as an outgrowth of the Oxford Movement, choirs began moving from the rear galleries to the front to be seated in divided chancels. This necessitated a processional by the choir to get to front of the church. This, too, created some controversy.⁴⁰

Another influence on American church choirs from the Oxford Movement was the quartet choir. This was a group of four singers (one per part) who were paid to sing, sometimes by themselves or sometimes imbedded in a larger volunteer organization. Part of the argument for these quartets was the musical unreliability and behavior during the sermon of volunteer choir members. The quartets also had their problems. Quartet members were subject to musical vanity and would sometimes slip out during the sermon. There were actually anthems written which gave each part a featured solo. Liemohn commented that those pieces were not really church music in a functional sense. "It was more of a sporting proposition, with the soloists vying with one another to impress their 'audience,' as in a concert at the opera house, with the soloists singing to the worshipers instead of aiding them by means of their musical contributions to participate in the service."⁴¹ Some of these

³⁷ Liemohn, *Organ and Choir*, 115.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

⁴⁰ Ellinwood, *History*, 81-86.

⁴¹ Liemohn, *Organ and Choir*, 125.

quartet choirs persisted in liturgical churches into the early twentieth century.

The revivals of the nineteenth century were another influence on the American church choir, perhaps of more direct influence than anything previous in music history. Using the choir during an invitation was an innovation by Ira Sankey.

Moody, having made his usual plea for those who were willing to be saved to rise from their seats and then come forward to the inquiry rooms, would motion to Sankey; Sankey would gently sound a chord on the organ, and the choir would sing . . . as the penitents walked down the aisles. These songs were called “invitation hymns” and specifically written for the purpose of coaxing people out of their seats and into the inquiry rooms.⁴²

The choir was becoming an extension of the message, assisting the preacher in proclaiming the gospel and asking for a response to the claims of Christ. This was a significant step in worship leadership.

Two other music evangelists broke new ground with the choir’s role in the evangelistic services. Charles Alexander worked with R. A. Torrey as soloist and chorister. Alexander preferred the percussive attack and cadenzas of the piano to the organ to help accompany all the music (this was something new that later transferred itself to the churches). He also used the choir to set the stage for the message of the evangelist.

It was a remarkable innovation in revivalism when “Charlie” [Alexander] warmed up a crowd by having the choir of six hundred to a thousand voices sing a rousing hymn like “O Lord Send the Power Just Now” and then turned to the audience and ask them to sing a chorus just to see if they could sing it louder than the choir.⁴³

Was this true worship leadership by the choir? Not really. However, the concept of the choir as cheerleader, which is sometimes seen today, began to take hold at this time. “Setting the pattern for a number of song leaders after him, Alexander believed it was his task to ‘warm up’ the congregation with rousing singing, buoyant good will, and brisk choir music before Torrey appeared on the platform.”⁴⁴ Homer A. Rodeheaver picked up where Alexander left off with the revival choir. Working alongside Billy Sunday, “Rody” Rodeheaver would sometimes direct choirs of two thousand people. Playing the trombone and working the

⁴² William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finny to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), 238-39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁴⁴ Keith J. Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing: Evangelism and Revivals in America*, with foreword by Luis Palau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 221.

crowd with his personality, Rodeheaver used music even more powerfully than had Alexander.⁴⁵

The Choir Today

In the early part of the twentieth century, glee clubs (choirs) were a popular form of entertainment which proliferated across America. While there are still a number of choirs now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, community choruses are not as numerous and school choirs (along with many fine arts programs) sometimes face an uphill battle for survival. In this day of sound bytes, fast television commercials, microwave cooking, instant global communication via the Internet, and widely available recordings of incredible variety and quality, going to sit down in a room and quietly listen to people sing in a choir may seem archaic to the uninitiated.

Church growth experts encourage pastors and worship leaders to listen to the radio, survey the people in the community they want to reach and gear the style of their music accordingly.⁴⁶ The logic is that if the musical style is more familiar to prospects, it will not produce unnecessary barriers as these folks attend the worship services. A soft rock style (i.e. music built around a rhythm section of traps, bass guitar, and keyboard) is the musical underpinning for an incredible amount of music found on the radio up and down the spectrum of popular musical styles. If worship leaders are basing their convictions about the relevance of the choir on the Top 40, then choirs as worship leaders may be passé.

The popular formats are also based on small groups of singers or soloists on microphones as opposed to large groups of people singing together (a choir). Popular music inspires something like a karaoke effect, the idea that everyone can be a soloist. Harold Best commented on this development of “soloism” in the arts.

Individualism has metamorphosed into soloism. I don't mean soloists; I mean soloism, that unique and dangerous aberration in the human ego where center stage is the only possibility, and where change, stimulus, and growth become increasingly dependent on the soloistic charisma of an individual; where business, the arts, the media, and lately, our churches, are compelled to seek out the most powerful soloist.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 233-34.

⁴⁶ William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 84; and Charles Arn, *How to Start a New Service: Your Church Can Reach New People*, with foreword by Leith Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 123.

⁴⁷ Harold Best, “What’s Ahead for the Church in the 1990s?” in *On the State of Church Music* (ed. Thomas B. Milligan; Jefferson City, TN: Center for Church Music, Carson Newman College, 1992), 17.

Best may have a point. In one church I served, I had people come to me who were interested in singing on the praise team. I then invited them to choir practice, since all my soloists and praise team members were pulled from the main worship choir. Most were not interested in the choir, however. They only wanted to know when the praise team rehearsed. Few of those people actually followed through with a commitment to the choir to later become a member of the praise team. Praise teams have proliferated in churches, sometimes to the detriment of the choir. The choir has become, for some, a second-class musical citizen.

There are other musical forces at work that are also affecting the efficacy of the church choir. Churches in the last century have largely depended upon the public schools and private teachers to provide the musical training necessary to read music and be competent church musicians. This dependency on outside help is beginning to catch up with the church. For example, there is a shortage of trained keyboard players, causing particular problems for smaller membership churches in need of accompanists. Some of the larger churches have started fine arts institutes to try to remedy this problem. One result of poorer musical preparation in schools is that decidedly fewer people know how to sing in parts. Others simply have problems matching pitch. These difficulties can make choir rehearsals and worship preparation for the choir more difficult.⁴⁸ Learning to match pitch goes all the way back to childhood. Lack of exposure to music and singing at that time can musically impair people as adults.⁴⁹ In the past just singing hymns in church (which are based on a simple, homophonic, four-part musical structure) encouraged part singing among the congregation at large. This, in turn, fed music readers to the choir. However, more widespread singing of unison choruses and the absence of music to look at during congregational singing (due to the use of projected text) have probably contributed to the erosion of part singing. There has also been a trend in twentieth-century hymnody toward the writing and arranging of unison hymns. A survey of the three Southern Baptist hymnals shows a marked increase in unison writing from the 1956 hymnal to the 1991 edition.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Lee Hinson, "Teaching Music to Your Choir: How Do They Learn," (*The Music Stand, Glory Songs Kit*, LifeWay Church Resources, Winter 2002-2003), 1; and "Teaching Music to Your Choir: Using Their Learning Styles," (*The Music Stand, Glory Songs Kit*, LifeWay Church Resources, Spring 2003), 1.

⁴⁹ For information on how children develop musically see Rhonda J. Edge and Barbara Sanders, *How to Lead Preschoolers in Musical Activities* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1991), 31-34; and Mary DeLaine Allcock and Madeline Bridges, *How to Lead Children's Choirs* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1991), 212-17.

⁵⁰ The 1956 *Baptist Hymnal* edited by W. Hines Sims only has two unison hymn arrangements, while the *Baptist Hymnal* published in 1975 and edited by William J.

Conclusion

Connections to the Past

Is the choral activity in our churches connected to historical and biblical models? This is not merely a question for friendly debate among music and worship scholars. The answer to this question drives our entire approach to the choir as worship leader. If what we do does have a connection, then making the church choir work should have some priority. If there is no connection, it really does not matter what we do, and we can turn away from all that has come before without even looking back. For those who ask, “Why have a choir?” we must have a cogent answer.

First, does the Bible mandate that our churches have a choir? I have heard it said that the choir is biblical. Based on the survey of biblical literature, there is no command to have a choir. It is, however, scripturally mandated that we sing and sing corporately. If that singing occasionally finds expression in a choral fashion, then that can add to the worship experience. That being said, simply dismissing choral music in worship would be to ignore how powerfully choirs were used in the worship of the Old Testament. There is a significant biblical heritage for the choir in worship. Like any system that fallen man touches, the choir in worship can be corrupted and mishandled. In spite of that, the choir has the potential and, more importantly, the biblical blessing to bring something unique and special to worship.

The big disconnect for evangelicals with the choirs of Scripture is the fact that most of the choirs described in the Old Testament were paid choirs of professional clergy. Paid choir members are an anathema to most people in the free church tradition. In this sense, there is not really a connection with the biblical model. Interestingly, I. E. Reynolds thought differently. For him, the paid singer should be normative.

The greatest alibi for the volunteer choir is that the church is financially unable to remunerate the musicians and that there is as much reason or scripture for paying the officers and teachers in the Sunday School, and the leaders in Young People’s Work as there is for paying the musicians, all of which is true. The scriptural plan, in both the Old and New Testaments, was to pay all religious workers without discrimination. If present-day churches [1938] were on the Bible plan of financing, they would be able to all they should do financially.⁵¹

Reynolds, included sixty unison hymns, *The Baptist Hymnal* published in 1991 and edited by Wesley L. Forbis contains sixty-eight unison hymn arrangements.

⁵¹ I. E. Reynolds, 25.

Reynolds admits in his book that this is a delicate subject and should not be forced on a church. He was merely drawing some personal conclusions from Scripture. For Reynolds, paying would raise the quality of music and increase the dependability of the musicians. The apostle Paul did encourage the churches to take care of the ones who made their living off the gospel, but Scripture tells us that sometimes even Paul refused his salary for the sake of the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:5-6). The survey of music history also showed that paying the choir does not always produce the desired result in either quality or spiritual service.

Second, does what we do with choirs have a connection to other church choirs throughout music history? As was perhaps obvious in the historical survey, there are many streams of choral music that run through history. Sometimes the streams dried up and went nowhere. Others seemed to overflow their banks and flood the surrounding landscape. Some persisted for centuries while others lasted less than a generation. In a very general functional sense, the choirs found in our churches today are descendents of all choirs that have ever sung in a church. Christians throughout the centuries have had choirs singing as part of worship, probably because of the presence of choirs in Scripture. Until the Reformation this was not even questioned. When the reformers put everything in worship on the table for re-evaluation, they came to different conclusions about the role of the choir in worship. Some overcorrected and abandoned the choir (and even singing) entirely. For them, the choir was just a reminder of other things that were theologically abhorrent and so everything had to go. Even through all this change, the church choir has continued to exist, and the fact that the institution has survived through history should make it difficult to dismiss today.

On a technical level, the connections between the choir of the twenty-first century and church choirs of the past are divided. There are some choral traditions that have no real link to what is done in evangelical circles today. The quartet choir, for example, was a relatively short-lived institution that holds little influence for today's volunteer church choir. The Oxford Movement helped move choirs to the front of the church and introduced choir robes to American choirs, both readily recognizable elements in churches today. Some of the strongest connections are with the revival choirs under the direction of Sankey, Alexander, and Rodeheaver. In fact, a case could be made that the tenor of Southern Baptist worship services in the twentieth century was hugely influenced by the model of the nineteenth-century revival meetings.

Historically, many American evangelical groups first introduced choirs in revival settings of the nineteenth century, and the singers were considered to be an extension of the ministry of proclamation; for this

reason they were usually seated in the center platform behind the preacher.⁵²

The choir as a proclaimer of the gospel message and its use to help set a mood (something new in church music history) come directly from the revival choir.

Historical precedent is not a reason to continue using the choir as a worship leader. History can be, however, an excellent teacher and friend.

Implications for the Choir in Twenty-First Century Worship

Luther wanted the choir to aid the congregation in their singing and to add some beauty to the service. Franklin Segler echoes Luther's sentiments.

The church choir has two tasks in worship. First, it should lead the congregation in expressing worship through the singing of hymns. Second, it should provide choral music which will inspire and enrich the worship experience of the entire congregation.⁵³

The first of these functions is perhaps the highest and best purpose a choir has as a worship leader. Since a choir can be an effective tool for assisting the uncertain singers in the congregation (and does not require the skill levels of the praise team), that reason alone should keep the choir alive and well. With regard to beauty, some evangelicals are afraid of the artistic side of the choir. There is good reason to fear it, and there are both historical and biblical examples to serve as warning signs. That notwithstanding, making and listening to well-done choral music that praises the Creator and Redeemer can be a magnificently lifting experience.

Admittedly, listeners must avoid the temptations of idolatry; they must not hear a "transcendent" choir for music's sake, nor receive a transcendent experience solely as pleasure. But, if the attitude is right, the imagination can soar on the wings of text and music, both of which reveals something of a numinous God.⁵⁴

Edmunds Lorenz notes that the simplicity of congregational song limits the musical expression that can be applied to worship. For Lorenz, the choir enriches and adds variety to the service while helping the congregation with its singing. In addition to these roles, he believes the choir can help build an enthusiasm or *esprit de corps* for the church

⁵² Hustad, *Jubilate II*, 389.

⁵³ Segler, *Worship*, 97.

⁵⁴ Hustad, *Jubilate II*, 111.

members and attract people to the church. However, he also warns against pride overriding devotion and the concertizing of a worship service. The “artistic choir” which gobbles up the worship time has no place in the church.⁵⁵ James White, worship theologian, says churches should rid themselves of that sort of choir.

Choral music . . . should be subject to a careful theological scrutiny. Where a choir does not foster corporate worship, or when it actually impedes it, the choir is expendable. Even excellent music should be rejected if it detracts from the worship of the church. After all, a large portion of Protestantism worshiped for more than three centuries without choirs.⁵⁶

Eric Routley adds one more suggestion to help the choir and the congregation connect in worship. In a time before presentation software and projected text, he said the words of the choir anthem ought to be presented to the worshipers. “This is not an insult to the choir’s diction. It is to give the unmusical person a visual image of the idea that the choir is setting to music.”⁵⁷ In today’s visually-oriented society, using video projectors to project not only words but pictures can be a powerful amplification of the choir anthem.

In addition to the previously mentioned purposes for the choir, Barry Liesch adds another: “An additional dimension needs emphasis [in worship] if we are to catch the picture of *kerygma* communication. *Kerygma* includes evangelism. Paul anticipates a time that visiting unbelievers will be converted during worship services (I Corinthians 14:24-25).”⁵⁸ The revival choir picked up on this function in worship, and the evangelical choir of today embraces it gladly. Anthems that proclaim the gospel message are a significant part of the choir’s worship repertoire. Special programs such as pageants and other seasonal productions that involve the choir are driven by the desire to evangelize the unchurched.

There are also some administrative reasons to have a choir. A choir provides an entry-level organization in the music ministry for those with little skill or experience in music. In this way, a person can gain some hands-on training in singing and reading music. It allows anyone at any

⁵⁵ Lorenz, *Music*, 216-22.

⁵⁶ James F. White, “Church Choir: Friend or Foe?” (originally published in *The Christian Century*, 23 March 1960), cited in *Opinions on Church Music: Comments and Reports from Four and a Half Centuries*, ed. Elwyn Wienandt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1974), 180-81.

⁵⁷ Eric Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, with a foreword by Martin E. Marty (Carol Stream, IL: Agape, 1978), 117.

⁵⁸ Liesch, *New Worship*, 165.

ability level to have a role in worship leadership. Certainly, they would need more detailed instruction in both music and worship, but the choir would be a practical introductory experience. Praise teams are by nature a closed system. Even if there is some sort of rotation, not everyone can take part (nor would they all be welcome). These teams of singers require a higher level of vocal skills. In an organizational way, they resemble the levitical choirs found in the Temple or the quartet choirs of England and early America. On the other hand, a choir would provide opportunity for involvement without exposing possible weaknesses. One of the great disadvantages of the praise team is a great strength for a choir, even a small one. Voices that do not blend well with others are even harder to hide when they are miked. A choir can better blend harsh tone qualities and correct (or hide) sagging intonation.

There were warnings above regarding the “artistic choir” and what Harold Best called “soloism.” A choir can be a way to filter possible praise team members and soloists, giving them a place to validate their servant spirit. Praise teams are by nature more subject to the “spotlight effect”—a subtle stroking of the ego due to the soloistic performance setting. Although not totally immune from this syndrome, choir members will be somewhat protected. I am spiritually suspicious of the talented person that can never seem to find the time to assist the choir as they lead worship, but will rearrange their entire schedule to make a praise team rehearsal or sing a solo.

On a musical level, a choir can be a real asset, helping a congregation negotiate musical transitions in worship. Today’s worship leaders may weave together many disparate musical materials to make a tapestry of praise. Modulations and interludes can sometimes leave the congregation behind. It must be remembered that many in the congregation are uncertain singers who are not confident in their abilities to match a pitch well, much less do something out of the ordinary with a song. A well-coached choir can help the congregation by making sure the melody is heard or that the modulatory chords make sense to the ears of the listeners. A strong choir augmented by a praise team that is not overamplified is a truly effective combination to aid congregational participation in a musically sophisticated worship service.

Finally, there is one last ministry-oriented reason one may want a choir—outreach. This one is somewhat controversial. For some, the presence of the obviously lost in the choir is inappropriate. This entire article has been about the role of worship leadership of the choir. How can a lost person singing in the choir lead worship? In reality, they cannot. Yet, the choir as a totality is leading worship, not the individual person. If their participation in the rehearsals and services brings them under the influence of the gospel and builds positive relationships with

believers that eventually brings them to faith in Christ, does that not bring glory to God also? Lost people may be engaging in an openly sinful lifestyle that causes the choir problems. However, the same can happen with a believer that is singing in the choir. This is a ministry philosophy decision that balances the needs of worship with the goals of evangelism. The pastor and minister of music should make this decision together. If the worship team decides that lost people can participate in the choir, a system should be put in place that connects them with strong believers in a choir care group or other small group setting.

Can the church choir survive the transitions of the twenty-first century? It has proved a resilient and versatile organization down through history. As White pointed out, believers have done without the choir. Yet it did come back. The forms and music changed with time and it sometimes struggled with its role in worship. But overall it fulfilled its purpose. The church choir will continue to have a place as a leader in worship. There is a rich opportunity waiting for the worship leaders of the future who choose to embrace and not abandon the choir.