

Chapter 5

American Gospel Song Movement

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHENEVER CHRISTIANS EXPERIENCE SEASONS of widespread revival, it changes the way we sing. The story of both biblical and church history is filled with new genres of music arising from periods of awakenings. As Vernon Whaley and Elmer Towns write in *Worship Through the Ages*, “Through the centuries, there have been periods of great encounter with God. We often call these periods revivals or Great Awakenings. During these periods of awakening, new methods, styles, processes, and techniques of worship emerge.”¹

This was certainly true in America during the nineteenth century, especially during the so-called Layman’s Revival between 1875 and 1900, which generated the era of the gospel song. This movement impacted church music for a hundred years and still affects our worship today. It unfolded in stages. During the 1800s, a series of revivals kept Christianity at the forefront of American history. The second great awakening in the first half of the century represented a merger of the camp revivals on the frontier and the campus revivals spreading through the Northeast. This awakening

1. Towns and Whaley, *Worship Through the Ages*, 5.

created a fertile environment for the growth of one of the greatest Christian innovations of the time—the Sunday school.

The American Sunday School Union was founded in the United States in 1824. In 1830, Francis Scott Key, the organization's president, challenged his colleagues to aggressively establish Sunday schools between Pittsburgh and Denver. Within a few years, over 61,000 Sunday schools were planted. The growth in Sunday school attendance in America rose from less than 100,000 children in 1824 to more than 3,250,000 in 1875.²

All these children needed songs to sing, which gave rise to the era of the “Sunday school song,” simple, easy-to-sing hymns and choruses written especially with children in mind—songs such as “Jesus Loves Me,” which has been called the unofficial theme for the Sunday school movement.³ One historian wrote, “From the 1840s there developed a new body of song particularly adapted to the American Sunday school—one that spoke in reassuring terms about God's love and a home in heaven.”⁴

William Bradbury, a Christian composer and children's music educator, deserves the lion's share of credit for this innovation in hymnody. William J. Reynolds wrote, “First designed solely for children, these songs were simple in character, popular in design, and intended for immediate appeal.”⁵

The Sunday school song quickly spread to wider congregational use. It was a natural evolution. As Sunday school children grew up, they wanted to take their Sunday school habits with them. By 1870, many Sunday schools were catering to adults as well as children and entire churches lifted their voices to sing these simpler and more sentimental songs.

In the preface of an 1871 collection of Sunday school songs, the editors explained: “The hymns in this work are not all projected on the plane of childhood. That quiet revolution, by which our Sunday schools for children are passing up to the higher level of Bible schools for all ages, has not been overlooked. Keeping that strictly in view, we have inserted hymns about Heaven, which veteran saints can sing, hymns of Activity for the strong and buoyant, hymns of new Experience for the Christian child; as well as hymns of Invitation for the unconverted, and hymns of Confession for the penitent.”⁶

2. Towns and Whaley, *Worship Through the Ages*, 163–64.
3. Blumhofer, *Her Heart Can See*, 182.
4. Clark, *Music and Theology*, 104.
5. Reynolds, *Companion*, 19.
6. Reynolds, *Companion*, 19.

Edwin Wilber Rice, in his 1917 history of the Sunday school movement in America, wrote:

The American Sunday School Union not only aimed to provide a juvenile literature, but it sought to displace the rollicking and ribald songs by cleaner and purer lyrics set to attractive music. It was a common proverb then, “The devil has all the popular songs.” Practically there were no moral songs of hymns of note for children in 1800 or 1810, except the small collection of Watts’s *Divine and Moral Songs*, Roland Hill’s *Divine Hymns in Easy Language*, and Jane and Ann Taylor’s *Original Hymns for Sunday Schools*. There were collections of hymns for children a century earlier, but those of any importance issued from 1700 to 1800 could be counted on the fingers of a person’s hand.⁷

Bradbury and his fellow composers such as Lowell Mason changed that by publishing and popularizing a galaxy of Sunday school songs for Christians of all ages. In many churches, these songs supplemented—but did not replace—Watts, Wesley, Newton, Cowper, and the classic hymns of the 1700s.

Rice goes on to point out how these Sunday school songs paved the way for the next powerful wave of emerging church music—the gospel song: “The charming melodies of Lowell Mason and the rhythmic songs of Thomas Hastings, and other musical writers, were composed for the young, and issued by the Union as worthy forerunners of the gospel songs that now fill our land.”⁸

The uncomplicated tunes and lyrics of Sunday school songs seeped into church worship and set the stage of an even greater shift in American church music, one that accompanied what is often called the Layman’s Revival. This revival arose in part from a New York City prayer meeting planned by Jeremiah Lamphier for noon on Wednesday, September 23, 1857. The location on Fulton Street was in the financial district, which was in the grip of the 1857 Financial Panic. The Fulton Street meetings spread across the East and gripped a nation that was tottering on the edge of the Civil War.

When the war came, it disrupted the revival but it didn’t stop it. Indeed, the Civil War was accompanied by continued revivals in both the Northern and the Southern armies.⁹ During the war, a brilliant but largely uneducated

7. Rice, *Sunday School Movement*, 147.

8. Rice, *Sunday School Movement*, 150.

9. For further study, see “Untold Story of Christianity.” Also Lacy, *Revivals in the Midst of the Years*, chapter 5; and Miller, *They Prayed to the Same God*.

entrepreneur from Chicago named Dwight Lyman Moody became an unofficial chaplain in the Union Army. Making repeated visits to the battlefield, he preached the gospel and cared for the spiritual needs of the soldiers. After the war, Moody continued preaching, and great power accompanied his ministry. Moody was never ordained; he was a layman, but, after all, this period is known as the Layman's Revival, and it's fitting that the man who would become its chief standard-bearer was a layman.

In June 1870, Moody was invited to speak at a convention in Indianapolis. During one service, an employee of the Internal Revenue Service, Ira Sankey, led the singing. Afterward the two men met, and, as Sankey later recalled, Moody began pelting him with questions: "Where are you from? Are you married? What is your business?"

Upon telling him that I lived in Pennsylvania, was married, had two children, and was in the government employ, he said abruptly, "You will have to give that up."

I was amazed, at a loss to understand why the man told me that I would have to give up what I considered a good position. "What for?" I exclaimed.

"To come to Chicago and help me in my work," was the answer.

When I told him that I could not leave my business, he retorted, "You must; I have been looking for you for the last eight years."¹⁰

Moody persuaded Sankey to join him as a musical evangelist in his campaigns, and the Moody-Sankey team embarked on a series of remarkable evangelistic endeavors in Great Britain and America. Sankey traveled with a small portable organ (a harmonium made by Mason & Hamlin), and during the meetings he searched out songs that felt warm, simple, evangelistic, and emotional. He called them, "our sweet church songs . . . sung from the heart."¹¹

Large choirs were a standard feature of the Moody-Sankey meetings. Sankey insisted on keeping and singing the older hymns, but felt his new sweet church songs should be sung alongside the great English and German hymns. "Old family hymns and tunes should be used," he wrote, "with now and then a Sunday-school song."¹² Indeed, the Sankey hymnbooks are full of these older hymns. But he believed his evangelistic efforts with Moody needed lighter, warmer songs that were easily taught and learned and that

10. Sankey, *My Life and the Story*, 21.

11. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 380.

12. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 381.

touched the sentiment, hit a strong emotional note, and conveyed the gospel. Sankey viewed himself just as truly an evangelist as Moody, and the two men were on the platform near each other, ready at a moment's notice to shift the message from one to the other.

On one rainy night, for example, Moody wound up a sermon in Brooklyn by urging his listeners to engage in the Lord's work with all their hearts. His voice reached the rafters as he told the story of a British woman who, aided by her husband, led 150 people to Christ. "That's the way we do it," Moody thundered. "God help you to lay yourselves out. Go ye all into the vineyard! Don't wait for the harvest, for—hark!"

At this exclamation, a thrill of indescribable anticipation seemed to pass through the breathless assembly, and then, after a pause, during which only the patter of raindrops on the roof could be heard, the speaker concluded with: "Hark! The voice of Jesus crying, who will go and work today?"

The tones of Mr. Moody's voice had hardly ceased before the same words were repeated by Mr. Sankey's musical voice in a beautiful hymn:

Hark! The voice of Jesus crying,
Who will go and work today?
Fields are white and harvest waiting,
Who will bear the sheaves away?¹³

Many souls made spontaneous, life-changing decisions to follow Christ while listening to a Sankey solo. Rev. E. J. Goodspeed wrote a contemporaneous account of the Moody-Sankey meetings in Great Britain and America, saying:

As a vocalist, Mr. Sankey has not many equals. Possessed of a voice of great volume and richness, he expressed with exquisite skill and pathos the Gospel message, in words very simple, but replete with love and tenderness, and always with marked effect upon his audience. It is, however, altogether a mistake to suppose that the blessings which attend Mr. Sankey's efforts is attributable only or chiefly to his fine voice and artistic expression. . . . Like his colleague, he likewise has a message to lost men from God the Father; and the Spirit of God in him finds a willing and effective instrument in his gift of song. . . . "It was a few evenings ago," said a youth in the Young Men's Meeting in Roby Chapel, "when Mr. Sankey was singing in the Free Trade Hall 'Jesus of Nazareth Passeth By,' that I was made to feel the

13. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 271–72.

need of my Savior; and when he came to those words, ‘Too late, too late,’ I said to myself it must not be too late for me, and I took him to my heart there and then.”¹⁴

Another observer wrote, “The admiration of Mr. Sankey’s music is enthusiastic. When he sings a solo a death-like silence reigns, or, as the *Irish Times* describes it, ‘It seems that he only is present in the vast building.’ When he ceases there is a rustling like the leaves of a forest when stirred by the wind.”¹⁵

Yet another wrote, “We have seen many stirred and melted by his singing before a word had been spoken. Indeed, his singing is just a powerful, distinct, and heart-toned way of speaking, that seems often to reach the heart by short cut.”¹⁶

J. F. Findley Jr., in his biography of Moody, wrote of the impact the Moody-Sankey team had abroad.

In Scotland . . . Sankey commanded attention simply because solo singing and the use of the harmonium had been all but unheard of. In England, there was a notable tradition of hymnody and congregational singing connected with the evangelical movement, but this tradition had been declining at the time the two Americans came overseas. Consciously or unconsciously, Sankey did something to revive the tradition. Participants in the revival meetings noted that the singing evangelist often did not really sing his songs but instead “spoke” them in a tuneful way. He put primary emphasis on precise enunciation, to make clear the words and their meaning. He made music the servant of the lyric rather than the reverse. . . . The melodies Sankey used were simple, yet when he performed them they often produced a noticeable emotional effect, since he was careful to utilize modulations in tempo and volume both in his voice and in the musical accompaniment.¹⁷

The stories of those who were converted to Christ mid-song are striking. One “intelligent young man” later testified that he had come to the Moody-Sankey Liverpool meeting in 1875 to scoff and make fun of the proceedings. He sat laughing to himself until

14. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 54–55.

15. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 54–55.

16. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 107.

17. Findley, *Dwight L. Moody*, 176–77.

that beautiful hymn, “Safe in the Arms of Jesus,” was sung. A sudden thrill passed through my whole frame, and then like a dart ran through my very heart. My feelings were awful, but I listened to the next verse, and felt there is a Savior. Who is He? Where is He? Instantly I realized the truth, Jesus is the Savior. I threw myself into His loving arms, and here I am now, rejoicing in Him.¹⁸

As Sankey collected songs from his collaborators, he taught them to the great crowds attending the meetings. One account explained the process like this:

Mr. Sankey also sang the verses to the 18th hymn, “Rescue the Perishing,” but the audience did not respond as enthusiastically as usual in the chorus. After the services, Mr. Sankey said that this hymn was new, at least he had not had it very long, and that a large portion of the audience was unacquainted with the tune. He was confident they would sing it with the usual force after hearing it a few more times.¹⁹

These gospel songs spread abroad because of the huge crowds and choirs that attended Moody’s rallies. When the duo came to Philadelphia, organizers built an auditorium seating twelve thousand people, including a choir loft for five hundred. Mr. Sankey led the choir and drilled them on the songs he was introducing, and in this way spread his music to churches all across the city.²⁰

Early in their campaigns, Sankey collected a scrapbook of songs that seemed suited to mass evangelistic meetings. “I was continually beset with requests for the loan of my ‘musical scrap-book,’” he said, “in which alone could be found the songs that were then being sung as solos at our meetings.”²¹

While Moody and Sankey were in London, publisher R. C. Morgan offered to publish a collection of the songs used in the Moody-Sankey meetings. “So,” Sankey recalled, “I cut from my scrap-book twenty-three pieces, rolled them up, and wrote on them the words ‘Sacred Songs and Solos, sung by Ira D. Sankey at the meetings of Mr. Moody of Chicago.’”²² This was the beginning of one of the most successful publishing ventures in the history of hymnody. With each new edition, Sankey added more hymns. The books

18. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 173.

19. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 256.

20. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 261.

21. Sankey, *My Life and the Story*, 46.

22. Sankey, *My Life and the Story*, 54.

spread far and wide, both in English and in translated editions. During Sankey's lifetime, an estimated 75 million copies were sold, "netting him a profit of \$500,000, all of which he gave away to charitable enterprises."²³ Martin Clark wrote, "With the publication and spread of *Sacred Songs and Solos*, the transition from Sunday school songs to revival hymns became a fait accompli and a new model of religious song became available."²⁴

At first, these new songs and songbooks were called "Sankey's." People would rush into bookstores and ask for a dozen Sankey's. "Let's sing a Sankey" was the cry. In 1875, Philip Bliss published his own collection of revival hymns, and he called them "gospel songs," and, in so doing, provided a title to this genre of Christian music. Later, updated collections of Sankey hymns were published under the title, *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs*.

In this way, the era of the gospel song began. While Sankey composed a few of the melodies for some of the songs he popularized, the Moody-Sankey movement produced a galaxy of lyricists and composers who fueled the era of the gospel song, such as:

- Fanny J. Crosby (1820–1915)—Crosby was of the most remarkable characters in nineteenth-century American Christian history. Indeed, apart from Moody and Sankey, she was the best-known Christian in the United States. Blinded in childhood, Crosby composed lyrics based on a rich storehouse of memorized Scripture and provided the words for thousands of gospel songs.
- Major Daniel Webster Whittle (1840–1901)—After the Civil War, Whittle became an executive of the Elgin Clock Company until Moody recruited him as a Bible teacher, evangelist, and song lyricist.
- Elisha A. Hoffman (1839–1929)—Hoffman was a Presbyterian minister who composed the lyrics of more than two thousand hymns and edited over fifty songbooks.
- Eliza E. Hewitt (1851–1920)—A native of Pennsylvania, Hewitt began her career as a schoolteacher but became disabled and, as an invalid, began writing the lyrics of hymns. She became one of Sankey's favorite lyricists.
- William Bradbury (1816–68)—As we stated earlier, Bradbury was a children's music educator who helped develop and popularize Sunday school songs. He passed away before Moody and Sankey joined forces,

23. Sankey, *Sacred Songs and Solos*, 78.

24. Clark, *Music and Theology*, 106.

but his hymn compositions were widely used by Sankey in meetings across Europe and America.

- Robert Lowry (1826–99)—Lowry was a pastor and educator, best remembered for his musical compositions and editorial work in compiling collections of gospel songs as an editor at Biglow & Main Publishing Company, the largest publisher of gospel music during the Moody-Sankey era.
- William H. Doane (1832–1915)—Doane was an inventor and manufacturer with more than seventy patents to his name. He presided over his business empire from his estate, Sunny Side, in Cincinnati. A dedicated Christian, Doane also wrote hymn tunes and became a longtime collaborator with Fanny Crosby.
- Philip Bliss (1838–76)—From humble origins, Bliss grew up wanting to be a musician, and by sheer determination and giftedness became one of the most revered young musicians of the gospel song era, and, as stated earlier, coined the phrase “gospel song.” He and his wife perished in the Ashtabula River Railroad Disaster on December 29, 1876, while traveling to Chicago to join Moody and Sankey for services on New Year’s Eve.
- Charles H. Gabriel (1856–1932)—Originally from Iowa, Gabriel was a self-taught musician who wrote the words and composed the tunes to thousands of gospel songs.
- George F. Root (1820–95)—Though he wrote the lyrics to a handful of gospel songs, Root was an accomplished musician who was better known for his gospel tunes.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND NOTABLE HYMNS

Because the gospel songs of the Sankey era were born in the midst of soul-winning rallies, they are simple, evangelistic, and gospel-centered; and because they evolved from Sunday school songs they were easy to learn, easy to sing, and could be quickly learned at mass meetings.

The golden age of German and English hymns (c. 1520–1820) provided the church with majestic and reverent hymns focused on the worship of God. But many of these new gospel songs were written for non-Christians. They were evangelistic in nature, and Sankey felt he was singing the gospel, even as Moody preached it. Whaley and Towns wrote, “The genre was termed ‘Gospel Music’ because its message centered on core ideas

of the salvation message—sin, grace, redemption, and the experience of conversion.”²⁵ According to William Reynolds, the distinguishing characteristics of the American gospel hymn are: (1) emotional rather than intellectual emphasis; (2) simple phrases repeated over and over; (3) evangelistic emphasis; (4) simple tunes based on popular melody—camp or marching songs and parlor piano music; (5) an easy to learn refrain; (6) words and melodies that can be memorized easily; and (7) a melodic line supported by simple harmonic structure with infrequent changes of chords.²⁶

One of Sankey’s most effecting songs, “Jesus of Nazareth Passeth By,” with words written by a New Jersey schoolteacher, Emma Campbell, was a ballad envisioning the scenes of Jesus passing by certain people or towns in gospel times. The final verse warned the listener, “If you still His call refuse / And all His wondrous love abuse, / Soon will He sadly from you turn / Your bitter prayer for pardon spurn, / ‘Too late! Too late!’ will be the cry, / Jesus of Nazareth has passed by.” In his memoirs, Sankey wrote, “At one of our early meetings in Edinburgh an old gentleman, more than seventy years of age, threw himself down on his knees and, sobbing like a child, said, “I was utterly careless about my soul until last night, but I have been so unhappy since I could not sleep. I seemed to hear ringing in my ears, ‘Jesus of Nazareth Passeth By,’ and I feel that if I am not saved now, I never shall be.”²⁷

Another of Sankey’s most beloved hymns, “The Ninety and Nine,” tells the story of a shepherd searching for a lost sheep that was “Away in the mountains wild and bare, / Away from the tender shepherd’s care.”

But all thro’ the mountains, thunder-rive,
And up from the rocky steep,
There arose a glad cry to the gate of heaven,
“Rejoice! I have found my sheep!”
And the Angels echoed around the throne,
“Rejoice! For the Lord brings back His own.”²⁸

Sankey explained his theology of worship during a convention of church music held in junction with Moody’s New York City campaign in 1876:

25. Towns and Whaley, *Worship Through the Ages*, 189.

26. Towns and Whaley, *Worship Through the Ages*, 189.

27. Sankey, *My Life and the Story*, 204–5.

28. Words by Elizabeth C. Celphane; music by Ira Sankey, published in *Sacred Songs and Solos*, 1874.

There are hymns which teach and preach the Gospel, and these are not hymns of praise. I believe there is another power of singing which many have not discovered yet, that of preaching the Gospel. There is no praise in the hymn, “Jesus of Nazareth Passeth By,” yet it has been blessed to hundreds of souls. It is not praising God at all. When it comes to praising God I will join in the general singing as heartily as any one else. If I want to preach to you in song I would ask you to listen.²⁹

It may not be surprising, then, that an entire category of “invitation hymns” arose to urge listeners to give their lives to Christ. These include,

- “Just as I Am” (1836) by Charlotte Elliott
- “Have Thine Own Way, Lord” (1907) by Adelaide A. Pollard
- “I Surrender All” (1896) by Judson W. Van DeVenter
- “Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is Calling” (1880) by Will L. Thompson
- “Jesus, I Come” (1887) by William T. Sleeper
- “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior” (1868) by Fanny Crosby
- “Take My Life and Let It Be” (1874) by Frances R. Havergal
- “Whiter Than Snow” (1872) by James L. Nicholson
- “Almost Persuaded” (1871) by Philip P. Bliss
- “Are You Coming Home Tonight” (1883) by an anonymous author

Other themes focused around the blood of Christ and its saving power. In almost every campaign, D. L. Moody preached a sermon about the power of the blood of Jesus, and this became a dominant note in gospel song hymnody. In one of his spellbinding sermons in New York, Moody said, “Why do you like that hymn, ‘Just as I am, without one plea, save that Thy blood was shed for me’? Why is it that that hymn is so popular? Why does the Church of God like it and sing it? Why do we sing it so often? Because it has got the precious blood in it.”³⁰ Other gospel songs focused on this theological theme of Christ’s blood include:

- “Are You Washed in the Blood?” (1878) by Elisha A. Hoffman
- “Nothing But the Blood” (1876) by Robert Lowry
- “There Is Power in the Blood” (1899) by Lewis E. Jones
- “Saved by the Blood” (1902) by S. J. Henderson

29. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 583.

30. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 497.

- “When I See the Blood” (1892) by John G. Fotte and Elisha A. Hoffman
- “Precious Blood” (1881) by MacLeod Wylie

In a similar vein, the themes of the cross and redemption pervaded the era of the gospel song, based on the conviction that the cross was the very heart of the gospel message. In an age that saw the abolition of slavery in the United States, there was an unspoken bond between current events and redemptive grace. The cross redeems from sin, liberates us, and sets us free:

- “Near the Cross” (1869) by Fanny Crosby
- “Hallelujah for the Cross” (1875) by Horatius Bonar
- “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” (1868) by Elizabeth C. Clephane
- “Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It” (1882) by Fanny Crosby
- “Since I Have Been Redeemed” (1884) by Edwin O. Excell
- “I Will Sing of My Redeemer” (1876) by Philip P. Bliss

Many of the gospel songs were designed to motivate believers to spread the gospel and tell the story of Jesus across the street and across the seas. The great era of modern missions had captured the imagination of the American church, and reports told of gospel advancement in Asia, Africa, the South Pacific, and other exotic locations that most people had never before contemplated. At the same time, evangelists like Moody emphasized the role of aggressive soul-winning. Many of the songs of this era helped stir the evangelistic zeal of the crowds who sang them.

- “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” (1858) by George Duffield Jr.
- “Rescue the Perishing” (1869) by Fanny Crosby
- “Tell Me the Old, Old Story” (1867) by Katherine Hankey
- “I Love to Tell the Story” (1866) by Katherine Hankey
- “Tell Me the Story of Jesus” (1880) by Fanny Crosby
- “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations” (1896) by Henry Ernest Nichol
- “I Will Sing the Wondrous Story” (1886) by Francis H. Rowley
- “The Story that Never Grows Old” (1898) by John H. Yates
- “Throw Out the Life Line” (1888) by Edwin S. Ufford
- “Dare to Be a Daniel” (1873) by Philip P. Bliss
- “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go, Dear Lord” (1892) By Mary Brown and Charles E. Prior

- “Let the Lower Lights Be Burning” (1871) by Philip P. Bliss
- “Lord, Speak to Me that I May Speak” (1872) by Frances Havergal

In keeping with the emotional and comforting nature of the gospel songs, many of them were written to afford Christians the comforts and consolations of faith, which served to enhance the believer’s testimony to the world. The years following the Civil War were marked by severe economic cycles and financial collapses, presidential assassinations, and the difficult course of national reconstruction. Modern medical technology was in its infancy, and one of the most magnetic attractions of Christianity involved the comfort found in the presence of God and the promises of Scripture. These understandably became themes that filled the churches with songs.

- “Blessed Assurance” (1873) by Fanny Crosby
- “A Shelter in the Time of Storm” (1880) by Vernon J. Charlesworth
- “He Leadeth Me” (1862) by Joseph H. Gilmore
- “I Need Thee Every Hour” (1871) by Annie S. Hawks
- “It Is Well with My Soul” (1873) by Horatio G. Spafford
- “Safe in the Arms of Jesus” (1868) by Fanny Crosby
- “The Sweet By and By” (1868) by Sanford F. Bennett
- “A Child of the King” (1877) by Harriet E. Buell

One Moody-Sankey defender said, “Theological critics might have said there was nothing in it; but only eternity will reveal how much there came out of it.”³¹ One historian wrote,

Sankey’s songs were nothing like the old psalm tunes preferred by English Nonconformists or the Scottish Covenanters, nor even the more recent Victorian tunes popularized in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. They were simply not like anything familiar to worshipers of an Anglican or Nonconformist stripe. They were from another world—the world of the American Sunday school.³²

Moody and Sankey finally gave out from the strain of their work, but their influence lasted and they established the tone of American church music for the next hundred years. Sankey’s voice lost much of its power from the exhaustion of singing to thousands of people without amplification. Yet

31. Goodspeed, *Full History of the Wonderful Career*, 141.

32. Clark, *Music and Theology*, 103.

before his death in 1908, he was able to record a handful of solos on brown wax cylinders and by listening to them we can still hear the resonance and power of his voice.

CONTRIBUTION TO LITURGY AND WORSHIP

After Moody and Sankey passed from the scene, the gospel song era continued into the twentieth century in the same atmosphere of mass evangelism. Billy Sunday and his music director, Homer Rodeheaver, kept the era of gospel song fresh and alive, along with a host of other traveling evangelists, such as George Bennard, who wrote “The Old Rugged Cross” while trudging from church to church, holding evangelistic campaigns.

In the middle of the twentieth century, another famous duo—Billy Graham and Cliff Barrows—burst on the evangelical scene, employing mass choirs in huge stadiums and utilizing recordings, radio, and television to spread the gospel through song and the spoken word. But rather than create a new genre of Christian music, Barrows and his colleague, soloist George Beverly Shea, borrowed heavily from the gospel song era and gave gospel songs a new lease on life.

Even the mid-century songs and choruses of John W. Peterson as well as Bill and Gloria Gather share many characteristics with the gospel songs of the Moody-Sankey era. Indeed, right up until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when another revival, the Jesus movement, created the age of praise and worship music, gospel songs were heard in evangelical churches around the world, intermingled with great hymns of earlier eras. Evangelicals followed Sankey’s pattern of adding new songs without forsaking the old.

In the small church in which I grew up, for example, I recall how the song leader would open the service with a majestic eighteenth-century English hymn such as “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” before having us turn in our hymnal to Elisha Hoffman’s “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” We often sang Wesley and Crosby side by side. The unspoken philosophy that guided our song leader’s selections reflected the words of Jesus in Matt 13:52 (NIV), “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

Until recently, most American worshipers grew up singing a rich tapestry of hymns and gospel songs over the course of a lifetime, memorizing their words and internalizing their message. Believers sang the songs their parents and grandparents had loved, along with newer selections from contemporary musicians. We should bear in mind the risks of tolerating a

disposable attitude about our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, especially when our worship trends are driven by an industry that, in some cases, no longer values legacy. Every generation should indeed write its own music and express its own praise. But how tragic to forget the richness of Christian worship through the ages! Like Ira Sankey, may the church sing the new songs without forgetting the old. And let the words of Fanny Crosby ever be sung:

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

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