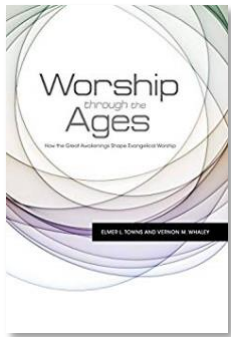


[Review] *Worship Through the Ages: How the Great Awakenings Shape Evangelical Worship*, by Elmer L. Towns and Vernon M. Whaley



JOHN DEVALVE

John DeValve has worked with SIM in Niger for 34 years. In February 2018, he completed a Ph.D. in African musicology and liturgical study at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (Oxford, UK).



Towns, Elmer L., and Vernon M. Whaley. *Worship Through the Ages: How the Great Awakenings Shape Evangelical Worship*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2012. 416pp., ISBN 978-1-4336-7257-6.

Worship Through the Ages tells a story of worship practices in the Western church and how they changed from one age to another during periods of revival and renewal. Each chapter of the book centers on one period of church history and its associated renewal movements. In particular, the book highlights new types of music and song connected with each period of renewal. This work is a historical, theological, and biographical overview of past worship practices and the rich worship culture Western Christians have inherited from their spiritual forebears. As a resource for students of history, worship, or theology, it is a good introduction to church worship practices, and a summary of some significant points of church history related to worship and music.

Authors Elmer Towns and Vernon Whaley organize their content around 14 “great awakenings”—periods of “great encounter with God.” These were times of great change and renewal, when new methods, styles, processes, and techniques entered into church worship. Each of the awakenings corresponds to one era of church history, as defined by the book’s authors. Each chapter highlights the main worship innovations and innovators of that particular awakening.

In the introductory chapter, the authors tackle a biblical definition of worship, using six adjectives. Worship, they say, is formational, transformational, relational, missional, reproducible, and measured by repentance. It is a response of the believer to God’s revealed truth. They further expand on the *what* and the *how* of worship. The former is a love and devotion of God, and the latter is worship with both heart and intellect (“in Spirit and in truth”). These two elements, the authors suggest, are characteristic of every great spiritual awakening.



The first two chapters deal briefly with worship in the Old Testament, looking at some of the main characters of the Bible and the characteristics of their worship. The chapters trace the development of different worship practices over the course of the history of God's people, especially concentrating on the worship of the Tabernacle and the Temple.

In chapters 3 through 5, Towns and Whaley give a bird's-eye view of the music of the church from AD 30 to 1500. Chapter 3 deals with the early church up to AD 100. Though we know little about what music and singing were like in this period, the New Testament gives some clues. The authors state that the model for worship during this time consisted of preaching (an innovation), scripture reading, songs, prayers, and the adoration of God. New Testament Christians also lived out their faith in front of the world, practicing worship in acts of service and through spiritual gifts. In chapter 4, the authors treat the period of the Greco-Roman world, from AD 100 to 500. During this period, the clergy began to play more of a leading role in preparing and presenting church music, in order to counter heresy. The final chapter in this section examines the church of the Middle Ages. The primary innovators in this period were Gregory the Great, Benedict, Guido d'Arezzo, and St. Francis. The main innovations were the creation of plainchant, Benedict's "Rule" (dividing the day into hours of prayer, manual work, study, and rest), and the invention of modes, choirs, polyphony, and musical notation.

The bulk of the book focuses on the time after the Reformation, with a heavy concentration on North American worship. Chapter 6 highlights the worship renewal inspired by the Reformation and emphasizes the innovations and reforms of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Chapter 7 covers the great awakenings of the 18th century. Innovators of this period included Isaac Watts and the Wesley brothers, who popularized the hymn format and stimulated a movement to teach people how to sing. During this period, many hymnbooks were published as aids to congregational singing. Chapters 8 through 10 outline three awakenings in North America in the 19th century: the camp meeting awakenings (1780–1820), the Finney revivals and the Sunday School movement (1820–1850), and the Layman's Prayer Revival, which started in 1857 and continued to the end of the century. These revivals brought innovations such as shape-notes and simple songs of testimony and inspiration to worship services.

Chapters 11 through 16 look at revivals in the 20th century, starting with the Welsh Revival of 1904–1906. An innovation in this revival was the introduction of improvised songs and hymns into worship. Right after this was the Azusa Street Revival (1906–1908), a forerunner of the modern charismatic movement. In the last four chapters of this section, the authors describe the great evangelistic

campaigns of the first 60 years of the century, and the baby boomer renewals of the last 40 years. The main innovations of the former were the emergence of three streams of gospel music and the introduction of the piano into Christian worship. An innovation of the latter was the use of “praise music,” which originated in the Jesus People movement and helped birth contemporary Christian music.

The final chapter deals with trends and movements in worship music in the 21st century. These include more church-based publishing and recording of worship music, the influence of Christian copyright licensing, and the effects of the renewal of Reformed theology on worship practices.

I bought this book because I’d been working on a doctoral project in African worship music. The book was mentioned in several bibliographies, and I thought it would be helpful in analyzing worship practices in African churches. The book did help me understand my North American worship heritage better, confirming for me where my African brothers and sisters got much of their worship music. It also referred to griots, African musicians the authors describe as “ceremonial leader[s] who stimulated audience participation through spoken word, song, or drama” (257). Griots are part of the subject of my research among the Songhai of West Africa. Though it seems to me that the authors distort their real purpose in that brief mention, in fact it can be rather hard to pin down precisely what a griot is. No occupation in Western society exactly matches the roles combined in the African griot, and any English word used to describe them (musician, poet, historian, genealogist, storyteller, wordsmith, bard, praise-singer, spokesperson) is at best only a partial equivalent.

Worship Through the Ages was not as helpful to my research as I had anticipated, however, because it doesn’t say much about Christian worship practices outside of Europe and North America. This is a common weakness in books like this. Given its title, more effort might have been put into mentioning what has happened elsewhere in the world. There are too few books about awakenings and worship renewal in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

In any survey work of this kind, covering over 2,000 years, treatment of the subject matter is bound to be somewhat cursory. Nothing is said about classical composers such as J. S. Bach and Handel, for instance, even though they could be considered musical innovators of one or more “great awakenings.” Likewise, there are only a few words about the liturgical renewal of the 21st century, and nothing about the worship of the emerging church. Also missing is any reference to innovations in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches.

Another omission that surprised me was the lack of a bibliography. Notes at the end of each chapter contain bibliographic references, but a full bibliography would have been helpful for someone who wants to comb through a list of sources for further reading. There is, however, a helpful timeline at the end of the book that summarizes the awakenings and the worship innovations of each era.

In spite of these weaknesses, *Worship Through the Ages* gives the reader an excellent introduction to worship practices of the Western Protestant church. Towns and Whaley have done an admirable job summarizing the main points and people within each worship awakening. This book should be in the library of every pastor and worship music leader in the North American and European church. It will also help African, Asian, and Latin American believers understand the progression of worship practices in the Western world and how those practices influence world worship practices.