

Hillsong Church

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Hillsong is a recently emerged Christian church in Sydney, Australia, with satellite churches in 35 countries. According to Hillsong’s website, their mission is to prepare “purpose-filled Jesus followers,” build “healthy church communities” and create “significant and sustainable social impact.”¹

Founder(s):

Brian Houston (b. 1954) and his wife Bobbie (Roberta, b. 1957)

Statistics:

After Hillsong’s founding in Sydney, Australia, in 1983, its first satellite church was established in London in 1992. As of 2021, the church had 131 locations around the world.² Hillsong has colleges in Sydney and in Irvine, Calif., to prepare pastors and worship leaders for their network of churches. More than 10,000 students of 65 nationalities have graduated from their leadership and ministry programs.³ One of the church’s bands, Hillsong Worship, has produced over 46 albums. Another, Hillsong United, has produced 17 albums and was named Top Christian Artist in 2016 at the Billboard Music Awards. Hillsong’s youth music ministry, Young and Free, has produced six albums. In 2018, Hillsong Worship earned a Grammy Award for their song “What a Beautiful Name.”⁴ The popularity of Hillsong music helped to set the standard for contemporary worship music.

History:

Brian Houston and his wife Bobbie founded Hills Christian Life Centre in Sydney, Australia, in 1983, renaming the church Hillsong after one of its popular bands. Hillsong began as part of the Australian Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, but became its own denomination in 2018.⁵ Hillsong’s network of churches “appealed to young people and city dwellers with

¹ “About Hillsong,” Hillsong Church, accessed Feb. 26, 2026, hillsong.com/about.

² Alex French and Dan Adler, “Carl Lentz and the Trouble at Hillsong,” *Vanity Fair*, Feb. 11, 2021, vanityfair.com/style/2021/02/carl-lentz-and-the-trouble-at-hillsong.

³ Hillsong Church, “About Hillsong.”

⁴ Matthew Leimkuehler, “For Christian group Hillsong Worship, the songs play beyond Sunday morning,” *The Tennessean*, Nov. 15, 2019, tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2019/11/15/hillsong-worship-awake-modern-praise-group-songs-stretching-beyond-sunday-usa-tour-nashville/3929402002/.

⁵ Ruth Graham, “Hillsong, Once a Leader of Christian Cool, Loses Footing in America,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2023, nytimes.com/2022/03/29/us/hillsong-church-scandals.html.

energetic, stylish preachers and an upbeat atmosphere. Hillsong translated the charismatic church experience, which emphasizes miracles and personal encounters with the Holy Spirit, for a hip, upscale audience.”⁶

Hillsong’s leadership has faced a number of public controversies. In 2015, a royal commission in Australia accused Brian Houston of failing to alert police about allegations that his father Frank (an Assemblies of God pastor) had sexually assaulted children (though the courts later ruled in his favor).⁷ In January of 2020, a staff member pleaded guilty to indecent assault. Carl Lentz joined Hillsong in 2010 as a lead pastor in New York, becoming known for his celebrity lifestyle and his association with entertainers such as Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez. He became involved in an extramarital affair and was fired by Brian Houston.⁸ In response to these troubling issues, Hillsong lost 11 of its 16 American churches.

More recently, Brian Houston resigned as Hillsong’s lead pastor in 2023 after an investigation found that he behaved inappropriately toward two women. Phil and Lucinda Dooley became Hillsong’s “Global Senior Pastors” in 2023, and in 2024 Brian Houston and his wife started a new online ministry called Jesus Followers TV.

Texts:

Hillsong Church believes that the Bible is God’s Word and “is accurate, authoritative and applicable to our everyday lives.”⁹ Founder Brian Houston has written several books, although these are not foundational texts for Hillsong. His books include *How to Make Wise Choices* (2004), *For This I Was Born: Aligning Your Vision to God’s Cause* (2008), *Live, Love, Lead: Your Best Is Yet to Come!* (2015) and *There Is More: When the World Says You Can’t, God Says You Can* (2018).

Beliefs and Practices:

Beliefs

According to its statement of beliefs, Hillsong Church affirms the Holy Trinity and teaches that salvation is found only in Jesus’ redeeming death and resurrection, through the repentance of sins and surrendering one’s will to Jesus. Believers “need to be baptized in water and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit,” who grants spiritual gifts including speaking in tongues. Believers are to meet together for fellowship, prayer and “the breaking of bread.” Hillsong teaches that God’s purpose for believers is to worship Him, fulfill their roles in the church and serve their communities.¹⁰

⁶ Graham, “Hillsong, Once a Leader of Christian Cool.”

⁷ David Smith, “‘Why do pastors keep falling?’: inside the shocking downfall of Hillsong church,” *The Guardian*, May 18, 2023, [theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/may/18/hillsong-church-documentary-carl-lentz-scandal](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/may/18/hillsong-church-documentary-carl-lentz-scandal).

⁸ Smith, “‘Why do pastors keep falling?’”

⁹ “What We Believe,” Hillsong Church, accessed Feb. 26, 2026, [hillsong.com/what-we-believe](https://www.hillsong.com/what-we-believe).

¹⁰ Hillsong Church, “What We Believe.”

When Brian Houston visited the United States in 1989, he was influenced by prosperity gospel preaching and adopted those beliefs in his own teaching. As one journalist wrote of Hillsong, “The prosperity doctrine is partly a financial proposition: If you donate to Hillsong, God will give you that money back. It’s a spiritual investment and a literal one.” A former Hillsong College student heard statements such as this in worship: “If you step out in faith and make that first step with a donation, you will be rewarded and it will come back to you.”¹¹

An interview with Brian Houston in 2014 raised questions about Hillsong’s views on homosexuality. Houston said that with homosexual marriage legalized, “in many circles the church can look like a pariah, because to many people it’s so irrelevant now. ... So staying relevant is a big challenge.”¹² The Hillsong website posted additional comments from Houston, who stated that his personal view on homosexuality “would line up with most traditionally held Christian views.” He said that in the interview he was making the point that “public statements condemning people [would] place a barrier between the church and the world.”¹³

Worship and Music

Hillsong follows a Pentecostal theology of worship. A former Hillsong worship pastor commented, “Our praise is irresistible to God. As soon as He hears us call His name, He is ready to answer us. That is the God we serve. Every time the praise and worship team with our musicians, singers, production teams, dancers, and actors begin to praise God, His presence comes in like a flood. Even though we live in His presence, His love is lavished on us in a miraculous way when we praise Him.”¹⁴

In Pentecostal worship, music may be regarded as nearly sacramental because the worship songs are thought to invite God’s presence.¹⁵ The flow of the service moves from *praise*, that is, songs about God, to *worship*, songs addressed to God.¹⁶ Inspiration for such worship is found in the psalms: “Yet You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Psalm 22:3) and “Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise! Give thanks to Him; bless His name!” (Psalm 100:4). This flow from praise to worship is said to reflect Old Testament tabernacle and temple practices, as the priest moved through the temple courts, proceeded into the temple itself and

¹¹ French and Adler, “Carl Lentz and the Trouble at Hillsong.”

¹² Nicola Menzie, “Hillsong’s Brian Houston on Gay Marriage: ‘I Believe the Writings of Paul Are Clear on This Subject,’” *The Christian Post*, Oct. 18, 2014, christianpost.com/news/hillsongs-brian-houston-on-gay-marriage-i-believe-the-writings-of-paul-are-clear-on-this-subject.html.

¹³ “Statement from Brian Houston - Senior Pastor, Hillsong Church Re: recent media comments on homosexuality,” Hillsong Church, Oct. 2014, accessed Feb. 26, 2026, hillsong.com/media-archives/statement-from-brian-houston-re-recent-media-comments-on-homosexuality.

¹⁴ Darlene Zschech, *Extravagant Worship: Holy, Holy, Holy Is the Lord God Almighty Who Was and Is, and Is to Come* (Bethany House, 2002), as quoted in Scott Aniol, “Stop Singing Hillsong, Bethel, Jesus Culture, and Elevation,” *G3 Ministries: By the Waters of Babylon*, Feb. 21, 2022, g3min.org/stop-singing-hillsong-bethel-jesus-culture-and-elevation.

¹⁵ Lim Swee Hong and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 121.

¹⁶ David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation Through Contemporary Worship Music* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 140.

finally approached the Holy of Holies.¹⁷ Since the Holy Spirit is given to all believers, Pentecostal traditions may not emphasize the role of pastors in worship. Musicians become the main worship leaders.¹⁸

Four churches, all from charismatic traditions, dominate contemporary worship music: Hillsong, Jesus Culture/Bethel in Redding, Calif., Elevation in Charlotte, N.C., and Passion in Atlanta, Ga.¹⁹ In 2022, *Christianity Today* reported that four out of the ten most popular worship songs were produced by Hillsong: “The Goodness of God,” “What a Beautiful Name,” “Who You Say I Am” and “King of Kings.”²⁰

Some Hillsong lyrics reflect the Pentecostal worship experience, as in this verse of the song “Latter Rain”: “These are the days of the latter rain / Days of power, days of grace / This is the time the fire will fall / To make this land holy / To make this land holy to the Lord.”²¹ The Latter Rain Movement was an important Pentecostal revival in the 1940s in Canada and the United States.

The personal experience of connecting to God through music is reflected in an advertisement for the 2025 Hillsong United tour in the United States. Those who attend will “experience the magic” of the live performances and the “soul-stirring worship and praise.” Listeners will “feel connected to a higher power through the unity of voices.”²² Adam Perez, a professor of worship studies at Belmont University in Nashville, comments that worship songs “become one of the primary ways of connecting with God — rather than prayer or sacraments or other rituals. Because of their market success, these churches have changed the spiritual practices and sometimes even the theology of congregations from many traditions.”²³

A Lutheran Response

Beliefs

Hillsong Church affirms the Holy Trinity and the truth of salvation found only through faith in Jesus Christ, but describes Holy Scripture only as “accurate, authoritative and applicable to our everyday lives.”²⁴ Scripture is certainly accurate, authoritative and applicable to our lives, but it is also inspired and inerrant. Hillsong regards Baptism and Holy Communion as symbols of

¹⁷ Hong and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*, 126–127,

¹⁸ Hong and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*, 18.

¹⁹ Bob Smietana, “How Bethel and Hillsong Took Over Our Worship Sets,” *Christianity Today*, April 12, 2023, christianitytoday.com/2023/04/bethel-hillsong-worship-sound-christian-research.

²⁰ Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, “Should We Keep Singing Hillsong?” *Christianity Today*, May 2, 2022, christianitytoday.com/2022/05/hillsong-church-music-sing-worship-scandal-documentary.

²¹ Hillsong Worship, “Latter Rain - Live,” by Russel Fragar and Geoff Bullock, Hills Christian Life Center, track 15 on *The Power of Your Love*, 1992, Genius Lyrics: genius.com/Hillsong-worship-latter-rain-lyrics. The words “latter rain” are taken from a prophecy in Joel 2:23.

²² “Hillsong United Tour 2025 USA,” Tour 2026, May 12, 2025, accessed March 6, 2026, tour2026.com/hillsong-united-tour-2025-usa.

²³ Smietana, “How Bethel and Hillsong Took Over Our Worship Sets.”

²⁴ Hillsong Church, “What We Believe.”

Christian fellowship and God’s love rather than as Means of Grace. As Lutherans, we know that Baptism is not merely a symbol or a human decision but an act of God, a “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The Lord’s Supper is not simply a sign of fellowship, but a Sacrament in which we receive Jesus’ true body and blood (Matt. 26:27–28).

Hillsong teaches a prosperity gospel; but God does not promise earthly wealth and prosperity to believers. God graciously enriches us “in every way to be generous in every way” (2 Cor. 9:11). Jesus said, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). While some believers may enjoy the blessing of earthly riches, all who follow Christ have heavenly treasure greater than any worldly wealth (Matt. 6:19–21).

Regarding Hillsong’s emphasis on numerical growth and its attempts to imitate the surrounding culture, one writer warns of equating the kingdom of God “with the kingdoms that we are trying to build with our Western consumeristic brand of Christianity.”²⁵ Scripture warns against adopting the ways of the world: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life — is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 John 2:15–16).

Worship and Music

Commenting on the influence of Hillsong, one writer states: “Hillsong has been a major player in transforming Christianity from a communal lifestyle to a spectator sport.”²⁶ Hillsong’s focus on performance and entertainment provides an “experiential approach” to worship.²⁷ The volume level of the music may drown out the voices of the congregation, which can cause worship to be seen as a concert or to become a private, personal experience. Christian songwriter Keith Getty believes that modern worship songs often focus on pleasing the surrounding culture rather than worshipping God: “Many worship songs are focused on this Earth. I believe that the modern worship movement is a movement for cultural relevance. It’s a de-Christianizing of God’s people.”²⁸

The Lord is present when we worship (Matt. 18:20), but worship itself is not a sacrament. The introduction to *Lutheran Service Book* states this about worship: “Our Lord serves us today through His holy Word and Sacraments. ... The Lord’s service calls forth our service — in sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to Him and in loving service to one another.”²⁹ The songs we sing in worship glorify God, teach the story of our salvation and provide encouragement for

²⁵ Peter Ko, “More Than a Hillsong Hit Piece,” *The Gospel Coalition Australia Edition*, June 17, 2023, au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/more-than-a-hillsong-hit-piece.

²⁶ David Roark, “How the Hillsong Cool Factor Changed Worship for Good and for Ill,” *Christ and Pop Culture Magazine* 4:3, April 18, 2016, christandpopculture.com/how-the-hillsong-cool-factor-changed-worship-for-good-and-for-ill.

²⁷ Roark, “How the Hillsong Cool Factor Changed Worship.”

²⁸ Keith Getty, as quoted by Jon Brown, “Brandon Lake suggests overtly biblical worship songs risk alienating non-Christians: ‘Christianese,’” *The Christian Post*, June 4, 2025, christianpost.com/news/brandon-lake-says-overtly-biblical-worship-songs-risk-alienating.html.

²⁹ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), viii.

our new life in Christ. The apostle Paul writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). Martin Luther wrote, “The gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words.”³⁰ Congregations should only use songs with biblically sound lyrics that clearly proclaim the Word of God and the story of our salvation.³¹

Addressing different aspects of worship, Paul said, “Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26). In worship, we receive the gifts of God for the forgiveness of our sins and for building up of the Body of Christ. We have a foretaste of the day when we will join the saints and angels in singing a new song to the Lamb who was slain for us, a new song that was written down for us more than 2000 years ago: “Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals, for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9–10).

Links for Additional Information

Related Evaluations from a Lutheran Perspective (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations), available at [CTCR Library — Religious Organizations, Movements and Lodges](#):

United Pentecostal Church International (2005)

Vineyard Ministries (2005)

Word-Faith Movement / Positive Confession Movement (2007)

See also the 1972 CTCR report, *The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology*, found in [the CTCR Library](#).

³⁰ Martin Luther, “Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iucundae*, 1538,” *Luther’s Works* vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1965), 321–324.

³¹ See, for example, the lyrics of “In Christ Alone” by Keith and Kristyn Getty (genius.com/Keith-and-kristyn-getty-in-christ-alone-lyrics) or “I Will Glory in the Cross” from The Songwriter Initiative of Concordia University in Irvine, California (cui.edu/academicprograms/christcollege/center-for-worship-leadership/songwriter.)