

*THE INFLUENCE OF THE HYMNAL  
“GREAT SONGS OF THE CHURCH”  
IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES*

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*The advent of “Great Songs of the Church” from Standard Publishing Company was heralded with an editorial by Edwin Errett, editor of “Christian Standard,” the company’s flagship publication. In an article titled, “A Noble Symbol of Unity,” Errett said, “It is . . . a matter for unusual exultation that The Standard Publishing Company has joined hands with E. L. Jorgenson in the promotion and sale of the excellent hymnbook . . . ‘Great Songs of the Church.’”<sup>i</sup>*

*Errett rejoiced greatly that the arrangement bridged the “regrettable alienation between the brethren who use instruments to accompany worship and those who can not conscientiously do so. . . . The supreme element of pleasure . . . is in the thought that brethren separated with reference to certain matters, may now be found united in use of the same hymnal.” (Errett) The influence of this hymnal—from one sector of this movement to another—had begun.*

*Standard acquired rights to publish a round note edition of the hymnal in 1937. The company’s acquisition of rights to the hymnal were surely negotiated between E. L. Jorgenson and James De Forest Murch, an editor at Standard.<sup>ii</sup> In May 7 and 8, 1940, Murch led in what came to be known as the James Murch-Claud Witty meetings in Lexington<sup>iii</sup>. Jorgenson assisted with those meetings.<sup>iv</sup>*

*A few words about the hymnal’s features. Certainly, its alphabetical organization is almost unique (if that is not an oxymoron). “The Majestic Hymnal” of Firm Foundation is the only other such hymnal that I know.<sup>v</sup>*

*Why did Jorgenson choose this format? One possible answer is that there was no need to arrange the hymnal by seasons or special days such as Advent, Pentecost, or Lent since the hymnal was for people not using historic liturgy.*

*Some hymnals of the time were arranged according to the church year. Many since that time are arranged that way. How should Jorgenson have arranged his hymnal? An alphabetical arrangement seems fully appropriate.*

*Another curious feature is the inclusion of choral selections—notably “Hallelujah,” from Handel’s “Messiah,” and “Christ, we do all adore Thee,” from the “Seven Last Words of Christ” by Dubois. Their inclusion in a congregational hymnal is curious, but the inclusion of “God of Our Fathers,” “If I Have Wounded Any Soul,” “In the Time of Roses,” and four others—all with cued notation of the instrumental accompaniment—is also curious in an a cappella Church of Christ hymnal. These selections must have been included for home or concert use.* <sup>vi</sup>

*Standard’s publication of the hymnal in round notes is another feature. The predominant mode of notation among Church of Christ worshippers was shape notes. Christian Church folks usually sang from round notes. Hence round notes.* <sup>vii</sup>

*Standard’s initial advertisement of the hymnal touted its assets extensively. It was a “Complete New Church Hymnal, [with] gospel songs with their choruses and easy harmonies, the noble hymns of the ages, and 32 hymns rated the greatest in ‘Etude’ magazine and the magazine ‘World’s Best Music.’”*

*“No hymnal has such appeal to all ages, classes, varying musical tastes, and abilities of church members. [The book] covers the range of Christian living and experience [and] affords suitable expression of the sacred emotions for all types of religious services.”* <sup>viii</sup>

*By January of 1941, the endorsements of several well-known figures had been sought. One such endorser was glad to see the hymns of “Shaw, Fillmore, Murch, Hawes, Kurfees, Hopkins, and Jamison [sic].”* <sup>ix</sup>

*By 1942, however, “Great Songs” had a companion in the advertisements: “Favorite Hymns Number Two,” now marketed in glowing terms also. “Favorite Hymns” was “the very best of our seventy-five years as religious publishers.”* <sup>x</sup>

*Both hymnals now included the same fifty-two responsive readings, compiled by Murch. Noteworthy was Jorgenson’s statement in the Foreword to early editions of his hymnal. “Responsive readings have been designedly omitted. It is not believed advisable to provide this substitute for the Bible itself.”* <sup>xi</sup>

*In the midst of marketing “Great Songs of the Church”—a hymnal with such advertised appeal, one is moved to ask, “What warranted the distribution of a totally different hymnal, ‘Favorite Hymns Number Two’”?*

*It was now “exceeding fondest expectations.” If “Great Songs of the Church” was so good, why would Standard have risked its diminished sales and the widespread use of “Great Songs” by promoting an entirely different book?*

*In the midst of the marketing of these hymnals, Edwin Errett wrote an editorial cry for deeper congregational song. His distress directly relates to the hymnals Standard sold at the time. His diatribe is in the context of those hymnals.*

*I am distressed at the inanity of the songs and hymns being used by the majority of our churches and Bible schools. Have we softening of the brain? Have we grown childish? Are we morally incompetent and spiritually imbecile? Is there no maturity in our worship? . . . . Is “Brighten the Corner Where You Are” a true measure of the mental capacity of our brotherhood in worship? Does “The Touch of His Hand in Mine” indicate the level of spiritual attainment? Can “Since Jesus Came into My Heart” . . . be taken as a criterion of our maturity in Christian thought and consecration? For a people with a history such as ours, this [is] tragic. . . . O tempora! O mores!<sup>xii</sup> How we have descended! Here we are devoting much of our time to thin emotional stuff characterized by the vain repetition of some . . . picturesque idea on the level of the pre-school child and choosing our song upon the basis of catchiness of the tune with the frank statement that it will be an excuse for standing and relieving the tension of too extended application to thought and too cramped physical position .... [Consider] some results of a canvass of a group of our brethren with respect to their preferences. . . . They rejected “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” and accepted “In My Heart There Rings a Melody”, turned down “Fairest Lord Jesus,” to vote for “Sunshine in My Soul”; . . . voted against “The Church’s One Foundation” and voted for “In the Garden”. I say . . . the situation is perilous. The minds have grown flabby. They do not want to strive with noble spiritual thought. If someone holds that it is [a] matter of taste, I say that so, too, is the preference for ‘St. Louis Blues’ as against ‘The Sextet from Lucia’. . . . [S]omething must be done . . . without delay. These vain repetitions of childish stuff in kindergarten style [will] degrade our whole comprehension of Christianity. The dignity of the throne room will be lost.... We shall be left with nothing but a soft sentimentalism which no self-respecting mind will be able to endure.<sup>xiii</sup>*

*Errett has provided us with full commentary on the influence of hymnals in Christian Churches. We can at least take heart that most of the hymns that Errett preferred were in “Great Songs of the Church.” Several of the hymns of which he disapproved were not. Nevertheless, the hymnal contained numerous gospel songs primarily from free church worship settings.*

*These preliminary observations lead to three statements about the influence of the hymnal in Christian Churches. First, the hymnal influenced Christian Churches to function as free-church congregations, not adhering to historic liturgy. Its alphabetical arrangement, without references to the church year, encouraged that practice of worship.* <sup>xiv</sup>

*The hymnal appeared in Christian Church circles in the same era that a more liturgically oriented Disciples of Christ hymnal was marketed. Most Independent Christian Churches chose “Great Songs.”*

*The Disciples hymnal was, in fact, criticized in “Christian Standard.” James De Forest Murch reviewed the hymnal, noting the index of hymns for “special seasons”. It contained hymns and responsive readings for eleven different special days—liturgical and secular. Murch expressed regret at the omission of several hymns familiar to Stone / Campbell people. He also regretted the inclusion of several new hymns that exalted “social ethics to the place of divine redemption”.* <sup>xv</sup>

*After reading the review, no discerning, conservative church leader would encourage a church to use it. “Great Songs” influenced these churches to function in a free church sense, largely rejecting historic liturgy.* <sup>xvi</sup>

*Second, the hymnal influenced Christian Churches to function evangelically. The term “evangelical” is used advisedly. It is a term that many Churches of Christ and Christian Churches might have denied then, and might still today.*

*The term evangelical simply identifies groups that believe firmly in God as creator and sustainer of life, the Bible as fully inspired, the divinity of Christ, the Holy Spirit as actively working in personal life, and the gospel as central to personal salvation of humanity through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.*

*How do we know of such influence? First, it includes many songs used extensively in the broader evangelical church, including songs whose lyrics center on the conversion experience. The hymnal being distributed simultaneously by the Disciples of Christ did not contain such emphasis. “Great Songs” did include many songs whose lyrics focus on “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”*

*The hymnal’s effect in Christian Churches was to influence churches to sing of that “personal relationship.”* <sup>xvii</sup> *That influence prolonged an evangelical function of Christian Churches into the 1950s and 1960s.*

*Finally, the hymnal could have been a uniting influence with Churches of Christ, but it was not. The hymnal’s use by instrumental congregations elicited strong objection from one sector of the Churches of Christ and lukewarm reception from several other sectors. The media of the Christian Churches joined the debate.*

*The hymnal’s use drove a wedge between some members of the two groups at a time when others attempted expressions of unity. The Murch-Witty National Unity Meetings featured speakers on both sides of matters of difference. J. D. Murch thought the meetings were worth the effort.* <sup>xviii</sup>

Edwin Errett discussed the hymnal and the meetings in glowing terms in August 31, 1940. Then in the September 1940 issue of "Bible Banner," of the Churches of Christ, its editor, Cled Wallace, counter-attacked the meetings—their participants, and their hymnal. He rejected that any unity had taken place.<sup>xix</sup>

John T. Lewis of the "Bible Banner," cited an August 16, 1941 "Christian Standard" article by S. S. Lappin.<sup>xx</sup> Lappin's sin was having seen "Great Songs of the Church" and lauded it as "the best since the Hymn and Tune Book."<sup>xxi</sup> The hymnal had become a source of decline in relationships rather than of unity.

In the pages of "Christian Standard," Lappin celebrated the cordial welcome he had recently received from people when he spoke in Highland Church of Christ. E. L. Jorgenson led the singing. This event was followed by a similar and glorious exchange in the local Christian Church, where Lappin regularly preached. It seemed to have been a very cordial event.<sup>xxii</sup>

Those events, however, elicited more contentious exchange, with an article in the "Bible Banner" of October 1941. Such people were "false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Those wolves were Murch and Witty in their unity meetings and Jorgenson and Lappin in their cordial exchanges.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Errett had already lamented the bitterness of this contention in a September 6, 1941, editorial titled "How to Destroy a Songbook." Errett was especially sad that Lewis's publication has "taken so seriously our endorsement of E. L. Jorgenson's fine hymnal, "Great Songs of the Church," that it has called upon all churches of Christ who do not use instruments to cast these hymnals out the windows."<sup>xxiv</sup>

"Lewis finds his Christian spirit outraged at our suggestion that there is some satisfaction in the thought that we can sing and worship out of the same hymnal, despite our differing views on the instruments." (Errett) The hymnal had driven a wedge between two groups at a time when unity was sought. But the hymnal did not, in any way, identify itself as seeking unity. Such was not its original intent.

That the hymnal could have been a uniting influence with Churches of Christ, but was not, was also because Standard Publishing Company simultaneously marketed another hymnal. The unifying influence of a hymnal is certainly limited if its constituency is moved to purchase a different book. Sometimes, "Great Songs" and "Favorite Hymns Number Two" were even advertised together.

What messages does the hymnal hold for the church today at its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary? First, congregational song must be renewed in every generation, just as the church must experience renewal—a new restoration movement—in every generation. If it does not, it risks stagnation.

*A good hymnal retains the best of tradition and institutes the best of new material. If congregational song does not retain the best of tradition, worship sacrifices its sense of an eternal nature as a cherished experience.*

*If congregational song does not use the best of new material, worship sacrifices its vitality for speaking to the current generation. “Great Songs of the Church” embodied these two practices—tradition and newness—in its former generations. It stands as a lesson to the point for today.*

*Next, the hymnal calls our age to reflect its identity with passion—its doctrine with conviction. To create that reflection, the church must address any disparity in music as a largely emotional expression, exclusive of rational doctrine.*

*The doctrine and theology of the Stone / Campbell Movement has been a cognitive and rational matter. Expressing that doctrine and theology in the art of music—with passion—brought challenges. Thus, a Campbellite might not be surprised that gospel songs held sway in many Campbellite settings. They may have filled a gap created by doctrine and theology that had difficulty singing its way into hearts.*

*Was this great cause one movement doctrinally and theologically, and another movement musically? Was its doctrine rooted in rational, biblical theology of Christ as Savior and Lord, the church as the body of Christ and its ordinances as the memorial of Christ? But was a significant portion of its music an experiential and idealized view of “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ”?*

*The two expressions can come together. “Great Songs of the Church” aided that union for a time. Its hundredth anniversary may call this Movement to new musical expressions that sing with both the head and the heart as one.*

*Third, the hymnal, and especially its attempted unity between two sectors of the Movement, issues again a call for unity. This hymnal, lo a hundred years since its inception, has brought representatives of two Stone / Campbell groups together for a few minutes in an era in which these two groups seldom do anything together.*

*Perhaps the greatest influence of this hymnal lies ahead—as the impetus for further expressions of unity in an abysmally divided sector of the church. Division is our grand and detestable sin. We may be called to discover the ways to continue fellowship and discussion beyond these presentations—and diminish the effect of that sin. Our activity is far more than an academic or nostalgic exercise. God is at work in us, “both to work and to will for His good pleasure.” What a glorious calling! Let us rise to the task. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Errett, Edwin, editor, 1940. “Better Labor Standards—A Noble Symbol of Unity,” *Christian Standard* (August 31): 3 (847).

<sup>ii</sup> Murch, James DeForest. “Christian Standard,” in *Adventuring for Christ In Changing Times*. Louisville: Restoration Press, 1973, 33-39.

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- iii Errett, Edwin, editor, 1940. "National Unity Meeting" *Christian Standard* (April 20): 3 (375).
- iv *Christian Standard* (April 20, 1940): 3 (375)
- v Reuel Lemmons, editor, *The Majestic Hymnal—Number Two*, (Austin, Texas: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1959), 1-442.
- vi Jorgenson, E. L., compiler. 1922. *Great Songs of The Church*. Louisville: Word and Work. 1-450.
- vii Jorgenson, E. L., compiler, 1937. *Great Songs of The Church*, Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Foundation. 1-600.
- viii *Christian Standard* (September 28, 1940): 31 (995)
- ix O (Christian Standard, George W. Knepper, "Leaders Heartily Endorse New Church Hymnal", advertisement, January 11, 1941, 24, 48)
- x *Christian Standard* (March 7, 1942): 24 (240).
- xi Jorgenson, E. L., compiler. 1922. *Great Songs of The Church*. Louisville: Word and Work. foreword.
- xii Marcus Tullias Cicero. Yonge, Charles Duke, editor. *Catalinian Orations to the Roman Senate, 63 BC*. London: Delphi Classics: The Complete Works of Cicero, 1856, Perseus Digital Library, Henry G. Bohn, editor, 1856: "Oh, what terrible times! Oh, what terrible behavior!"
- xiii Edwin Errett, editor, 1942. "May I Share My Hymnal?" *Christian Standard*, (May 16): 8 (480).
- xiv Jorgenson, E. L., compiler, 1937. *Great Songs of the Church*, Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Foundation. Topics (E).
- xv Murch, J. D., 1943. "Reviews of Recent Books: "Christian Worship: A Hymnal," *Christian Standard* (January 11): 2.
- xvi William P. Shelton and Luther Wesley Smith, editors. *Christian Worship: A Hymnal*, (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication / The Bethany Press, 1941), 12 and 515-523.
- xvii Murch, J. D., 1940. "Adventuring in Christian Unity" *Christian Standard*, (April 20): 6 (378).
- xviii Errett, Edwin, 1940. "National Unity Meeting," *Christian Standard* (April 20): 3 (375).
- xix Wallace, Cled E. and John T. Lewis, 1940. "Advancing Backwards", *Bible Banner*, vol. 4, no. 3 (private publication), 2.
- xx Lewis, John T. "The 'Progressives' And the 'Antis' In The 'Lowlands and Highlands'", *Bible Banner*, vol. 4, no. 4 (private publication), 2.
- xxi S. S. Lappin, "Lowlands and Highlands", *Christian Standard*, (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, August 16, 1941), 853.
- xxii Lappin, S. S.
- xxiii Lappin, S. S., "Lowlands and Highlands".
- xxiv Errett, Edwin, "How to Destroy a Songbook", *Christian Standard* Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, September 6, 1941, 8, 916.