

**The Influence of *Great Songs of the Church* on Subsequent Hymnals:
The Case of *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (2012)**

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***Great Songs of the Church* (1921)**
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Introduction: It is a pleasure to appear on this colloquium, representing a continuing interest in the hymnody of the American “Restoration Movement” (or, “Stone-Campbell Movement”). I must confess, however, to intense disappointment at not being able to assemble at Lincoln Christian College (only 2 hours south of my home in suburban Chicago), where the outstanding Dowling collection of hymnals is housed. Even digitally, however, it is impressive – as its website attests (though I must confess also to mild disappointment that its current timeline is not so colorful as a prior iteration – see the PowerPoint slides for the oral presentation this paper). As with many such presentations, there is far more information in the paper than can be delivered orally.

This paper recounts some of the author’s experience in co-editing the 2012 hymnal, *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (hereinafter abbreviated *PHaSS*).¹ As may become obvious, I speak from the perspective of one trained in “secular” (social and intellectual) history who happens to have a lifelong interest in hymnology.

To the uninitiated, it appears strange that the last man who publishes a tune book does not reproduce the popular pieces in all previous publications, and thus combine in one the excellencies of all.²

¹ The “re-purposing” of the title of Alexander Campbell’s dominant 19th-century hymnal, *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs*, will be obvious to any student of “Restoration Movement” history and hymnody.

² J.W. McGarvey, “Sunday School Hymns and Music,” *Millennial Harbinger*, (Fifth Series, Vol. 7, No. 6, June 1864), 261f.

But as McGarvey knew, and as anyone who has ever tried to produce a new hymnal soon learns, the situation is much more complicated than that. In preparing *PHaSS*, we wanted to situate it in the broader spectrum of Protestant hymnody, as well as to challenge some of the traditions into which “Church of Christ hymnody” had fallen. While we never embarked on a course to consciously imitate Elmer Leon Jorgenson’s *Great Songs of the Church*, its influence on the editors cannot be denied; indeed, Jorgenson’s influence on the subsequent hymnody of Churches of Christ is pervasive. To what degree this influence extends to *PHaSS* will become evident in this paper. As editors, we probably did have illusions of being able to nudge the hymnological practices of some Churches of Christ in a certain direction. In that, I believe we were trying to achieve the same ends that brother Jorgenson pursued almost a century earlier.

To the work, to the work: a popular perception is that editing a hymnal merely involves “deadlines and commitments” and decisions about “what to leave in, what to leave out” – to invoke a modern, secular lyric.³ Of course, selection of hymns is an important ingredient in producing a hymnal which congregations can use to aid in worshipping God in song. However, there is much more which is perhaps not readily apparent.

But to avoid re-inventing the wheel, it is instructive to at least consider what past hymnals have included, and how the editors of those hymnals arrived at their decisions. Should hymnal editors adopt a “minimalist” approach, publishing only the most “popular” hymns or those which are recently fashionable – or should they take a more “directive” approach, attempting to prescribe what they believe churches “should” be singing? Should a hymnal include mostly (or altogether) the “old, standard, well-known” or “classical” hymns? And which ones are those, anyway, and how and who would determine such matters?⁴

How does one go about selecting hymns for a new hymnal? In order to comprehend the difficulties inherent in selecting a mere 800-900 hymns for inclusion, consider the following items:

- Even limiting the selection to the hymnals most used among “Churches of Christ” in the 20th century, a collation of their indices produced a list of more than 1,800 hymns selected by the editors of these previous hymnals. Obviously, for a new hymnal of 850 hymns, more than half of these were omitted.

³ For “non-Baby Boomers,” the lyric is from Bob Seger’s “Against the Wind,” which also contains the classic line, “Wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then.”

⁴ A fuller discussion of such editorial issues, written while we were in process of preparing and publishing *PHaSS* (after we produced a supplement of 78 hymns as a prototype of several new features, but while the hymnal itself was still in a preliminary phase), is in Steve Wolfgang, “A New Hymnal for Worshipping God in Song,” in *Great Texts of the Old Testament: 2007 Truth Lectures* (Bowling Green, KY: Truth Publications, 2007), pp. 116-159. This lecture provides more extensive discussion and broad documentation of the deep background of hymnody in the early Restoration Movement, and earlier roots in English and Lutheran hymnody of the Reformation.

- Casting the net wider, consider that the American Protestant Hymns Database, compiled by professor Stephen Marini of Wellesley College, registers more than 100,000 hymns published in America from 1640 to 1970.⁵
- An older and even broader database of American hymns compiled by the American Hymn Society and housed at Oberlin College under the long-time direction of Mary Louise VanDyke, is even more extensive than Marini's, not being focused on "Evangelical" hymns—to say nothing of the broader base of Roman Catholic hymnology.⁶

The sheer number of hymnals and psalters published in America is stunning in scope, spanning nearly four centuries.⁷ In the early stages of preparing *PHaSS* (an effort spanning 2005-2014), I made some effort to "situate" and familiarize myself with prior hymnody, I perused hymnal archives in some the larger collections, including the Library of Congress (at that time, the largest hymnal collection in the United States). It has since been overtaken by the expansion of the Emory University collection in Atlanta (where I was a graduate student in the 1970's) – an originally strongly-Methodist collection which was bolstered when the Pitts Theology Library at Emory purchased the Hartford Seminary Foundation collection of 8,700 hymnals.⁸ Other collections readily available to me were the John Jacob Niles collection at the University of

⁵ See Stephen Marini, in Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow, eds., *Music in the American Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Marini, "From Classical to Modern: Hymnody and the Development of American Evangelicalism," in Edith Blumhofer and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land: Hymnody in the Development of North American Protestantism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

⁶ See the *Dictionary of North American Hymnology: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Master Index of Hymns and Hymnals Published in the United States and Canada, 1640-1978* (CD-ROM produced by the Dictionary of American Hymnology Project, Oberlin College), and Carol Pemberton, "Interview With Mary Louise VanDyke," *The Hymn* 46 (July 1995), 4-10.

⁷ See, for instance, the further work of Stephen Marini, including "Hymnody as History: Early Evangelical Hymns and the Recovery of American Popular Religion," *Church History* 71 (2002):273-306; and chapters by various scholars in Edith Blumhofer and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Sing Them Over Again to Me: Hymns and Hymnbooks in America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006); or Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004).

The notes above (and several to follow) indicate a growing interest, in this century, in the study of hymns, hymnals, and hymnody by historians of social, intellectual, and religious impulses and movements, as distinguished from those trained in musical disciplines who then record history. This is but one thing which make historical disciplines so fascinating, as well as perhaps the broadest of the liberal arts (one can, after all, write a history of nearly anything). How the results of these various cross-disciplinary approaches compare is intriguing, but well beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸ Information on the various hymnal collections in this section is compiled from the author's research in many of these collections, and from data contained in Tina Schneider, *Hymnal Collections in the United States* (Methuen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2003). This printed work is still cited, though superseded in some ways, by the online listing of hymnal collections in the US at https://hymnary.org/hymnal_collections (which, interestingly, lists the personal collection of D.J. Bulls, moderator for this session, at #22 in size).

Kentucky, where I taught for nearly two decades, and the collection at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, where I earned my MDiv.⁹

We also attempted to identify which hymns had been popular enough to be included in prior hymnals used in Churches of Christ in the 20th century – both among “mainstream” and “non-institutional” churches. We constructed a website poll collated from the indices from eight of the most widely used (most sold) hymnals among Churches of Christ. We discovered about 1820 different hymns which had been selected for inclusion in one or more of these hymnals known and used by “Churches of Christ.” The hymnals selected as the basis for this digital, web-based poll included:

Great Songs of the Church (Jorgenson, 1937)
 Christian Hymns #2 (Sanderson 1948)
 Sacred Selections (Crum, 1956)
 Songs of the Church (Howard, 1971)
 Great Songs of the Church, Revised (McCann/Boyd, 1986)
 Hymns for Worship (Stevens/Shepard, 1987)
 Songs of Faith and Praise (Howard, 1990)
 Praise for the Lord (Wiegand, 1992)

Interestingly, even before we opened the website to the public to allow contemporary Christians to help us by telling us what hymns they like (and don't like), we discovered several intriguing items just from the raw data. For example, to my amazement, there are only about 100 hymns of the 1820 which are included in all eight hymnals (I would have expected 3 or 4 times that many – but then, that just shows how much editors know!) Space does not permit listing them here, but perhaps more intriguing is to notice what hymns were omitted by only one of the eight hymnals. On that list of hymns—which at least one editor or editorial board evidently felt unworthy of inclusion—one finds these hymns:

Almost Persuaded
 God Is Calling the Prodigal
 Is Thy Heart Right With God?
 The Gospel Is For All
 We Shall See the King
 Who At My Door Is Standing?
 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
 I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say
 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
 Sun of My Soul
 Let the Beauty of Jesus Be Seen in Me

⁹ Hymnary.org lists the Niles/UK collection (nestled amidst the much larger Wilcox/Lair collections of musical Americana) at 5000 hymnals, which includes only those catalogued so far; there are many boxes of as-yet uncatalogued hymnals in the collection. The SBTS collection comprises about 4500 hymnals. I also was able to access the Dowling Collection at Lincoln Christian University (2500), the Newberry Library in Chicago (2500), Wheaton College (2300), and at David Lipscomb University in Nashville (2000).

Among the bedeviling questions raised by the frequency of some these hymns is whether expectations or familiarity sometimes “trumps” hymn quality. Are the songs led most frequently the best hymns ever written—or, at the least, so much better than the others that they demand to be led regularly? What about the songs which require several alto-lead or bass-lead singers, a song leader capable of directing the split-part chorus, and a congregation willing to follow that leader (not all of which are present in some congregations)?¹⁰ Is the frequency with which these songs are used due more to the perceived expectations of brethren than the stunning lyrical or musical quality of the hymn itself? These questions are not easily answered, and they raise daunting issues for those who compile and edit hymnals. Does a particular hymn, through wide usage, broad familiarity, and “traditional” acceptance, demand inclusion even if it is not lyrically very edifying? What if its popularity is due more to its musical uniqueness than any teaching or edifying merit it may possess? Should hymnal editors, or song leaders, indulge the desires of the audience even for songs which do not edify as well as others hymns?¹¹

Jorgenson’s answer to such questions may perhaps be deduced from his remarks in the front matter of the 1925 edition of *Great Songs of the Church*:

The book has been built on this unusual principle: no song was eligible unless it was indispensable, or at least of compelling excellence...A conscientious effort has been made to render a lasting service to the Church of God, rather than to build a book which, no matter how popular for a season, would soon wear out, and call for another. Accordingly, songs of transient interest have been omitted. Hymns of strength, clearness, poetic beauty, lyrical quality, and above all, scripturalness, joined with suitable music to wing the words, high-grade of its kind but not too difficult (for the greatest things are simple) – such are the songs of this collection; here are the classics of hymnology.”

But this does not mean the exclusion of those animated pieces, with their bright and rhythmic choruses, commonly called ‘gospel songs’ as distinguished from the ‘hymns’ of statelier measure. This style has passed the experimental stage, and, having proved its usefulness, has come to stay. The tried and tested songs of this class are in the book.

For comparison, consider the following statement of editorial objectives, taken from the Preface to *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs*:

¹⁰ One of the most colorful descriptions of such hymns was provided by one sister who offered this explanation: “I despise those hymns where, when you get to the chorus, it’s every man for himself!” Perhaps as vivid is the description of some modern “contemporary” hymns as “Jesus-is-my-boyfriend” hymns. Such comments are reminiscent of John Wesley’s description of the “sickly sensationalism” of many of Zinzendorf’s hymns as “so erotic that they are more suitable to the mouth of a lover than in that of a sinner standing in the presence of Almighty God” (see David W. Stowe, *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004], p. 25, and John L. Nuelson, *John Wesley and the German Hymn* [Yorkshire: Calverley, 1972]).

¹¹ For an interesting discussion of this question, see James R. Davidson’s standard *Dictionary of Protestant Church Music* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 135-142.

Its textual content, musical arrangements, style format, and special features are intended to enhance the praise of God and the teaching and admonition of Christians ... [These hymns] are both old and new, that represent a variety of musical and poetic styles, and that as a collection reflect an emphasis on quality and suitability for congregational worship... The hymn editing policy gave greatest preference for language that was biblical, poetic, and original or standard; the policy gave least preference for language that conformed to political correctness, cultural competence, or other secular fashions... In some cases, excellent stanzas that had disappeared from hymns were reintroduced in this hymnal. The criteria for reintroduction were biblical expression, worthy content, and poetic quality.

Editorially, we recognized that there are some hymns which, while perhaps not quite measuring up to the highest standards (and thus would not be adopted if they were new hymns just being introduced), are so deeply “embedded in the DNA” of churches that their absence would be glaringly obvious, and thus perhaps detrimental to adoption by many congregations. These criteria were sometimes framed against my “mantra,” repeated often enough that it might be referred to as the “Wolfgang Corollary” – “If we produce the greatest hymnal in the history of hymnals, and no one buys or uses it, what’s the point of the activity?”

These considerations came into play as we attempted to determine, more specifically, which hymns were widely known, sung, and appreciated among “non-institutional” Churches of Christ (the “native audience” and primary market for *PHaSS*). As we sought sources of information regarding what hymns might need to be strongly considered for inclusion, we realized that if there is anything remotely approaching a “received collection” of “favorite hymns” known and sung in non-institutional churches of Christ, it would have to be those led by R. J. Stevens at the Florida College Lectures—still the largest single physical/geographical gathering of Christians from those churches anywhere (with approximately 2,000 attending and singing each evening). We compiled a list re-constructed from the print copies of hymn lyrics distributed at the Florida College Lectures each evening from 1986 to 2003.

There are about 196 different hymns on the cumulative list, plus 14 Psalms set to familiar modern hymn tunes, for a total of 210. A total of 768 hymns were led during this period (10-12 hymns on each of four nights, each year for the 18 years). Of these, nearly half (368) were the thirty-five hymns sung at least eight times in those 18 years; more than two-thirds of the 768 “slots” were filled by the 45 hymns sung five times or more during the time-span. Thus, one conclusion supported by this data seems to be that there is an “inner core” of 35-45 “favorite” hymns nested inside the larger list of about 200 or so.

From the web survey, interpreted and occasionally adjusted slightly by other data sources, a “core collection” of 550 hymns, as explained in the Preface to *PHaSS*:

Because the 550 were familiar and widely used, they were considered the core repertoire of many churches. To this core repertoire were added 300 titles of all genres appropriate for congregational worship; these genres included contemporary, folk, gospel, New English Renaissance, and high church hymns.

Several of these additional 300 titles were hymns written by the brethren in recent decades [which were] subjected to a blind review and ranked on the basis of content, poetic and musical quality, and potential use in any congregation desiring to learn new hymns.

One way to determine the influence of a seminal hymnal like brother Jorgenson's might be to ascertain the number hymns which are adopted for use in subsequent hymnals. The following information is derived from the extensive work of D.J. Bulls, whose input and encouragement in the preparation of this paper I gratefully acknowledge. According to his accumulated resources and information, there are a total of 681 hymns in the corpus of the various editions of Jorgenson's hymnals, including the supplement.

In the case of PHaSS, of 850 total hymns, there are 329 hymns previously used in the Jorgenson corpus, constituting 39% of PHaSS content. When one removes the 300 "newer" titles, unavailable to Jorgenson, the percentage rises to 60% (329 of 550).

For comparative purposes, 296 out of 702 hymns (42%) in the Stevens/Shepard *Hymns For Worship* (probably still the dominant hymnal among "non-institutional" churches) previously appeared in the Jorgenson corpus. That percentage would rise somewhat if the fewer number of "newer" hymns (an undetermined number) were subtracted for similar comparison.

John Wiegand's widely-used *Praise for the Lord* contains 467 of the Jorgenson body of hymns, out of 999 hymns (47%), which rises to 52% when the "Expanded Collection" of 99 "newer" hymns added in 1997 are removed to compare "apples to apples." These are, of course, very "rough calculations," and I look forward to the reactions and input of John Wiegand, DJ Bulls, and John Wakefield during this session.

One of the conclusions to draw from these numbers is not so much to make a case for one or another being more derivative, but to note that ALL are deeply indebted to the extensively influential work of Elmer Leon Jorgenson and *Great Songs of the Church*.

One must also consider, of course, that brother Jorgenson himself derived the content of his hymnal from the broader repertoire of Protestant hymnody generally. *Great Songs of the Church* was one of the first, if not the first, hymnal to include hymns from both of the extensive hymn lists of two major hymn-copyright owners: Edwin O. Excell and Charles M. Alexander. By including many such hymns, known both among Churches of Christ and in wider contexts, Jorgenson "push-pulled" hymnody among Churches of Christ in a more "mainstream" Protestant direction. Indeed, when a list of the "World's Thirty Greatest Hymns" appeared in the musical publication *The Etude*, Jorgenson noted that all but one were included in *Great Songs of the Church*.¹²

¹² The exception was "Come Thou, Almighty King," and Jorgenson had used the traditional tune for that hymn ("Italian Hymn") for another set of lyrics. The exclusion was, of course, corrected in later edition. See Forrest McCann, "A History of Great Songs of the Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 38 (1996), 219-228. McCann's *Hymns and History: An Annotated Survey of Sources* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1997), is a comprehensive resource which grew out of the 1986 revision by Abilene Christian University of E.L. Jorgenson's *Great Songs of the Church*.

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs is now in its fifth printing, including a South African printing, and is in use in churches from Manhattan to Honolulu, Alaska to Florida, as well as Canada, Australia, and in churches on US military installations around the world. I appreciate this opportunity to explicate some of its roots, and look forward to clarifications and questions in the discussion.