

Louis F. Benson's 1895 Presbyterian Hymnal Innovation

Roger Wayne Hicks

The Hymnal, published by authority of The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1895, is considered to be "an epoch-making work."¹ Under the general editorship of Louis F. Benson, the 1895 *Hymnal* set a new standard for church hymnals of all denominations.

The 1889 General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church had decided it was time for a new official hymnal. In the following year, the U.S. Census Bureau announced the end of the American frontier, which signaled the completion of a two-and-a-half-century evolutionary era of the American pioneering life style. The interests and problems, as well as the general outlook of America would now be of a different kind. It would be reflective of a more uniform life throughout the country, with an increased population centralization and industrialization. America's development would now be focused more on consolidation and less on expansion.

Perhaps the changing sociological picture of Americans in general, and of American Presbyterians in particular, had a fairly strong influence upon the 1889 General Assembly's call for a new authorized hymnal. The last part of the nineteenth century found great agitation among northern Presbyterians over several matters, such as the proposed revision of doctrinal standards and the appearance of new critical studies of the Bible. Individualistic designing of worship ser-

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The Hymnal

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vices had become the rule to such an extent that there was little uniformity in worship service structures.

Adding to the confused state of worship among northern Presbyterians was the widespread use of unofficial, independently published hymnbooks, including those of Charles S. Robinson, a Presbyterian pastor. The books produced by Robinson included *Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1875), *A Selection of Spiritual Songs* (1878), *Laudes Domini* (1885), and *The New Laudes Domini* (1892). The volume of advertising produced by the independent publishers and the increasing popularity of their products caused no little strain on denominational loyalty before *The Hymnal* of 1874² was finally replaced in 1895. Even in 1897 the publisher of Robinson's series published *In Excelsis* as an open competitor to *The Hymnal* of 1895.

It is interesting to note that the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church of Germantown, Pennsylvania, C. P. H. Nason, is credited in the publisher's note of *In Excelsis* as having assisted in the preparation of the book.³ Benson, as we will see, had been pastor at Germantown's Presbyterian Church of the Redeemer. According to the General Assembly minutes, both men had served in the city at the same time.

¹ William Chalmers Covert, *Handbook to The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1935), p. xxi.

² *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1874).

³ *In Excelsis. Hymns With Tunes for Christian Worship* (New York: The Century Company, 1897).

The attitude toward the use of music in worship varied from church to church. While the evangelistic efforts of such spiritual leaders as Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey were finding great success with their popular approach to music, including the style of songs, the format of the songbooks, and the use of the organ, Presbyterians found little agreement among their ranks on such issues.

At the time of the 1889 General Assembly Louis F. Benson was in his second year as pastor of the Presbyterian Church of the Redeemer in Germantown, Pennsylvania. He served this church a total of six years and it was the only church he ever pastored. One would perhaps imagine such a notable person to have pastored a large congregation. It is interesting to note that, according to the statistical report in *The Minutes of the General Assembly of 1891*, this church recorded a membership of 64.⁴

Having developed a recognized interest in the hymnody and worship of the Presbyterian church, Louis F. Benson was chosen by the 1889 General Assembly as the editor of the proposed new hymnal. Benson resigned his church in 1893 to dedicate his total energies to this project and other hymnic and liturgical pursuits.

A carelessly made and inadequate authorized *Hymnal* of 1874, coupled with the ever-increasing popularity of unauthorized hymnbooks, had brought American Presbyterian hymnody to quite a low level. To regain a higher position for Presbyterian hymnody, Louis F. Benson sought to produce a hymnal superior to any on the market. It was "to be a church book unexcelled for utility, beauty and editorial carefulness."⁵

The Preface to *The Hymnal* of 1895 provides some insight into the standards established and accomplished by Benson and the editorial committee with the book's publication. Here are some significant quotes from the Preface.

1) Now that the book is complete and approved, it must stand as the best exponent of the aims kept in view during its preparation—to produce a manual of the church's praise, a treasure of things new and old, chosen for actual service, expressive in some degree of the devotional feeling and also of the culture of God's people.

2) In the selection of hymns, those endeared to the Church by proved fitness have been given the first place; and the whole field of modern hymnody has been laboriously gleaned.

3) Great pains have been taken with the state of the text. The editor has in all cases sought to have before him the author's original texts, and the authorized texts also of such amendments and revisions as seemed worthy of attention. As far as

possible, the hymns are printed as their authors wrote them. When any changes have been adopted, the fact has invariably been noted beneath the hymn.

4) In the choice of tunes...and in the revision of the harmonies...the guiding thought has been to adapt the book for use in congregational singing. Enough music familiar and simple is included to enable any congregation to make immediate use of the book. Beyond that is a great body of tunes, just as available when they shall be learned, and having a charm of freshness: some no doubt simpler and more readily caught; none, it is believed, beyond the reach of a congregation in the matter of musical culture, and it is fitting that the needs of all should be thought of, and not left unprovided for.

5) In making up the pages of the *Hymnal*, it is not merely the grace of beauty which has been sought. The openness and amplex so grateful to the eye mean also that every hymn and tune has had given to it whatever space it properly called for, so that the notes and text may be distinct and clear, every syllable of the first verse, as far as may be, printed under its proper note, and, best of all, that the number of verses in a hymn may be determined for their own sake, and not by mere mechanical consideration of space.

Of the 972 hymn texts found in *The Hymnal* of 1874, Benson carried 359 into *The Hymnal* of 1895. The process of determining which hymns would be retained was not without great emotion. Benson says, "I recall the venerable senior of those engaged with *The Hymnal* of 1895 pleading with tears for the retention of certain hymns that the immense majority of the present-day generation never heard of."⁶

Only 28 of the 724 hymn texts found in *The Hymnal* of 1895 were written after 1874, which we will call the "contemporary texts." Only two hymns were written in the year of the book's publication. They were both by Benson: "O risen Christ, who from Thy throne" and "O Christ, who didst our tasks fulfill." *The Hymnal's* competitor *In Excelsis* contained 34 "contemporary texts" out of its total of 868 hymns.

The remaining 337 hymns in *The Hymnal* of 1895 were culled from various American and English collections, leading Benson to proclaim later in the book's Preface, "the whole field of modern hymnody has been laboriously gleaned."

The quote from the Preface to *The Hymnal* of 1895 signals a major concern in the production of the new Presbyterian hymnal, that of accuracy of texts. *The Hymnal* of 1874 had not been alone in its alteration of original texts. Benson informs us:

⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Stated Clerk, 1891).

⁵ Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1915), p. 555.

⁶ Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of The Christian Church* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1956), p. 131.

In the texts of the body of hymns that were sung in the eighteen-sixties, let us say, and which was the inheritance of my generation, there were countless divergences from the author's text and variant readings even of the emendations. There was a striking lack of uniformity. There was no common text, even among Old and New School Presbyterians, or among Baptists, or Congregationalists.... This state of things made itself felt as an annoyance to anybody who really cared for the hymns and a great embarrassment when different groups of Christian people tried to sing together.⁷

Benson was determined to print the hymn texts just as their authors had written them, so far as practical. He leaves the door open for "as far as practical," believing there must be a distinction between an *anthology* and a *hymnbook*.

In a collection of poems for poetry's sake the rule of fidelity of text is absolute. In a collection of hymns for congregational use the fidelity must be tempered by consideration of practical utility. There is no real use in playing the part of "superior" in this matter or in increasing the hue and cry after the fleeing "hymn-tinkerer." When all has been said and the tinkerer impounded, the regrettable necessity of making certain adjustments of materials abides.⁸

Let us examine a few of the hymns which were retained in *The Hymnal* of 1895 but adjusted by Benson in his passion for presenting the author's original wording and intent.

The oldest Greek hymn, "Shepherd of tender youth," had undergone alteration in the 1866 *Hymnal*⁹ and the 1874 *Hymnal* in an alleged attempt to popularize Dexter's 1846 translation. The 1874 *Hymnal* included only four stanzas, omitting stanza two, and the 1866 *Hymnal* contained stanzas one and three. Benson restored the original five-stanza Dexter translation in *The Hymnal* of 1895. Although the hymn was fully restored to Presbyterians by Benson in 1895, continuing in the 1911 *Hymnal* revision, it was omitted from the 1933 *Hymnal*, but restored in the 1955 *Hymnbook*¹⁰ as "Shepherd of eager youth," only to be omitted again in *The Hymnal* of 1990.

Other examples of texts benefiting from Benson's diligent and scholarly edition include:

**"Before Jehovah's awful throne"
—by Isaac Watts (No. 103).**

With Benson's footnotes, the 1895 *Hymnal* users are made aware that Isaac Watts was not solely responsible for this hymn, that John Wesley had altered the first two lines of stanza one. The 1874 *Hymnal* had attributed the hymn solely to Watts.

**"Come, thou Almighty King"
—Anonymous c. 1757 (No. 58).**

Benson sets the record straight when he notes that this text is "anonymous." Scholars believe the attribution to Charles Wesley as author, as in the 1874 *Hymnal*, is incorrect. *The Hymnal* of 1866 had gone even further astray with its crediting of *Madan's Collection* as being the text's original source.

**"Hail, the day that sees Him rise"
—by Charles Wesley (No. 245).**

Benson correctly attributed this text to Wesley, whereas *The Hymnal* of 1874 had credited "Madan," obviously referring to the *Collection* above.

**"Love divine, all loves excelling"
—by Charles Wesley (No. 559).**

The footnote that Benson provides for the second stanza of this text is another example of his unrelenting scholastic detail. He informs *The Hymnal* user that line four, "Let us find the promised rest," and line five, "Take away the love of sinning," had been altered from Wesley's original. He points this out even though such a scholar as Robert Guy McCutchan, in *Our Hymnody*,¹¹ observes that such alterations had been made in the eighteenth century. One may wonder why Benson, in his insistence on original texts, did not restore the original second line, "Let us find that second rest," and the original fifth line, "Take away our power of sinning." Evidently Benson questioned the theology of Wesley's original lines. This type of scholarly editing was certainly a great part of Benson's 1895 Presbyterian hymnal innovation, as he provided such footnotes for a great number of the 1895 *Hymnal* selections.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

⁹ *Hymnal of The Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1866), No. 150.

¹⁰ *The Hymnbook* (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in the United States; United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America; Reformed Church in America, 1955).

¹¹ Robert Guy McCutchan, *Our Hymnody* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937).

Jesus Christ our Lord
178 EPHRATAH 2, 4, 4, 5, 5, 4, 4
Thomas C. Burpee, 1867

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© For Christ is born of Mary;
And gathered all about,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering awe.
O morning stars, together
Breakin' thro' the holy day,
And praise sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth.

1 How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heav'n.

No ear may hear His coming,
But in the world of sin,
Where mockers smile and sages frown,
The dear Christ enter in.

4 O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us to-day.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.

Revised Phillips Brooks, 1895

"Behold! a stranger's at the door"

—by Joseph Grigg (No. 445).

Simply by inserting a hyphen between words and adding a comma Benson returned this text to its original meaning. The 1874 *Hymnal*'s rendering of stanza four's line three had been "that soul destroying monster sin." Benson corrected it to read "that soul-destroying monster, sin." It is interesting to note that Benson inserted an apostrophe and an "s" following "stranger" in the first line, to read "Behold! a stranger's at the door." Earlier books—as well as the 1933 *Hymnal* and Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*—carry the most-likely original "Behold! a stranger at the door."

"God bless our native land"

—by Charles T. Brooks and John S. Dwight (No. 666).

Benson's scholarship is evident when he drops from this hymn the third stanza, as published in both the 1866 and 1874 books. This third stanza rightly belongs to Samuel F. Smith's text of "My country, 'tis of thee," which is where Benson placed it in 1895 as hymn number 665.

"O little town of Bethlehem"

—by Phillips Brooks (No. 178).

This nativity hymn entered Presbyterian hymnals for the first time in 1895, thanks to Louis F. Benson. Although the popular tune St. Louis was included in *The Hymnal* of 1895, it appeared as a secondary tune. The first tune was a new one named EPHRATAH, written in 1895 for the new hymnal. St. Louis took its rightful place in the 1911 revision of *The Hymnal*.¹²

As diligent as Benson was in presenting the authors' original texts in the Presbyterian *Hymnal*, he also deleted and altered texts. Two cases in point are:

"How sweet the name of Jesus sounds"

—by John Newton (No. 556).

Benson provided what seems to be a theologically emasculated revision of Newton's fifth stanza, when he altered "Jesus, my Shepherd, *Husband*, Friend" to read "Jesus, my Shepherd, *Brother*, Friend." Does this represent a "watered down" theology of the church being the Bride of Christ?

"Ye Christian heralds, go proclaim"

—by Bourne H. Draper (No. 396).

It can be suggested that perhaps Benson's change in the original first two lines of stanza two from "He'll (referring to Immanuel of stanza one) shield you with a wall of fire, with flaming zeal your breasts inspire..." to read "God shield you..." weakens the impact of the text. The text "He'll shield" seems more definite or emphatic than does "God shield." "God shield" appears more as a *petition* than as a *fact*. Perhaps it would have been better for Benson to have been more concerned with "inspired breasts," and to have altered "breasts" to read "hearts," as some editors were soon to do, even as they retained "He'll shield."

Examples of Benson's dropping of entire stanzas are found in the hymns "Behold the throne of grace" by John Newton (No. 583) and "Behold what wondrous grace" by Isaac Watts (No. 608). In both hymns the second stanza is the one omitted, seemingly because of the negative tone of the text. Omitted from Newton's text is:

"That rich atoning blood,
which sprinkled round I see,
Provides, for those who come to God,
an all-prevailing plea."

Omitted from Watts's text is:

" 'Tis no surprising thing,
that we should be unknown;
The Jewish world knew not their King,
God's everlasting Son."

John Newton's entire hymn "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound" was, in effect, dropped by Benson from Presbyterian hymnals, beginning in 1895, for a period of sixty years. It re-entered with the publication of *The Hymnbook* of 1955, and continued in the 1990 *Hymnal*.

Some thirty years following the publication of *The Hymnal* of 1895, Benson commented regarding the emending of texts:

It was indeed, I now think, a fault of the text of 1895 that it made too little use of the privilege of amendment. The vast preponderance of the alterations were restorations of what the author originally wrote or adoptions of changes already made to a hymn's advantage. It was the fault of an over-scrupulosity in respecting the original texts, natural enough to a reaction from the uninformed and careless methods of its predecessors. With more than thirty years of

¹² *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1911), No. 181.

added experience, I should now not hesitate to go much further.¹³

Even though Benson believed he could have been more radical in his amendments, he was nevertheless successful in giving Presbyterian hymnody some relief from the ponderous hymnody of Isaac Watts. This was accomplished by omitting many of the negative self-image selections, such as:

"How heavy is the night"

"How sad our state by nature is"

"Laden with guilt and full of fears"

"Lord! Thou hast scourged our guilty land"

"That awful day will surely come"

"Unveil thy bosom, faithful tomb."

In all, Benson reduced the number of Watts's hymns by 145 from the 201 which had appeared in the 1874 *Hymnal*. Watts represented only 7.8 percent of the 724 hymns of *The Hymnal* of 1895, compared with 20.7 percent of the 972 selections of the 1874 *Hymnal*. The 1911 revision contained only 6.7 percent, still a considerably large percentage compared with the 1933 *Hymnal* with 3.9 percent; the 1955 *Hymnbook* with 3.7 percent; and the 1990 *Hymnal* with a mere 2.4 percent of its hymns being those written by Watts.

While there were only 28 "contemporary texts" in the 1895 *Hymnal*, there were 171 "contemporary tunes," 54 being composed especially for this book and copyrighted by the Presbyterian Board of Publication. One may wonder why Benson (or musical editor William W. Gilchrist) felt compelled to recast the music of such a large number of hymns. Of the 171 "contemporary tunes," 54 were replaced in the 1911 revision by more popular tunes and 19 were simply dropped. Ten of the "popular" replacement tunes were those which had been used in the 1874 *Hymnal*, restored to Presbyterian hymnody by popular demand.

As for the typographical layout of *The Hymnal*, Benson chose not to use the prevailing style of the earlier published hymnbooks, the printing of the tune at the top of the hymnal and page and then filling the space beneath with whatever hymn corresponded in meter, arranged in double columns and closely packed. He saw in this practice the necessity of padding with less than superior material when there was extra space on a page, or the trimming of hymns when space was short, making hymn length a matter of typographical consideration.

Benson chose instead to follow the arrangement modeled by the then current Episcopal hymnal musical edition¹⁴ of printing one hymn per page, with only its tune or perhaps two tunes on the page, with the first stanza printed between the staves.

A major "pet peeve" with Benson was the practice of some of the newer hymnbooks of "following the pattern set forth in the ephemeral song books of printing all the words of the hymns between the staves of the tunes." He believed, regarding this practice, that:

This expedient arose from the singer's difficulty in mating the rapid and rollicking tunes to the words provided, the words in many cases being evidently little more than pegs to hang the musical notes on.... It is, of course, a phenomenon that has passed over from the side of modern religious song that is admittedly illiterate and demonstrably decadent.... Let us hope it will not pass far into the fair field of church song. It may be a fad, but it has already become a menace.¹⁵

Benson later admitted that a number of church committees had rejected *The Hymnal* because it was not printed in the new manner, and that some pastors were calling for an edition so printed. We must also note that Louis F. Benson died in 1930 and that three years later *The Hymnal* of 1933¹⁶ was published with the entire hymn text printed between the music staves, because, as the Preface informs us, "of a general and urgent demand."

Through the 1895 *Hymnal*, American Presbyterians were introduced to additional hymnal indexes. This was the first American Presbyterian hymnbook to contain an alphabetical index of authors and an alphabetical index of composers. Both the 1866 *Hymnal* and the 1874 *Hymnal* had contained indexes of authors and composers, but they had simply listed the authors alongside the hymns in the index of first lines of hymns, and the composers alongside the tune names in the index of tunes. The 1866 *Hymnal* had an "Index of Texts Related to Hymns" which referred to the scripture texts, but the 1874 *Hymnal* did not have any type of scripture-related index. Benson restored such a reference tool with the 1895 "Index of Scriptural Texts," which was more detailed than that of 1866. Benson's index made a distinction between paraphrases, hymns wholly founded on the biblical passages, and hymns that simply quoted words of the Scripture texts.

The index of first lines appeared at the front of a Presbyterian hymnal, directly following the table of contents, for the first time in 1895. This idea had perhaps also been sparked by Charles L. Hutchins's musical edition of the 1892 *Hymnal* of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

Sixteen years following the invention of the electric light bulb, when a good home parlor organ could be purchased through Sears and Roebuck for thirty-five dollars, and Grover Cleveland was President of the United States of America, the Presbyterian *Hymnal* of 1895 began to push northern Presbyterians closer to the forefront of progressive church song.

Thanks in large part to Louis F. Benson's meticulous editing, *The Hymnal* of 1895 was ultimately adopted by nearly five thousand churches, with a million copies being sold, compared with the half-million circulation of the 1874 *Hymnal*. ■

¹³ Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of The Christian Church*, p. 218.

¹⁴ *The Church Hymnal*, ed. by Charles L. Hutchins (Boston: The Parish Choir, 1894).

¹⁵ Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church*, pp. 221 and 223.

¹⁶ *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1933).