The Influence of Paul Gerhardt Upon Evangelical Hymnody

by Anne W. Kuhn

Paul Gerhardt is undoubtedly the David of German hymnody. Born at Grafenhainichen in Saxony in 1607, his career of 69 years coincided with the Thirty Years' War and the tragic transitional period which followed these three decades of pillage and pestilence. He is still the sweet singer of the Fatherland to all true sons of Germany. Some scholars have termed him "the George Herbert of Germany" for the cultured refinement of his poetic expression; but whereas Herbert's hymns are spiritual gems set in poems of such beauty as to be understandable only to the select few, the hymns of Paul Gerhardt are for the everyday congregation. His hymns are not only a reflection of his troubled times but also a biography in poetry setting forth the disappointments in his own career, the aspirations of his own inward life, and his unfailing faith in the goodness and love of God. In contrast to the objective hymns of the great Luther, Gerhardt's hymns were subjective, devotional and in the best sense pietistic.

As a watchman waits for day, And looks for light, and looks again When the night grows old and grey, To be relieved he calls again; So look, so wait, so long my eyes To see, my Lord, thy Sun arise!

This article by Mrs. Anne Wicker Kuhn was taken from the Spring, 1948 issue of The Asbury Seminarian. Mrs. Kuhn served as professor of German at Asbury College for twelve years, and has completed graduate studies at Harvard University, Boston University, Trinity College in London, and the University of Munich.

The writer purposes in this study to examine some of Gerhardt's hymns, with special reference to the manner in which they influenced, directly and indirectly, the hymnody of the Evangelical Revival in England. The article is not a critical or historical essay on the work of Gerhardt, nor a survey of German Pietism, with which his name is correctly linked. It is rather designed as an appreciation of the man who by universal consent was called "the prince of Lutheran poets."

In a sense, such an investigation will be also the tracing of the pilgrimage of a soul. Inasmuch as our times parallel those of Gerhardt, the lure of such a pilgrimage may prove to be attractive to men of our times.

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Gerhardt's most famous hymn is his translation of Bernard of Clairvaux' "Salve Caput Cruentatum" ("O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden"). This Passion chorale translates as follows:

O sacred head once wounded
With grief and pain weighed down,
How scornfully surrounded
With thorns, Thine only crown!
How pale art Thou with anguish,
With sore abuse and scorn!
How doth Thy visage languish
Which once was bright as morn!

O Lord of life and glory,
What bliss till now was Thine!
I read the wondrous story,
I joy to call Thee mine.
Thy grief and Thy compulsion
Were all for sinners' gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression,
But Thine the deadly pain.

What language shall I borrow To praise Thee, heavenly Friend, For this, Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end? Lord, make me Thine forever, Nor let me faithless prove; Oh, let me never, never Abuse such dying love.

Be near me, Lord, when dying; O, show Thyself to me; And for my succour flying, Come, Lord, to set me free. These eyes, new faith receiving From Jesus shall not move; For he who dies believing, Dies safely through Thy love.

This hymn is sung throughout Germany on Good Friday, usually to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach in his famous St. Matthew's Passion. To what extent Christian liberty in song was suppressed by the late regime is difficult to determine. It is safe to venture, however, that no rise and fall of governments can eradicate from German Protestanism its love for this hymn.

St. Bernard (if indeed he wrote the original) entitled his hymn "A rhythmical prayer to any one of the members of Christ suffering and hanging on the Cross". The original manuscript is not in existence, and the oldest copy now extant (possibly copied from the original) was not found until the 14th century. In its earliest form, the hymn was long, being divided into seven parts, each addressed to a part of the Body of Christ. The portion which Gerhardt so correctly translated is addressed to "the Face of Jesus".²

When the well-known German missionary, Schwartz, who preceded Henry Martyn to India, lay dying after 50 years of incessant labor among the heathen, it was Gerhardt's hymn which he chanted. Surrounded by his sorrowing Malabar pupils, he passed away with its echoes in his soul. This is but one instance of the power of this chorale to sing its way into the hearts of the faithful.

Of Gerhardt's version Philip Schaff says,

This classical hymn has shown an imperishable vitality in passing from the Latin into the German, and from the German into the English, and proclaiming with equal effect in three tongues, and in the name of three creeds—the

Catholic, the Lutheran, and the Reformed—the dying love of our Saviour and our boundless indebtedness to Him.

While the English translation of this hymn did not find an immediate place in Wesleyan hymnody, the spirit of it was caught by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. Their themes and their style reflect its mood and its message.³

John Wesley translated a number of Gerhardt's hymns into English. Several of these have remained in use to the present time. Some of the hymns which we attribute to Wesley are really Gerhardt's. Here are two verses of one of the Saxon's hymns which John Wesley translated.⁴

My Saviour! How shall I proclaim, How pay the mighty debt I owe? Let all I have, and all I am Ceaseless to all Thy glory show.

Too much to Thee I cannot give; Too much I cannot do for Thee; Let all Thy love and all Thy grief, Graven on my heart for ever be.

The following is one of Gerhardt's best known hymns, sung almost as much in England as in Germany. Written under title of "Befiel'du deine Wege" it was translated by Wesley in 1739.

Commit thou all thy griefs And ways into His hands, To His sure truth and tender care, Who heaven and earth commands.

Who points the clouds their course, Whom winds and seas obey, Who shall direct thy wandering feet; He shall prepare thy way.

Thou on the Lord rely, So safe shalt thou go on, Fix on His work thy steadfast eye, So shall thy work be done.

No profit canst thou gain By self-consuming care; To Him commend thy cause; His ear Attends the softest prayer.

Thy everlasting truth,
Father, Thy ceaseless love
Sees all Thy children's wants, and knows
What best for each will prove.

When Thou arisest, Lord, What shall Thy work withstand? Whate'er Thy children want Thou givest, And who shall stay Thy hand?

The spirit of this English translation is remarkably like that of the original. May it not be that John Wesley was able to transcribe the mood and rhythm of this hymn so accurately because his circumstances at this point in his career were so like those of Gerhardt?

Around this hymn have grown up a number of interesting traditions, describing the remarkable role which it has played in ministering to those in distress. Of these the following is a representative sample.⁵

A German peasant called Dober, who lived in a village near Warsaw, was to be evicted on the morrow with his family amid the snows of winter, because he could not pay his rent. In the evening, gathering wife and children around him, he prayed with them, and then joined with them in this hymn; as they reached the last verse, a raven which his grandfather had tamed and set at liberty, tapped at the window. In its bill was a ring set with precious stones. The peasant took it to the minister. It was found to belong to the King, Stanislaus. When the minister told the King the story he sent for Dober, gave him a handsome reward, and the next year built him a new house, and filled its cattle sheds from his own estates. Over the door was an iron tablet, bearing the representation of a raven with a ring in its bill, and the verse which I previously omitted in the above hymn:

Thou everywhere hast sway, And all things serve Thy might, Thy every act pure blessing is, Thy path unsullied light.

The richest period of German hymnology was that of the devastation, moral as well as physical of the years, 1618-1648. The darkness of this era of near-barbarism called forth a new return to faith in God, a new expression of hope in spite of darkest national calamity.

This pious confidence, this unabated poetic glow, found in Paul Gerhardt the most fervent and refined expression that has been reached in German hymnody.⁶

In common with the devout of his time, Gerhardt frequently sought relief from earth's cares in contemplation of Heaven's joys, as the following hymn testifies:

O Christ! how good and fair Will be my portion, where Thine eyes on me shall rest And make me fully blest, When from this narrow earth To Thee I shall spring forth!

Oh thou, poor passing earth,
What are thy treasures worth
Beside those heavenly crowns,
And more than golden thrones,
Which Christ hath treasured there
For those who please Him here!

This is the angel's land Where all the blessed stand! Hear, I hear nought but singing See all with glory springing; Here is no cross, no sorrow, No parting on the morrow! It is easy to discern in the mood of this hymn the heart-beat of the Evangelical Revival in England.

Gerhardt's temperament and his religion alike served to make him cheerful, and the many disappointments of his life seem never to have embittered him. He always maintained a tender heart and a scrupulous conscience. His portrait in the church in Luebben bears the inscription, "Theologus in cribo Satanae versatus," i.e., a divine sifted in Satan's sieve. Attention will be given later in this study to some of the trying details of his life and ministry, and to the manner in which Gerhardt met his problems.

John Wesley, in his Plain Account of Christian Perfection,7 says:

In the beginning of the year 1738, as I was returning from thence (Savannah, his first appointment after his ordination, and where he seemed to have failed so miserably) the cry of my heart was:

Oh, grant that nothing in my soul May dwell, but Thy pure love alone; Oh, may Thy love possess me whole, My joy, my treasure, and my crown. Strange fancies from my heart remove, My every act, word, thought, be love!

Evangelicals think when they join in this well-known hymn, which has become part of English religious life, that they are singing one of Wesley's hymns; in a sense they are, but the original words are those of Paul Gerhardt. His first verse reads:

Jesus, Thy boundless love to me
No thought can reach, no tongue declare;
Oh, knit my thankful heart to Thee,
And reign without a rival there!
Thine, wholly Thine alone I am
Be Thou alone my constant flame!

Thomas Walsh, converted Irish Romanist of Limerick, was in the habit of singing the third verse of the above hymn with something like holy rapture:

O love, how cheering is thy ray! All pain before thy presence flies, Care, anguish, sorrow melt away Where'er thy healing beams arise. O Jesu, nothing may I see, Nothing desire or seek but Thee!

H

In 1907 Germany celebrated the three hundredth anniversary of Gerhardt's birth. A greater tribute to his genius as a poet, or to his greatness as a preacher of righteousness could hardly be paid to any man than this, that an entire empire should pause in its national pursuits, in public as well as in private sing over again his songs, and recall his fights for truth and tolerance, while the emperor extolled him as a shining example of self-sacrifice and Christian purpose. In the words of Wilhelm II, "None had done more for the advancement of religion in Germany than the singer, Paulus Gerhardt."

Gerhardt's musical contribution to the world of Evangelical religion can be best appreciated in the light of the problems which he faced in the world of his day. Some biographical details will therefore be of value at this point. Son of the burgomaster of Grafinhainichen (in Saxony), he was well-educated. At the same time he lived no sheltered life; emerging from his school days, he found himself amid the confusion of the Thirty Years' War. He shared to the full, along with his contemporaries, the sorrows, disappointments, and humiliations of that direful conflict.

As a young man he had frequently to take his place beside his fellow-citizens and defend the hearth and home of his parents. He was compelled to wait until he was 45 years of age before he was ordained and before he could secure a pastorate. Only then was he able to marry the beautiful woman whom for long years he had loved, but to whom he could not earlier offer a home. It was in these disappointing years of waiting that he composed some of his most popular hymns, among which the following ought to be quoted:

How shall I meet Thee? How my heart Receive her Lord aright? Desire of all the earth, Thou art! My hope, my sole delight! Kindle the lamp, Thou Lord, alone Half-dying in my breast, And make Thy gracious pleasure known, How I may greet thee best!

Her budding boughs and fairest palms
Thy Zion strews around
And songs of praise and sweetest psalms
From my glad heart shall sound.
My desert soul breaks forth in flowers,
Rejoicing in Thy fame;
And puts forth all her sleeping powers,
To honor Jesu's name.

In heavy bonds I languished long,
Thou com'st to set me free;
The scorn of every mocking tongue—
Thou com'st to honour me.
A heavenly crown wilt Thou bestow,
And gifts of priceless worth,
That vanish not as here below,
The fading wealth of earth!

It requires little imagination to discern in this hymn the basic spirit underlying the famous hymns of Charles Wesley, with their "hungering and thirsting after righteousness."

The poet, famous at 45 for his hymns, was invited to the pastorate of the Church of St. Nicolai, in Berlin. Here his influence spread rapidly throughout Germany. A few years later his patron, the great Elector of Brandenburg, sought to interfere with Gerhardt's liberty of preaching. Refusing to subscribe to the edicts of June 2, 1662 and September 16, 1664, which he felt to be subversive to the interests of the Lutheran Church, and which he felt to represent an attempt to force the Reformed doctrine of predestination upon his Church, he was dismissed from his pastorate in 1666.

Gerhardt did not seek a quarrel, but was drawn forcibly into this controversy. The Elector doubtless meant well, wishing to terminate the long controversy between the two sections of the Reformed Church. But he was too masterful in action, while Gerhardt was overly conscientious, and displayed a want of tact in dealing with the really pious prince. He was primarily concerned with keeping a clear

conscience; and with the exception of some written statements to the Elector, his dealings with the Magistrate, the Stande, and the Elector were kindly and conciliatory.

When it became apparent that he could not with a good conscience accept the condition which the Elector placed upon his preachng, he went forth with his family, a homeless wanderer. At a little country inn which they reached in the evening, Gerhardt, distressed by his helplessness and his inability to comfort his weeping wife and children, went out into the woods to pray. Suddenly the words of the Psalm came to him: "Commit thy ways unto the Lord; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass."

The words brought not only rest and comfort, but inspiration; for he rose from his knees and as he walked to and fro under the trees that calm evening, he composed a hymn that has given strength to thousands. Full of confidence in God, he returned to his humble inn, and read the following verses to his wife:

Give to the winds thy fears,
Hope and be undismayed;
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears,
God shall lift up thy head.
Through waves, through clouds and storms,
He gently clears the way;
Wait thou His time: so shall the night
Soon end in joyous day.

Still heavy is thy heart?
Still sink thy spirits down?
Cast off the weight, let fear depart,
But every care be gone!
What though thou rulest not?
Yet heaven and earth and hell
Proclaim, God sitteth on the throne,
And ruleth all things well!

Leave to His sovereign sway
To choose and to command;
So shalt thou, wondering, own His way,
How wise, how strong His hand.
Far, far above thy thought

His counsel shall appear; When fully He the work hath wrought That caused thy needless fear.

Thou seest our weakness, Lord, Our hearts are known to Thee; Oh, lift Thou up the sinking head, Confirm the feeble knee! Let us in life, in death Thy steadfast truth declare, And publish with our latest breath Thy love and guardian care.

When the good pastor had finished reading the hymn, even his wife was cheered by the thought that God would indeed take care of them. The family had hardly retired to their humble room before a loud and imperative knock was heard, rousing the whole house. A messenger stood at the door holding a sealed packet for Pastor Gerhardt. The surprised doctor, with his trembling wife, opened the packet and to their great joy found an invitation from the Duke of Meresberg, offering him "Church, people, home and livelihood, with liberty to preach the Gospel as your heart may prompt you."

Full of gratitude, the little party now journeyed to Luebben, where Gerhardt became archdeacon. Here he lost, first his wife and then his little son, occasions which drew other imperishable songs form his soul. Seven years later he himself passed away, with the word of one of his own songs on his lips:

Us, no death has power to kill.

Like Luther, Gerhardt was more poet than musician. Both were fortunate to have men of like mind and heart to set their hymns to suitable music. If Luther had his Johann Walther, Gerhardt has his Johann Crueger. To understand the permanent mark which Gerhardt left upon Evangelicalism in Germany, it is essential to know something of Pietism, a movement which is popularly associated with his name. It is too simple to regard Pietism as a mere protest against a rigid and barren orthodoxy. Rather, it is a continuation of many of the principles of primitive Lutheranism, and stemmed from the very heart of the Lutheran Reformation.8

Gerhardt is notable in this connection for his pioneering in the field of the inner life; for it was in the year of his dismissal from St. Nicolai that Spener was appointed pastor in Frankfort, while the *Pia Desideria* of the latter was published but a year before Gerhardt's death. Not until six years later were the *collegia pietatis* made into public gatherings. Thus Gerhardt expressed the spirit of Pietism before Francke and Spener had laid the real foundations for their work, and before Francke, Anton and Breithaupt were appointed to their chairs at Halle.

Ш

It is impossible to determine just how greatly the leaders of the Pietistic movement were influenced by Gerhardt's hymnody. To say the least, he put into verse much that was formulated into sermons several decades later. Had Pietism followed Gerhardt's thesis, that the Christian life is the soundest and purest form of human life, and had it avoided depreciating the Bible, the sacraments, and the ministerial office, it might have avoided the attacks of J. Deutschmann and Valentin Ernst Loescher, and—worse still— the sentimentalization of its teachings.

Gerhardt preserved in Germany the more enduring legacy of the Pietistic movement. While Pietism, in its 17th and early 18th century form, was largely submerged in the ongoing of German religious thought, Gerhardt's hymns retain their power to inspire the heart and challenge the soul. Considered by historians to be the greatest hymn writer Germany has produced, he continues to sing his way wherever German hymns are sung.

Something needs to be said at this point in comparison of the hymnody of Luther with that of Gerhardt. From the standpoint of the number of hymns written, the latter was, of course more prolific. The best authorities attribute less than 10 hymns directly to Luther; Gerhardt's number about 120.9 But such a comparison is superficial; the real question is that of the style and content of their respective hymns. Luther's hymns were usually objective, and frequently militant. Those of Gerhardt were subjective, expressive of quiet trust, and replete with references to the intimate relationship between the soul and God. Each had its ministry to perform; the one type served to balance the other. Taken together, the two blended into a balanced whole.

The songs of both Luther and Gerhardt have stood the ruthless test

of time, but when the works of the two are compared, the palm must be given to Gerhardt for affording real spiritual insight, and for proffering help in every phase and circumstance of human life. Living in times comparable to those through which Germany is passing today, he mirrored with exquisite delicacy and admirable fidelity the deepest aspirations of man confronted by God and met by His Krisis. His hymns are the mirror held up to the soul, wherein it may read itself. In consequence, one seldom turns to Gerhardt's songs in vain. He has a word of warning, of comfort, of hope, of joy, or of assurance for every one. In sorrow, in rejoicing, in health and in sickness, in the homeland or on the journey, in time of war and in the day of peace, at the altar or by the cradle, at the bedside and at the grave, he strikes with unerring fingers the chords of the human heart.

It is small wonder that for spontaneity, simplicity and purity of expression he is the greatest favorite (among foreign hymnodists) in England. To understand his influence in Britain, it is necessary to bear in mind that prior to 1600 there were few English hymns suitable to congregational use. Noble sacred poetry there was, but these poems were, as it has been well said, "too subtle and fanciful" ever to come home to the hearts of the people. This is due to at least two influences: first, the large adherence of the English Church of the period to Roman usage; and second, the Puritan prohibition of all hymns except rhymed paraphrases of the Psalms. Thus there was no upsurge of congregational hymn singing in the English Church of the 16th century comparable to that in Luther's day. This must wait for nearly a century and a half—until the circulation of Gerhardt's hymns.

Such hymns as did exist in England prior to 1625 were written for the choice few to enjoy. They were full of subtle allusions, half the pleasure of which was derived from the exercise of ingenuity required to understand them. Such could never be sung, like Luther's, by little children at Christmas, nor as a nation's battle song. Still less could they distill peace at moments when heart and flesh failed and mortal effort was impossible, when the soul had lost its power to cling to anything. England must wait for Isaac Watts—or perhaps better, until the Wesleyan Revival, before she could enter the hymn-singing era.

IV

It is a commonplace that the Wesleyan movement was a singing movement, and that as Luther had his Walther, John Wesley had his

brother Charles. To trace the influence of Gerhardt's hymns upon John Wesley and his gifted brother, one must take into account a number of factors, most of them indirect. Attention was called earlier in this study to the fact that John Wesley translated several of Gerhardt's hymns into English. Of perhaps greater significance was the fact that he learned German, this indicating that he expected knowledge of this language to yield him important contacts with newer movements on the Continent. Doubtless his interest in, and contacts with, the Moravians served as an incentive to this.

The degree to which Wesley's thinking was shaped by the Saxon poet must be understood, not only in terms of the effort which he put forth in the translation of his hymns, but in the light of the type of hymnody which came from the pens of both the Wesleys. The temptation is strong, in a study of this kind, to exaggerate the degree to which Wesley's beliefs were derived from the poems of Gerhardt. Accuracy demands the recognition that John Wesley was an Anglican, and differed rather greatly from the Pietism of 17th century Germany. His background lacked the physical factors, such as the devastation of the Thirty Years' War, and the consequent famine and poverty, which were so powerful in shaping the thought of Gerhardt.

Umphrey Lee observes that the doctrine for which Wesley is justly most famous, namely Christian Perfection, was not derived from German Pietism, but from the Bible, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law. 10 Around this doctrine, and related principles, he developed an essentially British Pietism. Some hold that his Evangelicalism was radically different from Pietism in Germany. This seems to the writer to be an extreme view.

A comparison of Gerhardt's hymns with the general tenor of Wesley's teaching seems to yield the conclusion that the underlying atmosphere of that teaching is identical with that of the hymns which he translated from the German. Outstanding among the parallel ideas is that of the close relation between God and His world. It is important to remember that the thought of England at that time was still dominated by the Newtonian physics, with its mechanistic and lifeless view of the world. Wesley certainly derived his ideas at this point from some source. Now, the hymns of Gerhardt which he translated speak of the close correlation of God with the world. The following are illustrative of this:

Through waves, and clouds, and storms, He gently clears the way; Wait thou his time, so shall this night Soon end in joyous day.

Who points the clouds their course Whom winds and seas obey, He shall direct thy wandering feet, He shall prepare thy way.

Thou everywhere hast sway, And all things serve thy might; Thy every act pure blessing is, Thy path unsullied light.

Indirect evidence for this influence of Gerhardt upon Wesley is to be found in the manner in which some of his hymns, appearing in Wesley's translations, have become known in the popular mind as Wesleyan hymns. The writer has examined a representative group of hymnals, 11 and finds that each of these contains from five to eight of Gerhardt's hymns, most of them having come through John Wesley's translation, a few through the work of Catherine Winkworth. That these hymns, written three centuries ago and by a man of whom relatively so little is known outside of Germany should have such a firm place in modern hymnals of the major denominations, is a remarkable testimony to their vitality. Interestingly enough, in the latest edition of the Methodist Hymnal, some of these hymns are indexed, not under Gerhardt, but under John Wesley, though credit is given to the German author on the pages where the music occurs.

These facts indicate that Wesley translated these hymns of Gerardt because of his interest in them, and—we believe—his kinship of spirit with them. This is the more remarkable in view of the fact that he learned a relatively little-known (in England) language and that he went back over a century for his materials. He has derived from them, not so much his doctrinal tenets as his attitudes toward nature, providence, and availability of God to human petition. In short, we may attribute much of the inwardness of John Wesley's religious emphasis, and of the spiritual warmth of his outlook, to the impact of Gerhardt's hymns upon his life and thought.

A final link in the chain of evidence is found in the fact that without

the usual antecedents, a new tradition in hymnody appeared in England in the time of the Wesleyan awakening. Theological factors alone would hardly account for the appearance of the hymns of Isaac Watts and of the Wesleys, following so closely upon the steps of the relatively barren period in hymnody following the English Reformation. Taken together with the fact that the hymnody of the Evangelical Revival is so obviously in the spirit of Gerhardt, this affords further evidence of the influence of Paul Gerhardt upon the hymnody of the period. This influence appears to have been quite out of proportion to the numbers of his hymns which appeared in English translation. His spirit seems to have been contagious; imbued by it, the Wesleyan Revival sang its way into the hearts of millions in England, and shortly to countless others in the New World.

Footnotes

¹There is a question now concerning Bernard's authorship of this hymn. There is evidence for and against the traditional belief at this point. Such an authority as H. Augustine Smith ascribes the original to Arnulf von Loewen, 1200-1250.

²The English translation was by James W. Alexander, a Presbyterian minister and professor.

³Edward Dickinson, Music in the History of the Western Church (New York: Scribners, 1902), pp. 379f.

⁴There are nine stanzas in the original.

⁵This account was given by Dr. H. Augustine Smith to a class in sacred muic in 1941. Similar accounts in connection with the same hymn may be found in Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, (revised edition, reprint of 1925), pp. 125.

6Dickinson, op. cit., pp. 265f.

⁷Section 7.

⁸But for a contrary opinion see Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (2nd English Edition, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), p. 84.

⁹A. W. Wilson, *The Chorales* (London, The Faith Press, 1920), pp. 26, 12. ¹⁰Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville, Cokesbury, 1936), p. 110.

¹¹The Methodist Hymnal, The Baptist Hymnal, The Presbyterian Hymnal, The Episcopal Hymnal, The Advent Christian Hymnal, New Church Hymnal, The Hymnal for American Youth and The Congregational Hymnal.