

Hymn of the Month

April 2007

HE LIVES

“Why should I worship a dead Jew?”

This was the question that started the process leading to the composition of our Hymn of the Month, *He Lives*. A young Jewish student asked this question of Rev. Alfred Ackley after attending several of Rev. Ackley’s evangelistic meetings. Alfred Ackley, a Presbyterian minister, was well-educated in both music and theology. He received musical training from the Royal Academy of Music in London, England, and received his theology education from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. As an ordained minister, Rev. Ackley served congregations in both his home state of Pennsylvania and California.

Given his training in both music and theology, it is not surprising to learn that Ackley was an avid hymn-writer and composer. At the peak of his career in the early 1900s, Alfred and his brother Benton were considered two of the most prominent and important gospel hymn and song writers of their time. Unfortunately, few of their gospel songs are widely published or sung currently. *He Lives* is perhaps the most popular and best recognized of Ackley’s hymns, and may have been the hymn that had the greatest impact on even the writer’s life.

It is recorded that Ackley’s response to the young Jewish student’s query was as follows:

He lives! I tell you, He is not dead, but lives here and now! Jesus Christ is more alive today than ever before. I can prove it by my own experience, as well as the testimony of countless thousands.

As he continued to share his own experiences of a personal relationship with Christ, Ackley re-read the Gospels and studied the Scriptures with new eyes. He was continually moved by the phrase, “He is risen,” and the important implications of that statement. No longer was sin and death a threat to mankind; they could find salvation through Jesus Christ because of His resurrection. The proof was not only in the eyewitness testimony of the apostles and other first century Jewish Christians who personally saw Jesus after he had been raised from the dead, but also in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Christians throughout the ages who have experienced the power of the risen Savior since that first Easter morning.

Enthralled with this re-discovered focus on the resurrection and the personal experience of a changed life in Christ, Ackley wrote the text and music to the hymn and published it in the hymnal *Triumphant Service Songs* in 1933. It is unclear whether the young inquisitive Jewish student ever converted to Christianity and experienced the exciting assurance of Jesus’ resurrection. However, his one question led a simple pastor and songwriter to explore the depths of his faith, and resulted in a hymn of triumph, hope, and assurance in the living Christ.

As we celebrate the Easter season, may we as Christians rejoice, lift our voices, and sing eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ the King, for He truly lives within our hearts. Hallelujah! Amen.