

Belden, Franklin Edson (1858–1945)

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Franklin E. Belden was the most prolific writer of hymn tunes, gospel songs, and related texts in the early years of the Seventh-day Adventist church, and was prominent in various facets of the church’s publishing work.¹

“Sweet Singer of Israel”

Frank was born in Battle Creek, Michigan, on March 21, 1858, the first of four children born to Stephen and Sarah Harmon Belden, older sister of Ellen Harmon White.² He began writing music in his late teenage years following a move to California with his family. Because of poor health, he moved to Colorado, where he met and married Harriet (Hattie) C. McDearmon, also a talented musician, in 1881. They would have one child, Linnie Louise.³ They returned to Battle Creek in the early 1880s, where he became involved in the Seventh-day Adventist publishing work.

Frank Belden was referred to as “the sweet singer of Israel” and was known for his ability to compose hymns spontaneously as sermons were being delivered. At the end of the service he and his wife would perform the newly created song and then give a copy of the manuscript to the preacher as a souvenir.⁴

Belden and Edwin Barnes, a talented musician who had recently moved to Battle Creek from England, served as music editors for and contributors to the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymn and Tune Book for Use in Divine Worship*



Franklin Edson Belden, c. 1880

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

more widely known as *Hymns and Tunes*, a collection of over 1100 hymns published in 1886. Belden, then in his late twenties, contributed over 80 texts and 87 tunes to the collection, and later also collaborated with his cousin J. Edson White on several songbooks.

Belden's name is especially associated with *Christ in Song*, the most popular songbook ever published by the church. He had started working on the collection in 1884 as *Hymns and Tunes* was nearing completion. In 1900 he personally published the completed collection, which was then sold by the Review and Herald Publishing Association (RHPA).

Publishing Disputes

In 1905 a disagreement arose between Belden and the RHPA over the royalties from *Hymns and Tunes*. Although it was reported that Belden was greedy for money, in reality he was upset that the copyright for *Hymns and Tunes* had been re-assigned to RHPA in violation of an 1885 agreement that all profit from its sales would go to support the church's mission work, not the publishing house. In December 1905 the RHPA agreed to transfer ownership of *Hymns and Tunes* back to the General Conference, bringing an apparent resolution.⁵

However, Belden became embroiled in a dispute over the jurisdiction of the Battle Creek Tabernacle that was part of the larger conflict between the General Conference leadership and Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, director of the Battle Creek Sanitarium and the International Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association. In 1907 Belden brought a lawsuit attempting to block the transfer of the Tabernacle to the West Michigan Conference. In July 1907 he and several other members were disfellowshipped from the Tabernacle church, as was Dr. Kellogg later that year.

According to a newspaper report reprinted in the *West Michigan Herald* (the conference periodical), Belden was not present when his name came up as the first of several to be considered at a meeting of around 100 church members on July 7, 1907. Two elders, George Amadon and A. C. Bourdeau, urged the group to wait until Belden, who was expected to return from a trip by 8 p.m., would be present to defend himself. When he failed to show by the end of the meeting, he was dropped from membership by a unanimous vote.⁶

Publication of the revised edition of *Christ In Song* proceeded in 1908. The RHPA made a one-time payment of \$6,000 to Belden to secure worldwide rights for publishing and circulating the hymnal.⁷ Financial and legal wrangling aside, this version would become the favorite song collection of church members for decades.

Near the end of his work on *Christ In Song*, Belden began writing songs for the noted evangelist Billy Sunday, which were included in *Songs for the King's Business*, a hymnbook Belden edited. Even though it was published in 1909 by Sunday School Supply House in Chicago, it was advertised in the *Review and Herald* and available through the RHPA.⁸

Unfortunately, Belden's financial grievances with the denomination persisted. As late as 1939 and 1940, the matter of paying Belden his share of the royalties for use of his songs was still in question. In response to assertions he was making verbally and in writing, the General Conference Committee, on January 22, 1940, approved a letter drafted by an investigative committee that stated, "according to our findings, all arrangements entered into for the use of the songs were mutually satisfactory to him and the denomination at the time the negotiations were carried on."⁹

Alienation From Ellen White

Several factors contributed to an antagonism Belden developed toward his aunt, Ellen White, though he was at times receptive to her counsel.¹⁰ At the 1888 General Conference session, for example, he was among the foremost in questioning Ellen White's prophetic gift on the grounds that she was being influenced by her son, W. C. White, as well as A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, in the sharp theological conflicts that marked the conference.

In the ensuing years he was among those at the Review and Herald office who instituted policies that undercut Ellen White's influence. Belden and Clement "Captain" Eldridge implemented a system in which one major book at a time would be promoted for sale by the church's colporteurs. Their designation of *Bible Readings for the Home Circle* as the one book for heavy promotion in door-to-door sales had the effect of diminishing circulation of newly published books in Ellen White's Conflict of the Ages series – *The Great Controversy* (1888) and *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890).

Around the turn of the century, Belden experienced renewal in his spiritual life and reconciled with Ellen White. However, his feelings towards her poisoned once again amidst the disputes over publication of his work described above and he is reported to have remained embittered to the end of his life.¹¹

Contribution

Franklin E. Belden's compositions have made a major and lasting impact on music and worship in Adventism. The 1941 *Church Hymnal* included 22 of Belden's songs and hymns, a move that was questioned but resolved as the hymnal was prepared.¹² The 1985 *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* includes twelve complete hymns and four tunes by him.

Following Belden's death in Marshall, Michigan, on December 2, 1945, at age 87, his papers and manuscripts were purchased for \$1000 by the church and given to the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, then in Takoma Park, Maryland. They are now available at the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.¹³

"Adventists Using the Pruning Knife." Reprinted from *Battle Creek Morning Enquirer* in *West Michigan Herald*, July 24, 1907.

Chase, Jerry. "Belden, Franklin Edson (1858-1945) and Harriet McDearmon." In *The Encyclopedia of Ellen G. White*, edited by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, 308-310. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013.

Froom, Le Roy Edwin. *Movement of Destiny*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971.

General Conference Committee Minutes. General Conference Online Archives, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/Forms/AllFolders.aspx>

Hooper, Wayne H. and Edward E. White. *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1988.

"Our Publishing Work." *ARH*, January 4, 1906.

NOTES

1. Jerry Chase, "Belden, Franklin Edson (1858-1945) and Harriet McDearmon," in *The Encyclopedia of Ellen G. White*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 308-310.
2. 1880, 1890, U.S. Federal Census Records, Ancestry.com; Howland family tree, F.E.B. LifeStory, Ancestry.com.
3. Champion-Shell-Spruiell-Robertson family tree, Franklin Edson Belden LifeStory, Ancestry.com;
4. Wayne H. Hooper and Edward E. White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald), 627-628.
5. "Our Publishing Work," *ARH*, January 4, 1906, 2; Chase, "Belden, Franklin Edson," 309-310.
6. "Adventists Using the Pruning Knife," reprinted from *Battle Creek Morning Enquirer* in *West Michigan Herald*, July 24, 1907, 2-3.
7. Chase, "Belden, Franklin Edson," 310.
8. Hooper and Edward, 627-628.
9. "Reply to F. E. Belden," General Conference Committee, January 22, 1940, 1361, General Conference Archives, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1940-01.pdf>.
10. Chase, "Belden, Franklin Edson," 309.
11. Kenneth H. Wood recalled that as a young minister in 1945, he, along with the prominent church leader Carlyle B. Haynes, visited Belden, who would die later that year. According to Wood, Belden refused the ministers' offer to pray with him before departing, saying, "Not as long as you

believe in that woman." Roger W. Coon tells the story of the visit in "The Ultimate Question," *ARH*, March 10, 1988, 10.

12. Le Roy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971), 539.

13. "F. E. Belden Collection of Books and Periodicals," General Conference Committee, August 9, 1945, 2003, General Conference Archives, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1945-08.pdf>.

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