

“Higher Ground” ~ Johnson Oatman Jr.

Johnson Oatman, Jr. was born near Medford, New Jersey, on April 21, 1856. He became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, when was nineteen years of age. Soon he was licensed to preach and was ordained by his denomination, although he never actually pastored a church. In his early life, he was actively involved in the family’s mercantile business, insurance business, and, upon his father’s death, entered the insurance business. In 1892, he started writing gospel songs, and, from then till his death, in 1922, he wrote approximately 3,000 gospel hymn texts. It is reported that Oatman generally averaged four to five new texts each week, throughout this period of his life, receiving no more than \$1.00 for each of his songs. His texts were always in great demand by the leading gospel musicians of his day, such as Kirkpatrick, Excell and Charles Gabriel.

Johnson Oatman is also the author of such popular hymn texts as “Count Your Blessings,” and “No Not One!”

The composer of the music, Charles Hutchinson Gabriel, was born on August 18, 1856, in Wilton, Iowa. Gabriel is generally considered to be the most popular and influential, gospel song writer during the evangelistic crusade decade, 1910-20. In his association with the Rodeheaver Publishing Company as music editor, Gabriel continued his prolific musical output, until his death on September 15, 1932, in Los Angeles, California. It is estimated that Charles Gabriel was involved in the writing of more than 8,000 gospel songs as well as in the editing of numerous compilations and hymnals. In many of his songs he authored both the text and the music. Often Gabriel attributed his texts to his pseudonym, “Charles G. Homer.”

Charles Gabriel also supplied the music for the gospel hymn “O That Will Be Glory.” Other well-known gospel favorites written or composed by Charles Gabriel include: “More Like the Master,” “Send the Light,” “My Savior’s Love,” “He I So Precious to Me,” “He lifted Me,” and “O It Is wonderful.”

“Higher Ground” was first published, in 1898, in the collection, *Songs of Love and Praise*, No. 5, compiled by John R. Sweney, Frank M. Davis, and J. Howard Entwisle. In his autobiography, *Sixty Years of Gospel Song*, Gabriel recalls that he composed this tune after his return to Chicago in September, 1892, and sold it for the grand sum of five dollars.

“There is not a heart but has it moments of longing, yearning for something better, nobler, holier than it knows now.” Henry Ward Beecher.

*I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

Refrain

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith, on Heaven's table land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

*My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where those abound,
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

Refrain

*I want to live above the world,
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
For faith has caught the joyful sound,
The song of saints on higher ground.*

Refrain

*I want to scale the utmost height
And catch a gleam of glory bright;
But still I'll pray till Heav'n I've found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

Refrain