

Hymns of the Faith: “The Church's One Foundation”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi,
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.” . . . Here with “Hymns of the Faith” now is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas, and the three of us today are back together for “Hymns of the Faith,” where we discuss the great hymns that have been handed down over the course of two millennia, a heritage of Christian faith in song.

Today we're discussing what is truly one of the finest hymns in the English language, *The Church's One Foundation*. My guess is that many in the listening audience the minute I say those words know many of the lyrics of this hymn and immediately hear the tune of Samuel Wesley's AURELIA in your mind's ear.

Bill Wymond, maybe for those who don't have an instantaneous association with this tune, why don't you just play the tune through for us. [Dr. Wymond plays.]

Just hearing that tune makes me think of church. I mean, the grown-ups have come to church, and we're here to worship! It's just an outstanding tune.

And, Derek, you were telling us off-air a little bit about the background of this hymn. I'd been concentrating on the text. I've always loved the text to this hymn; I like it even more having heard the background that you gave us from your historical research on the hymn. I'm going to ask you to tell us about that in a few moments, but Erik Routley says that this is surely one of the ten best hymns in the English language. I'm tempted to agree with him. He says it's surely one of the two or three best hymns on the subject of the church. I'm really tempted to agree with that! But you gave some background as we were chatting ahead of time that I just didn't know. I did not know about Samuel Stone and his involvement in this particular controversy (or as you would say in the Queen's English, con-TROV-ersy). Tell us a little bit about the background of the hymn and the author of it, Derek.

Dr. Thomas: Well, the author is Samuel John Stone, who was born in 1839, and died at the turn of the century in 1900. This hymn was written in 1866, when he was a young curate — and all our Anglican friends will know what a curate is, but “I want to be minister” is what I'm going to say a curate is, but it's the first stage in the Anglican Church. When you enter into the ministry you become a curate, and then you become a rector, or something like that...I don't know my Anglican hierarchy. He was a curate first at Windsor (everybody knows where Windsor is...Windsor Castle, where the Queen has her residence when she's not in London) and then at St. Paul's, Haggerston, in London, where his father had been vicar — which is unusual, I think, for a son to succeed his father. When his father went to this church, according to these notes I have here, it had an endowment only of J13 (which is about \$25) per annum, and it was without church, school, or vicarage...which doesn't sound too healthy. And in the background apparently...now it makes sense to me why a certain verse in this hymn reads the way it does...there was a controversy (or a con-TROV-ersy!) in South Africa caused by one John William Colenso, a bishop of Natal, and he had published a book called *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined*. Apparently it was written just four years or so before the publication of this hymn.

Dr. Duncan: We should probably say... as you tell the story, I'll interrupt briefly to say we have a friend of ours who actually did his PhD on a similar controversy that broke out in the Church of Scotland when William Robertson Smith and George Adams Smith and others began to adopt critical theories that had been circulating in German scholarly circles for a hundred years, but then began to be popularized in the English-speaking churches both in England and in Scotland and in other parts of the English-speaking world. So from the 1860's to the 1900's, you had this happening over and over again, where scholars that were in more or less evangelical denominations were exposed to German higher critical thought, and they began to popularize it in the English-speaking churches, and it met with tremendous resistance from a number of conservative stalwarts. And that seems to be what was going on here.

Dr. Thomas: And in this case calling into question the Mosaic authorship of Numbers and Leviticus, saying that these books were written at a much later period. Anyway, he was attacked, this man John William Colenso was attacked by a Bishop Robert Grey of Cape Town, who apparently claimed jurisdiction over Natal and attempted to have Colenso deposed and excommunicated (and successfully, I should add); and Stone's hymn is a major legacy of this controversy, this important, important controversy. And it sort of makes sense. I've sung these words for 35 years...

Dr. Duncan: Well, let me draw attention to those words, Derek, because I do think it enriches one's appreciation...I've always liked the words because they're bold, they're declaratory, they're martial, they're willing to draw a line and stand there. Share those words for us.

Dr. Thomas: The fourth stanza (at least in our hymnbook, *The Trinity Hymnal*):

“The church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end;
Though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale,
[...although the original had *false souls* in her pale]
Against or foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.”

And I had never realized there was an actual figure behind those words *foe* or *traitor*. They're strong words.

Dr. Duncan: They're very strong words, because it declares that this undermining of the Bible...I mean, notice not only is the person called a *false soul* or a *false son*, but notice that “though there be those that hate her.” That is, that when you are declaring false doctrine you are actually hating the church. Now the false teachers themselves would protest against that mightily, of course, and declare their undying love for the bride of Christ. But Stone's calling a spade a spade.

Dr. Thomas: Indeed! And what he's saying in effect is that you cannot love Jesus and not love the truthfulness, and we'd say inerrancy, of the Bible. And I have to say, I will probably sing verse four now with perhaps other attacks on the Bible in mind, and it's a very strong...I don't mean this in a dismissive way, but for an Anglican hymn, this is a very strong hymn on an attack on the Bible.

Dr. Duncan: Well, it reminds us of that strong strand of J.C. Ryle-ish evangelical low-church Anglicanism that existed throughout the nineteenth century. And we could point to many stalwarts. We were singing a song by Edward Bickerstaff on Sunday, who you had introduced me to...another one of those great low-church Anglicans in the nineteenth century who just produced outstanding stuff...I mean stuff from a theological standpoint that most Presbyterians would agree with right down the line. And I think there was a lot of interaction between evangelical Presbyterians and independent Non-conformists and low-church Anglicans in the nineteenth century, all of whom on a range of issues — whether it was defending sort of basic *Apostles' Creed* Christianity or whether it was defending the authority of Scripture, or whether it was resisting the Tractarian Movement, the Oxford movement that was leading some not only into a high-church Anglo-Catholicism, but even into a Romanism — in the nineteenth century you had a lot of outstanding low-church Anglicans who were defending the faith, and Samuel Stone was one of them. He does it both positively and negatively in this hymn. It celebrates the fact of the indestructibility of the church against all of the onslaughts and slings and arrows that are endured in life in this fallen world; and it's a remarkably positive hymn, but it's also a brave and a martial hymn. In fact, you mention the fourth stanza in our hymnal: even the third stanza has something of this in it:

“Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,

By schisms...”

[And I don't know when we started saying “*skizms*”, but historically in your Oxford-English Dictionary it's “*sizms*.” S-c-h-i-s-m, “*sizm*.”]

“By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed...”

[I mean, how many hymns do you know that speak about heresy? Well, here's one that's addressing the problem of heresy in the church.]

“Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, ‘How long?’
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.”

So there in two stanzas there's a willingness to address theological division and infidelity in the life of the church.

But all along with this great text, and I'll come back to the text in a minute, Bill Wymond, it's a great tune. And you've done a little background work on the tune as well. Tell us a little bit about AURELIA.

Dr. Wymond: It is a good tune, and it's in some ways more pedestrian than others because for the most part the tune is a vehicle to discuss doctrinal things. It's not so much addressed to God until about the last stanza when it turns to prayer.

But the tune serves well this discussion, and as the discussion and the emphases get a little bit more dramatic toward the third line, it starts rising so as to make a point [*plays*]...here's the high point of the hymn. And so the tune rises there.

I think it's a really well-crafted tune, and it's crafted by a good musician whose name was Samuel S. Wesley, and he was a grandson of Charles Wesley. His father also had been in the Anglican Church as a minister, and S.S. Wesley early on in his life evidenced musical ability, so he became a choirboy at that great training school, St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and also the Chapel Royal. Both of those institutions had good boy choirs, and some of the most important musicians in the Anglican Church got their training in those choirs. It is even here in the twenty-first century that those choirs are good, and many boys go there and end up as church musicians.

S.S. Wesley was organist for several different cathedrals after he got his doctorate at Oxford University. He played at Hereford Cathedral, where he also eloped with the daughter of the Dean there...

Dr. Duncan: Uh-oh! [*laughter*]

Dr. Wymond: ...so he must have felt very secure.

Dr. Thomas: Turn the page, quick! [*laughter*]

Dr. Wymond: ...Then he was at Exeter Cathedral, Leeds Parish Church, later at Winchester and Gloucester Cathedral. And some of those cathedrals I've mentioned are involved in the Three Choirs Festival.

Dr. Duncan: So he was Anglican... so this means that the grandson of Charles Wesley was Anglican. Now that's interesting, because you already have the Methodist Church at this time, and you would have had it for ...seventy years or so?...and yet you've got a Wesley that's still in the Anglican Church. And of course even within the Wesley family there were some folks that stayed in the Anglican Church and some that went with the Methodist Church. That's very interesting. I didn't know that.

Did he write other hymn tunes that we use? I'm trying to think right now, Bill. I can't remember other Samuel Wesley hymn tunes off the top of my head.

Dr. Wymond: He wrote others, but not so well known. This is the most prominent one. He also worked in the secular world in the theater, conducting orchestras and so on like that. But the thing that has always interested me about S.S. Wesley was that he was in this Middle Victorian period, and in some of the cathedrals the music was not at the high level it is today, and he has left us a body of anthems which are really good — well written. And I have noticed that with the voicing of those anthems sometimes they're for soprano, alto, and just "men"...three-part anthems because he was not always able to get enough tenors or basses to split them.

Dr. Duncan: Kind of makes you feel good, doesn't it, Bill? I mean, it's not like we haven't been fighting this thing for a while! [*laughter*]

Dr. Wymond: No, this has been going on forever and forever, getting enough tenors, especially, or basses! But those are well crafted, but sometimes his choirs would only have tenors. So he was imaginative, and even though the anthems have that kind of restricted voicing, they're very good.

The tune which is entitled AURELIA...I had at first thought that might be his wife's name or some other friend, but it comes from the fact that the tune was originally written for the words "Jerusalem, the Golden," and in Latin *Zion Aurelia*. And so the last word of that, which means *golden*, has given us the tune name.

Dr. Duncan: And so the text of this tune was written after the tune. Wesley wrote

it...Samuel S. Wesley wrote it for *Jerusalem, the Golden*, which is in and of itself a very famous hymn that's of course in English but translated out of...isn't that a John of Damascus text? Goes back to the eighth century?

Dr. Wymond: Yes.

Dr. Duncan: So this is a very famous English hymn, because a couple of texts of John of Damascus were very, very popular in nineteenth century England.

Dr. Wymond: There is one kind of Victorian description of the effect of this tune. It caught on very quickly, this hymn did in fact, because it was born out of controversy and so it was a good propaganda hymn if nothing else. And it was used, we're told, for the processional services held at the Lambeth Conferences in 1888, and those were held at Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster, and also St. Paul's. And one person who attended the service at St. Paul said the effect of the hymn was "most appalling." Now, I don't think he meant that in a negative way. That was just that he was so struck. He said,

"It was sung by a large congregation, and some people say that this hymn was really more than they could bear. It made them feel weak at the knees. Their legs trembled, and they felt as though they were going to collapse."

Dr. Duncan: Wow!

Dr. Wymond: It just meant that the hymn was overwhelming to them there in St. Paul's.

Dr. Duncan: That's interesting and instructive. Of course, we're coming up on the Lambeth meetings this summer; and isn't it interesting, Derek, that stanzas three and four of this hymn again come to bear on what's happening in the world Anglican communion, and we're so thankful for godly and brave bishops like Peter Akinola from Nigeria, and Henry Orombi from Uganda, and Emmanuel Kolina from Rwanda, who are saying "no" to heresy in the world-wide Anglican communion.

And it seems as if there will be a split — the evangelical Anglicans are meeting (or have met) in Jerusalem ahead of time, preparing for the Lambeth Conference, which is where all of the leaders from world Anglicanism come together at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury and talk about doctrine and polity and other issues in the life of the church. And this hymn text again comes to bear on that.

But I encourage you, pick up the hymnal and look at the words to this song. I want to go to the last stanza that Bill has already mentioned:

"Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,

And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we,
Like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with Thee.”

You can see the Isaianic reference there to the Lord dwelling with the meek and lowly, but there is a picture of the resplendent display of the church triumphant in glory. Derek, let's walk through some of the stanzas.

I love the first stanza: it declares Christ as the foundation of the church, and it says that the church is His new creation by water and the word. Now some folks in our audience may get the heebie-jeebies about that — you know, they think, “Oh, no! There's some baptismal regeneration going on here!” But there's actually something very important being asserted by that. You want to talk with us about that?

Dr. Thomas: Well, yes. Of course it begins with what is probably a reference to I Corinthians 3, that “No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” So, “the church's one foundation.”

And then, “She is His new creation by water and the word.” Water there is a reference to baptism. And I was thinking of Romans 6. You know, we read Romans 6 and we want to explain that we're not regenerated by baptism. But the Bible can sometimes use what is symbolic of the regenerating work of the Spirit. Is the word metonymy? Is that the word I want to use? That that which symbolizes is used as a euphemism, and therefore in the Bible, and certainly historically we are not regenerated by the application of water. But the application of water is symbolic of that which God does in regeneration.

Dr. Duncan: And as you say, it is used that way in the New Testament...*baptism* standing for the whole picture of conversion. And that is important, because we live in a day and time where often evangelism is done totally apart from the church and from the doctrine of the church, and it results in a reduction of what the New Testament sees as the irreducible core of a profession of faith. A profession of faith always comes before the church and with baptism, and so you know that joining the church and that professing the faith, and confessing Jesus as Lord, and having the symbol of Jesus as Lord as a part of that which is required for membership in the church is simply following obediently the commands of the New Testament.

Dr. Thomas: It's also interesting that the cause of the church's existence, both individually as a member of the church and corporately, is an act of divine sovereignty. It's not a decision that we make or a feeling that we feel. “She is His new creation” by something which God does, and that's a very strong statement of God's sovereignty right there at the beginning.

Dr. Duncan: The final words of the first stanza,

“From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride,
And with His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.”

You hear the echoes of Acts 10:28, as well as Ephesians 5:25ff, where Paul emphasizes that Jesus purchased the church at the cost of His own blood, that He loved the church and gave himself up for her. A strong statement about the atoning death of Christ being part of that foundational work which Jesus has done in order to bring the church into being. So there's a beautiful picture of sovereignty and redemption here in the very first line. You can't get out of the first stanza without thinking about those things.

Dr. Thomas: And so many emphases here...stanza two begins with election — “elect from every nation...” It's about heresy; it's about... “Mid toil and tribulation and tumults of her war.” No “health and wealth gospel” here! This is about fighting and looking to heaven, because the final verse is joining with the church triumphant in heaven. So it's very Puritan in its sentiment.

Dr. Duncan: Well, which is to say it's deeply Christian, and utterly repugnant to anyone with a pluralistic spirit. I mean, listen again to that language. Not only have you said

“Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth,

Her charter of salvation one Lord, one faith, one birth; *One* holy name she blesses...”

One holy food she partakes; *one* holy hope she presses to with every grace endued.

So, over and over this emphasis on this locked-in focus that the church has on her one hope, her one Lord, and this one way of salvation.

Bill, are we ready to listen to this hymn this morning?

Dr. Wymond: This morning we'll hear the King's College Choir singing *The Church's One Foundation*.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the Word:
From Heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation one Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,

And to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.

Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,
Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, 'How long?'
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

The church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end;
Though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale,
Against or foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.

Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace forevermore;
Till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest,
And the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.

Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we,
Like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with Thee.

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