

Hymns of the Faith: “Of the Father's Love Begotten”

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. This is Ligon Duncan, and we're here today with Derek Thomas to talk about Hymns of the Faith, and we are going way back in the church's history to a hymn that would have been composed in Latin, Derek, in the fourth century, and in the wake of one of the great controversies in the history of the church. I'm often struck by how fruitful controversy was both for doctrinal formation and for the enrichment of our worship through hymns and creeds and language which has supplied the church with material for affirming its faith and for explaining its faith, and for singing its faith.

This hymn in English was translated by John Mason Neale back in the nineteenth century, and then heavily edited by Henry Baker, who had a reputation for being a very (I'm told) autocratic editor, but a very good one. His editions have held up well. Henry Baker eventually edited a hymnbook, Bill, called *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, which became a standard in the Church of England from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century, and I think there still continue to be editions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* produced by the Church of England. I've got a couple of editions myself. I love those hymnbooks and the riches that they contain. But just so that folks have this tune in their minds — they'll associate it with Christmastime — *Of the Father's Love Begotten* is the name of the hymn in its English translation. Bill, would you just play through once this beautiful plainsong?

Dr. Wymond: What I think I'm going to do is to play it just as a single melody because that's the way it was sung for hundreds of years, and only more recently set with a harmony. So I'll do it just the melody. [*Plays.*]

Dr. Duncan: There's a lot to talk about this song with regard to both the text and the translators, and I want to do that with you in a minute, Derek.

But, Bill, I love listening to this tune. I love singing the tune because I've sung it a lot over the years in choirs. Our congregation struggles a little bit sometimes singing this. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about plainsong chant and how it was done, and why this might be a little bit challenging for some congregations to sing.

Dr. Wymond: Well, the challenge of this particular song set in this plainchant way is that it does not have a regular rhythmic pattern, and that bothers people! They want four counts to a measure on everything, and this has different counts to the measure.

The wonder of plainsong is, first of all, it has such ancient roots that you can actually trace back to the tunes of Christ's time that are preserved in some of the Jewish writings, melodies that were taken on by the church in Gregorian chant and later were adopted in the plainchant, and so they're very ancient.

If you want to have an idea of what the early church may have sounded like when they were singing a hymn, you can play some of these Gregorian or plainchant tunes and get an idea of what the tunes were like. The thing that is so nice about it is that the tune tends to follow the text, and as it rises and falls then you get the emphases that the text would have, and the tune does not get in the way of the text.

And they're really not hard to sing — at least this one is not. As you add a harmony to it you can affect a rhythm a little bit and make it easier to sing. With harmony it goes [*plays*].... The harmony falls on the stronger beats, and so that helps the congregation to be able to sing it, I think, a little bit. It's sort of interesting when this hymn did first appear — actually, it was around for a long time. It was in Italian and German songbooks, but it was actually not adapted to this text until about the middle of the nineteenth century. And when it was in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, it was given a regular beat so that it was like a traditional hymn and it went like this... [*plays*]...

Dr. Thomas: And all of a sudden it sounds very English.

Dr. Duncan: Oh, it's true, it does!

Dr. Wymond: All of the life, though, for me, is taken out of it when you do that. And a congregation can learn just about anything, ultimately. Some of the gospel hymns we sing are really not easy, so it just takes a lot of exposure.

Dr. Duncan: That's true.

Dr. Thomas: Well, plainsong or plainchant as well as Gregorian chant in classical music CD sales consistently top the charts. Now to have a chart in classical music, it sounds a little odd — but you go to almost any site on classical

music and see what's selling at the minute. There are these groups of monks from Spain...a couple of them in particular have been on the top of the charts for the last three or four years. So they sell in large quantities, sung of course in that very open-spaced, echo-y surrounding. And you can hear the sort...of monks singing that tune.

Dr. Duncan: Right. Well, it lends itself to the hard surfaces and to the long sort of echo down the nave, because the simple melody doesn't get in the way of itself with the long reverberations.

I'm sure there was a philosophy, Bill, behind the utilization of that kind of a style. Presumably in singing something that doesn't have a steady number of beats per measure and such, it would lend itself to different utilization of non-standardized meters within the phrases or the lines, so that you could have sung a complex Psalm up and down to those.

But can you tell us a little bit more about what was the logic behind using plainsong? We know that it would have been utilized in the worship services from very early on, and into the high Middle Ages. What was the philosophy behind using that kind of a style?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think actually it was not so much a philosophy, it was just a practice because that's the way melodies used to be. They didn't have the kind of meter that we later superimposed upon them. The whole idea of strict meter is a late kind of invention that didn't come in until, say, the 1300-1400's, somewhere around there.

Dr. Thomas: So pause lines would be whatever your breath could take? Presumably at some point you have to pause to take a breath, so...

Dr. Wymond: I think probably so, yes. And then sometimes the text probably dictated a pause as well. So the church just took what was there. You've said it yourselves, too – the church was ambivalent about singing in the early days because in the pagan religions music was used in a very bad way, and so the church was cautious about the use of music, period, because they didn't want to have anything that was associated with pagan religion.

The early church fathers all talked about that, up through about the 300-400's. And then as they just adopted the tune styles of the day, it was just a natural thing. And this just prevailed until people got more sophisticated in their music experimentation in secular music, and then that came into the church again in about the thirteenth century, somewhere around there.

Dr. Duncan: So, early on, then, Bill, as churches began to build purpose-built space for worship, what would have been typical for congregational involvement in singing? I know that for instance the Arians were big on creating little ditties for

their people to sing. I don't know whether that was designed to be done more publicly or whether it was designed to be private, or whether it was to be done in public but not in worship, or public in worship. I know that they tended to ...early on they were building rounder rooms, and then later they built longer rooms and such. I don't know how early on...you said that this tune wasn't associated to this text until later, is that the case?

Dr. Wymond: Not until the middle of the nineteenth century with this particular text, but the tune was associated with other religious texts before that. We just don't have that particular association. So it was — what? — about 325 and after that the buildings of the church started appearing because the religion became legal in the Empire, and it's interesting that a little bit earlier than that we had had these controversies where the Arians and others were making up ditties to use as propaganda for their philosophy. But also as the development of the mass as something to be observed by the congregation and practiced by the clergy occurred, you probably had a decrease in singing in the church anyway, so that by the 600's when Gregory started collecting the chants for Gregorian chant, most of these were sung by clergy and by the monks and so on like that.

Dr. Duncan: So the clergy and the monks' choir then would sort of sing this for the congregation. The congregation wouldn't necessarily be...so that would explain why they could do things that are a little bit more melodically complex and without the rhythm, because they would have been practicing them during the week and then be doing them during the various services of the mass that would have been done as the week rolled on.

But this text is clearly designed, Derek, to respond directly to the kinds of assertions that were made by the Arians during the Arian controversy in the early part of the fourth century, the late 200's-early 300's.

Talk a little bit about the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the deity of Christ and what was going on in this time frame that would have made sense for a text like this to be written by an orthodox Christian minister who was wanting to convey a biblical view of Christ and the Trinity to his congregation.

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course the text is written by this man, Prudentius — Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. A Spaniard, born in 348, so he has this Iberian background. And was at one point chief of the imperial bodyguard of Emperor Honorius, which sounds impressive. And then in his fifty-seventh year becomes a recluse in a monastery, in an unnamed monastery somewhere, and then seemingly spends the rest of his life writing poems, sacred poems and hymns, and dies in 413. So he lives right during or immediately after some of the great creeds — *The Nicene Creed*...the *Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed*...

Dr. Duncan: You have the Council of Nicea that meets in 325, and then you have the Council of Constantinople that meets in 381, and during that time frame

was a very fruitful time for the early church in formulating church doctrine.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and was there anything ever like that since? Where the major representatives of Christendom meet and agree on a doctrinal statement on the doctrine of Christ, and Trinitarian affirmations? And it's unthinkable that anything like that could take place now. Of course there were already the beginnings of schism between East and West and some sharp disagreements on some aspects of this, but you've got in this hymn just some wonderful, wonderful statements affirming the person of Christ in His humanity and deity, but also couched in wonderful phrases are affirmations of the doctrine of the Trinity. And you've got this important line of "things that are and have been, and that future years shall see...who is and was and ever shall be" and that three-foldness is a Trinitarian motif as you find in creeds and hymns.

Dr. Duncan: Well, let's take it sort of line by line. One of the assertions of the Arians was that there was a time when the *logos* was not; there was a time when God's word incarnate, Jesus Christ, did not exist. And the song begins immediately with an affirmation of His eternity:

Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the Ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore!

So immediately in our English rendering via Neale and Baker there is an affirmation that He is not a created being, He's begotten and He's actually the source of everything. So that gets at one of the main affirmations that the church made in the creeds.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, and the very first line is one that still finds some contention in some places — the begottenness of the Son: that there never was a time when the Son was not. And in our world of course fathers always precede sons, so some balk at the idea then of referring to the Son as being begotten. But even if you can get over that aspect, one is still called Father and one is still called Son, so you'd have to change the nomenclature of the Trinity, which of course some in the church... But it seems to me that you can't get by this. I mean, it's stating for us where the boundary lines are in this wonderful, wonderful affirmation of the Trinity.

Dr. Duncan: The second stanza affirms the virgin birth, and this is something that would not have been a controversy in the early church. In fact, you wonder if it's sort of the end of the line that's being emphasized — "...the world's Redeemer, First revealed His sacred face" — there. But it certainly has become a controversy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so I always like hymns that have us singing strong affirmations of the virgin birth.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, and of course we're on the edge I suppose here on the reference to the virgin herself, "full of grace," and Neale, of course, the translator here, had Roman sympathies for sure. There's nothing wrong with the statement — absolutely nothing wrong with it. It has become one of those statements around which...

Dr. Duncan: Well, let's explain that. I mean, Neale was a part of the Oxford Movement. We've talked about this several times on "Hymns of the Faith" because so many wonderful nineteenth century English hymn writers were at least sympathetic to the Oxford Movement, which was a high church movement. Some of the members of the Oxford Movement eventually became Roman Catholic, some stayed very high Anglicans and had a very high view of sacraments and liturgy and such, and the reference to the virgin Mary full of grace perhaps for some of them gave them a sense of biblical grounding for their belief that Mary was immaculate, without sin. She was full of grace...grace to bestow.

Dr. Thomas: The Roman affirmation of the immaculate conception of Mary is late nineteenth century, which is the period of Neale.

Dr. Duncan: Vatican I, in that time frame.

Dr. Thomas: Some of our listeners may think that that has a long, long history, but in actual fact it doesn't. It's barely 125 years old, I think. I just love, though, the simplicity of the language:

O that birth forever blessed, when the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race;
And the babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face,
Evermore and evermore!

And again you see those echoes of conceived by the Holy Ghost, and the reference to *The Apostles' Creed* perhaps influencing that translation.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. Bill mentioned how sometimes these tunes take us back to little snippets of things that would have been sung amongst the Jewish people and others around the time of Christ, and I was struck by how the third stanza takes us back to something that is explicitly part of every example of the apostolic preaching in the book of Acts, and that is the affirmation that Jesus' birth is in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and specifically Old Testament messianic prophecy, and it's that beautiful stanza:

"This is He whom heav'n-taught singers sang of old with one accord,
Whom the Scriptures of the prophets promised in their faithful word;

Now He shines, the long-expected;
Let creation praise its Lord..."

And so it's an affirmation that Jesus' birth is in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible have come to pass in His birth.

Dr. Thomas: There are a couple of stanzas that have been left out — and one can perhaps see why they were left out, sadly. One of them is:

"He is found in human fashion, death and sorrow here to know
That the race of Adam's children, doomed by law to endless woe,
May not henceforth die and perish in the dreadful gulf below."

And then another equally strong stanza was left out:

"Righteous Judge of souls departed, righteous King of them that live,
On the Father's throne exalted, none in might with Thee may strive,
Who at last in vengeance coming, sinners from Thy face shall drive."

And those two stanzas...

Dr. Duncan: Powerful stanzas. They'd be worth adding back in. The final stanza, Derek, gives a wonderful expression to the doctrine of the Trinity. You want to walk us through the fifth stanza, as we have it in our hymnal, that begins with

"Christ, to Thee, with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost..."?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, and we've said many times in these programs how important the doctrine of the Trinity is, and beautifully versified, I think, here:

Christ, to Thee, with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to Thee,
Hymn, and chant, and high thanksgiving, and unwearied praises be,
Honor, glory, and dominion,
And eternal victory,
Evermore and evermore!

And I think that's a wonderful way to begin a worship service, with the doctrine of the Trinity, and especially the thought of singing God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, let's hear this wonderful hymn, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*.

Of the Father's love begotten ere the world began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the Source, the Ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,

Evermore and evermore!

O that birth forever blessed, when the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race;
And the babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face,
Evermore and evermore!

This is He whom heav'n-taught singers sang of old with one accord,
Whom the Scriptures of the prophets promised in their faithful word;
Now He shines, the long-expected;
Let creation praise its Lord,
Evermore and evermore!

O ye heights of heav'n, adore Him; angel hosts, His praises sing;
All dominions, bow before Him and extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Every voice in concert ring,
Evermore and evermore!

Christ, to Thee, with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to Thee,
Hymn, and chant, and high thanksgiving, and unwearied praises be,
Honor, glory, and dominion,
And eternal victory,
Evermore and evermore!

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