

Hymns of the Faith: “Holy God, We Praise Your Name”

Psalm 103

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” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: And good morning to you, Bill Wymond, and to you as well, my friend Derek Thomas. It's great to be with you on “Hymns of the Faith.”

We are enjoying walking through some of the great hymns of the Christian church, and we've said all along that we're studying hymns that have been composed over the last two millennia, the last twenty centuries, the last two thousand years, and we are really reaching back! (Though of course this particular English version of the hymn that we're about to study today dates into the eighteenth century, the latter part of the 1700's.) The text itself in Latin goes all the way back to the 300's.

This is the very famous hymn of the early church, the *Te Deum*. Now the tune that we're going to hear it sung to by the choir at the end is out of a Catholic song book from the end of the eighteenth century, around 1774, 1775, and Bill was telling us before we came on the air it has sort of a German folk tune base.

But, Bill, you actually have some of the plainsong...or an example of the plainsong tune that this would have been sung to. So why don't you give us a taste of the tune that we're going to hear, and then tell us about the plainsong tune that would have been used to the *Te Deum*.

Dr. Wymond: So I will give you the tune that we sing it to now, which is, as you said, from Vienna in the middle of the eighteenth century; here's that tune. [Plays.] So that's this eighteenth century tune. We don't know who composed it; we just know, as I was saying, that it came from a hymnal in Vienna and is dated around 1774.

I like that tune. I will confess to you I don't think it is exactly the best tune for these words. These words are very elevated, and the *Te Deum* is praise to God — such a majestic set of words that I feel that the tune is a little light for this. It is based on a folk song, and you can hear the folk song effect if I just do the first part again [*plays*]...nice tune, but just a little bit light, it feels to me, for the elevated text. I would want something that is really bold and strong.

Dr. Duncan: It's interesting. This hymn tune...I was reading one of the hymnologists saying that it's interesting that the Catholic tunes from this era typically were anonymous. They would appear in a Catholic hymnal, but without attribution to a particular author. And it also made the comment that this tune was first found in a hymnal that was dedicated to Maria Theresa, the very, very famous Austrian empress.

Dr. Wymond: That's right. Now we know that this text is one of the very oldest that we have in our hymnal, and so this song had been sung for years and years. And for about a thousand years, Gregorian chant and various plainsong tunes dominated in the church. They didn't have quite the same kind of melody or the beat, and so I'm going to show you a little bit about what one of the best known of the plainsong tunes that it was done to sounded like. And the only way I can do it actually is to sing a little bit (so you'll just have to forgive me) so that you can get a bit of the meter. It would have been unaccompanied, and it sounds something like this...[sings]

So that's the *Te Deum* that was known in the church for years and years and years, and there are all kinds of historical associations with the singing of the *Te Deum*, because the *Te Deum* would be sung oftentimes in thanksgiving after calamitous events.

I think of one sort of contemporary one. After Paris was liberated in World War II, they immediately planned a service in Notre Dame Cathedral where the *Te Deum* was to be the major event — the singing of the *Te Deum*. And all of the Germans had not been cleared out of Paris at that time and there were still snipers; and there happened to be a couple of snipers in Notre Dame Cathedral where this vast crowd assembled. And Charles de Gaulle came and he made a big show of walking down the aisle in the cathedral and so on, and snipers started shooting at him! And so the security people there shot back at the snipers, who were up in the upper areas of the cathedral, and De Gaulle didn't flinch. He kept walking right down the aisle, and evidently they took care of the snipers and went on with the *Te Deum*! But I've always thought that was one of the most dramatic worship services, and it has caught my fancy.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, there's a long history to the text of the *Te Deum*, and all manner of legends and myths about its origins. Tell us just a little bit about the *Te Deum* and its origins in the early church.

Dr. Thomas: Yes. Before I do that, let me say that the *Te Deum* has been set to music by anybody who is anybody, Brookner, and Mozart, and Verdi, and on the English scene I suppose Ralph Vaughan Williams, Tallis, Handel, and even John Rutter has a marvelous retro-esque edition of the *Te Deum*.

The *Te Deum*, according to tradition (which is pooh-poohed by some historians, but I love it all the more for that) is supposed to have been first composed by Ambrose at the time of Augustine's baptism, 387 A.D. And if that's true, that's a wonderful, wonderful occasion: the conversion and baptism of Augustine is of course a phenomenal moment in Western civilization, let alone in the history of the church.

Dr. Duncan: Now, Derek, there's a reason why that...if it is myth, there's a reason why that would have happened. And part of it is because Ambrose and of course Augustine, *par excellence*, were so zealous to defend the church's teaching on the Trinity because in their own lifetime there had been people who had attempted to assault the doctrine of the Trinity. And one of the ways they had tried to do is was by writing catchy little songs for people to sing. And Ambrose we know was indeed a great hymn writer; we have hymns from Ambrose's hand. And the *Te Deum*, one of the things that the ancient text does is it makes it clear that our one true God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in One eternally. So that's one reason surely why that rumor or that myth or that story began. But I interrupt you. Go right ahead.

Dr. Thomas: Well, there's a section of the *Te Deum* of course that I particularly like:

The glorious company of apostles praise Thee,
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise Thee,
The noble army of martyrs praise Thee,
The holy church throughout all the world
Doth acknowledge Thee...

And so on. And in an age, a post-modern age, and in an age that discounts the institutional church — and there are many, many reasons why that's being done in our time, and the roots that lie behind that are many — but I think that to acknowledge the fellowship of the saints, to acknowledge the historicity of the church, to acknowledge our roots, that we have fellowship that stretches all the way back to the early church and beyond — I find that an enormously stabilizing feature.

When we sing a hymn of this caliber, particularly (and of course, to our Psalm-singing friends, they have even greater historical precedence going way back into the Old Testament!) in a time when everything is changing, there's this stabilizing force: we are part of the historic church. And that's not just the claim of

our friends in the Catholic church, and it's not just the claim of our friends in Eastern Orthodoxy for whom that doctrine is particularly important (and sometimes exaggerated to a degree that as Protestants we would not accept) but the emphasis on the doctrine of the church and the historicity of the church which is a central feature as well as the doctrine of the Trinity, of course, of the *Te Deum* is just a very important, crucially important text. And the fact that there are many hymns that are based on the *Te Deum* is something that we should....

Dr. Duncan: Well, as you were reading from that English rendering of the *Te Deum*, a person could hear the stanzas of Vaughan Williams' *For All the Saints*, so you're right. There are so many hymns that have picked up on the language and the sentiment and the content of the *Te Deum*.

Derek, walk us through the text of *Holy God, We Praise Your Name* as we have it in our hymnal. This particular translation is a pretty free translation by a man named Clarence Walworth in the middle of the nineteenth century, and then it's been again modified in our hymnal—and we only have four stanzas, so it has to pretty rapidly go through the paces of the *Te Deum*, because the *Te Deum* is a long text. I couldn't tell you exactly how many lines there are, but it's a long piece. It would have taken a while to chant all the way through the *Te Deum*, as Bill Wymond was illustrating before we began. We've got four stanzas in front of us. Walk us through the substance of each of those stanzas.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, actually this particular version of the *Te Deum* is almost a mirror image of the original in that the original begins with the doctrine of the Trinity and this one ends with the doctrine of the Trinity. I just like hymns. This is a Sunday morning hymn for me. This is an opening Sunday morning hymn, (a) because it's the doctrine of the Trinity, which is a good way to begin a service; and, (b) because it confesses the fellowship of the church, the communion of saints. That it's not just me in my small corner, but it's me with my brothers and sisters, and not just those that I can see, but all over the world and those who are now in heaven surrounding the throne. So "Holy God, we praise Your name." And it's a reference both to God —

"...We bow before You;
All on earth Your scepter claim, All in heaven above adore You.
Infinite Your vast domain,
Everlasting is Your reign."

Dr. Duncan: Now, the phrase "all on earth Your scepter claim" doesn't mean that they're vying for supremacy and lordship, but that they're acknowledging God's rule, doesn't it?

Dr. Thomas: Yes. I mean, the orb and scepter is a metaphor familiar to the British, of course, because of the crown and symbols of royalty and symbols of rule. All this is basically saying that we're acknowledging God's rule and

dominion over the earth and over heaven.

Dr. Duncan: And those are themes that we see in the Psalms themselves. In fact, we were recently looking at a hymn about Psalm 100, and that's one of the themes that you see there, the rule of God. And the *Te Deum* picks up on that idea; it's a very biblical idea. What about the second stanza?

Dr. Thomas: Well, I was going to ask you. You know I'm often accused of being repetitive when I pray, because I always make reference to angels and archangels! But here it is:

“Hark, the loud celestial hymn angel choirs above are raising;
Cherubim and seraphim in unceasing chorus praising...”

And I'd like to ask you. I mean, I think in a religion that is supernatural like ours we ought by faith to be able to hear the angelic choirs singing.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, I love that you regularly remind us of this, and I'm always thankful that you do. It helps me, because I have to work on it and work it down into my heart and embrace it. But you remind us regularly that when we gather in the name of Christ here, we are actually joining in a worship service that is going on above; and that worship service above not only has in it participating those saints who have gone before (and we'll talk about them in the next stanza), but it's being led by perfect beings, beings with absolutely no flaw, and yet they are bowing in awed admiration of God. And that ought to tell us something!

Dr. Thomas: Well, I think...maybe it's because of my love for music, but when the choir begins at the beginning of our service, just before the call to worship, the choir is going to sing something, and I often think, “That's what worship is like. It's like pulling back the curtain and you can hear angels singing.” And I've heard some phenomenal choirs sing in my time, and you've sung in phenomenal choirs. All I've done ever is listen to them. But they are nothing in comparison to the choirs of heaven, and if we don't get that we're missing something very, very profound.

Dr. Duncan: And the way Walworth has this line end is what their unceasing chorus is: “Holy, holy, holy Lord.” It's right out of Isaiah. It's right out of the vision of the throne room. It's right out of what the seraphim and the cherubim are saying to God in Isaiah 6, and so the *Te Deum* has a root in that grand vision of the enthroned God.

Dr. Thomas: But here's a test for us Christians:

“Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, Three we name You;
While in essence only One, undivided God we claim You.”

Well, how can God be undivided and yet Three? And how can He be Three and yet One? And we're saying this is at the very heart — this is not some peripheral thing for seminary students, this is at the very heart of what we mean by affirming God to be our God: that He's Three in One. Talk to us about that.

Dr. Duncan: Well, I'd say three things about that. The first thing is there are many people — there may some people listening today — that come from a tradition that denies the doctrine of the Trinity, and one of their arguments against it is, "Well, you just can't understand that." Well, the orthodox Christian response to that is, "Right. So what?"

In other words, that's not an argument against the doctrine of God; it's an argument for the doctrine of God. If you believe in an infinite God and you accept that you're finite, then there are going to be things about your infinite God that you don't fully understand. That's the nature of it. If you can comprehend all that there is of God, then He's not infinite. And so the argument that there are things about God that we cannot understand and therefore God cannot be that way does not follow in Christian orthodoxy. In fact, this is the very foundation of the argument that Arius made. He argued that "I cannot worship what I cannot comprehend." And the orthodox Christian response to that is, "Well, of course we can't comprehend fully the infinite God." And what Arius ended up doing was creating a God that he could understand, but it wasn't the God of the Bible. And so I think it's important for people who think that ('Well, this doctrine is hard to understand; therefore, it couldn't be true') to recognize that they are actually embracing an argument that all of the church in all of its branches historically rejected as being a doctrine that reduced God to the size of our minds. I think that's one thing to see.

I think another thing to say is that the doctrine of the Trinity, as mind-boggling as it is, actually simplifies our doctrine of God in this way: Christians do not believe that God is dependent upon the world that He has created for anything. And the only way that that can be is if God is Triune, because every once in a while you'll hear a theologian — and particularly you will hear theologians who come from traditions that deny the Trinity — say something like this: God created man because He needed someone to love. God created the world so that He could have fellowship with someone.

Well, the orthodox Christian response to that is God did not need to create man in order to love and be loved, because within the eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God both gave and received love. There was a relationship and a direction within the one true God so that God's love towards the world was not something that He...He didn't bring the world into being so that He could be loved and love; He brought the world into being so that there could be an overflow of the love that already existed in Him into our experience. In other words, it was for our benefit, not for His, not as if there were something lacking in Him, or He was in a state of being needful of something else outside of

himself in order to be complete. And I think that's important for us to remember when we think about the doctrine of the Trinity.

And then I think one last thing that I would say is that when we say God is One and God is Three, we are not actually saying that God is one in the same way that God is three. And when we say that God is undivided, we are not saying that we cannot distinguish the three persons within the one true God. We are saying that they can't be divided from one another, but we're not saying that they cannot be distinguished. So the language is not sort of mystical nonsensical language that you can't do anything with. Because when we say God is One and God is Three, we are not saying that He is One and Three in the same way. We're saying He is — notice again the beautiful language that's used here: “He is one in essence, but we name Him Three.” So it's not asserting that He's Three in essence, but we name Him One; it's saying that He's essentially One, and yet eternally He exists in Three Persons, is how the Christian church has talked about that.

So when you look at the doctrine of the Trinity, more and more I think you find it to be a tremendous strength of Christianity, especially in this Muslim world that we are encountering today, because our Muslim friends do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. They believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is a heresy, and they assert that God is an undifferentiated monad:¹ He is just one, period. And I believe that that is one of the fundamental flaws of the Muslim doctrine of the Trinity, because it means then that that sovereign God is dependent upon the world in order to express His sovereignty or to manifest His mercy, whereas in the doctrine of the Trinity that's not the case. Maybe that was more than you were bargaining for in that question.

Dr. Thomas: No, I was being reminded of the only time I ever heard a preacher in a sermon say that “God is not an undifferentiated monad” [*laughter*] was you! And it has remained in my consciousness ever since, and people still talk about it!

I love the way it ends with the words “while we sing this mystery,” and not suggesting that there's nothing we can say about the Trinity, because it's already said some wonderful, wonderful things, but at the end it is still a mystery.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, let's hear this wonderful *Te Deum* — *Holy God, We Praise Your Name*.

Dr. Wymond: Singing this hymn for us today is Lauren Randall. *Holy God, We Praise Your Name*.

Holy God, we praise Your name; Lord of all, we bow before You;
All on earth Your scepter claim, All in heaven above adore You.
Infinite Your vast domain,

Everlasting is Your reign.

Hark, the loud celestial hymn angel choirs above are raising;
Cherubim and seraphim in unceasing chorus praising,
Fill the heavens with sweet accord:
"Holy, holy, holy Lord."

Lo! The apostolic train join Your sacred name to hallow;
Prophets swell the glad refrain, and the white-robed martyrs follow;
And from morn to set of sun,
Through the church the song goes on.

Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, Three we name You;
While in essence only One, undivided God we claim You,
And adoring bend the knee,
While we sing this mystery.

Dr. Wymond: This has been "Hymns of the Faith," brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

1. Undifferentiated Monad. "a [divine] unity within which there are no personal distinctions or distinct persons"

To believe in a god who is "a divine unity within which there are no personal distinctions" is to believe in a god who is incapable of the experience of relationship, except with something outside himself, since he is absolutely one, and does not have within his oneness or unity, eternally existing three persons.

So, though Christians, Muslims and Jews all are monotheists, Christians believe that in the unity of the one true God, there are three persons who eternally exist in fellowship and relationship.

Christianity - Trinity - One God, in whom are three eternally existing persons

Islam - Unity - One God. Period. No persons. Just an undifferentiated monad. A unity within which there are no personal distinctions.

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