

Hymns of the Faith: "Holy, Holy, Holy"

Revelation 4, Isaiah 6

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: 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." And now here with "Hymns of the Faith" is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: This is Ligon Duncan with Bill Wymond and Derek Thomas for "Hymns of the Faith." Derek, it's good to be back with you talking about these great hymns of the Christian church this morning. You've been traveling hither, thither, and yon this spring! You've been involved with the PCRT, the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology in Grand Rapids, and also in California. You were in California? And the theme this year is...?

Dr. Thomas: It's on "The Blood of The Cross." It's a wonderful...

Dr. Duncan: And you said that the conference in Grand Rapids that you were at recently had gone very well.

Dr. Thomas: Very well! I actually met someone who has been listening to these programs.

Dr. Duncan: ...as I continually do, in various places.

Dr. Thomas: And you've just come back from "Together for the Gospel"...

Dr. Duncan: Yes, "Together for the Gospel" was a blast in Louisville.

Dr. Thomas: I heard that you sang hymns the whole time.

Dr. Duncan: We really did. There were a few of the...you know, the Getty and Townsend pieces, but most of it was hymns. Five and a half thousand pastors, a piano, and hymns...and the thunderous sound of those guys belting out the hymns in parts! I mean, I would have paid to just go and hear them sing. It was

worth it to hear five and a half thousand voices singing hymns.

And it's interesting, too—on the blogs you're getting a lot of comments about the singing and about the fact that there was nothing sort of trendy or edgy. It was just the great classic hymns. You've got to give credit to Mark Dever for that. Mark worked hard with Bob Coughlin to choose the hymns that were sung and they fit well with the messages, and I think greatly enhanced the effectiveness of everything that was done. I mean, the men really did seem to enjoy singing with one another and listening to one another sing. So, yeah, great experience.

But I'm delighted that today we are talking about what has to be in everybody's Top Ten list. *Holy, Holy, Holy!* is truly one of the great hymns ever written in the English language. It's a relatively recent hymn, a nineteenth century hymn...very early in the nineteenth century it would have been composed, and that makes it on the younger end of hymnody. And even in the concentration that we've done on hymnody in the last 500 years, it's on the younger side of the last 500 years. But, boy! We use this hymn at First Pres. regularly. It's one of my favorite opening hymns to a worship service, because it's so God-focused and it's Trinitarian.

Dr. Thomas: And (I may speak about this later) it has had considerable affect on liturgy, or maybe the other way around...that liturgy has had a considerable affect on the hymn.

Dr. Duncan: Tell me about that. What do you mean by that?

Dr. Thomas: Well, we often refer to the Trisagion in liturgy, meaning the three-fold "Holy, holy, holy" in Isaiah 6, although this hymn is probably based on Revelation 4, rather than Isaiah 6.

Dr. Duncan: Right.

Dr. Thomas: And folks will understand that by your "I-sa-ah" it's the same as my "I-si-ah"! [*Dr. Duncan laughs*] But the importance of that three-fold repetition has some liturgical connotations, not least because it was thought to be reflective of the Trinity.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, just by my saying "Holy, holy, holy," over half of the people listening to us this morning know the tune in their minds. But would you just play through one stanza of this great hymn and let folks just soak that tune in, and then we'll talk about it some more.

Dr. Wymond: [*Plays.*]

Dr. Duncan: It's a beautiful, beautiful tune. It really is perfect. Bill, we were talking off air... John B. Dykes, who wrote the tune...tell us a little bit about the

composer of the tune, and tell us a little bit about the tune.

Dr. Wymond: Well, let me tell you about John Bacchus Dykes. He has that pagan Greek name, the god of wine, I think it was. And people have wondered why he, who later was an Episcopal clergyman, would have that name. But it was an old family name that they just wanted to honor and to keep.

John Dykes was born in Hull in England. His father was a banker, and evidently as a young man he was talented musically and he learned the violin and the piano. And he could play by ear, which is a wonderful gift for someone to have. The organ early on in his life caught his attention, and so he practiced organ at his grandfather's church with his little sister pumping the organ for a penny an hour. (Poor thing! Didn't make much money, did she?)

Later on, John Dykes went to Cambridge University where he got a Master's in music, and then he took Episcopal orders and became an Episcopal minister. He was the precentor at Durham Cathedral. Durham is a very important cathedral, I know, in England. And "precentor" I think means the music director of the church. He was delighted to have that job because that allowed him a lot of time to write music, hymn tunes. And we are told that the text for this hymn had been misplaced or had been lost from notice, and was rediscovered. And the publisher came to John Dykes as a young man and asked him if he would write a tune for it, and the tune was written within thirty minutes!

Isn't it interesting how that happens from time to time? Tunes just come right out of the words. The words evidently suggested this tune. And he named the tune NICEA because of the Trinitarian aspect of the text and because at the Council of Nicaea the doctrine of the Trinity was affirmed.

And it's also interesting to me to see what happened to John Dykes later in his life. He was appointed as rector of another church, and he didn't get along with his bishop. He evidently was a high-churchman, and the bishop was a low-churchman, and there was real resistance on the bishop's part to some of the liturgical practices of John Dykes. John Dykes was a popular preacher, and so a lot of people were attracted to his church, and he needed help. He needed an assistant. And his bishop said that he would appoint an assistant if John Dykes would give up his high-church practices such as wearing vestments, colored vestments, and different things like that, and John Dykes thought that was such an affront that it appalled him, his biographer says, and maybe even killed him. He died young, at the age of 53.

Let me say something about the tune. This tune is interesting to me because we have the "Holy, holy, holy"...the tripartite praise of God, and musically we have thirds. We have three "holies" and we have musical thirds that begin this hymn. [*Plays.*] Those are thirds, and I just think it perhaps was intentional. It certainly does work well.

The tune is an easy tune, it's very easy to sing, very easy to pick up, and it has a progressive kind of majesty so that when you get to the last line, "God in three Persons..." the tune is at its highest point. So here are the three "holies"... [plays]... "Lord God Almighty!" ... [plays]... and then when you get to the last of the hymn you have "Holy, holy, holy" again... [playing]... "Merciful and mighty..." nice contrast of ideas...and then "God" is the high point of the tune... "Blessed Trinity." This is such a good hymn with which to start a service because of the text, and I know you'll be talking about the text.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, it does build up to that in that final assertion in the first stanza. It's "God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!" and it's the same in the last verse, and you're sort of culminating praises. In the second and third stanzas, it's "who wert and art, and evermore shall be," affirming the eternity of the Trinity; and then, "Perfect in power, in love and purity" in the third stanza. And so it is a high point. But even though it's a high point in terms that it's a D musically, it's not too high to sing. You know some hymns will sort of place themselves out of range, but even though you're up good and high, you're not so high that you're straining there, typically.

Dr. Wymond: I'm sure that I've probably said on more than one occasion that I think that that D is about as high as most congregations can go, and when I first started out playing for churches as an organist, I remember that this hymn was a whole step higher. It was in the key of E, and so that high note was an E and it was a real stretch at that time. And so the hymnals have now moved it down. But it's important that it stay in this particular key, I think, because there are keys that are bright and there are keys that are more mellow. And with anything that has majesty and glory as its theme, I think it's good to keep it in the bright keys, and both E and D are considered two of the brightest keys.

Most of Bach's great works, such as *The Magnificat* and other things like that are written either in E or D because they're so bright and because they just convey that sense of excitement.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, the author of this hymn is a fairly well-known English churchman who ended his life as the Bishop of Calcutta. Now the words to this hymn were written a long time before the tune that is now inseparably in our minds joined to the lyric. The words were presumably written some sixty years before the tune was written. Tell us a little bit about Reginald Heber. (I'm guessing how his name would have been said....)

Dr. Thomas: Yes, it's an uncommon name. I'm not sure that I've ever met anyone by the name of Heber. Reginald, of course, is a perfectly ordinary name. But he was born in Malpas, which is in Cheshire in England, on April 21 in 1783, and died 43 years later. He was 43 years old, and died at Trichinopoli in India, in his bath, and died of apoplexy.

I love the description.... Thackeray, in his work, *George IV*, speaks of Reginald Heber as “an English gentleman of the best sort: handsome, witty, competent, and of high character.”

Dr. Duncan: [*Laughs*] That's a Victorian description to the tee, isn't it?

Dr. Thomas: I love that! He was a poet; had a private education as a child, and then went to Brasenose College in Oxford, which is a beautiful setting. It's exactly what you think of as one of the colleges in Oxford.

He's also known for a poem which I studied a little back in my grammar school days, *Palestine*, which he won an award for. There's a famous story — it's...you know, if you're not into poetry it's kind of boring...but he gave a private reading of this poem to Sir Walter Scott just before he gave a public reading of the poem, and Scott had commented that he was missing a certain section. It was on the temple, and Scott drew attention to the fact that no tools were used in the erection of the temple, and Heber apparently went off to the side for a few minutes in silence and then came back to Sir Walter Scott with the lines,

“No hammers fell, no ponderous axes rung;
Like some tall palm the mystic fabric sprung
Majestic, silent.”

(Well, if you're not into poetry, it doesn't mean anything!) But it brings back some memories!

Dr. Wymond: However, Derek, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson considered this one of his favorite hymns.

Dr. Thomas: Yes! I read that somewhere, that he thought it was the finest hymn ever written because of its purity of language. And there, you know...the tune, I said, was perfect, but there's something about “Holy, holy, holy!” that you.... I know that hymns have been edited. Lots of the hymns we sing are not the original hymns. Editors have tinkered with them, sometimes for ill. It would be hard to improve on “Holy, holy, holy!”

Dr. Duncan: That's true.

Dr. Thomas: Reginald Heber eventually...he had had a passion for travel. I think after Brasenose College he went on a three-year tour of Eastern Europe, and had actually written some poetry about India, and eventually ended up as the Bishop of Calcutta. You know we think of Calcutta today (and I can't imagine it was any better then) as a city of enormous poverty and of enormous size, population-wise. And that's where he was, and as I said, he died at the age of 43 at Trichinopoli in India.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, let's talk a little bit about the verse. The four stanzas that we have in our hymnal to this remarkable song celebrate certain aspects of the Person of God. Obviously woven throughout is reference to the Triune God, and so the very opening stanza acknowledges at its climax that God in three Persons is the blessed Trinity.

Dr. Thomas: And the phrase (which of course comes out of the Scriptures, but was used a lot in early liturgical practice), "Who was, and is, and is to come," that three-fold repetition again...

Dr. Duncan: Right. And you get this in the song, *The Gloria Patri*, which was used by the early church especially in connection with the singing and reading of Psalms, that "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be," referring to the Trinity, and so you get an echo of that.

Dr. Thomas: And Episcopalians who are listening to us, of course, especially if they're using the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, will know that this is an ending to many prayers and psalms in the Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*.

Dr. Duncan: The song calls upon the congregation to address God directly:

"Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee."

And so from the very beginning it is corporate, it's congregational, it's "our song" rising to the one true Triune God, and ascribing to Him thrice holiness: "Holy, holy, holy!"

And then, "Holy, holy, holy!" is repeated in the first stanza, and God's mercifulness and His mightiness are drawn attention to:

"Merciful and mighty! God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!"

And so the song begins by direct address to God. It's coming from the congregation. He is acknowledged to be the Lord God Almighty. He is acknowledged to be holy, and He is acknowledged to be merciful and mighty, and the Triune God. And so really, in very simple majestic verse, a lot of things are affirmed at once.

Now, Derek, There are a lot of folks writing songs today who claim that hymns say too much, and that's why we need to have really, really simple songs that we sing over and over and over again, because hymns give you too much to think about. Bill, Derek? What are your thoughts about that criticism of hymns?

Dr. Thomas: Well, if worship is meant to be an accommodation to the lowest

common denominator, then that's fine.

[Dr. Duncan laughs... "Tell us how you really feel about it, Derek! If anybody now has the gall to make this assertion in Derek's presence...!"]

Dr. Thomas: Well, they don't do that with the Bible! The Bible contains many things that need to be explained, and I think the same is with hymnody. Now hymnody can move into poetry, and when I was a minister back in Belfast, I one time went through the hymnal and crossed out several hymns because the language was too poetic; the metaphor was too far-fetched for people to "get." So there is a transition from what I would call a hymn to what is poetry.

Dr. Duncan: Well, this is elegant poetry, but it doesn't get in the way of what's being said. It's not overly flowery. And we've seen, even in the course of some of the wonderful hymns that we've looked at over the last number of months, some pretty flowery nineteenth century poetry. This is not it, though. This is majestic.

Dr. Thomas: You know, one of Calvin's concerns in the liturgy of 1543 and '45, the Genevan-Salisbury liturgies, was intelligibility, a principle he got from I Corinthians 14: that what goes on in worship must be intelligible; it must be understandable. And that doesn't mean that language has to be simplistic. And if in poetry, as in the Psalms, there are tons of phrases in the Psalms, metaphors, that need explaining—and I think it's appropriate to do what we're doing here, and it's appropriate in church in some setting to explain what it is we sing.

Dr. Wymond: But I think also if you think not only of the language but also the teaching content, the Psalms stand as a model for us and the Psalms always give you great reason for praising God, going to a lot of detail. And since music helps to bind thoughts in people's minds, I think it is wonderful to bind a lot of great thoughts about God rather than a few thoughts.

Dr. Duncan: That's so true, yes. And I think the Psalms argument for me just locks the door on that criticism of hymnody, because this hymn is simply imitating, as Bill said, the way Psalms work. And so if this is a problem for this hymn to give us lots of meat, then that's a problem for the Psalms too, and then you're criticizing the Author of the Psalms, and that's out of bounds.

Dr. Thomas: You know, I think this is a perfect way to start a morning's service, not least because it says "early in the morning", and if you sing it in the evening, it's...you know...sort of odd! And there are morning hymns and evening hymns, which Luther was fond of emphasizing. But I just think this is a perfect way to start a morning service because it's God-centered. It immediately reminds you of why it is we're gathering for worship. We're not there to see "What can I get out of this?" It's "We are giving God worship."

Dr. Duncan: By the time you get to the second stanza, you see that Revelation

4:8 context, by the way:

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns
Around the glassy sea.
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

So there's the scene in the throne room in heaven, and the multitudes are gathered from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, and the elders and the creatures are falling down before the Lamb who sits on the throne, and glory and honor is being given to the one true God. And so the context there—as you said, you might think “Holy, holy, holy!” is out of Isaiah 6, but actually it's a scene from Revelation. It's a scene from John as he watches heavenly worship.

And then the third stanza, interestingly, switches the context:

“Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see,
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.”

And I think that is fascinating, in light of the fact that he's taken you there to the scene in Revelation, and then he pulls back and he says, ‘But we don't always see God as He is. We don't always see Him in all His glory. But even when the darkness hides Him, only He is holy, and there is none beside Him, and He's perfect in power.’ And that's a very pastoral point to make, don't you think, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, because I think that we pander to the fact that God can only be worshiped insofar as our feelings allow Him to be worshiped, and God is to be worshiped even when, as he says, we can't see Him. So that there is a constancy to the being of God, regardless of how we may feel at that point.

Dr. Duncan: I want to make one more comment. Now he comes back in the fourth stanza,

“Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea.”

So there's this comprehensive praise. It's sort of a Psalm 148, 149, 150...you know, “Let everything that hath life and breath praise the Lord.” And then, back again to

“...Merciful and mighty!

God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!”

It's really an outstanding text in every way. Derek, let's listen to it.

Dr. Wymond: And Dr. Duncan, Victor Smith will sing for us this version of *Holy, Holy, Holy!*

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see,
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

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