

Hymns of the Faith: “O Word of God Incarnate”

John 1

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.”... And now here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you very much, Bill. Good morning to both you and Derek. We're back to an author that we've actually studied a couple of times before because he's a good hymn writer; the texts that he provides for us are excellent. And we're talking, of course, about William Walsham How, the very famous Anglican bishop from the nineteenth century in England. In the 1800's he ministered amongst very, very poor people, and we've mentioned before that the people really took to him. They called him “our bishop” and they loved him deeply. And though he was working amongst poor and underprivileged folk, the verse that he writes is exalted verse. We've met him before, Derek, in the hymn *For All the Saints*, which is one of our congregation's favorite hymns. We sing it at funerals and at other occasions of great meaning.

But the hymn that we're going to look at today, Derek and Bill, is *O Word of God Incarnate*, and it's a wonderful meditation on the Bible and reflects a very high view of Scripture, and uses really unusual, or at least unique, metaphors to talk about various aspects of the Word of God. And, Derek, I definitely want to talk through each of those things with you, but maybe you'd want to just elaborate a little bit on William Walsham How. We'll talk with Bill in just a few moments about the tune, which is a little more pedestrian. I wonder if this is one of those texts that we could perhaps use a new tune to, but tell us a little bit more about Bishop How.

Dr. Thomas: William Walsham How: an Anglican; nineteenth century; spanned almost the entirety of the last three quarters of the nineteenth century. As I think you said at the very beginning, he is notorious for being called “the poor man's bishop,” having spent a good number of years as a bishop in a very poor section of East London (probably to some extent still would have that connotation about

that part of London). He's buried, however, in Whittington, which is on the Welsh border, opposite the church where he was the rector for a while. It is opposite of a castle built by the Normans to keep out Welsh raiders (which is fascinating!) Whittington of course is the birthplace of Dick Whittington, the famous Whittington and his cat (well, he is to me...), one-time Bishop of London, and...

Dr. Duncan: Now, was there some family connection to that area, or is it just because he was a rector there for a time?

Dr. Thomas: Because he was a rector there. I can't work it out fully. I think he retired there, or went back there; and, at one time was buried in the churchyard; but they moved at least the stone to a place just opposite to the church. I believe it's still there to this day. You can go and visit it. And he wrote most of his hymns in a period spanning a dozen years or so, from 1858 to 1871, of which this and perhaps *For All the Saints* (and *O Word of God Incarnate*) are the most famous.

Dr. Wymond: Derek, I wanted to ask you something. He is credited with being in the Broad Movement, the Broad Anglican Movement of the nineteenth century. Can you just remind us of what was happening in the Anglican Church at that time, and what the different groups were?

Dr. Thomas: Oooh! Right! How much time have we got? I suppose...I mean, one of the movements in the nineteenth century was the Oxford Movement, a movement back to Rome to Catholicism. *Lead, Kindly Light*, whose author is Cardinal Newman, represents in part that section of Anglicanism. That's not where William Walsham How is, but I don't get the impression that William Walsham How was on the conservative, right-wing conservative evangelical section of Anglicanism either. And I think he would represent mainstream Anglicanism, the kind of Anglicanism that takes pride in the fact that they're a broad church and a church for the masses rather than for a certain section. And that would not necessarily mean that he wasn't conservative in his theology, but in his ecclesiology certainly I think would represent that broader view.

Dr. Duncan: Don't you think one thing that was going on in that time frame — I'm sure there are listeners this morning who don't remember the specifics of their British history from the early nineteenth century — but it wasn't until 1832, in Britain, and the reforms that happened under the Prime Minister, who was Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, that some of the great reforms that allowed wider suffrage, wider voting rights to people in Britain, changes of some of the old class system in England.... Do you think that maybe some of the modernism and some of the Broad Church-ism in the Church of England might have been an appropriate response to some of the sort of strictures that had been brought about by sort of the landed Tory control of the Church of England? And might have unfortunately embraced some other things that you wouldn't have wanted to have embraced in terms of theology, but which were part of wanting the church to have a deeper and a wider reach into the realities of the people of England

and not just the nobility and the landed gentry? You know, the folks that would have been the typical constituency of the Tory party in the late 1700's and the early 1800's? I'm speculating there is a story, and you'll know that history a lot better than I know it, having...

Dr. Thomas: Well, I suspect....You know he was made a bishop, the Bishop of Wakefield, under the reign of Queen Victoria. And I suppose we tend to think of Queen Victoria only after the death of Albert, and she gets lost in those cloudy years in the end of her life. But Queen Victoria I think had a sense of nobility, but also a sense I think of wanting to be a queen for the masses. I think her appointment of him as the Bishop of Wakefield in a very poor area was a deliberate ploy on her part to maybe move away from that landed gentry that is sometimes associated with a certain kind of Anglicanism.

Dr. Duncan: Hmm. Bill, this wonderful text which we'll talk about in just a few moments is associated with a German tune that's called in our English hymnals MUNICH. Do you want to tell us a little bit about it?

Dr. Wymond: Well, the tune MUNICH comes from the *Neuvermehrtes Gesangbuch*, or the hymnal for Munich, in Germany. And there is not a lot of information about its origin, but it is a tune that I like, actually. It's not a very assertive kind of tune, but there is musical value to it, I think. Let me just play this tune, first of all, and then we'll see. [*Plays.*]

I have to confess that I especially like this tune because Mendelssohn used it in his *Elijah*: "Cast Thy Burden Upon the Lord." It's a very gentle kind of tune and was really well suited for that use there in *Elijah*. And of course Mendelssohn was so involved in the 1830's with the cultural life of England then, with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and so on like that, so one of the musicians there (I think it was Henry Smart) acquainted him with this particular tune again and Mendelssohn used it. Or perhaps Mendelssohn acquainted Smart with it; we're not quite sure about that.

Dr. Duncan: Hmm. The tune is pretty old. I mean, it goes back to a hymnal that was late seventeenth century, late 1600's, and so what you're saying is that this would have been a tune that would have been in circulation for some time that Mendelssohn, through *Elijah*, probably introduced to that nineteenth century population, which would then explain why it might be associated with the words of this text.

Dr. Wymond: I think so.

Dr. Duncan: Now tell us a little bit about that tune. It's a very different tune from a rousing tune like the one we sing for instance to *Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty!* What are you looking for in this tune? As you're a singer and you're singing this, what are the things that you're looking for in this tune? Obviously

there are things that attract you to the tune and to the arrangement. Tell us what we're looking for.

Dr. Wymond: Well, it's a very simple arrangement. It's an A-A-B-C kind of tune, which means that in the second line it repeats what the first line does. And the melodic curve of the line is rather restricted, but there is an emotional build-up in the third line that I'll show you. Here's the first line, which is also the second line... [*plays*]...that's a pleasant enough beginning to a melody, and while not dramatic, it's original. It doesn't sound like anything else, so I like it for that reason. The second line is the same thing. And then you move to the V-chord and you build up in the key of A major. It starts off in the key of D, and then you go to this [*playing*] in the third line to this key, and you have a kind of a building of tension here which follows along as it's giving argument for the words. It goes like this... [*playing*.]

When I say it builds up tension, it's a line that drives itself to be resolved. You've gone to a minor key there, and you just don't want to stay there, and so...this is moving toward resolution, which comes in the last line....and then you have a pleasant resolution. So much of music is built on tension and release, and so this uses this, too. Walk along the argument that's being made by the text.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, the text of *O Word of God Incarnate* itself is interesting for the different ways the Word is described. Let's walk through it stanza by stanza, and why don't you comment on each of them in terms of the way the qualities, or the characteristics, or the attributes of the word of God, the holy Scriptures, the special revelation of God written, are described to us. The first stanza is

“O Word of God incarnate, O Wisdom from on high,
O Truth unchanged, unchanging, O Light of our dark sky...”

So already before you're even through the first line, at least three different descriptions of the Word of God are given. Talk to us a little bit about each of those.

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course it begins with the reference to perhaps one of the most important passages in Scripture on Christ, and that's the opening prologue of John's Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word with God, and the Word was God.” And then in John 1:14, “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...”

Dr. Duncan: And the word for *word* there, in Greek ...

Dr. Thomas: *Logos*...

Dr. Duncan: So even people that are just English-speakers are familiar with that term *logos* as a technical designation of the incarnate Second Person of the

Trinity, Jesus Christ.

Dr. Thomas: Right. And John of course is perhaps alluding to some passages in the Old Testament in that, and some point to certain passages in Proverbs — in particular Proverbs 8, for example, where wisdom is personified. But if God is going to reveal himself and disclose himself to us, He does it verbally and in words, and principally in His Son. And all of those are being brought together in the idea of referring to Jesus as the Word, or the *Logos*. And as soon as you've done that you've got a relationship then between Jesus and Scripture. Jesus is the Word, and Scripture is the Word. And the latter half of this first stanza, or this first verse, goes from Jesus as the Word to “the hallowed page” — “We praise Thee for the radiance that from the hallowed page...” [the Bible] “...a lantern to our footsteps, shines on from age to age.” [And alluding to Psalm 119 that the Bible is a light unto our path, a lantern to our footsteps.] So it's a beautiful way of beginning a hymn about Jesus.

Dr. Duncan: So it addresses the Word of God incarnate...that's addressing the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh. It identifies Him as “the Wisdom from on high;” as “Truth unchanged, unchanging, the Light of our dark sky.” So you go from Word to Wisdom to Truth to Light, and then it transfers that picture of light to the Bible itself: “We praise Thee for the radiance that from the hallowed page...” and then as you've already indicated, that old passage that the word is “a lamp to our feet, a light unto our path.” And so it's a praising to the incarnate Word for the word of God written, in that prayer.

Dr. Thomas: And it's a testimony to the Christ-centered nature of Scripture. And when one thinks perhaps of Jesus' own words to the disciples on the Emmaus road, “Beginning in Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all things concerning himself”—and so it begins with Jesus, but Jesus as He is revealed in Scripture, and when we read the Bible we should see this light of Jesus coming forth.

Dr. Duncan: That's a very interesting point coming from someone who was reckoned by contemporaries to be part of the Broad Church Movement in the Church of England, because very often people that adopt a truly modernistic or Broad Church outlook will attempt to separate Jesus from Scripture, and they'll say, “We venerate Jesus, not this old dusty dead book.” But what How is doing is he's saying this book is a gift to us from Jesus, and that it reveals Him, and that He shines forth in every page, just as you've quoted from the walk of Jesus with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. So I think that's actually a helpful thing for us today, because we still encounter people today that want to separate Jesus from the Bible.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and it's even clearer, I think, in the second stanza because you think this is a hymn about Jesus, but now it becomes a hymn about the Bible that shows us Jesus —

“The church from her dear Master received the gift divine...”

[And you're thinking is the gift Jesus or is the gift the Bible?]

“And still that light she lifteth o'er all the earth to shine.
It is the golden casket where gems of truth are stored;”

[And now you realize he's still talking about the Bible]

“It is the heav'n-drawn picture of Christ, the living Word.”

[And he's gone back again full circle to the gift of the Bible, but also the gift of God's own Son.]

Dr. Duncan: So now we have the images of the Bible as a gift from Jesus, as a “golden casket.” Now that's a really unique image there! It's something that is precious in itself that holds something even more precious, and in this case “gems of truth” and “the heav'n-drawn picture of Christ, the living Word.”

Dr. Thomas: Yes, I'm particularly fond of that metaphor of the Bible as a golden casket where gems of truth are stored. And I like it partly because first of all of its objectivity. Although this is a subjective hymn calling forth our praise...

Dr. Duncan: And once again, for somebody that's called part of the modernistic side of the Church of England, that's totally...that is not Samuel Taylor Coleridge!

Dr. Thomas: And he's not saying, you know, you read the Bible and you get warm fuzzy feelings! He says you read the Bible and you get truth, statements of truth, coherent truth.

Dr. Duncan: And then in the third stanza the metaphor changes again: “It floateth like a banner before God's host unfurled....” Talk us through that stanza.

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course there's a Bible reference, isn't there, to *banner*? In Isaiah, that is partly a picture of Christ and partly a picture of God's given word to His people. And I think he's still ringing the changes between Jesus and the Bible as God placarding truth and triumphant truth, and you think of a banner in military terms. A banner is a military term.

Dr. Duncan: Well, in terms of military functions, too, the banner, especially in ancient days, functioned to let you know “okay, that's us”! Because, you know, we're on that side...we're fighting those guys, we're over here. And then it changes again: “It shineth like a beacon above the darkling world.” Talk about that picture.

Dr. Thomas: Well, I think he's saying that in the midst of the mayhem, whether it's nineteenth century or twenty-first century, you look to the banner. That's where your people are. That's where your forces are. That's where your protection comes from. We look to a beacon in the midst of a storm, at sea or at land. There's a light that's shining or a fire that's burning, and that's the direction to go.

Dr. Duncan: And then he says, "It is the chart and compass that ...guides us, Christ, to Thee." Tell us about that picture.

Dr. Thomas: Yes. Someone who doesn't really like being on water very much [*laughter*], knowing...you know, the idea of being lost at sea and not knowing where you're going...the Bible is our guide. It charts and shows us a compass amidst the storms of life.

Dr. Duncan: So after two stanzas now of basically ascribing quality after quality to the Bible, now we're back into a prayer of petition, and the petition in stanza four starts, "O make Thy church, dear Savior, a lamp of purest gold." So now we've gone from Christ to the Bible to what he wants the church to be made. Talk to us about this stanza.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, this is a call to the church to make...let me read the second part of it:

"O make Thy church, dear Savior, a lamp of purest gold,
To bear before the nations Thy true light, as of old."

And I think it's a call for the church to uphold and preach and proclaim the word, the Bible, and therefore Christ.

Dr. Duncan: And to be transformed by the word, too, right? To be like the word. We don't just read this word and believe the word, but we're transformed by the word. And then he goes on to say:

"O teach Thy wand'ring pilgrims by this their path to trace,
Till, clouds and darkness ended, they see Thee face to face."

What's that prayer asking? "...By this their path to trace" — is that referring back to the word of God again, or is it referring to the church transformed by the word? What's in view in that stanza?

Dr. Thomas: You know, you sing this for thirty years, and then you think, "Did I misunderstand what How was saying?" You know, there comes a point where hymns become too poetic. I don't think this has happened here. I remember a dear friend of mine going through a hymnbook and he had crossed out a number of the hymns — "too poetic!" Meaning of course it was too difficult. I've always

taken it that this is still to be the Bible.

Dr. Duncan: Well, Bill, let's hear this great hymn.

O Word of God incarnate, O Wisdom from on high,
O Truth unchanged, unchanging, O Light of our dark sky;
We praise Thee for the radiance that from the hallowed page,
A lantern to our footsteps, shines on from age to age.

The church from her dear Master received the gift divine,
And still that light she lifteth o'er all the earth to shine.
It is the golden casket, where gems of truth are stored;
It is the heav'n-drawn picture of Christ, the living Word.

It floateth like a banner before God's host unfurled;
It shineth like a beacon above the darkling world.
It is the chart and compass that o'er life's surging sea,
'Mid mists and rocks and quicksands, still guides, O Christ, to Thee.

O make Thy church, dear Savior, a lamp of purest gold,
To bear before the nations Thy true light, as of old.
O teach Thy wand'ring pilgrims by this their path to trace,
Till, clouds and darkness ended, they see Thee face to face.

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