

## 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, Dr. Bill Wymond*

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill. It's great to be with you and with Derek on Hymns of the Faith. And we're into an age of hymn writing this morning from which we don't have many remains that still circulate commonly in the hymn singing churches but this is one of my very favorites. It's very old. It dates from the fifth century. It's written by a Spanish poet named Prudentius who wanted to emphasize in a very long poem that Christ ought to be on the believer's mind at every hour of the day. The Lord Jesus who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, ought to be the constant meditation of the believer's heart. And we often sing this hymn at Christmastime. It has a beautiful, flowing, plain-song melody that sometimes requires a congregation some concentration and skill and experience to be able to sing well but I love to sing it. It's usually meant to be sung in unison. It's the wonderful hymn, “Of the Father's Love Begotten.”

And before we get into talking about the text and the background, because the text came to us in English primarily via those in England in the nineteenth century that were interested in rediscovering the ancient text of Christendom and transporting them into Protestant hymnody, many of whom were part of the Tractarian movement. And we've talked about that a little bit more a little bit over the course of studying hymns on “Hymns of the Faith” but I'll get Derek to refresh your memory about that. But let's begin by hearing this beautiful, plain-song melody, “Of the Father's Love Begotten.”

**Dr. Wymond:** What I'll do in playing this is just play the melody because it was plain-song and so it was not harmonized.

**Dr. Thomas:** You can almost hear the monks chanting that.

**Dr. Duncan:** Oh, you can. I'm almost certain I've hummed this in the various ruins of abbeys in the south of Scotland. You know, I'll find a room with a vaulted ceiling and go in and you can just hum it forever. And it even catches the idea of the Alpha and the Omega because it flows. You can just keep on going and there's no, there's almost no beginning and no ending to the tune itself. Tell us

just a little bit about plain-song and the beautiful lyric to this, Bill.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well the plain-song grew out of the Gregorian chant. Pope Gregory, the sixth century pope who codified music for the church, got the best tunes that are around and made them the official tunes for the churches use. And usually we use the word plain-song to refer to the music that grew out of that that was used in Britain. And the tunes are very simple and really just compliment the words. They are servants of the words and so they are wonderful because of that because they don't get in the way and they're easy to sing. And they were preserved in monasteries, especially in the Dark Ages, and so that's why we associate them with the monasteries because the monasteries continued to do all of the hours of the official liturgical calendar and daily calendar and so that's why we have that association. And they're probably best sung in a context where people sing together every day and therefore they can stay together and they can sound more or less like one voice. But it's such a beautiful flow I think. And our congregation can sing this. I have the theory that congregations eventually can learn anything if they work at it long enough, we just don't have enough time for them to work at many difficult things. But some of those Scotch songs that they sing that are sort of like hymns, some of them are really difficult and yet they manage to learn those too. So it can be learned by a congregation.

**Dr. Duncan:** Derek, Gregory was one of Calvin's favorite Medievals to quote. He loved to quote Chrysostom, he loved to quote Bernard, but Gregory was one of the medieval figures that Calvin had a lot of time for and as Bill said, he also had a significant role in establishing a sung diet for the church in the early medieval period.

**Dr. Thomas:** It's interesting that Neil, John —

**Dr. Duncan:** John Mason Neil.

**Dr. Thomas:** Who was, of course, a great Latin and Greek scholar at Cambridge, in translating the Spanish original hymn went back to what we would now call Eastern Orthodox or Orthodox with a capital "O", sources. You know, Ecclesiastes comes to mind that there's "nothing new under the sun" and we're right back there now in 2010 too conscious of a tradition that many know almost nothing about. And this is a hymn that focuses very much on Christ and the doctrine of Christ.

Neil was suspicious, no more than suspicious — I mean he was accusatory that folk like Isaac Watts in particular and Newton and Toplady and other eighteenth century hymn writers were guilty of doctrinal error on the person of Christ. Now those allegations are very fanciful and I don't think they hold water at the end of the day, but those accusations are still made today by some of our friends. And that the answer was to go back to the early church. Now you mentioned Calvin and his love of Gregory and Chrysostom, and of course he was, he was back to

the early church.

And of course he had a polemic to argue in the sixteenth century because Rome was saying that Calvin and the magisterial reformers were new and novel and he wanted to make the opposite point that it was the medieval Catholic Church that was new and novel and he was just following the church fathers. And he was a scholar. That wonderful story — well, we mustn't get side-tracked, but he was a phenomenal, patristic scholar.

**Dr. Duncan:** He's in Leon in 1536 and the debate's going badly for the Protestants and he stands up and begins to cite large sections of Augustine, Cyprian, Tertullian, others from memory.

**Dr. Thomas:** He even says things like - "I think it's on the left-hand side of the page in the second column." Just a photographic memory. And he's nobody at that point. He wasn't supposed to be speaking.

**Dr. Duncan:** He's been a Christian for a few years.

**Dr. Thomas:** He's like an intern!

**Dr. Duncan:** Right! (laughter)

**Dr. Thomas:** Sit there and listen and learn! And suddenly his fathers suddenly realize what a gift they have among them. But it's interesting that in our day, Neil is addressing in the nineteenth century in what is called the Oxford Movement, a decline in church membership. The established church is in trouble. They've lost many twenty-five, thirty percent of their attendance, maybe more. People of course are still paying taxes to keep the established church, something which was a bit of a sore point and still is.

**Dr. Wymond:** What decade are you talking about?

**Dr. Thomas:** Nineteenth century for the Oxford Movement, for Neil. And it's interesting that his solution, at least the Oxford Movement's solution for church decline and problems with worship — they're different problems than we have but they were worship issue problems — is liturgy. And I'm not convinced that is the answer to our problems, let's have more liturgy, and let's have —

**Dr. Duncan:** And there are so many people making the same argument today. Behold, all the young guys out there planting churches all excited about Lent.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right, and I think they need to do a course in the Oxford Movement and where did the Oxford Movement end up. It ended up back in Rome. It ended and John Henry Newman was one of the great Oxford Movement leaders and it took him all the way back to mother Rome because if you want liturgy and an

authority structure that is clearly visible from the papacy downwards then that is the direction in which it is going. And we have friends of ours who were once exactly where we are and have gone all the way there. And I think that's a warning to us about liturgy. The liturgy has to be in the interest of the Gospel at the end of the day. What was wrong with worship in the nineteenth century was it did not contain Gospel.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, the other thing is, don't you think sociologically they're reacting on the one hand to rationalism and the rise of modernity especially in industrialization in Britain and the huge forces. And the temptation is, we've got to come back with some sort of counter offensive against this. On the other hand they're in the midst of the rise of romanticism and the liturgical movement taps into that sort of romantic spirit. We're going to escape from this rationalist, industrialist wasteland back into the romantic liturgy of the early church and that's going to solve all our problems.

But as you say, Christianity makes it very clear that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart and you can't change a heart by liturgy. You may be able to express a heart that's been changed in the context of liturgy but liturgy can't get to it. Only the Spirit can. Only the Gospel can. Only Christ can. And all so often you have guys looking other directions. But the hymn that Mason recovered here is a beautiful, beautiful hymn. Talk a little bit about the theology of "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

**Dr. Thomas:** Well it is a theology of Christ. It's the theology of the first chapter of John's gospel.

**Dr. Duncan:** Put the first line of this hymn — "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!" — put that in the context of a ditty that was written by a man named Arius and sung in the streets of Alexandria, "There was when there was not; there was a time when the logos was not." And let Prudentius respond to that just a little bit, Derek.

**Dr. Thomas:** It was a chorus sung in the streets during the so-called Arian controversy.

**Dr. Wymond:** This is especially in the North African church?

**Dr. Thomas:** The North African church where — it may surprise people now — where the church flourished in the second and third centuries was North Africa. I mean places like Tunisia and Libya that we think of as the seabed of Islam, that's where the church was at its strongest in the second and third century. Augustine of course comes from North Africa. And you have folk singing this little ditty. There was a time when "He" was not referring to Jesus, in other words that He

was a created being, that He has origin. He may be God-like, He may be semi-God, He may have been adopted into the Godhead in some way, but there was a time when He was not.

**Dr. Wymond:** Now forgive me for interrupting this elevated thought, but isn't it clever here that this heretic spreads his heresy by writing singable songs like that?

**Dr. Thomas:** Right, and we must be careful not to overuse that, and there would be come who would say, "There you go. That's what choruses do. They just spread heresy. You know what you need is choruses with good theology!" But there's no doubt that it appealed, as I think things appeal in modern pop song. You hear people singing little ditties today and it gets to the heart. Now Athanasius, you know *Athanasius contramundum*, Athanasius against the world. And this story, as I am now telling it, you know is immensely complicated and it has political things that would make your hair curl. Who is siding with who and why they're siding with certain people and they're not always for good reasons, but in God's providence this theology comes out. If there was a time when Jesus was not, we cannot be saved by Jesus. If He is just like God but is not true God then He cannot save us. If He is not God and man, He cannot represent God to us and He cannot represent us to God, and therefore we cannot be saved because the only way that we can be saved is by substitution. It's again the issue and the importance of substitution. And the language here, very John-like language in the Bible — either the prologue of John's gospel or the first few chapters of the book of Revelation — and Jesus is the first and the last before the world began to be. He has always been. "Of the things that are and have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!" He is the source of everything. He is the upholder of everything. It is the Christ-centeredness that you see in the opening. "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God; the Word was God."

**Dr. Duncan:** The second stanza of the hymn goes on to say, "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," turns us right to the incarnation. That too was in dispute in the days of the early church. And in the fifth century when this hymn would have been written there was still a Gnostic, Docetic witness in the early church that was attempting to undermine the incarnation and the humanity of Christ. Talk a little bit about that and how important the incarnation was.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, there's a reference here to the virgin full of grace - and nothing objectionable about that language of course.

**Dr. Duncan:** It comes right out of the Gospels.

**Dr. Thomas:** And whether the author intended something more it's not on the

page here and so it's perfectly acceptable and proper language to use. Jesus is conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, so there's no earthly father involved here, that half of the chromosomes of Jesus' DNA come from the Holy Spirit. Now, if that offends you, then you're not a super-naturalist, and you know it's at the heart of Christianity. You believe God created the world in six days, you believe Jesus rose from the dead, you believe half of His chromosomes — I forgot my science — twenty-three? Is it forty-six chromosomes we have and twenty-three of them must come from — if I'm wrong forgive me! But I think that's what the incarnation is saying. Mary supplies half of them and the Holy Spirit supplies the other half.

**Dr. Duncan:** But He's truly man. He takes on our poor flesh and our poor blood, as the old song goes. And then the third stanza turns us to another theological subject. "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." So this takes us back to the Hebrew Scriptures and says, "The Bible was telling us He was coming."

**Dr. Thomas:** Well this is why this is so appropriate to sing at Christmastime, because Jesus is the fulfillment of Messianic promises. He is the babe promised in Isaiah 9 and 11. He is the One who fulfills Genesis 3:15 — the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of Satan.

**Dr. Duncan:** So as we've worked through the stanzas of the hymn that we have in English in our hymnal, the first stanza you have the divinity of Christ, the second stanza you have the incarnation and the humanity of Christ, the third stanza you have the Christ prophesied of in the Old Testament Scriptures, and then in the fourth stanza there's this call to praise. "O ye heights of heav'n adore Him; angels His praises sing."

**Dr. Thomas:** Right. It's not though, first of all, as it so often in these beautiful hymns, it's not a call for the church militant to sing His praise, it's the call for the church triumphant and the angelic host in heaven with whom we join in worship and I just love that. I love on Sunday morning to think, "Yes I'm worshipping here, but there's a whole host of angels and archangels."

**Dr. Duncan:** And they're not joining with us, we're joining with them.

**Dr. Thomas:** And almost, you have to almost say to yourself on Sunday, "Listen to the angels singing in heaven." And Bill's choir often remind me of just a little glimpse of what that must sound like when you get that tingle as you hear all the different voices praising God and what that must be in heaven. I can't wait to hear one of those great concerts in heaven singing God's glory.

**Dr. Duncan:** Then, the final stanza, Derek, is directed to the persons of the Trinity in an interesting order. "Christ, to thee, with God the Father, and, O Holy

Ghost, to thee.” Now I don't know what the original is because I don't have the Latin in front of me. I may rifle through here while you answer this question and see if they have the Latin here, but that may simply be the function of Mason's translation for rhyming sake.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well it's perfectly appropriate since the whole hymn has been about Jesus. Now in the fifth stanza He joins with Jesus the person of the Father and the person of the Holy Spirit. So I think that's perfectly appropriate.

**Dr. Duncan:** But that final stanza becomes the expression of the church's determination to join with that angelic worship above and to, in the language of the hymn, “hymn, and chant, and high thanksgiving, and unwearied praises be, honor, glory, and dominion, and eternal victory, evermore and evermore!”

**Dr. Thomas:** I love the final phrase, “eternal victory.” And since some of this language is coming directly from John's book of Revelation, you know as a friend of ours often says, “What is the book of Revelation about, that Jesus wins” — it is about the victory of Christ and His atonement and cross over all the forces of darkness and evil. And that is such a triumphant ending. It's beautiful.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well that's vital for Christians today. It would be very easy, especially for those of us who are in the west, who are watching in some cases Christianity recede in its influence and in its reception in our society. It could be very easy for us to become negative about that and to think that the Gospel is losing. That's led people in past decades and generations to attempt to change the Gospel so it could be more popular and more winning amongst contemporaries but this passage just reminds us that the Lord Jesus wins.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, but people like that just need to travel more. They just need to go to Brazil or to southern Africa —

**Dr. Duncan:** Or to Asia.

**Dr. Thomas:** Where the Gospel is flourishing. And I think that's just a myopic vision. You know God may be judging us at this point and bringing us to our knees, but in other parts of the world the Gospel is flourishing. And of the future of the Gospel we have no doubt.

**Dr. Duncan:** And that's a hugely important theological point to live in, in the midst of the trials and tribulations and peaks and valleys of the Christian life. Well Bill let's leave time for us to hear this beautiful, beautiful hymn, “Of the Father's Love Begotten.”

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.

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.

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,  
Ev'ry voice in concert ring.

Thee let age and thee let manhood,  
Thee let boys in chorus sing;  
Matrons, virgins, little maidens,  
With glad voices answering;  
Let their guileless songs reecho,  
And their heart its music bring.

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.

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

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