

The Hymns of Christmas

REVIEW: This is week two of our Advent series on the hymns of Christmas. This year we are looking at Christmas hymns - the stories behind them, and the meaning of the lyrics. Last week we looked at the masterful hymn, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus* that blended the first and second comings of Christ so well that the song deserves to be sung not just at Christmastime, but all year round. *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus* was a hymn written by Charles Wesley after reading Haggai 2:7 and meditating on what it must have been like to be waiting for the appearance of the Messiah. He blended his lyrics so well that the song can be applied to both the first Advent, as well as the second Advent.

INTRO: This morning we move on to another Christmas hymn. This hymn has been so popular that it has actually made it into the top ten lists in America three different times.

I. The history of our hymn

- A. The Christmas hymn we look at today is *O Come All Ye Faithful*
- B. It has been sung in churches of all denominations for over 200 years
 - 1. It has been sung in Catholic churches for even longer
- C. It has been translated into 150 different languages
 - 1. Used in countless cantatas and musical productions
 - 2. And even been referred to as “the greatest carol ever written”
- D. What is most amazing is that the true author of the song remained unknown until just after WWII
 - 1. The song was written around 1750
 - 2. For years people thought the song was written by an unknown cleric
 - 3. Some believed that Saint Bonaventura wrote the song
 - 4. It wasn't until the 1950's that a man named Maurice Frost discovered the true author in the midst of all the legends - John Francis Wade
 - 5. How his authorship was a mystery for so long is a mystery unto itself

II. The Author, John Wade

- A. He was a man of God that got caught in the middle of a Holy war in his home country of England around 1745
 - 1. The church of England and the Roman Catholics church were at odds, and things were reaching their fever pitch
 - 2. Many Catholics had to take their faith underground during this time
 - a) We hinted at this last week when we talked about the origin of the song *The 12 Days of Christmas*
 - b) This is that same time period
 - 3. Eventually, John Wade had to flee Britain to avoid punishment or death
- B. He headed to Douay, France

The Hymns of Christmas

1. The city was swarming with English Catholics, and others that opposed the British Royal family
2. But here in Douay, John Wade was given the important job of researching, recording and preserving historical music that was being lost during the conflicts in England
 - a) He was very serious about his job, searching far and wide to be accurate and thorough
- C. John Wade was a calligrapher by trade, and a skilled musician
 1. Not only did he save historical church songs for posterity
 2. He distributed them to Catholic churches throughout Europe
 3. Many forgotten songs were reintroduced to the common man because of Wade's hard work
- D. Wade was not only working on reclaiming old pieces of music
 1. He also wrote new music
 2. As a Catholic cleric, he naturally composed new pieces in Latin
 3. Around 1750 Wade finished the music for what we now call *O Come All Ye Faithful* - originally called in Latin: *Adeste Fideles*
 4. He published it that same year
 5. It wasn't until ten years later that he created lyrics to go with the melody
- E. Twice *Adeste Fideles* was published under John Wade's name
 1. Yet in 1841 when Frederick Oakeley translated the lyrics into English, John's Wade's name was not associated with the song
- F. The legends about the authorship of the song were multiple and varied
 1. Saint Bonaventura seemed to come out on top in the 1800's as the author
 - a) There may be some truth to that
 - b) Wade may have come across some of Bonaventura's work which may have inspired Wade
 - c) But inspiration would have been the limit
 2. Another legend says that in London around 1860 the song was performed at the Portuguese Embassy
 - a) The audience was informed that a man named John Redding composed the tune
 - b) Redding, alive at the time, seemed to take credit for it
 - c) However, when manuscripts were found with John Wade's name on them dating 100 years before Redding was born, Redding was widely discredited
 - d) However, in older hymnals and books you may see the song referred to as "The Portuguese Hymn"
 - (1) This is where that story comes from

The Hymns of Christmas

G. The song was adopted in most churches around the world, but especially in America before 1900

1. When “caroling” became a big hit, *O Come All Ye Faithful* was one of the most popular songs of the time
2. *O Come All Ye Faithful* remained one of the most popular Christmas songs in both the religious community and the secular community, until Bing Crosby recorded *White Christmas*
 - a) The same album that *White Christmas* was on also featured *Adeste Fideles*
 - b) It was about this time that Maurice Frost made his discovery that John Wade was in fact the author of this wonderful Christmas Hymn

H. John Wade lived in a tumultuous time

1. There was great conflict between various branches of the church
2. As a result he was forced to leave his homeland
3. He accepted a job that required long hours seeking to preserve what some were trying to wipe out
4. In spite of all of that, John Wade loved his role as a servant of the Lord
5. John Wade’s faith comes shining through in every verse - which there are actually 4 verses with 2 added later
6. It would take a man of deep faith to overcome the environment he was in to write a hymn that would bring all sides in conflict to the same place each year - bowing before Christ the Lord.

III. The meaning of our song

A. To cover the meaning of our song may seem a little foolish

1. All of us know what the song is about
2. In fact most of us could probably sing all the words from memory
3. However, to not slow down and take a closer look would be foolish
 - a) These are songs that, while we dearly love them, and enjoy singing them each Christmas season
 - b) Too often we sing them out of rote rather than relationship
 - c) We fail to engage our minds and see the beautiful truths they point to in all of their glory
4. Not to mention the fact that I said before - there are actually 4 verses with 2 added later
 - a) Oddly, some of the most theologically rich verses are the least sung
 - b) Which in secular society is understandable that they drop the most theologically rich verses
 - c) For us in the church, those verses are a little awkward to sing, but still need to be reviewed because of how deep the theology that they provide

The Hymns of Christmas

B. And before we tackle the meaning of the song, I want to turn your attention to the medium of that day

1. At the time the song was written you still had much illiteracy
 - a) Many of the people could not read or write
 - b) So the way in which they learned was through story telling, and songs
2. The way that the people back then knew their theology was through the stories of the Bible - spoken, or depicted in artwork, as well as music that they could sing along with
3. Which brings me to us today - how do you learn your theology?
 - a) Back in the day, the average person had no choice but to rely on the church to teach them what the Bible said because they could not read
 - b) Today, we have no such problem
 - (1) Almost all of us can read, and read well
 - (2) The problem is that far too few exercise that ability
 - (a) And when I say exercise I mean make use of that to learn our Bible, and our theology
 - (b) But I also simply mean, to exercise one's mind
 - (3) We have been over this before, and it is something I will pound away at until I see movement and growth
 - (a) We have more resources at our fingertips to learn about God, His Word, and the theology that shapes our faith
 - (b) And still we struggle to do so
 - i) And it comes down to priorities or laziness
 - c) What I want to see is a church that is digging in deep to learn its theology
 - (1) Be that book form
 - (2) Be that on some good websites
 - (3) Be that using the video Bible studies we have online
 - (4) Point is to seek ways to learn and grow and understand the foundations of our faith more each day

C. On to the meaning of our Christmas Hymn

1. The first verse is actually quite self-explanatory
 - a) It is a bid to all those that have been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah
 - (1) The faithful is referring to those that have been watching and waiting for Him
 - b) They come joyful and triumphant because of who they are being called to see in Bethlehem - The King of angels, the Messiah
2. The second verse is what begins the theology lesson
 - a) "God of God, light of light eternal"
 - (1) For some, these verses make little sense

The Hymns of Christmas

- (2) However, they are among the most theologically astute lyrics in the song
- (3) These opening words are a statement that the Messiah, the Christ child is the very essence of God
 - (a) He is not some lesser deity
 - (b) He is the very same as God Himself
 - i) God of God - see it - Jesus is God just as God the Father is
 - ii) Light of Light is the same idea
- b) These words tie in so well with the third line I need to address the third line now
 - (1) "Very God, begotten not created"
 - (2) Again, this line is stressing the fact that Jesus is God
 - (a) He was begotten - meaning born in this sense, however the word is reflective of the fact that He is one of a kind or unique
 - (b) Jesus was born on this earth, but not created like any of the rest of us - pointing to His pre-existence
 - (3) It is all statements of who Jesus is - God Himself, born into this world, but not created like all others in this world
- c) Back to that second line, "Lo He abhors not the Virgin's womb"
 - (1) It is a statement of Christ's humility
 - (a) Abhor means to hate or despise
 - (b) Christ does NOT hate the virgin's womb, humbling Himself to take on the fashion of a man - sound familiar?
 - (2) Philippians 2:5-8
- 3. The third verse is familiar to us
 - a) It is a recounting of the story of the angels
 - (1) We know the angel appeared to the shepherds in the field and told them where to find the Messiah
 - (2) Suddenly a multitude of angels appeared
 - (a) And this is where the song errs, saying that the angels sang
 - (b) You will never find an angel singing in scripture
 - (c) They said "Glory to God in the Highest"
 - b) This verse again draws us in to praise with the angels
 - (1) We are to give glory to God on High for sending the Messiah, the Savior of all mankind
- 4. The fourth verse is one of the additions
 - a) Most likely added to fill out the Christmas story as it talks of the shepherds

The Hymns of Christmas

- b) The verse says, “See how the shepherds, summoned to his cradle, leave their flocks, draw nigh with lowly fear, we too will thither bend our joyful footsteps...”
- c) In addition to filling out the story of Christmas, the verse is inviting us to leave the cares of this world for a time to come and join with the shepherds to adoration of the newly born King
 - (1) As the shepherds were summoned to His cradle
 - (2) So to we should come, bow and worship the Messiah
- 5. The fifth verse is also an addition, and a great reminder of the heart of the gospel
 - a) “Child, for us sinners poor and in the manger, we would embrace Thee, with love and awe, Who would not love Thee, loving us so dearly...”
 - b) The heart of the verse is in the question: “who would not love thee, loving us so dearly”
 - (1) That is the heart of the gospel folks!
 - (2) Christ loved us so amazingly that we respond in love
 - c) Christ the Messiah had just left heaven to come to earth by means of a lowly birth in a stable
 - (1) God was providing the solution to man’s problems
 - (2) Even of the root of the problem was misunderstood at the time of Christ’s arrival
 - (a) They thought it was the culture and the oppressive Roman authorities
 - (b) They did not realize that it went down to the depths of each human soul - the sin that so easily entangles us
 - d) When we look at the picture, we have to agree with the author of the verse
 - (1) Who could not love this God that has just provided the means of salvation for us
 - (2) Who could not love God, who when correctly understood, paid the price for our sin so that His holiness would be satisfied not violated
 - (3) Who could not love this God that loves us this much!
- 6. The final verse is familiar to us all
 - a) It states how excited we are to greet the baby Jesus, and that we give Him the glory due His name
 - b) The most theological of the lines in verse six is “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing...”
 - (1) It is a reference to John 1 where it begins “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”

The Hymns of Christmas

(2)“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” - John 1:14

(3)The book of Hebrews reminds us that God spoke His final Word through Jesus

c) So the things we needed to know and understand about who God is, what He is like, and what He expects from us were once and for all communicated through Christ

IV. So how do we apply the truths of the song into our lives? How do we not just leave this as a song, but allow it to teach and train us?

A. One of the first lessons we take away is from the author, John Wade’s life - never allow the circumstances of life to keep you from your worship and devotion to Christ

1. John Wade lived in a time when the churches were actually at war with each other

2. If that were to happen today, you would see many people abandoning the church because “Christians are hypocrites that can’t get along.”

a) Sadly, they would be right

3. But rather than become embittered, John Wade pushed harder into Christ

a) He did not let humanity’s sad representation of Christianity determine his faith

b) He maintained his faith in the Savior

B. The second lesson we learn from his life is his servant’s heart

1. He worked long hours at research that no one at the time seemed to care about

a) Memorializing old songs, and copying them did not seem like important work - even though it proved more important than some realized

b) It was in working in this environment that John Wade was inspired to write his own music - including *O Come All Ye Faithful*

2. Wade viewed this work as serving the Lord

a) He never thought it a drudgery, or worthless

b) In fact, he saw the fruits of his labor in his lifetime

(1) He saw the revival of old church music long lost in the churches of his day

3. What Wade teaches us is

a) A heart to serve God

b) As well as not giving up in your service to the Lord

4. This is one lesson we need to come to terms with for ourselves

a) What is your ministry?

The Hymns of Christmas

- b) What are you serving the Lord at?
- c) We talked about having a regular means of ministry over the summer
 - (1) How many of you have found one?
 - (2) How many of you view it as your service to the Lord - rather than the pastor bugging you to be involved?
- C. A third thing we learn is how deep and theologically rich some of our Christmas songs are
 - 1. I'll grant you that some of the deeper verses are more difficult to sing
 - 2. Those verses can even be a little confusing because we do not understand our theology
 - 3. But that is also what makes them so great!
 - a) The fact that we can learn about the nature of the child in the manger, that He is God - born into this world but not created
 - (1) Which means He was eternally existing
 - (2) It means that He is unique in a way that the world has never seen before
- D. The fourth thing we learn from our Christmas hymn is joining in leaving the cares of this world to adore Christ
 - 1. The shepherds had to leave their flocks to see the newborn babe
 - 2. Throughout the song, those that have been faithful to love and wait for the appearing of the Messiah have been beckoned to come to adore the Christ child
 - 3. This speaks volumes to us today
 - a) First is the way the people being asked to come are addressed - Ye faithful
 - (1) They have already been watching and waiting
 - (2) Trusting in God's promise to send the Messiah
 - b) Being beckoned to come carries with it an inherent message of leaving whatever you are attending to at the time
 - (1) Leave the cares and concerns
 - (2) Leave the worries, and the stresses
 - (3) Come and worship at the feet of the king
 - 4. We are asked to do no less
 - a) Leave the things that hold us back - be they sinful things, or good things that are just keeping us from Christ
 - b) Come and worship at the feet of not just the King of Glory, not just the King of Israel
 - c) Come and worship at the feet of your king, of my king - Jesus Christ