

NOTES ON THE LITURGY: THE TE DEUM

BY RICH LUSK

The Te Deum is one of the most widely sung songs in the history of Christendom. The full title, "Te Deum Laudamus" means "We praise you God" and comes from the first line of the hymn. The origins of the Te Deum are shrouded in the blanket of mystery that covers much of early Christian history. A popular legend, dating back to at least the ninth century, claims that Ambrose and Augustine composed it on the eve of the latter's baptism by the former. But most scholars today trace the hymn back to Niceta, the fourth century Bishop of Romesiana in Dacia (Eastern Serbia). While Niceta's life and career are also largely unknown, it is evident he defended Nicene orthodoxy in the Trinitarian and Christological debates of his time. This orthodoxy shines through very clearly in the triumphant, joyous, and reverent tone of the Te Deum.

The Te Deum has been used in various ways in church history. It is a sung confession of praise, and we will use it regularly (in rotation with other songs of praise) as a response to the declaration of absolution (as recommended by Howard L. Rice and James C. Huffstutler in *Reformed Worship*, 85). Traditionally, the Te Deum has been part of the daily prayer service. From the time of St. Benedict on, it was used in the Matins (morning) service. Since then, it has been a regular feature in prayer books and hymnals. (Hymns based on the Te Deum may be found in the old [blue] Trinity Hymnal under the title "O God, We Praise Thee" and the new [red] *Trinity Hymnal* under the title "Holy God, We Praise Your Name" [# 103]. Leonard Payton also composed a version of it. Two of the best Te Deum chants are found in the 1965 Presbyterian *Hymnbook* and the *Anglo-Genevan Psalter*.)

While the Reformers were critical of late medieval worship, they did not hesitate to incorporate the Te Deum into their liturgies. Luther said the Te Deum deserved to be ranked with the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds as one of "the three [central] symbols or creeds of the Christians faith." In 1529, he wrote a German paraphrase of the hymn so that every member of his parish could learn it (*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, edited by Fred L. Precht, 447f). In 1523, several young Lutheran martyrs who were burned at the stake for their commitment to the Protestant faith. They died with the words of the Te Deum on their lips as the smoke and flame enveloped them (*Reformed Worship*, 99). Protestants clearly claimed this great song as their own.

Calvin also included the Te Deum in his liturgical reforms in Geneva: "Nor did our Reformers reject those other ancient Hymns which for ages had been closely united with the Psalms in public devotion. The *Te Deum*, the *Song of Simeon* [the *Nunc Dimittis*], the *Magnificat* [the *Song of Mary*], were likewise transferred in a metrical shape to the Protestant ritual. None of these perhaps, has been more frequently and heartily used, in the solemnities of the Church and in private acts of praise, than the sublime Hymn of Ambrose and Augustine [that is, the *Te Deum*]" (Charles Baird, *Presbyterian Liturgies*, 29). Richard Baxter included the Te Deum in his 1661 Savoy liturgy.

While the words of the Te Deum are not based directly on the Scripture, the hymn is something of an intertextual mosaic of biblical phrases and fragments. Every line can be shown to come straight out of the Bible. For example, the Te Deum incorporates the song of the angels from Isaiah 6: "Holy, holy, holy . . ." The Te Deum is very Psalm-like in its language and style. Its theological orientation is pure orthodoxy. One thing we need to really appreciate about the historic liturgical forms, such as the Te Deum, is that they keep us focused on the "BIG DOCTRINES" that all Christians in all times and places have believed. Otherwise, it's far too easy for us to dwell on our "denominational distinctives" and we end up more "sectarian" than "catholic." The Sunday school lesson and perhaps even the sermon may wander off into doctrinal minutiae, but the classical liturgical texts will always bring us back to the touchstones of the faith. Also, the Te Deum, because of its strong commitment to central Christian tenets such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Virginal Conception, and the resurrection, helps to conserve orthodoxy from one generation to the next. By singing this song together, we reinforce our own commitment to the historic Christian faith and pass it along to our children.

Several things should be noted about the Te Deum so we can sing it for all its worth.

First, this great hymn reveals the magnitude of what we do when we gather to worship the God of the universe. All the earth worships God; the angels cry out; the spirits of just men made perfect (apostles, prophets, and martyrs) worship the Lord; and to this cosmic assembly, the church militant on earth adds her praises. The Te Deum reminds us that when we worship God we are never alone. We are articulating creation's praises and joining our voices with the heavenly choir.

Second, this hymn is centered on the mystery of the Trinity. The hymn's pivotal line reads: "The Father, of an infinite majesty; Thine adorable, true and only Son; also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter." Like the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, the Te Deum has a threefold Trinitarian structure. The first part focuses on the Father as Creator and Lord, the second on the Son as Redeemer and King, the third (implicitly) on the Spirit as Sanctifier and Preserver. We should never tire of singing this song because we will never fully grasp its depths.

Third, the Te Deum re-narrates the gospel – the story of the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. He is the everlasting Son who humbled himself to be born of a virgin. He overcame the sharp curse and pain of death in his resurrection and has now opened heaven to all believers. He sits at the right hand of God in glory and will come again to be our gracious judge. When we sing the Te Deum, we are singing the gospel!

Fourth, the Te Deum pleads for God to preserve us and work in us day by day so that we might remain ever faithful to our Lord and Savior. Through the Spirit, Christ blesses us, governs us, and lifts us up. As we plead with him to keep us from sin each day – especially the sin of apostasy – we find that we can never be confounded. God has promised us the victory!

Clearly, the Te Deum is a blueprint for our praise. It is comprehensive, running the full gamut from Christian doctrine, to Christian experience; from creation by the Father's word, to consummation at the Son's final coming; from God's

accomplishment of salvation in Christ, to his application of salvation through the Spirit. It is majestic and reverent. It is joyful and triumphant. It brings together worshippers on earth and the heavenly chorus. It is masculine and militaristic. It is all that a song of worship to the Triune Creator and Redeemer should be! Let us sing with vigor and zeal!

Here is a standard form of the text:

*We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship Thee: the Father everlasting.*

*To Thee all angels cry aloud; the heavens and all the powers therein.
To Thee cherubim and seraphim continually do cry,*

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;¹
Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory.*

*The glorious company of the 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;*

*The Father, of an infinite majesty;
Thine adorable, true and only Son;
Also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter.*

*Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.
Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.*

*When Thou tookest upon thee to deliver man,
Thou didst humble Thyself to be born of a Virgin.*

*When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death,
Thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.
Thou sittest at the right hand of God, in the Glory of the Father.*

*We believe that Thou shalt come to be our judge;
We therefore pray Thee,
Help Thy servants whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy precious blood.*

*Make them to be numbered with Thy saints in glory everlasting.
O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine heritage;
Govern them and lift them up forever .*

*Day by day we magnify Thee, and we worship Thy name ever, world without end.
Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin.*

¹ "Sabaoth" means "armies."

*O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us.
 O Lord, let Thy mercy be upon us, as our trust is in Thee;
 O Lord in Thee have I trusted, let me never be confounded.*

Here is the full chant:

1. We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.
 2. To Thee all angels cry aloud: the heavens and all the pow'rs there in.
 3. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sab - a - oth:

All the earth doth worship Thee: the Father ev - er - last - ing.
 To Thee cherubim and seraphim con- tin - ual - ly do - cry,
 heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glo - ry.

4. The glorious company of the apostles praise - Thee;
 5. The noble army of martyrs praise - Thee:
 6. The Father, of an infinite majesty; Thine adorable, true and on - ly Son;

the goodly fellowship of the proph - ets praise - Thee:
 the holy Church throughout all the world doth ac - knowl - edge Thee:
 also the Holy Ghost, the Com - fort - er.

7. Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ,
 8. When Thou tookest upon Thee to de - liv - er man,
 9. When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death,

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Fa - ther.
 Thou didst humble Thyself to be born of a Vir - gin.
 Thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all be - liev - ers.

10. Thou sittest at the right
 11. We believe that Thou shalt come to
 12. Make them to be numbered

hand of God,
 be our judge;
 with Thy saints

in the glory of the Fa-ther.
 we therefore pray Thee: help Thy servants whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy precious blood:
 in glory ev-er-last-ing.

13. O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine her-it-age;
 14. Day by day we magni-fy Thee;
 15. Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day with-out sin.
 16. O Lord, let Thy mercy be upon us, as our trust is in Thee;

govern them and lift them up for-ev-er.
 and we worship Thy name ever world with-out end.
 O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy up-on us.
 O Lord, in Thee have I trusted, let me never be con-found-ed.

Here is Leonard Payton's hymn version:

Te Deum, c. 4th cent.

Leonard R. Payton, 1998

1. Ho - ly God, we praise your name; Lord of all, we bow be - fore you;
 2. Hark, the loud ce - les - tial hymn an - gel choirs a - bove are rais - ing;
 3. Lo! the ap - os - tol - ic train join your sa - cred name to hal - low;
 4. Ho - ly Fa - ther, Ho - ly Son, Ho - ly Spir - it, Three we name you;

all on earth your scep-ter claim, all in heav'n a - bove a - dore you.
 cher - u - bim and ser - a - phim in un - ceas - ing cho - rus prais - ing,
 proph-ets swell the glad re - frain, and the white-robed mar - tyrs fol - low;
 while in es - sence on - ly One, un - div - id - ed God we claim you,

In - fi - nite your vast do-main, ev - er - last - ing is your reign.
 fill the heav'ns with sweet ac-cord: "Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly Lord."
 and from morn to set of sun, through the Church the song goes on.
 and a - dor - ing bend the knee, while we sing this mys - ter - y.