

Horatius Bonar

Horatius Bonar has been called “the prince of Scottish hymn writers.” During the course of his life he is thought to have written more than 600 hymns. Putting that in a little perspective, one of his contemporaries wrote: “Dr. Bonar, it must be acknowledged, wrote greatly too many hymns. He was often negligent of rhyme and rhythm. He seldom removed even obvious blemishes from his hymns after they were in type.”

There is little to criticize in our first hymn, #195. Bonar’s original has 6 verses. The asterisk means that the words have minor alterations, and I found that to be true. Incidentally, composer John N. Yoakley (whose permission is noted) was an Ohioan and a young church organist (about 40-41) when the Hymnal was published. I couldn't find any other compositions by him on the internet, though a couple of copyrights for non-sacred music are registered to him. And British Christian Science composer Andrew Brewis has a recording and sheet music with a new tune for these words.

Hymn 195 (all 3 verses)

Born in 1808, Horatius Bonar graduated from the University of Edinburgh and immediately began preaching in villages and farmhouses throughout his home district. He was ordained in 1838, and served as the pastor of two Scottish churches for the next 50 years. Just before his death in 1889, he begged his friends: “Please don’t write a biography of me.” Quoting from a biography in Christianity.com, “[Bonar] knew that people would be interested in his life. But during his ministry, his one interest had been the glory of Christ, and he wanted to keep it that way. “Point men to Christ, not to Bonar,” he might have said. That is what his sermons had always done.... “

Speaking of his sermons, he was perhaps even more of a writer than he was a poet. In the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org) I found free access to 5 of his books, including audio versions of 2 or them. I found over 500 books and other print materials by or about Bonar (at least in part) on Amazon, suggesting that there is still wide interest in his evangelical take on Presbyterianism. On the Logos Bible Software website (www.logos.com), you can buy "The Life and Works of Horatius Bonar" in 47 volumes, marked down from \$1007 to \$249.95.

Hymn 21/22 is one that uses all Bonar’s verses (except one) and his exact words, except for the capitalization of “Love.” G. Thalben-Ball was a young (35-36 years) British composer, organist and choirmaster when our Hymnal was compiled. He’s an interesting character about whom you’ll eventually hear more.

Hymn 21/22 (sing two verses of each)

A key feature of Bonar’s Christianity was his belief that Jesus would return in the flesh. This belief was strengthened when he visited the Holy Land in 1856, and a fellow visitor wrote the following about seeing Bonar on that visit: ““One dark night in the year 1856, in the city of Jerusalem, I wandered into a lighted mission room on Mount Zion, where a small company of men and women of various nationalities and complexions were gathered. At the desk was a man of impressive countenance, of low and musical voice ... the preacher, as I learned later, was Dr. Horatius Bonar. Learned and eloquent, there was a wonderful charm in what he said that night, because he had strong convictions on that subject of much speculation — the second coming of the Lord. He believed in His personal coming to reign on the earth; and his faith, seconded by his rich poetic imagination and fervour all quickened by the fact that we were in Jerusalem, the city

of the Passion, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension, gave to his words a winning power which I cannot describe.... To hear such a man in Jerusalem, having a firm belief in the personal coming and reign of Christ, thus to communicate to others freely his confident hopes, was a memorable event".

Our Hymnal indicated that the words of Hymn 36 are "adapted." I believe it's more than that. As far as I can tell, Bonar's original had 6 verses. Our verse 1 is quite similar to his, but our verses 2-4 are unlike any of his.

Hymn 36 (2 verses)

I found this in one source: "The ministry of Dr. H. Bonar was marked by reality and earnestness, and at times it was solemnizing. He said 'laughter and gaiety belong to a fallen world. They are too superficial to have a place among the holy and too hollow to be known among the truly happy.'" By contrast his son, Horatius N. Bonar wrote: "One side of his character was scarcely suspected by those who did not know him in private. He had a strong sense of humour, which he very rarely allowed to show itself in public."

Our Hymnal notes Bonar's words for 108 are slightly adapted. Verses 1 and 4 are as Bonar wrote them; verse 2 has a minor change and verse 3 is unlike any of the rest of the 4 verses of his that we don't use. The reason is obvious: it embodies our own understanding of communion.

Hymn 108 (all verses)

Of his 600 hymns our hymnal uses only 5, and the obvious reason is Bonar's expression of what we would call "old theology." Take a look at Hymns 183 & 184.

Here is Bonar's original first verse:

*Make haste, O man, to live,
For thou so soon must die;
Time hurries past thee like the breeze;
How swift its moments fly!*

Hymn 184 (1st verse only)

And here's Bonar's last verse:

*Make haste, O man, to live,
Thy time is almost o'er;
O sleep not, dream not, but arise,
The Judge is at the door!*

Let's end with 183 and note the composer is our old friend, Lowell Mason.

Hymn 183 (2nd and 3rd verses)