



Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ

Text: Horatius Bonar (1808-1899)¹

Tune: Unknown, *The Parish Choir, vol. 3, London, 1851*

Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ is truly a 19th Century hymn. Both text and tune were written in the 1850s, and reflect the spirit of the era. However, it is remarkably free of many of the inward-focusing emphases of mid-19th century hymns.

Horatius Bonar was born in 1808 in Edinburgh, Scotland. He attended high school and university in Edinburgh, and was Ordained into the Office of the Holy Ministry there in 1837. In 1843 he became a member of the Free Church of Scotland. The Free Church of Scotland was born when the Disruption of 1843 fractured the Scottish Church over the practice of rich landowners selecting their own Pastors. Essentially it was a split between the conservative and moderate factions of the Church. During this time, Bonar became well-known for his authorship of the “Kelso Tracts,” a series of tracts he wrote for the teaching of his congregation. However, the tracts proved more popular than Bonar anticipated because of their



Horatius Bonar

comforting, devotional nature. During this time, Bonar also published several collections of his poetry, one entitled *Hymns of Faith and Hope*, which came in several volumes. Volume One, entitled

“The Sinbearer,” included the hymn, *Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ*.

Bonar is also the author of several hymns in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, including “Glory Be to God the Father” (TLH 244), “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” (TLH 277), “All That I Was, My Sin, My Guilt” (TLH 378), “Not What These Hands Have Done” (TLH 389), “Thy Way, Not Mine, O Lord” (TLH 532), and “I Lay My Sins on Jesus” (TLH 652). One praise of Bonar’s hymnody is as follows: “While he may not have created new types of English hymns, he had a distinctive style, a childlike simplicity and straightforwardness, a cheerful note with a plaintive undertone—and he impressed his striking personality on the English hymn. The appeal to his own generation was so widespread and pronounced as almost to create a cult.” (Pollack, *Handbook to The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 484)

This hymn is an outstanding hymn which boldly proclaims the message of Christianity, that our works avail us nothing, and Christ is the only One who can make atonement for our sin. It preaches perfectly Christ’s atoning death and His righteousness which covers us in our Baptism. Each stanza ends with the same refrain, “To Whom, save Thee, who canst alone for sin atone, Lord, shall I flee?” This is the fitting question of faith, echoing St. Paul in Romans 7: “O wretched man that I am! Who can save me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ Our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24-25)

May this hymn always be on our lips, especially its message of our salvation through Christ alone, and the assurance that it gives!

