

THE PRO-NICENE HYMNS OF AMBROSE: A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO ARIANISM

Coleman M. Ford*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of Ambrose of Milan's most overlooked achievements during his ministry as bishop was the creation of hymns intended to convey Nicene Orthodoxy to his congregation.¹ As bishop (374-397 AD), Ambrose employed significant influence over not only his flock but leaders and emperors as well. As bishop, Ambrose understood his primary role to be one of a shepherd. While Ambrose was unapologetically Nicene in his Christology, significant Arian influences surrounded his ministry context. With the continuing Arian controversy in the background, Ambrose remained undaunted in his pastoral task. One of the main roles of an overseer within the church of Christ has always been the crucial role of teacher.² While Ambrose produced numerous sermons and theological treatises, his pastoral response is best demonstrated in the creation of his hymns.

Writing about early Christological issues, D. Jeffrey Bingham says, "Church leaders who care for their congregations don't allow unacceptable thinking about the Trinity and Christ's person to go unchecked."³ There is an explicit pastoral obligation to teach what is true about the Christian faith, and to contend with false views. To understand the gravity of the theological environment, as well as the ingenuity of Ambrose's response, we need to understand the "egocentric soloist" (Arius) who inaugurated

*Coleman M. Ford serves as assistant professor of humanities at Texas Baptist College.

¹Works that neglect to include the role of hymnody in Augustine's life and ministry include Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), D. H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), and most recently John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (London: Longman, 1999), though the latter has provided two pages within his work to discuss the basics of Ambrose's hymns.

²1 Timothy 3:2.

³D. Jeffrey Bingham, *Pocket History of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 52.

the dissonant chorus of the Arian heresy. From there, we will turn to the “exacting virtuoso” (Athanasius) who corrected the theological sheet music that led to the disharmonious tones of Arianism. Finally, this essay will explore the life of the “reluctant conductor,” (Ambrose) and his pastoral response, concluding with a brief survey of the theological content of his hymns.

II. ARIUS: THE EGOCENTRIC SOLOIST

Maurice Wiles reminded his readers, “The influence of heresy on the early development of doctrine is so great that it is almost impossible to exaggerate it.”⁴ Indeed it was Arius of Alexandria (ca. 256–336 AD) who played that first cacophonous note, forcing the church to turn their ear and respond. Arius, a presbyter from Boukolia outside Alexandria, in the year 318 began openly criticizing the Christological teachings of Alexander, the bishop of the city. His charisma and asceticism appealed to the common people and fellow ascetics alike.⁵ Lewis Ayres notes various social factors at play which allowed Arius to gain a wider following.⁶ What we know of Arius and his teaching comes from a handful of letters and fragments, as well as fairly extensive quotations from his *Thalia*, verses written in certain style in order to set forth his doctrine.⁷ Rowan Williams translates the term *Thalia* as “dinner party songs.”⁸ For an uneducated lay population, his method of conveying his theological perspective seemed quite appropriate. What better way to reach small town folk than with a lively dinner party ballad? Thus, his ideas spread among the working classes through popular songs “for the sea, for the mill, and for the road.”⁹

These letters and verses conveyed that Christ was a created being and therefore not co-equal with the Father. Arius summarized his thought as follows:

⁴Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 36.

⁵Rowan Williams, “Athanasius and the Arian Crisis,” *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 159.

⁶Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16. Ayres notes that “even while Alexandria moved towards a monarchical model, it apparently maintained a tradition of independent priests whose relationship with the bishop was complex.”

⁷R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 5–6.

⁸Williams, “Athanasius and the Arian Crisis,” 161.

⁹Philostorgius, *History of the Church*, 2.2 cited in F. M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 59.

That the Son is not unbegotten nor in any way a part of an Unbegotten, nor derived from some (alien) substratum, but that he exists by will and counsel before times and ages, full of truth, and grace, God, Only-begotten, unaltering. And before he was begotten, or created or determined or established, he did not exist. For he was not unbegotten (or unoriginated).¹⁰

Arius, in his literal exegesis of Proverbs 8:22 and Colossians 1:15–16, surmised that Christ was a created being. He can say, however, that Christ is “beyond change or alteration” if one understands that he was first created.¹¹

Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373 AD) established the content of Arius’s *Thalia*. Among the doctrinal affirmations, Arius taught the following:

We praise Him as without beginning because of Him who has a beginning. And adore Him as everlasting, because of Him who in time has come to be. The Unbegun made the Son a beginning of things originated; and advanced Him as a Son to Himself by adoption. He has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence. He is not equal, no, nor one in essence with Him.... Hence the Son, not being (for He existed at the will of the Father), is God Only-begotten, and He is alien from either... nothing which is called comprehensible does the Son know to speak about; for it is impossible for Him to investigate the Father, who is by Himself. For the Son does not know His own essence, For, being Son, He really existed, at the will of the Father... For it is plain that for that which hath a beginning to conceive how the Unbegun is, or to grasp the idea, is not possible.¹²

According to Arius, there was a time when God was not Father and there was a time when the Son did not exist. God was solitary and his Word and Wisdom had yet to come into being.¹³

¹⁰Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 6.

¹¹Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 8.

¹²Athanasius, *De Synodis*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd series, vol. 4 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 457–58.

¹³Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 13.

It is important to consider, as both Hanson and Ayres note, that Arius was not the prolific spearhead as some might believe.¹⁴ Later so called Arians “seldom or never quote him, and sometimes directly disavow connection with him.”¹⁵ It is perhaps best to see him as the “spark that started the explosion.”¹⁶ It is clear in his few letters, however, that numerous others in agreement with him held to his theology. In his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, numerous presbyters, deacons and bishops are cited at the close of his letter.¹⁷ Arius confirmed his position that “he [Christ] is not everlasting or co-everlasting or unbegotten with the Father” as well as “God is thus before all as a monad. . . . he is also before the Son.” Refuting any novelty, Arius attributed this teaching to Alexander himself!¹⁸

Alexander quickly replied to criticisms from Arius.¹⁹ The official response came in the form of the first ecumenical council of the church at Nicaea in 325. Constantine, following the Edict of Milan in 313, which pronounced formal toleration of the Christian faith, called together between 250 and 300 bishops from the empire in May of 325.²⁰ Nicaea, contra Arius, declared that the Son was “of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being one substance with the Father.” All Arian bishops were subsequently excommunicated if they refused to affirm the Nicene statement of Christology. Kelly provides further insight when he says, “Arianism proper had, for the moment, been driven underground, but the conflict only served to throw into relief the deep-seated theological divisions in the ranks of its adversaries.”²¹ The aria of Arianism was far from complete.

III. ATHANASIUS: THE EXACTING VIRTUOSO

Though ecumenical, the Council at Nicaea was not extensively effective. Great numbers evidenced loyalty to Arius and Arian teaching and,

¹⁴Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, xvii; Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 145. Specifically, Ayres notes how later theologians following Arius never “made any claim on Arius’ legacy.”

¹⁵Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, xvii.

¹⁶Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, xvii.

¹⁷“Arius’s Letter to Alexander of Alexandria,” in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought, ed. and trans. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 31–32.

¹⁸Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 32.

¹⁹See “Alexander of Alexandria’s Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica,” in Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 33–44.

²⁰For an extensive discussion on the Council of Nicaea see Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 152–78; Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 85–104.

²¹J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Continuum, 2011), 237.

as one author reminds us, “It also shows the insidiousness of false teaching and how easily the charisma of the teacher and the trendiness of the delivery can lead people away from orthodoxy.”²² Arian bishops would eventually be reinstated and Arius himself continued to reside in the good graces of emperor Constantine.²³ The chorus remained divided, and the jarring polyphony persisted. The definitive theological answer to the Arian question would come from a pupil of Alexander of Alexandria. This apprentice, destined to surpass his master, showed the promise of a virtuoso who could masterfully command the attention of an expectant audience. Athanasius would masterfully compose the definitive work against Arius’s disharmonious melody, though not all would be willing to listen. The Arian controversy would ultimately persist through the end of the fourth century to the time of Ambrose.

Louis Berkhof remarks, “Arius was first of all opposed by his own bishop Alexander. . . . However, his real opponent proved to be the archdeacon of Alexandria, the great Athanasius, who stands out on the pages of history as a strong, inflexible and unwavering champion of truth.”²⁴ Athanasius, archdeacon and pupil of Alexander of Alexandria, was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and soon succeeded his master as bishop of Alexandria. He was subsequently a consistent defender of Nicene orthodoxy. The center of Athanasius’s “polemical and theological argumentation was his use and interpretation of Scripture.”²⁵ The Arian argument required a firm hermeneutical response. To Athanasius, the Arian hermeneutical scheme led essentially to polytheism and explicit idolatry. Peter Leithart notes, “[Athanasius] would charge that the Arians have been co-opted by an alien metaphysical scheme and that their Hellenism has led them into idolatry and polytheism.”²⁶

While hermeneutical, the issue was ultimately soteriological. In his pivotal work *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, Athanasius states, “For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all,

²²Carl Beckwith, “Athanasius,” in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians*, ed. Bradley G. Green (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 159.

²³Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 72–75.

²⁴Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 85.

²⁵J. J. Brogan, “Athanasius” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 129.

²⁶Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 25.

He fulfilled in death all that was required.”²⁷ Later he adds, “Thus by His own power he restored the whole nature of man.”²⁸ The soteriological issue rested in the restoration of man from his fallen state, and for Athanasius the Arian answer to the question was insufficient. “The Word of God came in His own Person,” says Athanasius, “because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.”²⁹ The Arians themselves confessed the humanity of Christ and held no issue with the Word becoming flesh. After all, they were not Docetists. The issue lay, however, at the generated *nature* of the Son. According to Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, “The Arian Christ was a ‘creature’ or a ‘work’ of God the Creator who had been promoted to the rank of a divine son and redeemer.”³⁰ Stead, in analyzing the philosophical assumptions of Arius, sees connections between his belief in the generation of the Son at the will of the Father and Plato’s teaching of subordinate gods brought into being by a supreme power.³¹ The Arian notion of the incarnation of the Son “necessitated a reduction of lowering so that they had to be undertaken by a being who, though divine, was less than fully divine.”³²

According to Arians, God could in no way be apprehended by his creation; therefore the Son must have been a created being in order to become the mediator for the intentions of the Father.³³ He is a subservient to the Father and is the only-begotten, “produced before everything, before anything conceivable, but is still not co-eternal with the Father.”³⁴ Athanasius, seeking to exact this errant view, gives the following reply:

²⁷Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. by a religious of C.S.M.V (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 35.

²⁸Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 36.

²⁹Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 41.

³⁰Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 1. Numerous treatments on Arian Christology point to the Greek philosophical idea of God as the indivisible monad unable (or unwilling) to condescend to a fleshly state. This necessitated a created being with God-like abilities yet ultimately unequal to the ungenerated one and therefore able to take on flesh. The Arian view of God could not fathom divine condescension. In a Neo-platonic view of God, Sonship was an impersonal property or attribute. For in-depth discussions on the influence of Greek philosophical notions of God on Arius, I refer the reader to Christopher Stead, *Doctrine and Philosophy in Early Christianity: Arius, Athanasius, Augustine* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) as well as Christopher Stead, “Platonism of Arius,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 15, no. 1 (1964): 16–31.

³¹Stead, “Platonism of Arius,” 27.

³²Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 100.

³³Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 101.

³⁴Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 103.

Since he is the peculiar Son of God who always is, he exists everlastingly. It is distinctive of men to reproduce in time because of the imperfection of their nature. God's offspring is everlasting because of the continual perfection of his nature. Therefore if he is not a Son but a work that came into existence from nothing, let them prove it!³⁵

The begotten Son of God is not like any normal begotten son; he is uniquely and peculiarly begotten of God which implies something everlasting, and eternal based on the nature of God himself. The image of God is nothing less than co-eternal. "There was never a time when he was not" is the functional reply of Athanasius to the Arians. For Athanasius the impassibility and transcendence of God informed the nature in which the Son was to be understood. Again, he states, "If the Son was not before he was begotten, truth was not always in God.... Since the Father exists, there is always in him truth, which is the Son who says, 'I am the truth.'"³⁶ To deny the eternity of the Son was to deny truth and in so doing, be subject to the charge of impiety. The Arians are impious, not because of any fleshly immorality, but since they do not uphold the truth of God and his Son.

For our exacting virtuoso, the Arian chorus was disharmonious because it denied the revealed truth of God in Christ. Only the highest of all beings can bring salvation, and such a being was none other than God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. According to Athanasius, Arius declared such things as, "The Word is not true God. Even if he is declared God, he is not true God. By sharing grace, just as all the others is he declared God only in name."³⁷ Athanasius, alluding to the Arian error, asserted, "For whereas human things cease and the fact of Christ remains, it is clear to all that the things which cease are temporary, but that He Who remains is God and very Son of God, the sole-begotten Word."³⁸ The atonal notation of Arius declared that the Son did not share in all things with the Father. Such a timbre created a dissonant chorus that continued to be chanted throughout the fourth century. While many sought to address Arianism, a creative and effective response would come from a reluctant conductor

³⁵Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 77.

³⁶Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 83.

³⁷Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 67.

³⁸Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 95.

who avoided the spotlight yet finally assumed its responsibilities.

IV. AMBROSE: THE RELUCTANT CONDUCTOR

By the middle of the fourth century A.D., Milan had become a thriving metropolis and home to emperors and elite. Milan for Ambrose, being a governor of the province who took up residence in the city, was a natural fit for the “Roman of Rome.”³⁹ But what brought Ambrose to Milan? For his background we turn to his biographer, Paulinus. From this we see that Ambrose has a prestigious parentage as his father “was administering the prefectureship of the Gallic provinces.”⁴⁰ McLynn notes that this placed the elder Ambrose’s service during the reign of Constantine II, giving him great power of office yet not necessarily of Roman nobility.⁴¹ It was during this time, in 339 that the younger Ambrose was born. It appears that Ambrose followed in the footsteps of his father. He was educated in Rome, likely studying law and rhetoric, and prepared for a political career.

Much ecclesiastical strife and debate preceded Ambrose before his election as governor and eventual settling in Milan. Auxentius, the bishop of Milan prior to Ambrose, was an unashamed adherent to Arian Christology. As evidenced by Hilary of Poitiers, Auxentius was regarded as the great opponent of the Nicene Creed in the West.⁴² Upon Valentinian’s rise to imperial power, two consecutive attempts were made to dispose Auxentius of his position. Valentinian, being a devout Christian and probably the first baptized Christian to inherit the purple, spent an entire year in Milan and subsequently became very familiar with her ecclesiastical leadership.⁴³ Hilary subsequently attempted to persuade the Nicene emperor against Milan’s anti-Nicene bishop. His strategies were unsuccessful and Hilary’s attempts to expel Auxentius from his episcopal seat failed.⁴⁴

In 374, Auxentius died and left the bishopric of Milan open, subsequently dividing the city into Nicene and Arian factions. This had turned

³⁹McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 31.

⁴⁰Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 3, in Roy J. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol 15: *Early Christian Biographies* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 34. I will refer to this work as *Life of St. Ambrose* from this point on, with pagination referring to the Deferrari volume.

⁴¹McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 32.

⁴²For a significant discussion regarding Hilary against Auxentius, see Daniel H. Williams, “The Anti-Arian Campaigns of Hilary of Poitiers and the *Liber Contra Auxentium*,” *Church History* 61 (1992): 7–22.

⁴³McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 25–27.

⁴⁴Williams, “Anti-Arian Campaigns of Hilary of Poitiers,” 20.

into a civil matter just as much as it was an ecclesiastical one. The popularity surrounding the recently deceased Arian bishop was evident, and the struggle to bridge the two factions together was brought to the forefront. Being the governor of the province, Ambrose chose to intervene in this situation himself. McLynn sees this interruption as Ambrose's attempt to mediate the two positions and allow the Nicene voice to be heard amidst the majority Arian party.⁴⁵ Whatever the motivation, the outcome produced something quite unexpected. Not only was Ambrose to be the civic mediator in this situation, but he was destined to become the ecclesiastical conductor who would soon be charged to bring the church into harmony with the proper doctrines of the church.

From the various treatments on Ambrose, both ancient and modern, Ambrose considered himself a "reluctant bishop."⁴⁶ His election to the episcopacy was not planned or deliberate, nor upon being called did he necessarily accept the summons. Paulinus recounts Ambrose's election to the episcopate:

The people were about to revolt in seeking a bishop, Ambrose had the task of putting down the revolt. So he went to the church. And when he was addressing the people, the voice of a child among the people is said to have called out suddenly: "Ambrose bishop." At the sound of this voice, the mouths of all the people joined in the cry: "Ambrose bishop." Thus, those who a while before were disagreeing most violently. . . suddenly agreed on this one with miraculous and unbelievable harmony.⁴⁷

Paulinus goes on to describe various actions which Ambrose immediately took to avoid the election. He ordered tortures to be inflicted on individuals, then pondered being a philosopher, then attempted to escape and flee the city at midnight that evening.⁴⁸ His escape, according to Paulinus, was prevented as a matter of divine will for God was "preparing a strong support for His Catholic church against His enemies."⁴⁹

⁴⁵McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 43.

⁴⁶The title of "reluctant bishop" comes from the title of chapter one from McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*.

⁴⁷Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 6.

⁴⁸Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 7–8.

⁴⁹Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 8.

Ambrose, upon failure to avoid this election, demanded baptism by a Catholic bishop. In this regard, Paulinus demonstrates Ambrose's Nicene affinities for, "he was carefully guarding himself against the heresy of the Arians."⁵⁰ Whether or not Ambrose was as emphatic regarding his baptism as Paulinus says cannot ultimately be determined because, as Williams reminds his readers, "few other sources are available for the reconstruction of Ambrose's early career."⁵¹ Certainly an insistence on proper Catholic baptism conforms to Ambrose's attitude regarding Arianism as seen early in his episcopal career at the Council of Aquileia.⁵² As a reader, one has little basis to deny Ambrose's Nicene beliefs. Immediately following his baptism, Ambrose quickly progressed through all the appropriate offices of the church that would lead to his consecration as bishop on the eighth day.⁵³

Ambrose, in an effort to maintain peace, did not immediately dispose of the presbyters who were previously loyal to Auxentius.⁵⁴ It is also clear that Ambrose was not considered as a "champion of orthodoxy" from the outset of his episcopacy.⁵⁵ Ambrose, though set on orthodoxy, chose to be judicious in his early episcopal career because of the deep entrenchment of Arianism within Milan.⁵⁶ Ambrose's prior theological training is unclear, but his basic commitment to Nicene orthodoxy as evidenced by Paulinus remains evident. To emphasize the lack of clarity regarding his theological instruction, Williams highlights the fact that there are no theological treatises from Ambrose for the first three years of his episcopacy.⁵⁷ There could be numerous reasons for this, yet we hear from Ambrose himself how he initially considered himself "unlearned" and an "initiate

⁵⁰Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 9.

⁵¹D. H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 109.

⁵²Much is to be said on this episode early in Ambrose's episcopal career and how it explicitly reveals his Nicene convictions. It also highlights his somewhat cynical nature and early attempts to promote Nicene orthodoxy at any cost. Ambrose's episcopal career and activities, while prolific and a treasury of wealth to the church, should also be critiqued openly and honestly. We should use caution, however, not to throw the proverbial baby out with the dirty bath water. Episodes like his behavior at the Council of Aquileia reveal his less than humble qualities, especially as a newly consecrated bishop of the church. Palladius, writing about the council afterwards, accused Ambrose of being nothing more than a catechumen, referring to his hasty election and consecration as bishop. Because this is not the focus of this section, I refer the reader to Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 154–84.

⁵³Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 9.

⁵⁴Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 121.

⁵⁵Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 127.

⁵⁶Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 176.

⁵⁷Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 128.

in religious matters.”⁵⁸

The sea-change came following the defeat of Valens at Hadrianople against Gothic forces in 378. A flood of people entered Milan as barbarians began surrounding Constantinople. This brought Arian-sympathizers to the city and a need for a church arose. Emperor Gratian, nephew of Valens and now sole ruler, ordered a church to be sequestered, a decision conforming to his political position of tolerance. Thus, religious toleration under Gratian was foisted upon the city of Milan. It appeared, at least partially, that Gratian’s decision regarding implementation of religious toleration to such a forceful degree was partially influenced by Arians in Milan.⁵⁹ The act that exemplified this program of toleration was Gratian’s request to sequester a church for Arian use and worship.⁶⁰ This situation, likely due to negative remarks made by the Arians to the emperor regarding Ambrose, prompted Gratian to request a summary of the faith that Ambrose proclaimed.⁶¹ Ambrose’s *De fide* is his response to this imperial request. It is important to understand that Ambrose did not write anything about the Arians until *De fide* books I and II. *De fide*, composed by the reluctant conductor expressing the motif which his choristers were to sing, was Ambrose’s first polemical foray into the Arian-Nicene debate.⁶² In *De fide*, Ambrose faithfully transmitted the ideals of Nicaea while using “the usual arguments for the Nicene view.”⁶³ It is not inappropriate to say that Ambrose was not as forward thinking of a theologian by the likes of Athanasius in this regard, but it is safe to say that he saw himself as a mouthpiece for the ruling of Nicaea in 325. In this way some regard him as the heir of Athanasius in the West.⁶⁴

An Unhappy Patron. Daniel Williams declares that the basilica conflict of 385-6 is “the most celebrated period of Ambrose’s career” and cites numerous ancient sources acknowledging this fact.⁶⁵ Though Gratian had issued the original edict procuring a basilica for the Arians, it was ultimately

⁵⁸Ambrose, *Duties of the Clergy*, 1.4; Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Repentance* 2.73 in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10, *St. Ambrose Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3, 354.

⁵⁹Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 140.

⁶⁰Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 139.

⁶¹Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 140–41.

⁶²Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 129; 140–41.

⁶³Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 670.

⁶⁴Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 667.

⁶⁵Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 210.

Emperor Valentinian's edict issued in January of 386 granting liberty for worshipers in the Arian tradition.⁶⁶ Ambrose refused to relinquish control and was subsequently ordered to leave Milan.⁶⁷ Because the Valentinian edict promoted tolerance based on the creed produced at the Council of Arminum, an Arian-affirming assembly, Ambrose thus rejected it. For Ambrose, the true faith was the Nicene faith and any shifting shadow should thus be repudiated.

During the Easter season of 386 events quickly escalated. A group of counts approached Ambrose on Friday 27 March and demanded that he hand over the entire cathedral, an arrogant demand as the cathedral was the center of his bishopric and would have constituted a relinquishing of position.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Ambrose refused reminiscent of one refusing to turn over a copy of the Scriptures during an earlier time of Christian persecution. Ambrose declined to put down the baton. On Palm Sunday just two days later, word came that various peoples had rushed to the basilica due to reports that the emperor would arrive, yet Ambrose remained unwavering and continued in the liturgy, even as word spread that an anti-Nicene priest was to be lynched by the people. According to John Moorhead, Ambrose sent aid and "wept bitterly . . . praying that if blood were shed it would be his."⁶⁹

During the week the nobles of the city persisted in their pursuit to apprehend the basilica from Ambrose. By dawn on Wednesday 2 April reports that soldiers had surrounded the basilica reached Ambrose, inciting an impromptu sermon. Preaching from Job and relating the words of Job's wife, "Say something against God and die" (Job 2:9), Ambrose implied that in this similar wrestling with the powers of evil that the emperor's mother Justina was commanding Ambrose to curse God by handing over the basilica.⁷⁰ For Ambrose, "The palaces belong to the Emperor, the churches to the Bishop."⁷¹ Ambrose thus spoke frankly of the young emperor Valentinian and his mother, admonishing them for asserting

⁶⁶Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 212.

⁶⁷Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 212.

⁶⁸John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (London: Longman, 1999), 137.

⁶⁹Moorhead, *Ambrose*, 138.

⁷⁰Moorhead, *Ambrose*, 138.

⁷¹Ambrose, Letter 20.19 in Ambrose of Milan, "The Letters of St. Ambrose," in *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H. T. F. Duckworth, vol. 10, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1896), 425.

rights over sacred places which were clearly the domain of the bishops.⁷²

During this incident, Ambrose bid his people to sing. He knew that “religious singing gave Christians spiritual strength.”⁷³ His biographer, Paulinus, declared that even the soldiers who were sent to ensure that no Catholics would enter the basilica joined in the cause and “acclaimed the Catholic faith equally with the congregation.”⁷⁴ It was during this time that hymns “first begin to be practised in the church at Milan” and Paulinus affirms to his readers that “this custom remains even to this very day ... through almost all the provinces of the West.”⁷⁵ Augustine makes an almost identical assertion saying, “From that time to this day the practice has been retained and many, indeed almost all your flocks, in other parts of the world have imitated it.”⁷⁶

V. DRAFTING THE MOVEMENTS OF NICENE ORTHODOXY

With the theological and social context established, a motive for the creation of Ambrose’s hymns emerges. J. den Boeft observes how the hymns of Ambrose arise from motivation to communicate theological truth to his congregation.⁷⁷ In his sermon against Auxentius during the basilica crisis of 386, Ambrose spoke to the Arian reaction regarding the success of his anti-Arian hymns:

They declare also that the people have been beguiled by the strains of my hymns. I certainly do not deny it. That is a lofty strain, and there is nothing more powerful than it. For what has more power than the confession of the Trinity which is daily celebrated by the mouth of the whole people? All eagerly vie one with the other in confessing the faith, and know how to praise in verse the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So they all have become teachers, who scarcely could be disciples.⁷⁸

⁷²Moorhead, *Ambrose*, 139.

⁷³Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 273.

⁷⁴Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 41.

⁷⁵Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 41.

⁷⁶Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.7, 15 in Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 165.

⁷⁷J. den Boeft, “Ambrosius Lyricus,” in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 83.

⁷⁸Ambrose, *Sermon Against Auxentius*, 34, in Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, ed., *Nicene and*

There is a clear connection between the simplicity of Ambrose's hymns and his people's ability to communicate theological truth. "They all have become teachers," says Ambrose. He composed hymns as a means of instructing his people in a way that they would appreciate and understand; he wrote hymns which they could sing, as heretics had already done before him.⁷⁹ This last observation is important as the reader must first understand that Ambrose did not invent the Christian hymn itself, just a particular form of hymnody.

The hymns of Ambrose could be easily learned and sung. More importantly, their doctrinal content "was simple and basic, such that even the uneducated could grasp it."⁸⁰ Boeft observes, "He did not compose beautiful songs which were gratifying to the ears, but authentic poetry which could move men's hearts."⁸¹ It was only fitting that Ambrose turn to hymnody, as this had been the strategy of Arius years before. One author conjectured that Auxentius may have introduced Arian hymns in Milan, Arius's *Thalia* being particularly famous.⁸² The diffusion of Arianism is often explained through their use of verse. Ballads were sung "ad nauseam by sailors, merchants, and travelers in the streets and harbors."⁸³ It is only natural for a man such as Ambrose to appropriate his opponent's method and employ it for his own means. The erudite pastor was keen on using whatever means necessary to arrest heresy and promote orthodoxy.

The impact of Ambrose's hymns is great when one considers the pastoral paucity of previous hymn writers. Hilary of Poitiers likewise composed hymns for congregational singing, but this endeavor ultimately failed, most likely to the "obscurity and heaviness of his words."⁸⁴ Illiterate parishioners likely were unable to learn the rhythmic prose and complex theological reflection. Due to the rapid spread and ease of use, Ambrose's hymns (or at least his style) soon took upon themselves the name of their progenitor with the term "Ambrosian" becoming synonymous with "hymn."⁸⁵ Mans

Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 10, *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 436. I will refer to this work as *Sermon Against Auxentius* from this point forward.

⁷⁹Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 336.

⁸⁰Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 273.

⁸¹den Boeft, "Ambrosius Lyricus," 89.

⁸²Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 337.

⁸³Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 337.

⁸⁴Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 337.

⁸⁵Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 337.

contributes this important note:

Although Hilary of Poitiers is credited with being the first to introduce liturgical hymns in the Latin language into the West, Ambrose developed the [liturgical hymn] genre into a simple, highly poetic form, in order to capture the imagination of his congregation, and to communicate particular evangelical messages, thereby making it a very popular and useful medium.... The real history of ancient Latin Christian hymns in the West, therefore, begins with St. Ambrose.⁸⁶

As noted earlier, Ambrose and his congregation refused to vacate the basilica in the spring of 386. With court soldiers surrounding the church, Ambrose implored his people to sing hymns. It is proper to say that it was by his hymns, more than his theological works, that Ambrose was able to triumph over heterodoxy, while producing a profitable instrument to be used in the church's liturgy.⁸⁷ In these hymns, Ambrose reveals his poetic nature and orthodox convictions. The hymns that Ambrose composed were wholly conceived to be sung by Nicene-confessing Christians. Any genuinely confessing Arian could not have affirmed their content. By these hymns, Ambrose encouraged the hearts of his congregation and provided a means to gain spiritual strength in the face of spiritual adversity. Of numerous hymns attributed to Ambrose, we will look at four to understand their theological and pastoral value.⁸⁸

1. *Aeterne rerum conditor*. This hymn, translated as *Eternal Creator of Things*, is today "used in the Liturgy of Hours ... for Sunday Lauds on the first and third Sundays of the Psalter during Ordinary Time."⁸⁹ The hymn relates one who slumbers to the eternal Creator to Jesus. The listener

⁸⁶M. J. Mans, "The Function of Biblical Material in the Hymns of Ambrose," in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 91.

⁸⁷Mans, "The Function of Biblical Material in the Hymns of Ambrose," 91.

⁸⁸Because of the style and simplicity, Ambrosian hymns were often imitated. Though numerous hymns are attributed to Ambrose, there are four that are universally recognized to be authentic. This is largely based on Augustine's mention of them in his *Confessions*. For a quick reference regarding this, I refer the reader to Moreschini and Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, 2:273.

⁸⁹From <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/AeterneRerum.html>. Moving forward, the translations used in my analysis of Ambrose's hymns, I will refer to the translations offered in Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997).

is implored to look upon Jesus and not slumber because it is Christ who looks into our souls, and we should be open, willing, and waiting for such an occasion. Christ peers into our souls and declares “Should you look, our sins will founder and tears will dissolve our guilt.”⁹⁰ Because of this reality, the name of Christ should be on every tongue at the earliest part of the day declaring, “may your praise open our mouths.”⁹¹

Ambrose uses the crowing of a cock, a symbol found both in nature and Scripture, as a warning and reminder to his congregation regarding the Lord’s Second Coming. His call is truly redemptive. This image, found in such biblical texts as Matt 26:69–75, Luke 22:56–62 and John 18:25–7, deviates slightly from its use in Scripture. In the gospel accounts, the crowing of the cock symbolizes Peter’s prophetic denial of Christ and subsequent contrition. For Ambrose, according to Mans, the cock crowing imagery “should rather be seen in the light of the eschatological alignment” harking to Mark 13:35–6.⁹² The imagery of the cock crowing and Peter’s denial, according to Mans, “Makes a great impact on the audience’s emotion, especially by virtue of his exploitation of Christ’s implicit reprimanding look.”⁹³ In this text, the listener is implored to not be found in slumber as one does not know when the master will return. He could return in the evening, or at the crowing of a cock at sunrise.

The hymn again is a call to awaken oneself from slumber and prepare for Christ to peer into the soul by his “piercing ray” (*tu lux refulge sensibus*).⁹⁴ This conjures images of impending eschatological judgment. This hymn conveys that it is Christ who not only looks into our souls but has the power to forgive and pardon and subsequently is worthy of praise. Only if Christ were God could he truly pardon sin; a created being cannot accomplish such an endeavor. The ultimate result of recognizing the mercy of Christ is praise; his name should be first upon our tongues as we rise for the day. The hymn closes in a standard Trinitarian formula with direct mention of “God the Father,” “Eternal Son,” and “God the Holy Paraclete.” With a proper understanding of Christ and his role comes a subsequent praise to the triune God for his work that secures pardon for sin and creates a people for himself who will praise him and give him glory.

⁹⁰Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 167.

⁹¹Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 167.

⁹²Mans, “Biblical Material in the Hymns of St. Ambrose,” 96.

⁹³Mans, “Biblical Material in the Hymns of St. Ambrose,” 93.

⁹⁴Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 168.

2. *Iam surgit hora tertia*. This hymn translated from the Latin is *The Third Hour Is Already Here*. Clearly in the title alone, the listener should realize the referent to which this hymn recalls. The passion of Christ is the emphasis of this work, referring to the gospel account in Mark 15:25. The passion reveals the mystery of Christ's humanity but also involves the entire life course of Christ which began at his miraculous conception. The passion has inaugurated the "days of blessedness."⁹⁵ Ambrose describes Christ's placement on the cross as "the lofty summit of his triumph."⁹⁶ This triumph is the redemption of mankind and the forgiveness of sins through his atoning sacrifice. Quoting John 19:27, Ambrose highlights the acts of Mary within the life of Christ, which point not only to his humanity but his deity as well.

The reality of the God-man undergirds the entirety of this hymn. There is no hint of subordinationism, de-emphasis of essence, or question of generation. As Ambrose states in the last stanza, "We believe the God who was born, the offspring of the holy virgin, who, seated at the Father's right, has taken away the sins of the world."⁹⁷ Implicitly referencing John 1:29, Ambrose communicates the crucial position of Christ as the sacrifice for sins. As he relates in the third stanza, "This is the hour when Christ checked the ancient, dreadful crime, overthrew death's reign, and took the age-old sin upon himself."⁹⁸ Only the God-man, that is one who was fully God and fully man was capable of overthrowing the reign of death and exacting payment for the debt of sin. This crowning stanza echoes the assertions of Athanasius years earlier when he states, "For by the sacrifice of His own body He did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way; and He made a new beginning of life for us, by giving us the hope of resurrection."⁹⁹

This hymn also confronts those who do not have a proper belief in Christ. Ambrose connects this to the historic crucifixion but there is also a hint of contemporary disdain. Arians, in the opinion of Ambrose, do not believe in Christ properly and are therefore impious. The reference is likely to the original Jewish audience who rejected Christ and his message, but Ambrose in other places relates the rejection of Christ to the Arian

⁹⁵Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 169.

⁹⁶Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 169.

⁹⁷Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 169.

⁹⁸Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 168.

⁹⁹Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, §10.

heresy and must also imply that force here in the hymn.¹⁰⁰ The one who is saved is “the one who has believed.” At the end of this hymn, Ambrose’s theology of the incarnation is explicitly orthodox. Not only was it Christ as human who was born, but it was “God who was born, the offspring of a holy virgin, who seated at the Father’s right, has taken away the sins of the world.” John 1:29 is invoked in this final line to highlight the atonement once again; an act possible only with God made man. Regarding the spiritual significance of this hymn, Joel Otto notes, “In a world which seems more evil and sinful by the day, the clear message of Christ’s atoning work proclaimed in the poetry of Ambrose is a timeless one.”¹⁰¹

3. *Deus creator omnium. Deus creator omnium, or God Creator of the Universe*, is a hymn for ending the day. It is to be sung with the understanding that God will grant one rest and most importantly, that our faith should never slumber. Though our bodies require sleep, our faith should not. Though “our slackened limbs” are weary from “the exercise of toil,” Ambrose implores the listener to not allow the mind to slumber. Slumber is related to sinfulness, and we need help with our sinfulness. This hymn, in its simplicity, conveys the challenge that God’s people have before them to perpetually seek after righteousness and to ask for God’s help to “not permit our minds to slumber.” Though we rest our bodies, our minds are implored to remain active in order that we might grow in holiness.

Of the four hymns, this is admittedly the least Christological. There is no explicit mention of Christ in the main body of the hymn. This is a hymn intended to implore the faithful to continue abiding in faithfulness; sleep does not terminate this obligation. There is an idea implicit in this hymn of a rest that is above one that will regenerate the body. This rest is for those who continue to trust in God and pursue holiness through the confession of sin. Resting in God produces a regeneration of the soul. This hymn encourages the listener not to be disturbed in one’s journey towards a godly lifestyle. Though there is no clear mention of Christ in the main body, this hymn concludes with a succinct and simple invocation of the Trinity. Ambrose writes, “We beseech Christ and the Father, and the Spirit of Christ and the Father, who are one and omnipotent. O Trinity,

¹⁰⁰Ambrose, *De fides* 4.2.24. Ambrose describes the act of Christ standing at the door of one’s soul, yet the Arians can not accept him because they take him to be “petty, and weak, and menial” rather than “Christ in the form of God ... exalted above the heaven and all things.”

¹⁰¹Joel D. Otto, “Teaching the Truth and Defending the Faith: Theological Themes in the Hymns of St. Ambrose,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 113, no. 2 (2016): 103.

assist us who pray to you.” This concluding statement draws attention to the fact that the triune God should be one’s object of rest and comfort. God knows all things; therefore, our anxiety should be relieved in order that we can rest both physically and spiritually.

4. *Intende qui regis Israel*. Translated as *Hearken, You Who Rule Israel*, this hymn provides a clear orthodox understanding of the incarnation. Rightly so “it is used as the Advent hymn for the Office of the Readings for the octave before Christmas.”¹⁰² This hymn describes the status of Christ before the incarnation and the humble beginnings as God in the flesh. Ambrose makes explicit connections to his humanity as well as his deity and upholds the two as a unified whole. “The equal of the eternal Father” has girded “on the trophy of our flesh” and by doing fortifies “the frailty of our body with his enduring strength.”¹⁰³ Christ was begotten “not by a man’s seed” but the Word of God became flesh “by a mystical inbreathing.”¹⁰⁴ Because of this miraculous birth, the proper response is to let “every age in wonder fall.” Though in humble appearance, Ambrose reminds listeners that Christ is equal to the Father.

A proper understanding of the incarnation is foundational to the Nicene faith and is thus demonstrated in *Hearken*. Only God in the flesh can be the redeemer of the nations. Ambrose elegantly describes the intricacies of God taking on flesh and the profound mystery that is thereby represented. This is communicated in such a way that anyone who could be taught this hymn could likewise learn the mystery of the incarnation in a Nicene-confessing fashion. Ambrose says just enough to make this hymn doctrinally rich and at the same time easily committed to memory. It is easy to see that this hymn would make teachers out of those “who could scarcely be disciples.” Tapping into the heart of the incarnation through this hymn allowed Ambrose’s parishioners to understand in a basic sense the treasures of such a profound doctrine and thus communicate this through verse.

Hearken answers Arian arguments against the co-equality and co-eternality of Christ. This is not a hymn that a confessing Arian could sing in good conscience. In the poetic construction of illustrating Christ’s divinity,

¹⁰²See <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/VeniRedemptorG.html>. Ramsey refers to this hymn as *Intende Qui Regis Israel* per the first line of the first stanza, but numerous sources refer to this hymn as *Veni, redemptor gentium* or *Come, Redeemer of the Nations*.

¹⁰³Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 172.

¹⁰⁴Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 172.

Ambrose contrasts darkness and light and declares that in the manger a light shines forth and the night “will produce a new light.”¹⁰⁵ This light is the divine light of the Son and the hymn proclaims, “May no night destroy it, and may it beam with constant faith.”¹⁰⁶ Ambrose desired that his flock would not be overtaken by the darkness of Arian-influenced Christology. The “constant faith” driving Ambrose was the Nicene faith. Echoing Nicaea when the creed declares the Son as “Light of light” and “very God of very God,” *Hearken* declares Christ as the “equal of the eternal Father.”¹⁰⁷ Thus through the congregational recitation of *Hearken*, parishioners in Milan in the late fourth century echoed and continually proclaimed the truth of Christ declared at Nicaea.

This closing verse sets the record straight regarding the Arian perspective on Christ as a created being. Rather, Christ is the eternal Son who is to be equally adored and glorified with the Father and the Spirit. Mans remarks, “This particular instance proves to be an evidentiary and confessional example of the Lord’s majesty and glory, which St. Ambrose employs to lead the Christian to praise, worship and adoration of Christ, i.e. also a doxological implementation of the biblical material.”¹⁰⁸ Though human, he is equal to the Father in regards to deity. Imagine Ambrose’s congregation chanting this hymn and the subsequent reaction from Arian sympathizers. The educated and uneducated alike could appropriate this hymn and thereby grasp basic Nicene Christology. If Ambrose’s desire was fulfilled, such people would be spiritually strengthened to stand strong against heretical opposition.

VI. MUSICIANS IN UNISON

With a congregation united in song, Ambrose demonstrated that though he was not necessarily a “theological master” he was however a “spiritual one.”¹⁰⁹ While Athanasius and others would be considered the conceptual theologians of the era, “Ambrose’s contribution . . . was in the domain of the practical.”¹¹⁰ As demonstrated above, Ambrose had concern for pastoral matters and though perhaps not always in admirable ways (as

¹⁰⁵Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 172.

¹⁰⁶Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 172.

¹⁰⁷Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 172.

¹⁰⁸Mans, “Biblical Material in the Hymns of St. Ambrose,” 97.

¹⁰⁹Boniface Ramsey, “Ambrose” in *The First Christian Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 232.

¹¹⁰Ramsey, “Ambrose,” 232.

demonstrated by his behavior at the Council of Aquileia), he maintained orthodoxy in the midst of conflict. Against an empress and emperor, Ambrose preserved unity within a previously fractured community of faith. A Roman politician by training, he masterfully accomplished the role of pastor and brought to the pastorate the necessary skills for achieving unity and orthodox preeminence in an ecclesial world. Augustine comments regarding the unity of the body in Milan prior to his conversion experience, “It was not long before this that the Church at Milan had begun to seek comfort and spiritual strength in the practice of singing hymns, in which the faithful united fervently with heart and voice.”¹¹¹ A community once fractured by the dissonant chorus produced by Arius had now become a harmonious voice produced by Ambrose. The committed governor who had inserted himself to subdue an ecclesiastical disagreement had become the diligent pastor who helped solve a pastoral dilemma.

The Trinitarian convictions of Ambrose pour forth from the closing lines of *Iam surgit hora tertia* and *Deus creator omnium*. An explicit confession of the unity of Christ with the Father and an acknowledgment of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit united the congregation of Milan and dispelled any Arian influenced notions. Williams notes that following the basilica incident of 386 (and the discovery of the remains of the two martyrs Protasius and Gervasius), “Ambrose’s episcopate was no longer troubled by Homoian rivals or potentially damaging accusations from politically influential anti-Nicenes.”¹¹² He goes on to mention that the problem of Arianism would only persist within barbarian groups and only challenge the stability of orthodoxy by means of various invasions throughout the fifth-century.¹¹³ Doctrinally, the Christology of the Western church would remain orthodox. The security of the fact was undoubtedly dependent upon the hymns of Ambrose. As Augustine reminds us, such a custom “has been followed in many other places, in fact in almost every church throughout the world.”¹¹⁴

VII. THE LEGACY OF THE MAESTRO

Ambrose has been remembered mostly for his forays into political and ecclesiastical relationships. He is a bishop who stands between the chasm

¹¹¹Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.7.

¹¹²Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 231.

¹¹³Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 231.

¹¹⁴Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.7.

of church and state and subsequently bridges the gap, setting the stage for the medieval church. He lives on as a towering figure who was both a product of his time but also somewhat of a prophet in his posturing and exploits. Moorhead notes:

Ambrose cannot be seen as simply a figure of the ancient world, for his thinking and activities looked beyond that world. His attitudes to women, the Bible and other texts, the church and the secular state, as well as the authority he could command in his city, in varying degrees all pointed beyond the fourth century and firmly into the middle ages. It is this sense of pointing beyond the world in which he lived that gives Ambrose a lasting fascination.¹¹⁵

Though this is undeniably true, the legacy is best demonstrated within the hymnody of Ambrose; each performance being an *aide-mémoire* to his accomplishment and the doctrinal context in which he ministered. The notes of Nicene orthodoxy rise to the heavens and provide congregations with ongoing stimulation in worshipping the Triune God in Spirit and truth. More than a political manipulator or ecclesiastical tactician, Ambrose was a pastor with real pastoral concerns driving his ministry, and this is most evident in his hymnic production.

The hymns of Ambrose were innovative in form and content. They were soon imitated by others and entered the ecclesial milieu following the death of Ambrose. The Ambrosian hymn was thus imitated throughout much of the Western church and her liturgy, as evidenced by the ancient sources.¹¹⁶ White remarks, “No doubt the subjects of Ambrose’s hymns were also intended to be influential, for it is clear that he is concerned to stress orthodox Trinitarian, as opposed to Arian, doctrines, as is particularly obvious in the doctrinal statement at the end of *Deus creator omnium* or *Iam surgit hora tertia* and *Intende qui regis Israel*.¹¹⁷ The legacy of the maestro includes an initial dedication to theological truthfulness, and a creative way in which that theological truthfulness was communicated. This should be the ongoing paradigm for churches and pastors to the present day.

¹¹⁵Moorhead, *Ambrose*, 218.

¹¹⁶Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.7; Paulinus, *Life of St. Ambrose*, 41.

¹¹⁷Carolinne White, *Early Christian Latin Poets* (London: Routledge, 2000), 46.