

## History of Hymns: "Blest Be the Tie That Binds"

by C. Michael Hawn  
"Blest Be the Tie That Binds"  
John Fawcett  
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*Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.*

John Fawcett (1739-1817), a dissenting Baptist clergyman in England, gave us one of the most beloved farewell hymns of all time. Fawcett's parish in Wainsgate, described by hymnologist Albert Bailey as "a straggling group of houses on the top of a barren hill," may have been typical for many rural pastors in the 18th century.

Fawcett, orphaned at 12, was "bound out" to a tailor in Bradford where he worked long hours. He learned to read and eventually mastered *Pilgrim's Progress*, the devotional classic by John Bunyan.

Fawcett was converted under the powerful preaching of George Whitefield while the evangelist delivered a message to 20,000 people in an open field. It is said that upon telling Whitefield he wanted to preach, the evangelist gave Fawcett his blessing.

Mr. Bailey describes Fawcett's congregation at Wainsgate: "The people were all farmers and shepherds, poor as Job's turkey; an uncouth lot whose speech one could hardly understand, unable to read or write; most of them pagans cursed with vice and ignorance and wild tempers. The Established Church had never touched them; only the humble Baptists had sent an itinerant preacher there and he had made a good beginning."

John and Mary Fawcett went to live there in 1765 following his ordination. By engaging families house-to-house, he built a congregation that grew to the point that a gallery had to be added to the modest meetinghouse. With the addition of four children to the family, a modest salary that was supplemented by parishioners' donations of wool and potatoes was barely adequate, especially during the long winters.

The story is told that a prestigious parish with more financial resources in London, Carter's Lane Baptist Church, extended a call. It is at this point that it becomes difficult to separate fact from apocryphal imagination.

Mr. Bailey, a vivid storyteller, sets the scene: "[John] and Mary decided to accept. The announcement was made to the church, and the farewell sermon was preached, the bulky items of his furniture and some of his older books were sold and the day of departure arrived. The two-wheeled cart came for the rest of his belongings, and likewise came the parishioners to say good-by."

The crowd was despondent and in tears. According to Mr. Bailey, Mary is quoted as saying, "I can't stand it, John! I know not how to go." John responded, "Lord help me Mary, nor can I stand it! We will unload the

wagon. . . . [To the crowd], We've changed our minds! We are going to stay!" Mr. Bailey describes a scene of pandemonium as the crowd broke out in joyful acclamations.

It was the practice of many ministers to write hymns on the theme of the day to be sung at the conclusion of the sermon. This hymn was included under the title of "Brotherly Love" in Fawcett's *Hymns Adapted to the Circumstances of Public Worship and Private Devotion* (1782). *UM Hymnal* editor Carlton Young notes that the "collection contained 166 hymns, most of them to be sung as a congregational response to the sermon."

We do know that John Fawcett remained in Wainsgate for 54 years and nearby Hebden Bridge. We do not know if this hymn was written in conjunction with his decision to remain in Wainsgate, but its language connects well with congregations, identifying with the struggles of life and our unity in Christ.

No doubt this hymn has been tearfully sung by more Christians upon parting than any other hymn.

Fawcett developed a school for the area children by adding on to his home. He was known as an educator and scholar, as well as a fine preacher.

In 1811 Fawcett published his *Devotional Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* and was also honored with a Doctor of Divinity degree from Brown University, Providence, R.I.

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