

For God So Loved the World

By
Bill Dagle

I saw Dr. Al Smith for the first time while attending Tomas Road Bible Institute in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1974. Previous to that time, I never thought about the stories behind the hymns; but after meeting Dr. Al, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Little did I know how that Sunday night service would have such an impact on my life.

Alfred Barney Smith was born November 8, 1916, in Midland Park, New Jersey. His education included Juilliard School of Music in New York City, Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and Wheaton College. While attending Wheaton, Al Smith became good friends with Billy Graham, and for a time, was his first song leader. In 1941, Al founded Singspiration Publishing; and in 1972, Encore Publishing which resulted in the best hymnal of all times, *Living Hymns*. In his lifetime, he would write over 500 gospel songs and choruses including, "Surely Goodness and Mercy" and "For God So Loved the World."

In 1981, Dr. Al published his *Treasury of Hymn Histories* which has become my bible for hymn stories. It's from that publication that I get the story for "God So Loved." The year was 1938, and a young Al Smith was visiting George Stebbins, the gospel song composer. Mr. Stebbins had worked with D. L. Moody, Ira Sankey, P. P. Bliss, and Fanny Crosby, the great evangelists of the 19th century. For three hours, Al listened to the fascinating stories about these men and women of God—how the gospel songs drew souls to the cross and how these songs were born. That afternoon, he dedicated his life to the ministry of music.

Due at a meeting in Oneonta that evening, Al had to leave; but he left with a strong desire to write songs as Mr. Stebbins had. His trip from Catskill gave him time to think and to write. Arriving at the Townsend home in Oneonta, Al left an uncompleted song on the piano as he rushed off to the meeting. Looking at the chorus, Frances Townsend noticed a phrase was missing. Taking a pencil, she inserted, "What glory that will be"; and a song was born:

For God so loved the world
He gave His only Son
To die on Calvary's tree,
From sin to set me free:
Some day He's coming back,
What glory that will be!
Wonderful His love to me.