



ISAAC WATTS: Reassessing His Contributions to Hymnody and Baptist Worship

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Isaac Watts (1674–1748) was a man of many seeming contradictions. He was always in poor health but lived to the age of 74. He was well read, highly educated, and traveled in elite circles but expressed his concern for the “plain Christian.” He was an author of minutely detailed theological works but was also a poet. He authored volumes that appeared to some theologians to cast doubt on the divinity of Jesus while claiming himself to be completely orthodox in his views on the Trinity. He wrote university-level textbooks and books for children. He was an original thinker who borrowed often from himself and from others. He was innovative in the hymn texts he wrote but produced them to fit traditional tunes. He disliked the way that metrical psalmody exercised a monopoly over the congregational singing of his day but unintentionally created a hymnic monopoly of his own. The hymns he wrote are at the same time personal and corporate, rational and emotional, conservative and radical, artistic and practical, biblically based and freely composed.

Despite—or, perhaps, because of—these seeming contradictions, each of us as servants of the church can look to Watts as an example of what can be accomplished for the cause of Christ. After all, he was (as the saying goes) “only human,” complete with all the foibles, inconsistencies, and mistakes to which we are all susceptible. “The saintly Dr. Watts,” as he has sometimes been called, occasionally lost his temper, exhibited poor judgment, descended into unproductive speculation, and wrote doggerel. But this very human person also created a revolution in congregational song that still echoes today, not to mention a body of lyrics that continue to be sung throughout the world.

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WATTS'S LIFE AND WORK

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton, England, on July 17, 1674, during the reign of King Charles II, whose ascension to the throne of England in 1660 after the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell (and the execution of Charles's father, Charles I) marked the return of traditional Anglicanism as the state church. This was a problem for Watts's parents, who were Independents (Congregationalists), and during Watts's youth his father spent time in jail and later lived away from his family for two years because of persecution for his beliefs. Young Isaac followed in his parents's footsteps, becoming an Independent himself.

Watts's first educational lessons were with his father, who began to teach him Latin when he was four years old. He then attended a Latin and writing school taught by the rector of the Southampton Anglican church. In 1689, he professed faith in Christ, though he did not immediately join a church, and in the following year he moved to London, where he enrolled in a non-conformist academy kept by Thomas Rowe, who was also pastor of an Independent church. During that period non-conformists were not allowed to attend the historic English universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Independent students often studied instead at private academies such as Rowe's, where the education received was both rigorous and not as bound by convention as in the state-supported institutions. Watts completed his study with Rowe in 1693 and at about the same time joined Rowe's church. He returned to his home in Southampton in 1694 and remained there for a little over two years doing additional study in private. It was during this period that he began writing hymns.

Watts launched his professional career in 1696, by becoming a tutor to the son of Sir John Hartopp (who was also named John). In 1698, he became assistant pastor of the Independent church in Mark Lane, London. When the pastor resigned in 1701, Watts was invited to become the church's senior minister, which, after some hesitation, he accepted. Though he had been assistant pastor of the congregation for three years, he had never joined the church, nor had he been ordained. His membership transfer from Rowe's church was obtained, and he was ordained and installed into the pastorate by the Mark Lane church on March 18, 1701.

In late 1705 (though dated 1706 on the title page), Watts published his first book, a collection of poetry titled *Horæ Lyricæ*. Among the book's contents was "An Essay on a few of *DAVID*'s PSALMS Translated into Plain Verse, in Language more agreeable to the clearer Revelations of the

Gospel,” which included paraphrases of four psalms that were intended for congregational singing. In the preface to *Horæ Lyricæ*, Watts pointed out that “These are but a small part of two hundred Hymns of the same kind which are ready for Public Use if the World receive favourably what I now present.” Apparently, he felt that “the World” was ready to receive them, for in the following year (1707) he published *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, which included the four psalm paraphrases from *Horæ Lyricæ* plus ten others, as well as a host of texts based on other Scriptures or that were freely written. Among the lyrics thus printed for the first time were “Alas, and did my Savior bleed,” “Come, we that love the Lord,” “When I can read my title clear,” and “When I survey the wondrous cross.”

Hymns and Spiritual Songs also included an expansive preface and a concluding essay explaining Watts’s views on what he conceived to be the proper relationship between Scripture and congregational song, and why the singing should consist of more than simply the psalms turned into English verse. In the essay, he gives two reasons for the latter belief. The first is that the form of metrical psalmody already alters the sacred text because of its need to fit strophic tunes and incorporate rhyme, so that “it is very hard for any Man to say” that versified psalms “are in a strict Sense the Word of God.” Perhaps with tongue in cheek he points out that if nothing is allowed “to be sung but the Words of Inspiration or Scripture,” congregations “ought to learn the Hebrew Music, and sing in the Jewish Language” (242–43). His second argument is that there is a difference between reading or reciting the word of God and singing to God. “By Reading,” he says, “we learn what God speaks to us in his Word; but when we sing, especially unto God, our chief Design is, or should be, to speak *our own* Hearts and *our* Words to God” (emphases added); thus, we should “use such Words as we can for the most part assume as our own” (243–44). In Watts’s view, if the psalms are to be sung in worship they should be “Christianized,” made to reflect New Testament faith and belief.

Sales of *Horæ Lyricæ* and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* must have been encouraging, for only two years later second editions of both were issued (1709). In the meantime, Watts had determined to compile a collection of paraphrased psalms according to the principles he had put forth in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. He omitted the fourteen psalm versions from the second edition of that book in favor of transferring them to the new anthology, but he also added about 150 new hymns, making *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* a much more substantial volume; consequently, he omitted

the essay that had closed the first edition.

Watts's proposed psalter was published in 1719 as *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. On one hand, the book was not a complete psalter since the author omitted twelve entire psalms that he felt contained unchristian sentiments or duplicated material in other psalms, and he abbreviated others. On the other hand, he sometimes gave several versions of the same psalm to provide for the use of different tunes or to give a different emphasis to the text. The title of the book is significant because it tells us that these are not psalms, per se, but "imitations," a form that John Dryden defined as "*an Endeavour of a later Poet . . . to write, as he supposes that Authour [sic] would have done, had he liv'd in our Age, and in our Country.*"² The title of *The Psalms of David Imitated* also suggests that this book, together with the earlier *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, completes the trilogy of song types mentioned in Colossians 3:16 of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," thus forming what Louis F. Benson called a complete "System of Praise."³ Among the contents of the volume are such texts as "I'll praise my maker with my breath" (Watts's original first line), "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun," "Joy to the world," "My shepherd will supply my need," and "Our God, our help in ages past" (Watts's original first line).

In the meantime, Watts suffered some kind of nervous breakdown that caused him to miss preaching at his church for four years (1712–16). Invited to spend a week at the country estate of Sir Thomas and Lady Mary Abney, the sister of Watts's best friend, Thomas Gunston (who had died in 1700), Watts remained in the Abney's residence until his own death thirty-six years later(!). During Watts's incapacitation, most of the pastoral duties at the church—which had moved to Bury (Berry) Street in 1708—were carried out by the assistant pastor, Samuel Price, whose position was upgraded to that of co-pastor at Watts's insistence. Even after he was able to return to preaching, Watts's health was never robust, and Price evidently continued to carry much of the pastoral load.

After publication of *The Psalms of David Imitated*, Watts went on to write numerous theological, philosophical, and educational books, as well as continuing his pastoral work. In recognition of his contributions as a scholar and hymn writer he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree from the Universities of Edinburgh and Aberdeen in 1728. Watts's death on

²John Dryden, Preface to *Ovid's Epistles* (London: for Jacob Tonson, 1680), unpaginated.

³Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1915), 120.

November 25, 1748, called forth sermons and poems from his contemporaries, including the following lines by his eighteenth-century biographer Thomas Gibbons, which suggest that Watts's hymns could be appropriately compared with the song of the angels—or even sung by them.

But, O! how rich was thy POETIC Vein,
 How smooth thy Lays, and ev'ry Thought sublime:
 Angels, descending from their bright Abodes,
 Have catch'd the tuneful Praises from thy Tongue,
 And wonder'd how a Spirit, cramp'd in Clay,
 Could rival their Devotion, and their Bliss.⁴

WATTS'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO HYMNODY

Isaac Watts's contribution to the song of the church was profound. Perhaps his most evident gift was to break the stranglehold of metrical psalmody on English-language congregational song. Before Watts, the church in England was largely content to sing only the Psalms of David arranged into English poetry with rhyme and meter. The argument for this practice (which was based on the views of John Calvin) was that sinful humans are incapable of offering worthy praise to a holy God; therefore, the best gift we can give back to Him is his own words. Furthermore, God himself had provided the material for his praise in the book of Psalms. However, the hymns and essays in Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* proved that biblical truth could be sung without direct versification or even a paraphrase of Scripture. *The Psalms of David Imitated* showed that the psalmists could be made to “speak the common Sense and Language of a Christian”⁵ by using typology, alluding to New Testament passages, incorporating the name of Jesus, and other techniques.⁶ Essentially, Watts created a new relationship between song and scriptural truth, demonstrating that they differed in their purpose but could nevertheless be closely linked.

Another feature of Watts's hymns that had a lasting impact was their didacticism (their ability to teach the faith). One could spend a lifetime singing versified psalms and never learn anything about the Trinity, the

⁴Thomas Gibbons, *An Elegiac Poem, to the Memory of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D. D.* (London: for J. Oswald, et al., 1749), 5.

⁵I. Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (London: for J. Clark, R. Ford, and R. Cruttenden, 1719), xvi.

⁶For a discussion of some of the ways that Watts “Christianized” the psalms, see David W. Music, *Studies in the Hymnody of Isaac Watts* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 44–59.

saving work of Jesus, or the final judgment.⁷ Watts's 700-plus hymns can almost serve as a systematic theology of Christian belief, for they cover all its important themes, including some that are almost never sung about today, such as the pre-existence of Christ, the death of both the saint and the sinner, the role of civil magistrates, etc.⁸ According to one assessment, the singing of Watts's hymns was a principal reason that Independents maintained their theological orthodoxy when some other closely related English and American denominations fell into Unitarianism during the eighteenth century.⁹

At the same time, Watts's hymns are not mere "sermons in song," for, while they were aimed at the "plain Christian," they are also literary in nature. Watts achieved a striking balance between understandability, theological substance, and artistry that has been matched by few other Christian hymn and song writers. He tends to use short, simple words in relatively brief hymns—typically four to six stanzas or, in the case of longer hymns, with suggestions for deletion of stanzas to abbreviate a text or the insertion of pauses for reflection and rejuvenation. But this practicality is fused with a poetic idiom that makes full use of rhetorical features to create lyrics that are vivid, memorable, and full of emotion. For example, in one of Watts's most familiar hymns, "When I survey the wondrous cross," the third stanza begins with the line "See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet."¹⁰ Watts could have written "See from his Head and Hands and Feet," but using the commas instead of "and" allows a brief moment of pause for reflection as each of the body parts is named. The order of the words is also important: metrically, the line could just as well have read "See from his Hands, his Head, his Feet" ("feet" obviously had to come last because of the rhyme), but the sequence given by Watts suggests that one is "surveying" the body of Christ from head to toe, following the

⁷This statement is obviously not intended to disparage the psalms, which are vital to the Christian faith, but simply to point out that they must be "completed" by the New Testament.

⁸Examples of Watts hymns on the subjects mentioned include "Ere the blue heavens were stretched abroad" (bk. 1, no. 2); "My thoughts on awful subjects roll" (bk. 2, no. 2) and "Why should we start and fear to die?" (bk. 2, no. 31); and "Judges, who rule the world by laws" (Ps. 58). Perhaps not all these subjects are appropriate for singing in the contemporary church, but something has surely been lost in their absence. The one hymn on the pre-existence of Christ that is most often sung today is "Of the Father's love begotten."

⁹Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, combined ed., vol. 3, *From Watts and Wesley to Maurice*, 1690–1850 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015 [originally published 1961]), 94–95.

¹⁰Throughout this article direct quotations from Watts's hymns are given in their original spellings and typographical forms.

downward flow of the blood.

Watts is known to have been an amateur painter,¹¹ but he could paint with his pen as well as with his brush, for his hymns are often full of drama and color. Consider, for example, his description of what awaits the unrepentant in hell.

Eternal Plagues, and heavy Chains,
 Tormenting Racks and fiery Coals,
 And Darts t' inflict immortal Pains
 Dy'd in the Blood of Damned Souls.¹²

This horror is offset by his anticipation of the blessedness of heaven.

There is a Land of pure Delight
 Where Saints Immortal reign;
 Infinite Day excludes the Night,
 And Pleasures banish Pain.¹³

These contrasts point to other antitheses that are often found in Watts's hymns: God's hatred of sin but love for sinners, the glories of creation but the Bible's superiority to it, the supremacy of the gospel over the law, the awfulness of the crucifixion but the beauty of the salvation that sprang from it.

In his best hymns, Watts set the basic formal pattern for all writers of English congregational song for the next two hundred and fifty years, whether or not they were and are aware of it. He had a knack for writing an arresting opening stanza that immediately draws the singer into the text. The ensuing stanzas develop the theme of the hymn, which builds to a climax or challenge in the last stanza or two, often with a pair of memorable closing lines. The most familiar example is, of course, "When I survey the wondrous cross," with its beginning stanza rooted in Philippians 3:7, its

¹¹Thomas Gibbons, *Memoirs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D. D.* (London: for James Buckland and Thomas Gibbons, 1780), 160–61.

¹²I. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, 2nd ed. (London: J. H. for John Lawrence, 1709), book 2, no. 44 ("With holy fear and humble song," st. 3). Texts from *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* are quoted from the second edition because it incorporated revisions Watts made in some of the texts after the first edition.

¹³*Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1709), book 2, no. 66 (st. 1). Both of these quoted stanzas are examples of the rhetorical poetic technique known as hypotyposis, the use of vivid language to call a scene before the mind's eye.

representation of Jesus's blood as "sorrow" and "love," the use of chiasmus (the crossing of words—"Sorrow and Love" / "Love and Sorrow"—itself a symbol of the cross), and its climactic lines "Love so amazing, so divine / Demands my Soul, my Life, my All."¹⁴ But it can also be seen in many of the lesser-known hymns, such as the three-stanza text titled "Sight thro' a Glass, and Face to Face," with its metaphor of grace as a window through which to see Jesus, its longing to be with the Savior, its prayer to change passion to love and power to praise, and its allusions to 1 Corinthians 13:12, 2 Corinthians 5:7, 1 John 3:2, and Song of Solomon 8:14.

I love the Windows of thy Grace
 Thro' which my Lord is seen,
 And long to meet my Saviour's Face
 Without a Glass between.

O that the happy Hour were come
 To change my Faith to Sight!
 I shall behold my Lord at Home
 In a diviner Light.

Haste, my Beloved, and remove
 These interposing Days;
 Then shall my Passions all be Love,
 And all my Pow'rs be Praise.¹⁵

In addition to developing the modern form of the hymn, Watts was also largely responsible for inventing the modern hymnal. Before Watts, books of congregational song seldom contained first line, topical, or scriptural indexes, or any sort of organizational approach other than simply printing the psalms in their biblical order. Watts, on the other hand, provided the user with a first line index, a topical index, and—in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*—a scriptural index (the last-named was obviously less relevant for *The Psalms of David Imitated*), enhancing the use of the book to accompany preaching and other devotional activities.¹⁶ Furthermore,

¹⁴Other examples of Watts's memorable last lines include "No more a stranger or a guest / But like a child at home" ("My shepherd will supply my need") and "Here, Lord, I give myself away, / 'Tis all that I can do" ("Alas, and did my Savior bleed").

¹⁵*Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1709), book 2, no. 145.

¹⁶For a discussion of Watts's innovations in hymnal design, see Christopher N. Phillips, *The*

while he did not create a comprehensive organizational scheme, he did divide *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* into three separate books (but printed as a single volume), the first based on specific Scriptures, the second containing more freely written texts, and a third consisting of hymns designed for the Lord's supper. Within these larger categories he sometimes grouped together hymns on similar topics or individual biblical books; for example, hymns 66–78 of the first book are all paraphrases of passages from Song of Solomon in biblical order. The ultimate result of Watts's efforts was, as noted earlier, the dominance of his hymns and hymnbooks in British and American congregational song until well into the nineteenth century.

WATTS AND BAPTISTS

Like their closely related evangelical contemporaries, the Independents and Presbyterians, seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Baptists of Great Britain and America, when they sang at all, were mostly singers of metrical psalmody. However, some British Baptists, such as Benjamin Keach (1640–1704) and Richard Allen (fl. 1690s) published books that defended the use of hymns whose inspiration and language were drawn from the Bible but that were not necessarily versifications of Scripture. Keach and Joseph Stennett (1663–1713) also published examples of hymnody that fit this pattern. The writings of these British Baptists were known to Watts, who adopted and refined some of their arguments and quoted from some of Stennett's hymns in his own texts.¹⁷ The debt thus incurred by Watts was repaid many times over as Baptists adopted his work almost wholesale.

Beginning about 1770, Baptists in America began to replace their versified psalmody with Watts's hymns and paraphrased psalms. For example, in 1771 Watts's *Psalms of David Imitated* and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* supplanted Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady's *A New Version of the Psalms* (1696) at the First Baptist Church of Boston, Massachusetts. The Second Baptist Church of Boston (which split from the First Baptist Church in 1743) followed suit sometime between 1770 and 1772, while the First Church in Newport, Rhode Island, adopted Watts in 1787, and this trend continued in both the North and the South into the nineteenth century.

The position of Watts in Baptist congregational singing of that era is also

Hymnal: A Reading History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

¹⁷See David W. Music, "Isaac Watts, Baptists, and the Song of the Church," *Baptist History and Heritage* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 20–34.

evident from some of the hymnals issued by Baptists that were intended primarily as supplements to his work. In England, John Rippon's *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors* (1787)—the most popular Baptist hymnal in Britain for many decades—was billed on its title page as “an appendix to Dr. Watts’s psalms and hymns,” while his *An Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts* (1801) sought to provide a more convenient organization for the texts. Both books went through numerous editions and were reprinted in the United States beginning in 1792 and 1820, respectively. Several of the Baptist hymnals for public worship that were compiled in America during the early nineteenth century similarly sought either to augment or to reorganize Watts’s works, as is evident from their prefaces and title pages:

- Anon., *The Boston Collection of Sacred and Devotional Hymns* (1808)—
 “a supplement to Dr. Watts’s Psalms and Hymns” (“Advertisement”)
 William Parkinson, *A Selection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs . . . designed . . . as an appendix to Dr. Watts’s Psalms and Hymns* (1809)
 William Collier, *A New Selection of Hymns; designed . . . as a supplement to Dr. Watts’ Psalms and Hymns* (1812)
 Archibald Maclay, *A Selection of Hymns . . . designed as a supplement to Dr. Watts’s Psalms and Hymns* (1816)
 James M. Winchell, *An Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts* (1818)

Naturally, these collections (except for the “arrangements” by Rippon and Winchell) contained few of Watts’s hymns, since they were intended to be used alongside Watts’s own books. However, the awkwardness of using two books simultaneously and the desire to sing a greater range of song created the need for eclectic hymnals that included both Watts and lyrics from other writers. The use of “Watts entire” began to decline, and by 1850 was a rarity among Baptists, as it was in other denominations.

This is not to say, however, that Watts was no longer of critical importance for Baptist congregational singing. Baron Stow and S. F. Smith’s *The Psalmist* (1843)—the first collection to receive the imprimatur of a national Baptist body, the American Baptist Publication Society (ABPS), and the most widely distributed Baptist hymnal in the northern United

States during the mid-nineteenth century—including 1,180 texts, of which 302 were credited to Watts.¹⁸ Basil Manly and Basil Manly Jr.'s *Baptist Psalmody* (1850)—the first “official” Southern Baptist hymnal—contained 1,295 hymns, with 318 of these attributed to Watts. Thus, in both hymnals, texts by Watts accounted for about a quarter of the volume.

The process of winnowing Watts's hymns continued during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as new styles of and emphases in congregational song emerged. To choose but three examples, in the American Baptist Publication Society's *Baptist Hymnal for use in the church and the home* (1883) a little over fifteen percent of the volume was made up of Watts texts, while in the *New Baptist Hymnal* (1926)—published jointly by the ABPS and the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board—Watts accounted for slightly less than six percent of the lyrics, a figure that declined to about three and one half percent in the Sunday School Board's *Baptist Hymnal* of 1956; similar proportions to those of the 1956 book are found in the Southern Baptist hymnals of 1975 and 1991. Obviously, compared with the previous use of “Watts entire,” these are relatively small numbers, but they still outstrip most other writers represented in these books.

Although he no longer dominates Baptist congregational song as he once did, the continuing influence of Watts on Baptist hymnody can be seen by an examination of the indexes of authors, composers, and sources in the two most recent hymnals compiled for Baptists. *Baptist Hymnal* (2008) lists fourteen texts by Watts, more than any other authors except for Fanny Crosby and B. B. McKinney, with fifteen each (Charles Wesley has thirteen). In *Celebrating Grace* (2010), Watts and Wesley lead all other text writers with sixteen each. Admittedly, some of these hymns by Watts are duplicates using a different tune and others are lyrics that were altered or formed the basis for texts by other authors (see no. 187 in *Celebrating Grace*), but considering that Watts had been dead for more than 250 years before these hymnals were published, the figures indicate that Baptists still consider a dozen or so of his lyrics to be both relevant and meaningful in the twenty-first century. And, of course, there is no telling how often the text of “Joy to the world” is sung without hymnals during the Christmas season or the number of times Baptist churches have sung Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and J. D. Walt's “The Wonderful Cross” (based partly on

¹⁸The figures for this and the other hymnals mentioned below exclude sections of doxologies, chants, service music, and the like.

“When I survey the wondrous cross”) from projection screens.

Baptists, as well as other denominational groups from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, thus owe several debts to Watts: the expansion of congregational song to include freely written texts alongside paraphrased Scripture, the basic structure of the English hymn, the format of the modern hymnal, and a body of congregational songs that still relate to people as instructive and spiritually uplifting material for worship. It is little wonder that the name of “Watts” is engraved on Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary’s Cowden Hall as a reminder of how important this eighteenth-century hymn writer has been and still is to generations of Baptists as they worship, evangelize, minister, educate, and fellowship with one another.