# GIVING TO GOD IMMORTAL PRAISE

# ISAAC WATTS AND HIS WORLD

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The following is a reworked version of two addresses delivered at Melton Mowbray United Reformed Church on 21 September 2024. The event was organised by the East Midlands Synod of the URC in order to commemorate the three-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Isaac Watts’s birth. I am grateful for the invitation to speak and for the opportunity to produce the following text. In preparing it, I drew extensively from the following texts: Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion* (2016); Arthur P. Davis, *Isaac Watts* (1948); Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer* (1962); David Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered* (1974); Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* (1884); Thomas Wright, *The Life of Isaac Watts* (1914). This is an expanded version of a text first published in *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (November 2024), pp. 227-249.

## Introduction

According to Bernard Lord Manning, at one time a Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, member of the city’s Emmanuel Congregational Church, and a firm advocate of “orthodox” Dissent, “Hymns are for us Dissenters what the liturgy is for the Anglicans”.[[1]](#endnote-1)

On its own, such a statement might not justify commemorating the three-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Isaac Watts. Even in Manning’s day, few claimed to belong to the Dissenting tradition, and “Nonconformist”, too, had fallen out of vogue. If any terms were then in favour, they were “Free Church” and “Free Churchman” [sic]. It is not easy to think of a common designator for the twenty-first century.

Alongside this, we face a further difficulty. The hymns and spiritual songs that stir today’s congregations, or articulate for them the doctrine of the faith, might bear no resemblance to those which stirred Manning. Tastes come and go and Christian worship, if not the faith itself, is more often expressed according to the prevailing trends which emerge, and appeal to, the zeitgeist; there is no universal Christian language that has appealed either throughout history (diachronically) or in all places at any one time (synchronically). And we will look in vain in Watts for the kind of familiarity, even sensuality, of at least some modern songs of praise, if indeed that is what we seek, or ought to seek, in our worship.

And yet there remain some hymns that manage to communicate Christian experience, both that of hearing what the gospel tells us of mercy, grace and love, and the response of joyful and everlasting praise. No one has managed to achieve this in all their religious poetry. The task is, after all, a difficult one. Some have succeeded here and there, and their hymns continue to be sung, not out of nostalgia, but because they help congregations to grasp something of the gospel and to respond in ways that are both appropriate and authentic. Isaac Watts is one such hymn writer. Samuel Johnson, man of letters and devout churchman, considered the content of religion to be too restricted for any to produce satisfactory devotional poetry, and yet Watts had “done better than others what no man has done well”.[[2]](#endnote-2)

For those raised in Congregational churches from the mid-twentieth century, including those which joined the United Reformed Church, Christian worship, learning and discipleship were nurtured partly through singing from *Congregational Praise*. The book contains 778 hymns. With forty-eight, Watts is the contributor with the most entries; Charles Wesley runs a close second with forty-four. This might reflect something of the tradition which accepted that Watts was “one of its own”. Hymn books for “the people called Methodists” would reveal that Wesley was the Methodist songster *par excellence* in a way that, in Congregationalism, Watts never was.

Perhaps more revealing is where the hymns are placed. *Congregational Praise* separated its hymns into sixteen thematic sections. Twenty-six of Watts’s hymns are found in the sections on “The Eternal Father” and “The Lord Jesus Christ”, with a further ten in the section on “The Church”. For Wesley, the figures are one, nine and seven respectively. The Methodist contributes most to the section on “The Life of Discipleship” with sixteen, while Watts has only six. This might suggest that Watts was a hymnwriter of “praise” while Wesley was one who more frequently expressed the depth of personal faith and spirituality. This is a very general point, of course, and, as with all generalisation, it proves to be less than fully conclusive. But, for some, the statement continues to ring true.[[3]](#endnote-3)

*Congregational Praise* was first published in 1951 and reached its eighth impression in 1967. It might not be surprising to discover that Watts was prominent in that collection (though he accounts for only 6.3 per cent of its content). What might be more unexpected is that when, in 1991, the United Reformed Church published *Rejoice and Sing*, to date its only hymn book, Watts retained the most entries of any hymnwriter, this time with thirty-eight. Again his closest rival is Charles Wesley, with thirty-two. The book is separated into different sections to those of *Congregational Praise*, and the distribution, though different, is revealing.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | One God in Trinity | God the Creator | God Incarnate | God the Life-Giver | The Gospel |
| Watts | 2 | 7 | 10 | 3 | 1 |
| Wesley | 0 | 1 | 8 | 4 | 5 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | The Church’s Life and Witness | The Gospel in the World | All One in God’s Eternal Praise | Psalms |
| Watts | 9 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Wesley | 11 | 0 | 3 | 0 |

Hardly surprisingly, the vast majority of hymns of both writers are long forgotten. They wrote in, and for, a world far-removed from our own, not least in theology and spirituality. It is more remarkable that some of Watts’s hymns still resonate with Christian worshippers, which continue to express fundamental aspects of Christian belief and life, and contain words and images which, even in the twenty-first century, sustain our worship.

In Watts’s case, this is true both when he is singing God’s praise (“God is a name my soul adores”; “I sing the almighty power of God”; “I’ll praise my maker while I’ve breath”; “Give to our God immortal praise”; Come let us join our cheerful songs”; “Behold the Glories of the Lamb”; “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun”) and when he responds to God’s grace made known in the gospel (“Give me the wings of faith to rise”; “There is a land of pure delight”; and what Matthew Arnold called the greatest hymn in the English language “When I survey the wondrous cross”). Perhaps surprisingly, of the thirty-six hymns in *Rejoice and Sing*, four were not published in *Congregational Praise*. These were: “My God, my King, thy various praise”; “Sing to the Lord with joyful voice”; “Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove”; and “Joy to the world”.

Nevertheless, in his own day Watts was not known primarily as a hymn-writer. He was a broad thinker, often inspired to write on topics he was trying to teach when he could find no adequate textbook. *The Art of Reading and Writing English* (1721) he wrote as an aid to his work as a personal tutor to John Hartopp’s children. Against conventional wisdom, it argued that English could be learnt without first learning Latin. True to form, Watts produced a verse which encapsulated his thinking and encouraged his readers:

Let all the foreign tongue alone

Till you can spell and read your own.[[4]](#endnote-4)

His *Logick* (1724) was written to assist those entrusted to him for their education. It explored reason, what it is and what it is for, and became a textbook at Oxford and Cambridge universities, an irony given that Dissenters were barred from matriculating at the former and graduating from the latter. He also published on astronomy and geography as well as continuing his philosophical investigations in *The Improvement of the Mind* (1741, 1751).

Watts’s views on the teaching of children were relatively enlightened for his time. He suggested that “the teacher should alternate play and study, but see to it that no jokes on sacred things or cruelty to animals be allowed”.[[5]](#endnote-5) And, understandably, he also published on theological subjects: *A Short View of the Whole of Scripture* (1732); *Questions Proper for Students in Divinity* (1740); *The Harmony of Religion* (1742). Indeed, it has been argued that everything he published was composed in the hope that “divinity” (perhaps best understood as “Christian understanding” or even “Christian living”) would be enhanced. This was no mere intellectual pursuit. Instead, Watts sought the renewal of the church through better preaching and more fervent prayer as well as more enthusiastic congregational singing. He wrote on these subjects to encourage others in the revitalisation of personal faith as well as church life. He was recognised as a leader among the Dissenters and widely respected even by some who belonged to the religious establishment. It is important to remember, then, that Watts did so much more than compose hymns.[[6]](#endnote-6)

That being said, throughout his life Watts gave expression to his thoughts, both in expressing the deepest concerns of his heart and mind, as well as in celebration of lighter moments, in rhyme. Composing verse had distracted him in early life and stayed with him long after his days of hymn-writing came to an end. In what follows, we will consider his hymns and spiritual songs alongside the context in which he wrote in order to see how he represents the religious world of his day, looking also at how this might continue to speak to us. First, we briefly consider his life.

## A sketch of Watts’s life

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton on 17 July 1674, the same year in which John Milton died (8 November). His father, also called Isaac, was a convinced Dissenter who considered the rituals of the Church of England to be unbiblical. Isaac senior also dabbled in poetry and once articulated in verse his dispute with the Established Church:

Why do our churchmen with such zeal contend

For what the scriptures nowhere recommend?

Those ceremonies which they doat upon,

Were unto Christians heretofore unknown.

In ancient time, God’s worship did accord,

Not with traditions, but the written word;

Himself has told us how he’ll be adored.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In 1672, Watts senior was elected Deacon of a group “of the persuasion commonly called *Congregationall*”, licensed to meet in “*a Roome or Roomes*” in “Mr Say’s house”.[[8]](#endnote-8) The licence was made possible by an “indulgence” issued by Charles II in a thinly-veiled attempt to enable Roman Catholic worship. The penal code, established in the 1660s and which outlawed religious observance that diverged from that of the Book of Common Prayer, was briefly suspended. Life seemed to be going well, and Isaac senior married Sarah Taunton, who was descended from Huguenot stock, on 11 September 1673. However, the following year, parliament withdrew the king’s indulgence, and Isaac senior found himself gaoled. It was while he was incarcerated that Isaac junior was born. The tale was told that Isaac junior’s mother would sit outside the prison when feeding her baby, hoping for news of her husband.

Isaac junior was a sickly child and he continued to suffer bouts of illness throughout his life, though later commentators have seen in him elements of the psychosomatic[[9]](#endnote-9) and, less kindly, of hypochondria. He recorded having contracted smallpox in 1683 and a “great and dangerous sickness” in 1689; he suffered serious bouts of fever and illness in July 1699, June 1700 and June 1701, and reported frequent visits to the waters at Tunbridge and Bath in an attempt to recover. In 1712, he was “seized with a violent fever” and this illness stayed with him for four years. Samuel Johnson, writing sympathetically, noted that from “the feebleness which it brought upon him, he never perfectly recovered”.[[10]](#endnote-10) In light of his frequent infirmities, it could be that, when composing his hymns, he occasionally addressed himself. Consider this verse published under the heading “Comfort under Sorrow and Pain”:

Now let me Lord my Saviour smile,

And shew my Name upon his Heart;

I would forget my Pains awhile,

And in the Pleasure lose the Smart.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Recalling Christ’s favour towards the sinner reminded Watts of his own suffering; human pain, he concluded, paled into insignificance when considering that of the crucified saviour. He expressed the thought in a hymn entitled “The Agonies of Christ”, verse 6:

Now let our Pains be all forgot,

Our Hearts no more repine;

Our Suff’rings are not worth a Thought,

When, Lord, compar’d with thine.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Isaac junior was a studious if not precocious child. Aged four he began to learn Latin; Greek was added from age nine; from age thirteen he also learnt Hebrew. His intellect and piety were public knowledge and led to the opportunity to attend one of the English universities, which would have involved him conforming to the Church of England. Nothing came of this. It seems that Isaac junior, in matters of religion, was as convinced a Dissenter as Isaac senior. Instead, aged 16, he left Southampton to study at Thomas Rowe’s Academy. His course ended in 1694, and he found himself back in Southampton, remaining there for two-and-a-half years during which he continued to study and also began to compose hymns.

In October 1696, Watts returned to Stoke Newington to be tutor to the seven children of Sir John Hartopp. Hartopp owned a number of properties, one of which was at Freeby in Leicestershire, and Watts accompanied him to the estate where he preached in the Meeting House. Dissenters with few qualms, or perhaps convinced that the incumbent was truly converted, would celebrate Communion in the parish church and thereby qualify for public office. Hartopp was a Dissenter who, through such “occasional conformity”, was able to serve as High Sheriff of Leicestershire and to sit in parliament as the county’s MP. Not all were satisfied with such compromise; Daniel Defoe referred to it as “a-playing at bo-peep with God Almighty”,[[13]](#endnote-13) while High Anglicans were affronted and sought to outlaw the practice. Their wishes were granted with the passing of the Occasional Conformity Act in 1711, which remained on the Statute Book until 1719.

The Hartopp family were members of the Independent Church on Mark Lane and attended it while resident at their home in Stoke Newington. It was a chapel for the well-to-do. For a period, the church’s minister was John Owen, the seventeenth-century Puritan divine who had, at one time, been Oliver Cromwell’s favourite and had “converted” from an early commitment to Presbyterian polity to being a convinced Independent. Under his ministry, it was said that Mark Lane Church was “the most aristocratic dissenting meeting in London”. By the late seventeenth century, the glory days appeared to have passed; the church, it was later said, was shrouded in “the dignity and sanctity of a lost cause”.[[14]](#endnote-14) When Watts joined, John Owen’s wife was still in attendance. The diminishing links with the failed Republic persisted for a time. As a young man, Watts was acquainted with Richard Cromwell, who lived out his years at Cheshunt. Watts knew him “as a white-haired old man”. He recorded: “I never heard him glance at his former station but once, and that in a very distant manner”.[[15]](#endnote-15) Watts was a loyal royalist and seems not to have harboured any regret that the monarchy was restored in 1660. Indeed, he saw the role of providence in the overthrow of the Catholic king, James II, and the accession of the Protestants William III and Mary II in 1688 as well as in the succession of the Hanovers following the end of the Stuart dynasty on Queen Anne’s death in 1714 (she being no friend to Dissenters). This lay behind the words of his paraphrase of Psalm 75, “Apply’d to the Glorious Revolution by King William, or the Happy Accession of King George to the Throne”:

*Britain* was doom’d to be a Slave

Her Frame dissolv’d, her Fears were great;

When God a new Supporter gave

To bear the Pillars of the State.

He from thy Hand receiv’d his Crown,

And sware to rule by wholsome Laws;

His foot shall tread th’ oppressor down,

His Arm defend the righteous Cause.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The pastor at Mark Lane was Isaac Chauncey, but he was part of the church’s problem; he was no great preacher, and an emphasis on old-fashioned discipline in the congregation had led to many members voting with their feet. Watts first preached at the chapel in July 1698. On the retirement of Chauncey’s assistant pastor, Watts took on the role from February 1699. Unexpectedly, Chauncey resigned two years later and took up the post of tutor at the Homerton Academy. Despite his misgivings, Watts then accepted the church’s invitation to become its new minister. In June 1704, the church relocated to Pinners’ Hall and then, in 1709, to a new 428-seat chapel in Bury Street, moves which reflect the extent of church growth under Watts’s ministry.

Watts, then, has to be understood according to his distinctive context. As a minister, he spent most of his time with well-off and comfortable, if pious, Dissenters. He remained aware of the difficulties that Dissenters continued to endure even after the passing, in 1689, of the so-called Toleration Act (“An Act for exempting their Majesties’ Protestant Subjects Dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of Certain Laws” to give its exact title and demonstrate its true objective). It could be argued that, after 1689, the status of the Church of England was, in some respects, no different to a licensed Dissenting chapel. It was no longer possible for the state to justify or to enforce compulsory attendance at the parish church.[[17]](#endnote-17) Watts was aware of the resulting difficulties facing Dissenters. He argued that the Dissenters had to excel in their religion or else there would be nothing to differentiate them from the Church of England: “What is there of Duty to God or Man wherein you Separatists from the publick Establishment exceed the rest of the Nation?” he asked.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Nevertheless, the Dissenters remained prone to attack by the mob, and there was a particularly notorious incident which Watts recorded in his diary.

In 1709, Henry Sacheverell (1674-1724), an Anglican priest with a reputation for haughtiness and pomposity, preached the sermon at St Paul’s on the commemoration of the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605. He was clearly in an angry mood, and one witness recalled “the fiery red that overspread his face … and the goggling wideness of his eyes … he came into the pulpit like a Sybil to the mouth of her cave”.[[19]](#endnote-19) For his text, Sacheverell took 2 Corinthians 11:26:

In journeyings often, in perils of water, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren.

His sermon was entitled “Perils of False Brethren both in Church and State”. In it, he charged Dissenters with impiety and sedition, blaming them for the regicide of 1649 as well as the chaos of the interregnum which followed. Impeached by the House of Commons and found guilty, his sentence was generally considered to be light (he was suspended for three years and his sermon was to be publicly burnt at the Royal Exchange). Some inferred from the episode that those in authority quietly supported Sacheverell and agreed with his position.

As a result, the mob was stirred and Dissenting meeting houses were wrecked in London while others were attacked in the Midlands. Watts noted: “March 1 1710 – ye Mob rose and pulled down ye pews and galleries of 6 meeting-houses … but were dispersed by ye guards under Captain Horsey at 1 or 2 in ye morning”.[[20]](#endnote-20) It was around this time that he penned one of his best-known hymns, “Our God, our help in ages past”, a paraphrase of Psalm 90: “Lord thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations”. Neither Watts nor his meeting house were attacked, but he was still aware of the threat.

After leaving the Hartopps, Watts resided in the home of Thomas Hollis from 1702. Hollis was a businessman originally from Sheffield who belonged to the other Independent meeting at Pinners’ Hall, though according to his own profession he was a convinced Baptist. Hollis’s home was near Mark Lane. Hollis’s son was a benefactor to Harvard College in New England. In 1710, Watts left the Hollis residence to live with a Mr Bowes and then, from 1712, and during a period of illness, he resided in the various homes of Sir Thomas Abney, especially Theobolds near Cheshunt. After that, Watts preached when he was fit enough, but his contact with the church was, at best, infrequent.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Thomas Abney was another prominent London Dissenter. He began his working life as an apprentice fishmonger but rose through the ranks to become High Sheriff and, in 1694, one of the original directors of the Bank of England. He was knighted by William III. Watts first came into contact with Abney while he was assistant to Dr Chauncey, though doubt has been cast over whether he served as chaplain when Abney was Lord Mayor of London in 1700-1701; Watts spent much of that time indisposed by illness.[[22]](#endnote-22) Nevertheless, the arrangement suited both men: the pious Abney enjoyed nothing more than discussing theology with Watts, while Watts had access to Abney’s library. Sir Thomas died in 1728, but Watts continued to live with his widow and daughters until his death on 25 November 1746. Despite his continual ill health, Watts passed his three score years and ten, surviving to his seventy-fifth year.

Watts had known Dissenters officially persecuted, as his father had been. He knew, too, that the mob could be stirred against them. And yet he moved in distinctly refined circles and lived the life of the pious gentleman at the generosity of others. It was a life that afforded him the leisure to study and to write and, when illness gripped him, the security of a roof over his head.

## Faith and Reason

In the early eighteenth century, it was taken for granted that English society was Christian, but different views existed about what its Christianity should look like. While there were those who insisted that the Evangelical Revival, in England associated with George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, cast the sunshine of faith on the darkness of unbelief, the reality was more complicated. Among those who considered themselves champions of orthodox Christianity, or those who defended the inherited “Calvinism”, much debate occurred in the days before the revival. Their question, “how freely can salvation be offered to all?”, presaged the arguments between Whitefield (the Calvinist) and the Wesleys (the Arminians). The former “proclaimed” the gospel, expecting the Holy Spirit to animate the elect in response, while the latter “offered” the good news and expected human beings, exercising their “free will”, to make a personal decision for or against.[[23]](#endnote-23) The situation was complex, and while many sought to pigeonhole their opponents in one camp or the other, and others were willing to use “Calvinist” to show approbation, apparently contradictory doctrines were held in tension by some, such as Watts, as will be seen below.

While, for many, this demonstrated the influence of the Enlightenment on theological debate, a further complicating factor was the impact of Enlightenment rationalism on early eighteenth-century church life and practice. One aspect of this concerned the “fanatical”. The changed political and social circumstances which emerged when the Commonwealth fell apart led to a new dominant narrative. It was increasingly accepted in public discourse that religious enthusiasm had caused the civil wars and the execution of the king. Religious fanaticism, identified as that which went beyond both Prayer Book-regulated worship and the life of the reconstituted Established Church, needed to be eradicated in order to ensure both the spiritual and temporal safety of the realm.

And yet the facility to think and to reason offered to human beings a greater role than hitherto perceived in identifying, understanding and articulating aspects of faith. It also caused the questioning of what previously were considered to be established facts of faith. Battle ensued concerning what might constitute “proper” Christian teaching. Alongside the historic debates, new positions emerged, to some degree mirroring the arguments in early Christianity, which led to controversy over Christological questions. There were “Arians” who saw the Son and the Spirit as subordinate to the Father, rather than consubstantial and co-eternal; there were “Socinians”, bearing the name of Socinus – Fausto Sozzini – who were anti-Trinitarian and denied the pre-existence of Christ; and there were “Deists”, who held a logical and rationalised belief in God as the Creator who then left the creation to its own devices and about whom further revelation was unnecessary. Watts gave a qualified welcome to the emphasis on human reason. But the tendency to deny the authority of scripture, the atoning death of Christ, and the teaching that God is Trinity found among groups who either claimed, or did not deny, the name of “Arian”, “Socinian” or “Deist” caused Watts much consternation. He was particularly opposed to Deism because it simply could not be reconciled with traditional Christian teaching. But while the detail of these theological standpoints was a cause of debate and controversy, their impact on the worship life of the churches was a cause of greater concern.

Both hot-headed “enthusiasm” and cold “rationalism” perturbed Watts. Aspects of Enlightenment thought had effectively reduced Christianity to a philosophical system realised in someone’s life through moral and charitable activity. The negative effect of rationalism, he believed, had been to leave the church’s worship dull, dry and lifeless. Daniel Defoe, who could always be depended on for a pithy epigram, described the churches as being in a “declining and decaying posture” because of the lack of spiritual vigour.[[24]](#endnote-24) The problem for Watts was how to renew the church’s worship without descending into enthusiasm. He believed that the truly converted person would demonstrate evidence of the work of grace on the soul and that this should be nurtured and encouraged, in the words of one commentator, by “championing an experimental religion that engages the Christian intellectually, affectively and volitionally”.[[25]](#endnote-25) For Watts, the emphasis on faith, as correct and reasonable belief, left no room for the sense of complete trust in the living God and the good news of salvation. It was this which led him to compose hymns to improve public worship but also to enable personal confession of saving faith.

Nevertheless, while Christian faith and worship should be dynamic, “enthusiasm” was to be avoided. Reason had a place to play in ensuring that vital religion appealed to the mind as well as the heart. But where knowledge of God was concerned, reason had its limits. For some, this led Watts into intellectual inconsistency, championing reason in his more philosophical publications but down-playing its role in matters of religion. For Watts himself, it led to trouble over the doctrine of the Trinity.

## Trinity

Commentators of his day and more recently have doubted Watts’s “orthodoxy” when discussing the Trinity. He confessed that the words of the Athanasian Creed, usually appealed to as the expression of the orthodox doctrine, were unreasonable. While understanding that human beings as creatures cannot fully know God the Creator, he was frustrated by what he saw as incomprehensible credal expressions: “How shall a poor weak creature be able to adjust and reconcile these clashing ideas, and to understand the mystery?” he asked. “Or must I believe and act blindfold, without understanding?”[[26]](#endnote-26)

This did not mean that he rejected the claim that God was eternally One and eternally Three, but it did lead to an attempted explanation which others found, at best, to stretch the confines of orthodox Christian thought. Graham Beynon describes Watts’s view as “a scheme hypothesizing an eternal human soul of Christ that is joined to the divine nature, and speaking of the Spirit more as a divine power than a divine personality”.[[27]](#endnote-27) The debates in the early church had seen the Son, or the Second Person of the Trinity, become human when born into the world (established by the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381). He was then confessed to have two natures, one fully divine and one fully human (at the Council of Chalcedon in 451). The personality of the Spirit had been affirmed at the Council of Constantinople (381). If Beynon is correct, Watts’s views seem to have strayed from the understanding established as orthodox by the middle of the fifth century.

The matter came to a head when Dissenting ministers in the south-west were accused of Arianism and an appeal was made to their London colleagues for adjudication. In 1719, the Salters’ Hall debates ensued, in which Dissenters divided between (largely Congregational) subscribers, who wanted ministers to “subscribe” to the Athanasian Creed, thus demonstrating their Trinitarian orthodoxy, and (largely Presbyterian) Non-subscribers, some of whom were probably Arian, but many of whom believed that human documents, such as creeds, could not have binding authority.[[28]](#endnote-28) Watts missed the debates due to illness, but confessed he would not have supported either position, desiring unity among the Dissenters and perceiving that doctrinal compromise would be necessary in order to achieve it. Such a stance did not help his reputation among those who sought to defend the doctrine of the Trinity.

One biographer noted that “the effect which the debates had in unhinging his mind, and directing his attention to the investigation of the point in dispute”[[29]](#endnote-29) led to disaster. In his prose writings about the Trinity,[[30]](#endnote-30) Watts seemed to some to have been overly willing to compromise with contemporary theological movements. As a result, Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the American Puritan and Congregationalist, sometimes considered “the first American Evangelical”, said of Watts:

I take him to be a very Disqualified person, for the Managing of the vast Subject he has undertaken … He is not only too shallow for it; but also led away with a Spurious and Criminal Charity, for those Abominable Idolaters, the Arians …[[31]](#endnote-31)

As a hymnwriter, however, Watts was able to express worship of God the Trinity in an orthodox fashion, especially in his doxologies. Here are three, found at the back of his hymn book *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*:

Glory to God the Trinity,

Whose Name has Mysteries unknown;

In Essence One, in Persons Three;

A social Nature, yet alone.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Perhaps the following is more conventional:

To God the Father, God, the Son,

And God the Spirit, Three in One,

Be Honour, Praise, and Glory giv’n

By all on Earth, and all in Heav’n.[[33]](#endnote-33)

as is:

To our eternal God

The Father and the Son

And Spirit all divine

Three Mysteries in One,

Salvation, Pow’r,

And Praise be giv’n,

By all on Earth,

And all in Heav’n.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Indeed, Watts produced one of the classic hymns of praise to the Trinity that begins “I Give immortal Praise to God the Father’s Love”[[35]](#endnote-35) and continues “To God the Son belongs Immortal Glory too” and then “To God the Spirit’s Name Immortal Worship give” before ending with the great confession:

Almighty God! To Thee

Be endless Honours done,

The Undivided Three

And the Mysterious One:

Where Reason fails

With all her Pow’rs,

There Faith prevails,

And Love adores.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The hymn is demonstrably orthodox: God is the “undivided three” and yet “mysterious one”. Reason is presented here as full of power but deficient when discussing not just the *doctrine* of the Trinity but the nature of God. And so faith, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1) prevails and the greatest of the virtues, “love”, adores. Watts’s point is that we know God only in as much as we worship God. Consequently reason itself is inadequate; we know God as God has chosen to be revealed. Reason, on its own, cannot help.

Of this hymn, and this very issue, Donald Hilton wrote:

I’ve heard [“where reason fails”] interpreted as being a criticism of reason – how poor reason is, emotion and love are all we need. But the text does not allow such an interpretation. Though partners in the search for truth, they are not equal partners. Like Paul, Watts, the hymn-writer theologian indicates a priority and it is given to reason.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Hilton here admonishes those who deny that Christian faith and practice require any thought. Emotion and love are necessary parts of the Christian life, but in themselves they can neither lead us into truth nor fulfil the Christian calling without reason. But care must be taken because, while Watts would almost certainly have agreed with this, he was also aware of reason’s shortcomings. Reason is not, for Watts, a way to discover truth apart from its role in interrogating the evidence. It does not find God through speculative thought, but helps to evaluate revelation, scripture, nature, and so forth, in order to make sense of what it sees.

However, God as Trinity lies beyond the senses; it is revealed to us. Clearly reason gives some kind of form to our understanding, or at least articulation, of the doctrine, but in itself reason could never have discovered the Trinity without God revealing it. Therefore Watts asserted that belief in God the Three in One and One in Three is not the result of blind faith, but a faith based on the love that we have for God – because God first loved us. This faith asserts what we know through our *experimental* religion, or what we have experienced as a result of hearing the gospel. Reason plays a significant part in religious comprehension, but when considering both God’s nature and God’s action, it requires aid. That aid comes through God’s revelation. These distinctions can be found in one of Watts’s communion hymns:

Nature with open Volume stands

To spread her Maker’s Praise abroad

And ev’ry Labour of his Hands

Shews something worthy of a God.

There is something, Watts claimed, in the world, the creation, nature, which resonates with the presence of God. But it is meaningful only because God has acted to save humankind. Salvation is a matter of revelation, without which we would know nothing about it. As a result, revelation takes precedence:

But in the Grace that rescu’d Man

His brightest Form of Glory shines;

Here, on the Cross, ’tis fairest drawn

In precious Blood and crimson Lines.[[38]](#endnote-38)

There are some truths we know that are simply beyond reason. These Watts called “mysteries” and chief among them are the Trinity and the Incarnation. He says of these that “when [they are] revealed unto us, we know merely the existence or reality and certainty of them, but cannot comprehend the manner and mode of whose they are”.[[39]](#endnote-39) As far as the mysteries are concerned, he claims, “Reason itself teaches me to believe some things that are above my understanding”.[[40]](#endnote-40) Or in verse:

Our Reason stretches all its Wings,

And climbs above the Skies:

But still how far beneath thy Feet

Our groveling Reason lies.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Despite how extreme this sounds (reason is “groveling”), there is no disparagement of reason in Watts’s work. But, his revulsion at Deism, motivated by his belief in the evangelical truths of human sin and its cure found only in Christ and the cross, mean that faith, or experimental religion (or that in the practice of religion someone can know the reality of God) is the source of knowledge of God. While reason might be able to interrogate faith and help lead to understanding, sometimes it simply falls short. After all, “the divine glories” are “above reason”, according to the title of the last-quoted hymn.

The mystery that is God is finally beyond our thought and imagination, a point of which Donald Hilton would have approved. But God is still made known to us, Christian faith teaches, as “through a glass darkly” in Jesus Christ and through the benefits that are ours because of the cross. And that was something that Watts felt should be celebrated and sung aloud.

## Poetry

Watts famously turned to poetry at a young age. Though not always based on a religious theme, it is true also that he turned his hand to expressing Christian teaching and experience while still a youth. The following acrostic was written “before he was six” years old. In many ways it summarises the theology Watts would proclaim and defend throughout his life:

**I** am a vile polluted lump of earth

**S**o I’ve continu’d ever since my birth;

**A**lthough Jehovah grace does daily give me,

**A**s sure this monster Satan will deceive me.

**C**ome therefore, Lord, from Satan’s claws release me.

**W**ash me in thy blood O Christ,

**A**nd grace divine impart,

**T**hen seal and try the corners of my heart,

**T**hat I in all things may be fit to do

**S**ervice to thee and sing thy praises too.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Total depravity (i.e., the deliberate failure to live according to divinely-created human nature) lies behind the first line, which leads to the dependence on God’s grace which, though bestowed daily, comes to him in the midst of a battle with the evil one. Only the blood of Christ can cleanse him sufficiently to live the life of service to God’s glory.

Similarly, the following acrostic presents themes of dependence on God’s grace to be washed clean of sins and also to gain understanding of God’s Word. Given the difficulties Watts experienced with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, it is worth noting that he begins the poem with “persons three”, though the “one-ness” of God is less explicit:

**I**mortall god in persons three

**S**weetly convey thy grace to mee

**A**id mee with wisdom from above

**A**nd compasse mee about with love

**C**over my failings Blest Jehove

**W**ash off my sins make cleane my hart

**A**nd righteousnesse to mee impart

**T**each mee to understand aright

**T**hy sacred word and with delight

**S**hall I peruse it day and night.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Watts turned to poetry throughout his life, even when responding to criticism. He was, by nature, shy and retiring and, though highly regarded as a preacher, his congregation complained that they otherwise saw little of him. His response was given in verse:

The noisy world complains of me

That I should shun their sight, and flee

Visits, and crowds, and company.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Short in stature (standing at under five feet tall), Watts was once in a coffee-house when a stranger expressed surprise, if not disdain: “What! Is that the great Dr. Watts?” In his response he chided the stranger for paying too much attention to outward appearances rather than whether the soul is right with God, while the mind, informed by reason and revelation, was the guide to life:

Were I so tall to reach the pole,

Or grasp the ocean with a span,

I must be measured by my soul.

The mind’s the standard of the man.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Watts composed poetry specifically for children. Though the language was perhaps more straightforward, there was little compromise over imagery or theology:

Happy’s the Child whose youngest Years

Receive Instruction well;

Who hates the Sinner’s Path, and fears

The Road that leads to Hell.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Poetry, for the child as for the adult, could be used to instruct in religion and also in morality. In a poem entitled “Against quarrelling and fighting”, Watts implored:

Let dogs delight to bark and bite

For God hath made them so –

But children, you should never let

Such angry passions rise;

Your little hands were never made

To tear each other’s eyes.

And he used poetry to convey to children not only the need for loyalty to their country but that Britain was especially blessed by God:

’Tis to thy Sov’reign grace I owe

That I was born on British ground,

Where streams of heavn’ly mercy flow

And words of sweet salvation sound.[[47]](#endnote-47)

These are just some examples from many of Watts turning to rhyme in order to make his point, in the belief that his point would be more memorable when put in verse.

So what of the praise of the churches?

## Hymn writer

It is to the period 1694 to 1696 that we can date a change in Watts’s outlook. Having attended a service at the Above Bar meeting house in Southampton, it is said that he complained about the singing. His father apparently challenged him: “Try then whether you can yourself produce something better”.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Watts was critical of all aspects of Christian worship, but held that Psalm singing was worst among them:

Perhaps the Modes of Preaching, in the best Churches, still want some degrees of Reformation; nor are the Methods of Prayer so perfect, as to stand in need of no Correction or Improvement: But of all our Religious Solemnities, *Psalmody* is the most unhappily managed …[[49]](#endnote-49)

The consequence was a detached and aloof congregation when in fact those present should be moved to joy by the gospel. Indeed, such scenes might hint at the possibility that members of the congregation were unconverted:

To see the dull indifference, the neglect and the thoughtless air that sits upon the faces of a whole assembly, while the psalm is on their lips, might tempt even a charitable observer to suspect the fervency of inward religion; and ’tis much to be feared that the minds of most of the worshippers are absent or unconcerned.[[50]](#endnote-50)

But there was also something amiss with the Psalms themselves. Psalm-singing had developed because those in the Calvinist tradition – as Watts undoubtedly was – tended to think that only biblical language could be used in divine worship. But, for Watts, the Psalm-singing of the day was grossly inadequate, a problem which stemmed at least in part, he claimed, from the Psalms themselves.

While we are kindling into divine Love by the Meditations of the *loving-kindness of God*, *and the Multitude of his tender Mercies*; within a few Verses, some dreadful Curse against Men is proposed to our Lips;[[51]](#endnote-51)

The problem, as he saw it, was in the singing of Psalms which adhered closely to the biblical text and therefore cast what he called “the Vail of Moses” over the language of praise. To Watts, clinging too closely to the words of the Psalms meant that the Church assumed “as its own” “a thousand Lines … which are not made for a Church in our Days”.[[52]](#endnote-52) In their literal form, the Psalms belonged to the old dispensation and therefore cannot glorify Christ or reflect the gospel. In wording at which we would rightly balk, he claimed that glorious praise of the creator is followed by a line containing “something in it so extremely Jewish and cloudy, that it darkens our Sight of God the Saviour”.[[53]](#endnote-53) However, before attempting to reform the practice of singing metrical psalms, Watts first turned to hymn-writing.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Watts published *Hymns and Spiritual Songs in Three Books* in 1707 with a number of revised and expanded versions produced between then and 1719. The three “books” or sections were first, paraphrases of scripture verses; second, hymns “of mere humane Composure” which were “Composed on Divine Subjects”; and third, hymns composed to be sung when the Lord’s Supper was celebrated. These end with some doxologies and four hosannas. In its final edition, there were 150 hymns based on specific paraphrases of scripture, 170 hymns based on divine themes, twenty hymns to be sung at the Lord’s Supper and a further twenty-five doxologies and hosannas giving a total of 365.

Apart from the three sections, there is no order in the hymn book and John Wesley might well have had that in mind when he wrote, in the foreword to his *Collection of Hymns, For the Use of the People called Methodists*: “The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians”.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Disordered or not, one thing that becomes clear when reading Watts’s hymns is that they are devoid of any pretension. There are very few references to obscure biblical imagery. Though warm and fervid, there is a formality to the language that arose not simply from what in the eighteenth century was considered to be polite but from recognising God’s awesome (at times “awful”) other-ness as Creator and Redeemer. And yet, the language is earthy and easily understood. Their intended reach was definitely beyond that of his own congregation; Watts was writing for the Church catholic. Clarity was primary; the hymns were to articulate the gospel and offer praise to God in a way that the congregation would find comprehensible. Such an approach to language has been traced back to the reforms undertaken by the Royal Society and taught at Rowe’s Academy, which required a “close, naked, natural way of speaking”;[[56]](#endnote-56) it constitutes language which has been summarised as “a simple and telling vocabulary, easily memorised”.[[57]](#endnote-57) And so, as Harry Escott concluded, “Watts had to lay his poetic glories aside and dress the profound message of the Gospel in the home spun verse and language of the people”.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Watts was critical of the practice of “lining out” a Psalm, though he considered that there might, for the time being, be no alternative. As a consequence, he attempted to keep sense within each line so that the hymn’s meaning was not lost due to the breaking up of each verse. This brings a sharpness and a focus to his hymns in which the evangelical truths come to the fore; God’s grace shown to human sinners through salvation wrought by Christ and his cross. His hymns give voice to the congregation in responding to this truth with thanksgiving and joy at being counted among the saints, giving to God what he calls, in a number of hymns, “immortal praise”, or a recognition that the praise of God will be never-ending. That being said, it soon becomes clear why of the 365 hymns in the book, only a small number are sung today. There are at least two reasons for this, both of which concern how changes occur to our thinking over time.

The first reason concerns changes in theological outlook. Watts was a moderate Calvinist. He accepted the sinfulness of human beings and our inability to do anything about that condition. God in his grace planned to save some from eternal damnation. These were God’s “elect” or “saints” for whom Christ’s death on the cross atoned for sin. This is God’s doing not ours. Stark accounts of God’s election can be found in Watts’s hymns. For example, “Electing Grace: or Saints, beloved in Christ” in which Watts references the *pactum salutis* (the Covenant of Salvation), made in eternity between God the Father and God the Son in which the latter promises to become incarnate and to die on the cross in order to save God’s elect:

*Christ be my first Elect*, he said,

Then chose our Souls in *Christ* our Head:

Before he gave the Mountains Birth,

Or laid Foundations for the Earth.

Predestinated to be Sons,

Born by degrees, but chose at once;

A new regenerated Race,

To praise the Glory of his Grace.[[59]](#endnote-59)

God’s benevolence in this act of election is not to be doubted, according to “Election, Sovereign and Free”, though the question asked might be troubling to twenty-first century minds:

May not the Sovereign Lord on high

Dispense his Favours as he will,

Chuse some to Life, while others dye,

And yet be just and gracious still?[[60]](#endnote-60)

If taken at face value, then these words do not reflect belief in the doctrine of “double predestination” because God is active in choosing (electing) some; the others are left to their fate. Known as the doctrine of preterition, that God is passive in reprobation, this reflects Calvin’s view but not necessarily that of the Calvinists for whom, it seems, the eternal fate of each individual has been actively predestined. And yet Watts saw no contradiction between this teaching and the insistence that God’s grace was open to all providing they responded positively to hearing about it. The call in “The Promises of the Covenant of Grace” appears general:

Come, and he’ll cleanse our spotted Souls,

And wash away our Stains

In the dear Fountain that his Son

Pour’d from his dying Veins.[[61]](#endnote-61)

The onus is squarely on human beings to respond and Watts was critical of those who were too slow to do so, which he termed “spiritual sloth”:

My drowzie Powers, why sleep ye so?

Awake, my sluggish Soul!

Nothing has half thy Work to do,

Yet nothing’s half so dull.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Second, it is not theology alone but language itself develops over time and some of the ways in which Watts expressed himself would either be meaningless or would have a different meaning in the twenty-first century. Both theology and language render many of Watts’s hymns unsingable in our day.

Take, for example, in the First Book, entitled “The Deity and Humanity of Christ”. It is reproduced in full.

Ere the blue Heav’ns were stretch’d abroad

From everlasting was the Word;

With God He was; the Word was God,

And must divinely be ador’d.

By his own Pow’r all Things were made;

By him supported all Things stand;

He is the Whole Creation’s Head,

And Angels fly at his command.

Ere sin was born, or Satan fell,

He led the Host of Morning Stars;

(Thy Generation who can tell,

Or count the Number of thy Years?)

But lo, he leaves those heav’nly Forms;

The Word descends and dwells in Clay,

That he may hold Converse with Worms,

Dress’d in such feeble Flesh as they.

Mortals with Joy beheld his Face,

Th’ eternal Father’s only Son:

How full of Truth! how full of Grace!

When thro’ his Eyes the Godhead shone!

Archangels leave their blest Abode,

To learn new Myst’ries here, and tell

The Loves of our descending God,

The Glories of Immanuel.

In many ways, this hymn includes all the main elements we find in Watts’s work. It hails the descent and, in a sense, humiliation of the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, to take on flesh in order to save humankind. We find a hint of the *pactum salutis* in the second verse (“Ere Sin was born, or Satan fell”), and there are traces of Election and Predestination in his hymnody as a whole, though he uses them usually to acknowledge God’s sovereignty in salvation rather than confirm that salvation and damnation are preordained in eternity. Watts emphasised the *joy* which mortals can feel when they see Christ. And yet a sense of human worthlessness pervades his hymns as seen when it is contrasted with the goodness, holiness and righteousness of God. Often this leads to a reference to mortal life as dwelling in “clay” and “feeble flesh”, while one of his most common images for human beings is “worms”. For example:

Great God! how infinite art thou!

What worthless Worms are we!

Let the whole Race of Creatures bow,

And pay their Praise to thee.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Usually, Watts’s reference to “worms” offers a stark contrast to the breadth of God’s love and grace. Despite being undeserving, God still lavishes his gifts on us, especially the gift of salvation because, as well as being worthless, the worm is helpless:

Poor helpless Worms in thee possess,

Grace, Wisdom, Pow’r and Righteousness;

Thou art our mighty All, and we

Give our whole selves, O Lord, to thee.[[64]](#endnote-64)

In another hymn, “The Church’s Beauty in the Eyes of Christ”, Watts has Christ address the Church and proclaims, in verse 3, the effect of God’s love:

*Thou art all Fair, my Bride, to me,*

*I will behold no Spot in thee*.

What mighty Wonders Love performs,

And puts a comeliness on Worms![[65]](#endnote-65)

But Watts might well have been obsessed. Take his paraphrase of Psalm 8:

When I survey the Stars,

And all their shining Forms;

Lord, what is Man! that worthless Thing,

Akin to Dust and Worms.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Of these worms, as Alan Sell pointed out, “Watts himself has slithered them in; they are not in Psalm 8”.[[67]](#endnote-67) With this, Sell began an account of theological changes in Congregationalism regarding the Doctrine of God. From the sixteenth century, Congregationalists espoused a scholastic form of Calvinism which asserted the salvation of the elect alone through God’s predestinating grace. By the end of the nineteenth century, Congregationalists were favouring God’s loving Fatherhood over God’s offended justice and, therefore, God’s love of all.[[68]](#endnote-68) Watts is located at the point when scholastic Calvinism was beginning to be modified. While he did not dispense with the terms of Calvinism completely, he seemed assured of the ability of all human beings to respond to the gospel and insisted that this was their duty which was open to everyone on their way to eternal bliss. He did not understand this as God’s benevolence towards all. His sense of God’s holiness and justice in the face of human sin was too profound for him to accept completely the idea that God does not punish sin and this confirmed, for him, that only the penitent will be saved.

Another description favoured by Watts was to speak about the blood of Christ being poured out for our salvation. Watts saw no anomaly between a wrathful Father who is angry at human sin being appeased by the shedding of the Son’s blood. Indeed, it is the sprinkling of Christ’s blood, or the cross as propitiation for human sin, that appeases God. This is clearly seen in the hymn: “Access to the Throne of Grace by a Mediator”, verse 3:

Rich were the Drops of Jesus’ Blood,

That calm’d his frowning Face,

That sprinkled o’er the burning Throne,

And turn’d the Wrath to Grace.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Here Watts is explicit that it is Christ shedding his blood that enabled God’s anger at sinful human beings to be transformed into grace. The metaphor is stretched to see “sprinkling” of the blood over God’s throne, almost mirroring some of the rituals of the Old Testament (Leviticus 4:17, for example). Christian theologians subsequently saw Christ’s life and death as *the result* of God’s love and grace rather than *the cause* of it. But for Watts, the argument for penal substitution could be taken for granted. Rather than diminish God’s love and the saint’s joy, this teaching, for Watts, seems to enhance it. He lived in an age when penal substitution simply was not problematic. God could be angry about human sin *and* still be benevolent towards his creation; Watts did not see the two as mutually exclusive, or unbiblical or, according to reason, incompatible.

As a result, Watts did not consider it incongruous to speak of God’s “vengeance”; the word recurs in his hymns. He even gives the title “Hell: or The Vengeance of God”[[70]](#endnote-70) to one:

With holy Fear and humble Song,

The dreadful God our Souls adore;

Rev’rence and Awe become the Tongue

That speaks the Terrors of his Pow’r.

Far in the Deep where Darkness dwells,

The Land of Horror and Despair

Justice has built a dismal Hell,

And laid her Stores of Veng’ance there.

We see in these first two verses the assertion that God, or God’s justice, has been affronted by human sin and has created “hell” as a place where that justice will be satisfied. He goes on to describe what tormented souls will eternally experience there:

[Eternal Plagues and heavy Chains,[[71]](#endnote-71)

Tormenting Racks and fiery Coals,

And Darts t’inflict immortal Pains,

Dipt in the Blood of damned Souls.

There Satan the first Sinner lies,

And roars, and bites his Iron Bands;

In vain the Rebel strives to rise,

Crush’d with the Weight of both thy Hands.]

Those who find themselves in eternal torment have only themselves to blame because in life they “scorned” Christ’s grace and “incensed a dreadful God”.[[72]](#endnote-72) It seems that, for Watts, they could have decided otherwise:

There guilty Ghosts of Adam’s Race

Shriek out, and howl beneath thy Rod;

Once they could scorn a Saviour’s Grace,

But they incens’d a dreadful God.

Tremble, my Soul, and kiss the Son;

Sinner, obey the Saviour’s Call;

Else your Damnation hastens on,

And Hell gapes wide to wait your Fall.

We see a further example in “A Song of Praise to God the Redeemer”:[[73]](#endnote-73)

Let the old Heathens tune their Song

Of great Diana and of Jove;

But the sweet Theme that moves my Tongue

Is my Redeemer and his Love.

From praise of God’s love, Watts provides a vivid picture of the gaping mouth of Hell which is waiting to receive the impenitent sinner and provide a place of “endless pain” required by God’s justice and vengeance:

Behold a God descends and dies,

To save my Soul from gaping Hell!

How the black Gulph where Satan lies,

Yawn’d to receive me when I fell!

How Justice frown’d and Veng’ance stood

To drive me down to endless Pain!

But the great Son propos’d his Blood

And heav’nly Wrath grew mild again.

Again, it is the outpouring of Jesus’ blood which enables God’s wrath to subside. The transactional nature of salvation is asserted as is the substitutionary nature of atonement. Once confirmed in the narrative of salvation, Watts ends on a note of “endless” (or “immortal”) praise:

Infinite Lover! gracious Lord!

To thee be endless Honours giv’n;

Thy wond’rous Name shall be ador’d

Round the wide Earth, and wider Heav’n.

Another recurring theme in Watts’s hymns, arising from his conviction that the fate of humankind was either eternal suffering or eternal bliss, was that death for the Christian ought to be welcomed, but death for the non-Christian was the gateway to everlasting punishment. These constitute what Bernard Lord Manning called “ghastly poems”.[[74]](#endnote-74) Two hymns included in his collection, one following the other, explore this. The theme of eternal punishment for the impenitent sits alongside the claim that death can come at a time when least expected in “The Death of a Sinner”:

My Thoughts on awful Subjects roll,

Damnation and the Dead;

What Horrors seize the guilty Soul

Upon a dying Bed!

Ling’ring about these mortal Shores,

She makes a long Delay,

Till like a Flood with rapid Force

Death sweeps the Wretch away.

Then swift and dreadful she descends

Down to the fiery Coast

Amongst abominable Fiends

Herself a frighted Ghost.

There endless Crouds of Sinners lie,

And Darkness makes their Chains;

Tortur’d with keen Despair they cry,

Yet wait for fiercer Pains.

None of this helps the unfortunate reprobate, of course, because it constitutes appropriate divine punishment. And so, despite God’s love, their plight will be ignored:

Not all their Anguish and their Blood,

For their old Guilt atones,

Nor the Compassion of a God

Shall hearken to their Groans.

And after recounting the horrors suffered by the damned, Watts, and the singer, both offer thanks for their own salvation:

Amazing Grace, that kept my Breath,

Nor bid my Soul remove,

Till I had learn’d my Saviour’s Death,

And well insur’d his Love!

It is difficult to know what kind of occasion would warrant the singing of such a hymn, though it is likely to have followed the preaching of a sermon warning the congregation that they should make their decision to accept Christ’s salvation while there was still time. Stephen Orchard has suggested that “Watts was always better at celebrating grace than in frightening us with hell”,[[75]](#endnote-75) though it must be confessed that this was not for want of trying.

It is equally difficult to see how the next hymn in the collection, “The Death and Burial of a Saint”, could be sung today. It has a more positive understanding of the saint’s experience in eternity, but expresses it in terms that, to our eyes, might lack pastoral sensitivity:

Why do we mourn departing Friends?

Or Shake at Death’s Alarms?

’Tis but the Voice that Jesus sends

To call them to his Arms.

Are we not tending upward too

As fast as Time can move?

Nor should we with the Hours more slow,

To keep us from our Love.

Why should we tremble to convey

Their Bodies to the Tomb?

There the dear Flesh of Jesus lay,

And left a long Perfume.

The Graves of all his Saints he bless’d,

And soft’ned ev’ry Bed:

Where should the dying Members rest,

But with their dying Head?

Thence he arose, ascending high,

And shew’d our Feet the Way:

Up to the Lord our Flesh shall fly,

At the great Rising Day.

Then let the last loud Trumpet sound,

And bid our Kindred rise:

Awake, ye Nations under Ground;

Ye Saints, ascend the Skies.

Thus far, possible theological pitfalls have been identified with Watts’s hymns. But there are also linguistic difficulties. Words such as “dreadful” and “awful” occur again and again, but their meaning is “full of awe” and “full of dread” (in the sense of “holy fear” or “reverence”) rather than “unpleasant” or “disagreeable”. But such differences in meaning result in it being impossible to sing hymns such as “God the Son equal with the Father”:

Bright King of Glory, dreadful God!

Our Spirits bow before thy Seat:

To thee we lift an humble Thought

And worship at thine awful Feet.[[76]](#endnote-76)

But there is also expression which we would not dream of using. Take “Look on him whom they pierced and mourn”,[[77]](#endnote-77) verse 1:

Infinite Grief! amazing Woe!

Behold my bleeding Lord:

Hell and the *Jews* conspir’d his Death,

And us’d the *Roman* Sword.

Then verse 3 and 4:

But knotty Whips and ragged Thorns

In vain do I accuse;

In vain I blame the *Roman* Bands,

And the more spiteful *Jews*.

’Twere you, my Sins, my cruel Sins,

His chief Tormentors were;

Each of my Crimes became a Nail,

And Unbelief the Spear.

To modern eyes, Watts’s conclusion, that it is human sin (which he is willing to personalise: it was “*my* Sins, *my* cruel Sins”) that led to Christ’s crucifixion, in no way mitigates his mention of the “Jews” bearing responsibility for Jesus’ death. Watts’s references in his hymns to the Jewish people are consistently negative. “This was not a conscious anti-Semitism in the modern sense”, writes Stephen Orchard, “but it is still anti-Semitic”.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Again, a recurring image in Watts’s hymns concern bowels and their movement, sometimes ours, as in “The Beatitudes”, verse 5:

Bless’d are the Men whose Bowels move,

And melt with Sympathy and Love;

From Christ the Lord shall they obtain

Like Sympathy and Love again.[[79]](#endnote-79)

At other times, the bowels belong to Jesus or to God, such as in “Christ’s compassion to the weak and tempted”:

With Joy we meditate the Grace

Of our High Priest above;

His Heart is made of Tenderness

His Bowels melt with Love.[[80]](#endnote-80)

Or, again, consider the hymn “Love and Hatred”:

Now by the Bowels of my God,

His sharp Distress, his sore Complaints,

By his last Groans, his dying Blood,

I charge my Soul to love the Saints.[[81]](#endnote-81)

It surely compounds the difficulty to associate God’s “bowels” with “distress”, “sore complaints”, and “groans”. It would simply be impossible for bowels and their movement to be sung about in public worship today. But this is an example of how language changes over time. In Watts’s day, the “bowels” were where “affections” or “emotions” were to be found. For the Hebrews, this meant particularly the “tender affections”, such as kindness, decency and sympathy. This is true for human beings, but it is also true for God. It is where God’s grace and love, God’s benevolence and compassion, are located. Nevertheless, as Bernard Lord Manning concluded: “Unhappily for Watts, many of his words have lost their caste: and verse after verse of his psalms and hymns we find ruined by a turn of phrase that, once venerable, is become lost”.[[82]](#endnote-82)

What, then, of Watts’s Psalms?

## The Psalms

Watts’s Psalms were first published as *The Psalms of David imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* in 1719, and the title itself reveals his intent. As already explained, in literal form Watts considered that the Psalms could not sufficiently reflect the Christian gospel and, consequently, they had to be rewritten. Watts himself identified, as needing to be changed, the Psalmist’s “personal enemies” which he spiritualised as “sin”, “Satan” and “temptation”. When the Psalmist wrote about the “fear of God”, Watts added “faith” and “love”. When the Psalmist mentions the Temple and its sacrificial rites, Watts replaced this with Christ’s Atonement and Cross. Instead of desire for material blessings, Watts has the Psalmist speak of spiritual ones.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Watts’s paraphrasing was not simply the result of reinterpreting the Psalms in Christian terms, a process he justified by the claim that, had David lived in New Testament times, his verse would have reflected Christ’s mission, his atoning death and resurrection. But his paraphrases were justified also because the language of worship, and song, should reflect the response of the congregation. As a result, the words of the revised Psalm should arise from, and resonate with, the singers. As Harry Escott noted: “While it is essential to keep close to the original when God’s word is *read*, our response to that Word in singing cannot be so stereotyped, as worship-song must be our own peculiar response”.[[84]](#endnote-84)

Sometimes, Watts remains close to the original, such as in Psalm 46, First Part, which nevertheless he entitles “The Church’s Safety and Triumph among Nations Desolations”:

Psalm 46

1 God is our refuge and strength, God is the Refuge of his Saints,

a very present help in trouble. When Storms of sharp Distress invade;

E’er we can offer our Complaints

Behold him present with his Aid.

**2**Therefore will not we fear, Let Mountains from their Seats be hurl’d

though the earth be removed, Down to the Deep, and buried there;

and though the mountains be carried Convulsions shake the solid World,

into the midst of the sea; Our Faith shall never yield to fear.

**3**Though the waters thereof roar Lord may the troubled Ocean roar,

and be troubled, though the mountains In sacred Peace our Souls abide,

shake with the swelling thereof. While every Nation, every Shore

Trembles and dreads the swelling Tide.

**4**There is a river, the streams whereof There is a Stream whose gentle Flow

shall make glad the city of God, Supplies the City of our God;

the holy place of the tabernacles Life, Love and Joy still gliding thro’

of the most High. And wat’ring our divine Abode.

That sacred Stream, thine holy Word,

That all our raging Fear controls:

Sweet Peace thy Promises afford.

And give new strength to fainting Souls.

**5**God is in the midst of her; *Sion* enjoys her Monarch’s Love,

she shall not be moved: Secure against a threat’ning Hour

God shall help her, and that right early. Nor can her firm Foundations move,

Built on his Truth, and arm’d with Power.

However, on other occasions, the original Psalm is unrecognisable from Watts’s paraphrase. Some were quite critical of this. The prominent evangelical cleric William Romaine (1714-1795) commented: “As for his psalms, they are so far from the mind of the Spirit, that I am sure if David was to read them, he would not know anyone of them to be his … The Scripture wants no mending, nay, it is always worse for mending”.[[85]](#endnote-85)

Consider the following two well-known examples. First, Watts’s version of Psalm 98, Part 2, which he entitled “The Messiah and the Coming Kingdom”. We know it as “Joy to the World”. For Watts, this was not an Advent or Christmas carol but a hymn to be sung all year round. Dissenters in the eighteenth century simply did not observe the Christian seasons. If we set Watts’s words alongside the words of the Psalm, we see just how freely he paraphrased it.

Psalm 98

4 Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all Joy to the World, the Lord is come!

the earth: make a loud noise, Let Earth receive her King;

and rejoice, and sing praise. Let ev’ry Heart prepare him Room,

5 Sing unto the Lord with the harp; And Heav’n and Nature sing.

with the harp, and the voice of a psalm.

6 With trumpets and sound of cornet Joy to the Earth! the Saviour reigns!

make a joyful noise before the Lord, Let Men their Songs employ;

the King. While Fields and Flood, Rocks, Hills

7 Let the sea roar, and the fulness and Plains,

thereof; the world, and they Repeat the sounding Joy.

that dwell therein.

8 Let the floods clap their hands:

let the hills be joyful together.

No more let Sins and Sorrows grow,

Nor Thorns infest the Ground;

He comes to make His Blessings flow

Far as the Curse is Found.

9 Before the Lord; for he cometh to judge He rules the World with Truth and Grace;

the earth: with righteousness shall he And makes the Nations prove

judge the world, and the people with The Glories of his Righteousness,

equity. And Wonders of his Love.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Verse 3 is not based on words from Psalm 98 but from the story found in Genesis 3, namely the disobedience in Eden and the punishment which follows. Here, the reference is to that punishment now being overturned because the Messiah, Jesus, has come.

Another well-known example which illustrates how freely Watts approached his task is Psalm 122. It is one of the Psalms of Ascent in which the Psalmist is going up to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. Watts changed this to the Christian going to church. Thus:

I was glad when they said unto me,

let us go unto the house of the Lord.

Our feet shall stand

within thy gates, O Jerusalem.

became

How pleas’d and blest was I

To hear the People cry,

“Come let us seek our God to-day!”

Yes, with a cheerful Zeal

We haste to Zion’s Hill,

And there our Vows and Honours pay.[[87]](#endnote-87)

While, for the Psalmist, “Zion” is the hill on which Jerusalem was built, for Watts it represented the Dissenters’ Meeting Houses, some of which bore the name. As David Fountain puts it, Watts “changes the Psalm in order to apply it to the worship of the local church”.[[88]](#endnote-88)

Finally, Watts said he had “naturalised” the Psalms. In other words, he replaced Israel with Britain. Psalm 100 is headed “Praise to the Lord from all Nations”:

Sing to the Lord with joyful Voice;

Let every Land His Name adore;

The *British* Isles shall send the Noise

Across the Ocean to the Shore.[[89]](#endnote-89)

This is perhaps one of the least provocative and unproblematic references in his work. Watts was thoroughly patriotic and convinced that “Britain” (which, for Watts, really meant “England”) had an important role, under God’s providence, to play in the world.[[90]](#endnote-90) He pursued this in his hymns where Britain achieves some exclusivity:

Ye *British* Isles who read his Love

In long Epistles from Above,

(He hath not sent his Sacred Word

To every Land) Praise ye the Lord.[[91]](#endnote-91)

Britain enjoys God’s protection:

This *Northern* Isle, our Native Land,

Lies safe in God th’ Almighty’s Hand:

Our Foes of Vict’ry dream in vain,

And wear the captivating Chain.

Alongside protection, under God’s providence, Britain is ruled by kind monarchs:

He builds and guards the *British* Throne;

And makes it gracious, like his own;

Makes our successive Princes kind,

And gives our Dangers to the Wind.][[92]](#endnote-92)

Secular societies understand their existence in social and political rather than religious terms and, on the whole, so now does the Church. Furthermore, it would seem indefensible to claim that any nation was in receipt of God’s particular blessing or that it was consequently beyond reproach. It would simply be impossible to sing such words today.

Watts, however, appears to have been pleased with his work. He wrote:

Though there are many gone before me, who have taught the *Hebrew* psalmist to speak *English*, yet I think I may assume this pleasure of being the first who hath brought down the royal author into the common affairs of the christian life, and led the psalmist of *Israel* into the church of Christ, without anything of a *jew* about him.[[93]](#endnote-93)

Watts’s expression leaves something to be desired, and the paragraph reveals a rare moment of “boasting” on his part. Nevertheless, he accurately describes how he had revised the Psalms and followed his own guidance in order to render them more suitable for the church’s worship. In doing so, of course, they ceased to be the Psalms of the Bible, leaving behind any resonance with the history of the Jewish people. While the words themselves might have seemed more appropriate for the Christian community’s praise, the separation from the history of Israel was problematic both theologically and in the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people.

## Watts at his best

Widely considered the “father” of the English hymn, Alan Sell declared Watts to be “our greatest hymn writer”,[[94]](#endnote-94) though he might have intended “greatest” in Congregationalism and in the traditions which formed the United Reformed Church. Erik Routley was willing to name Watts and Charles Wesley as the two greatest English hymn writers, but not to differentiate between them.[[95]](#endnote-95) For Bernard Lord Manning, Watts had “the greater mind, the wider outlook, the more philosophic approach to human life and to the Christian revelation”. Watts placed his thoughts in a more cosmic setting – “were the whole realm of nature mine” – and “has also … more original poetry in him”.[[96]](#endnote-96) But Wesley “never, or almost never, is caught out by his metre”. His hymns were, therefore, “superior in literary form” and Wesley “the greater artist”.[[97]](#endnote-97)

For some, such as Donald Hilton, much depends on what is being searched for: “heart warming intimacy with Christ and his Church” with Wesley, “wondering praise at the greatness of a God beyond both our description and imagination” with Watts.[[98]](#endnote-98) Although Wesley composed more hymns than Watts, around 6,500 to Watts’s *c*.750, some see Wesley’s as more narrowly focused, and Watts’s as offering a far wider range of subjects. For Thomas Milner, Watts surpassed Wesley for “originality, catholicity, and versatility of genius”.[[99]](#endnote-99) Samuel Johnson identified in Watts a “vigorous and active” imagination as well as a “well-tuned” ear. Indeed, “his diction, though perhaps not always exactly pure, has such copiousness and splendour, as shows that he was but a very little distance from excellence”.[[100]](#endnote-100) He concluded: “Happy will be that reader whose mind is disposed by [Watts’s] verses or prose, to imitate him in all but his non-conformity, to copy his benevolence to man, and his reverence to God’.[[101]](#endnote-101)

Despite the issues of theology and language which locate him in a different religious, social and political world to our own, there is no escaping the fact that where Watts is good, he is sublime. Although Watts included it as a hymn to be sung when the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, Christians continue to find their feelings on Good Friday majestically expressed in the words of “Crucifixion to the Word by the Cross of Christ”:

When I survey the wond’rous Cross

On which the Prince of Glory dy’d,

My richest Gain I count but loss,

And pour Contempt on all my Pride.,

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast

Save in the Death of *Christ* my God;

All the vain things that charm me most,

I sacrifice them to his Blood.

See from his Head, his Hands, his feet,

Sorrow and Love flow mingled down;

Did e’er such Love and Sorrow meet?

Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?

[His dying Crimson like a Robe

Spreads o’er his Body on the Tree,

Then am I dead to all the Globe

And all the Globe is dead to me.]

Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,

That were a Present far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my Soul, my Life, my All.[[102]](#endnote-102)

There is objectivity in this hymn; surveying the cross is in itself a revelation. And yet it appeals to a subjectivity where the one observing the spectacle is informed by Christian teaching but responds with the mind (reason) and the affections. The words express awe and wonder at the spectacle of the crucified one (“Love so amazing, so divine”) but only as it is informed by doctrine: this is “*Christ* my God”. While an image of suffering and of shed blood – “His dying Crimson like a Robe” – here can be observed the meeting of divine sorrow, or God’s sorrow (not anger) over human sin and the death of the Son, with divine love which is what leads to the redemptive act. And the response is clear. All worldly riches, all personal ambitions and achievements (even perhaps charitable ones) fall below contempt unless they result from devotion to the God whose Son died for us. That comes first, though it demands soul, life and all.

Whatever else we read into Watts’s hymns, we need to read out of them his genuine sense of release, of forgiveness, of being in harmony with God because of what God has done and the profound sense of joy which results. It is interesting to note Geoffrey Nuttall’s stated preference for Philip Doddridge’s hymns, specifically because he saw in them, rather than in Watts, a sense of joy in the Lord, though admittedly this related to Nuttall learning to play the piano as a child and “O happy day that fixed my choice” being one of the pieces he played.[[103]](#endnote-103) There can be little doubt that, in his hymns, Watts sought to convey the deep-seated joy of the Christian. Reference has already been made to “Joy to the world”. But in closing, let us consider a hymn revealing what one commentator describes as Watts’s “cheerful piety”,[[104]](#endnote-104) namely “Heavenly Joy on Earth”,[[105]](#endnote-105) which begins:

[Come, we that love the Lord,

And let our Joys be known;

Join in a Song with sweet Accord,

And thus surround the Throne.

The hymn was included in *Congregational Praise* and *Rejoice and Sing*. In the former the tune was St Michael, which originated in the Genevan Psalter of 1551. In the latter, the tune is Windermere. In the church in which I grew up, it was sung to “Marching to Zion” which might appear irreverent to some, but it was jolly and in one sense captured something of the joy that Watts sought to convey. Both books included six verses. There are some minor, but important differences between the original (which consisted of ten verses) and the version in these hymn books.

Verse 3 (but verse 2 in the two hymn books) conveys the suggestion that singing – as a joyful pastime (which might not resonate, generally, with today’s culture) – results from our hearing of the gospel and receiving its merits. As found in the original, it reads:

Let those refuse to sing

That never knew our God,

But Fav’rites of the heav’nly King

May speak their Joys abroad.

“Fav’rites” reflects Watts’s belief in election; subsequent amended versions, as in the two hymn books named above, replace the word with “children”.

What was verse 8 in the original:

[The Men of Grace have found

Glory begun below:

Celestial Fruits on earthly Ground,

From Faith and Hope may grow.]

is included as verse 3 in *Congregational Praise* and in *Rejoice and Sing* in amended form: “For we by grace have found …” Otherwise the version in each hymn book reflects the original, apart from four verses which both books omit. The omission of the following two verses might appear to be defensible, if not appropriate:

[The God that rules on high

And thunders when he please,

That rides upon the stormy Sky

And manages the Seas:]

This awful God is ours

Our Father and our Love;

He shall send down his hean’ly Pow’rs

To carry us above.

But lost is a true and worthy insight: verse 2 in the original, omitted both in *Congregational Praise* and in *Rejoice and Sing* reads:

The Sorrows of the Mind

Be banish’d from this Place;

Religion never was design’d

To make our Pleasures less.]

We might see in the first two lines a desire to deny life’s struggles and troubles undergirded by a tendency to pretend that everything is “just fine”. But that would be to misunderstand Watts. This verse is intended to emphasise the genuinely changed nature of the Christian. Having one’s state changed from among the damned to among the saints, knowing the love of God in salvation, brings a deep-seated joy, in Watts’s view, which transcends all else, even the suffering that he knew only too well. And “religion” (there was no concept of “religion” in the eighteenth century to correspond with ours today – when used it simply meant “Christianity”) is meant to reflect that joy both in the church and its worship and in the world. The pressures facing the church in our day are different to those facing Watts, but at his best his poetry reminds us that the gospel is a source of joy for people. And the church, collectively, exists for us to know, to experience, and to live in that joy rather than feel burdened by keeping the show on the road.

What, then, would it look like if we were to grasp that fundamental gospel reality and live it out fully? That is Watts’s challenge to us today. And we find it in the fourth omitted verse which, despite confirming that the promise of a future blissful state is what motivated Watts, affirms that this enables the living of a joyful life in the here and now. It is not, for Watts, simply “pie in the sky when we die”, but a firm belief in “life before death”. We read in verse 7:

Yes, and before we rise

To that immortal State,

The Thoughts of such amazing Bliss

Should constant Joys create.

1. Bernard Lord Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (London: Epworth, 1948 [1942]), p. 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Johnson, “The Life of Isaac Watts D.D.”, in Isaac Watts, *Discourses on the World to Come* (Berwick: W. Lochhead, n.d.), p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There is a hint of this, for example, in Donald Hilton, *Where Reason Fails*, Free to Believe Pamphlet. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Arthur P. Davis, *Isaac Watts* (London: Independent Press, 1948), p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. David Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered* (Harpenden: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust, 1974), p. 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For brief assessments that go beyond Watts the hymn-writer, see Andrew C. Thompson, “What Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge were doing when they were not writing hymns”, in *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (2000), pp. 469-482; Alan Argent, *Isaac Watts: Poet, Thinker, Pastor*, The Congregational Lecture 1999 (London: Congregational Memorial Hall Trust (1978) Ltd., 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1884), p. 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Erik Routley, *Isaac Watts: A Heritage Biography* (London: Independent Press, 1961), p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Johnson, “The Life of Isaac Watts D.D.”, p. v. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs in Three Books* (London: Printed for W. Strahan, J. and F. Rivington, J. Buckland, G. Keith, L. Hawes, W. Clarke & B. Collins, T. Longman, T. Field, and E. and C. Dilly, 1774),Book 2, Hymn 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*,Book 3, Hymn 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in Thomas Wright, *The Life of Isaac Watts* (London: C. J. Farncombe & Sons Ltd., 1914), p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Davis, *Isaac Watts*, p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Quoted in Wright, *The Life of Isaac Watts*, p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Watts, *The Psalms of David*, p. 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Carys Brown, *Friends, Neighbours, Sinners: Religious Difference and English Society, 1689-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Isaac Watts, *An Humble Attempt Toward the Revival of Practical Religion Among Christians, and Particularly the Protestant Dissenters* (London: printed for E. Matthews, at the Bible in Pater-Noster-Row; R. Ford, at the Angel, and R. Hett, at the Bible and Crown, both in the Poultry, 1731), p. 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Dr Sacheverell* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Quoted in Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, p. 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This according to Routley, *Isaac Watts: A Heritage Biography*, p. 8; see also Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts D.D.*, pp. 205, 224; Wright, *The Life of Isaac Watts*, pp. 61, 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See Wright, *The Life of Isaac Watts*, p. 54 and Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*,p. 40 who argue he was chaplain at that time and Davis, *Isaac Watts*, p. 34 who suggests his chaplaincy came later, probably when living with Abney (from 1712). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For an account of the subtle differences in eighteenth-century theology, see Alan P. F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (Worthing: Walter, 1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Daniel Defoe, *The Present State of the Parties in Great Britain: Particularly an Enquiry into the State of the Dissenters in England* (London: J. Baker, 1712), p. 285; quoted in Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion* (London: T & T Clark, 2016), p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. W. Britt Stokes, *A Soul Prepared for Heaven: The Theological Foundation of Isaac Watts’ Spirituality* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Isaac Watts, *Works*, IV, pp. 640-641, quoted inDavis, *Isaac Watts*, p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See Roger Thomas, “The Non-Subscription Controversy amongst Dissenters in 1719: The Salters’ Hall Debate”, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1953), pp. 162-186. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, p. 583. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Such as Watts, *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: printed for J. Clark, at the Bible and Crown in the Poultry near Cheapside; E. Mathews at the Bible in Pater-Noster-Row; and R. Ford, at the Angel in the Poultry, 1721). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Quoted in Davis, *Isaac Watts*,p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs,* Book 3, Hymn 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs,* Book 3, Hymn 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs,* Book 3, Hymn 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Watts expressed praise in this hymn using the first person singular pronoun. Subsequent modifications make it plural, as in the version found in *Congregational Praise* and in *Rejoice and Sing*. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 3, Hymn 38: “A Song of Praise to the Blessed Trinity”. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Donald Hilton, *Where Reason Fails*, Free to Believe Pamphlet, p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 3, Hymn 10: “Christ Crucified, the Wisdom and Power of God”. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Watts, *Works* “Sermons”, Vol. I, p. 168, quoted in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Watts, “Wattiana”, A treatise on the dispositions to be Cherished and the means to be employed in the search after religious truth”, p. 268, quoted in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*,p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 87; cf. Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, centrepiece, p. viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer* (London: Independent Press, 1962), pp. 214-215. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Davis, *Isaac Watts*,pp. 78-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, p. 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs in Three Books*, p. v. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Watts, *Works*, “Hymns”, vol. 4, p. 147, quoted in Beynon, *Isaac Watts:* *Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*,p. 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, p. vi. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, p. vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, p. vi. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*, p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. John Wesley, *Collection of Hymns, For the Use of the People Called Methodists* (3rd ed. London: Printed by J. Paramore, at the Foundary, Upper Moorfields, 1782), quoted in Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*,p. 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Stephen Orchard, “The Hymns of Isaac Watts”, in *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1998), pp. 155-167 (p. 156). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Number 54, verses 2 and 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Number 117, verse 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Number 9, verse 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Number 25, verse 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 97: “Christ our Wisdom, Righteousness &c.” [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* (4th ed., London: Printed for John Clark, at the Bible and Crown, and Richard Ford, at the Angel: Both in the Poultry, 1722), p. 15, verse 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Alan P. F. Sell, “From Worms to Sunbeams: The Dilution of Calvinism in English Congregationalism”, in *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2004), p. 253. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Sell, “From Worms to Sunbeams: The Dilution of Calvinism in English Congregationalism”, p. 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. The square brackets are found in the original. Watts called them “crotchets” and indicated that such “crotcheted” verses could be omitted without losing the sense of the hymn. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. See, e.g., Watts, *Discourses on the World to Come*, pp. 108, 110, 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, p. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Orchard, “The Hymns of Isaac Watts”, p. 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Orchard, “The Hymns of Isaac Watts”, p. 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. See Watts, *Works*, “Hymns”, Vol. 4, p. 147, quoted in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, p. 149; Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*, pp. 122-124; Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, pp. 57-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*, p. 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. William Romaine, *An Essay on Psalmody* (London: s.n., 1775), p. 137; quoted in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, p. 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Watts, *The Psalms of David*, p. 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Watts, *The Psalms of David*, p. 267. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*,p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Watts, *The Psalms of David*, p. 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. For a study of Britain as the elect nation, see Linda Colley, *Britons* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Watts, *Hymns and Sacred Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Watts, *Hymns and Sacred Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 1, verses 5 and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Watts, *Works*, “Psalms”, Vol. 4, p. xxi, quoted in Beynon, *Isaac Watts:* *Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*,p. 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Sell, “From Worms to Sunbeams: The Dilution of Calvinism in English Congregationalism”, p. 253. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Erik Routley, “The hymns of Philip Doddridge”, in Geoffrey F. Nuttall (ed.), *Philip Doddridge 1702-51: His Contribution to English Religion* (London: Independent Press, 1951), p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, pp. 104-5, 84, 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, pp. 21, 23, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Hilton, *Where Reason Fails*, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, p. 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Johnson, “The Life of Isaac Watts D.D.”, pp. xi, iv-v. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Johnson, “The Life of Isaac Watts D.D.”, p. x. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Psalms*, Book 3, Hymn 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, “Philip Doddridge – A Personal Appreciation”, in Nuttall (ed.), *Philip Doddridge 1702-51: His Contribution to English Religion*, p. 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Fountain, *Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, Remembered*, p. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 2, Hymn 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)