

W. Britt Stokes

# *A Soul Prepared for Heaven*

The Theological Foundation of Isaac Watts' Spirituality



# Reformed Historical Theology

Edited by  
Herman J. Selderhuis

In co-operation with  
Emidio Campi, Irene Dingel, Benyamin F. Intan,  
Elsie Anne McKee, Richard A. Muller, and Risto Saarinen

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W. Britt Stokes

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For the Glory of God

Isaac Watts is best known as a hymnwriter, but his influence was much broader than his hymns, not least in the spirituality he conveyed regarding “vital” religion. At a time of religious cooling his view of the relationship with God as eternal life begun and experienced now, was a significant voice. Stokes’ examination of Watts’ spirituality opens this up for careful examination, and, crucially, examines its theological foundations. The result is a much deeper understanding of a key figure of the 18th century, as well as lessons for the church today.

– Graham Beynon, Oak Hill College, London, UK

Isaac Watts is one of the most influential Christians of all-time. He wrote more than 5,000 hymns, and several of them have been sung by followers of Christ around the world for 300 years. Some of them—such as “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Joy to the World,” and “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”—are among the most beloved songs in the church’s repertoire. And yet, within the small number of believers with a Watts’-sized impact, the life and theology of Isaac Watts are among the least known. This is so despite the fact that of his published *Works*—out of print for more than a century—five of the six volumes are about his life and theology. In *A Soul Prepared for Heaven*, Britt Stokes has done a masterful job to help correct that omission.

– Donald S. Whitney, professor of biblical spirituality and associate dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

Author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, *Praying the Bible*, and *Family Worship*.

It was my distinct pleasure to read Dr. Britt Stokes’ dissertation on Isaac Watts in its various stages of development. It is now my privilege to recommend his published work to you. Isaac Watts is of great historical interest, as he stands at an important juncture in the history of the church – spanning the decline of Puritanism and the rise of Evangelicalism. Moreover, his musical compositions and theological reflections (particularly on the doctrine of the Trinity) make him a fascinating figure of inquiry. In the present volume, Dr. Stokes provides a superb introduction to Watts’s literary corpus, focusing our attention on his experimental religion – namely, those “inward and spiritual” subjects that shaped his approach to the Christian life. For his exhaustive research, judicious analysis, and engaging presentation, Dr. Stokes is to be commended. My sincere prayer is that his work will receive the attention and appreciation it deserves.

– J. Stephen Yuille, professor of pastoral theology and spiritual formation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX

Isaac Watts is nearly always remembered today under the rubric of hymnwriter. But in his day, and for many who read his books for a hundred and fifty years after his death, he was much more: theologian, textbook author, and spiritual mentor. In this new study

of Watts' thought, Britt Stokes looks at Watts the spiritual mentor and deftly shows the way that spirituality *sub specie aeternitatis* informed all of his writing. A judicious and insightful study.

– Michael A.G. Haykin, chair and professor of church history, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.



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My priceless family has been a source of profound encouragement throughout the years. My mother and father have long been gripped by the cross of Christ, and their fingerprints are all over my journey. My older brother, Justin, modeled success on many fronts and often reached back to pull me along. I'm grateful for his attentive counsel over the years. My wife, Maegen, is the crown jewel of my life. She possesses a selflessness that is only surmounted by her joy for life and energy to take it on. If Maegen's joyful energy was not enough, God replicated it with divine precision in our daughter Grey.

And finally, there is Isaac Watts. It is odd how one can become close friends with someone who has been dead for centuries. I have never understood the statement in Hebrews, "though he died, he still speaks," quite like I have through this research. Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667) opens his seminal work, *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*, with a Greek proverb that serves as a type of notice: "Man is a bubble." Some bubbles appear and fade with ease, while others survive more than "two or three turns . . . upon the face of the waters" of this world. Taylor's bubble analogy is aimed at creating a mental picture of the brevity and fragility of life. Writing a book on a historical figure is a repeated aide-mémoire to the bubble-effect of life. It forced me into the historical corridors of our faith, and it pulled me through a multitude of perspectives. One recurring thought was that we will all one day disappear like a bubble and give our place to others. While sobering, this truth is also an encouragement because it compels us to live with an eternal perspective. Watts has encouraged me to look beyond this world for the source of aim and purpose. Though the pages of this work give painstaking detail to that aim and purpose, it above all else points to the most pivotal influence in history—Christ Jesus. Watts reminds us Christ's "blood has a voice in it" and that that voice still calls out to a broken world. From one bubble to another—and until my "turns" upon

the face of life's waters terminate with an eternity of holiness and happiness—thank you. Thank you to the pious Doctor and to all those who have come before and after him.

Britt Stokes  
Charleston, South Carolina  
December 2021

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Nature of Biblical Spirituality

On March 8, 1702, Isaac Watts (1674–1748) accepted a call to pastor Mark Lane Congregational Chapel in London.<sup>1</sup> In his acceptance letter, he penned the following words:

I give up my own ease for *your spiritual profit and your increase*. I submit my inclinations to my duty, and in hopes of being made an instrument to build up this ancient church, I return this solemn answer to your call, that, with a great sense of my own inability, in mind and body, to discharge the duties of so sacred an office, I do, in the strength of Christ and his saints, my utmost diligence in all the duties of a pastor, so far as God shall enlighten and strengthen me; and I leave this promise in the hands of Christ our Mediator, to see it performed by me unto you, through the assistance of his grace and Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Watts believed that nurturing his congregants’ “spiritual profit” and “increase” was his principal duty as a minister, and he viewed it as the chief means of bringing about the church’s renewal.<sup>3</sup> But what exactly did he mean by it? How did he envision this “spiritual” life?

Alister McGrath defines spirituality as “the way in which Christian individuals or groups aim to deepen their experience of God.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Brad Holt believes spirituality encompasses the dimensions of “being, relating and doing” because it is ultimately about “experience.”<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on experience has a rich tradition.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, D.D. Containing, Besides His Sermons and Essays on Miscellaneous Subjects Several Additional Pieces, Selected from His Manuscripts by the Reve. Dr. Jennings, and the Rev. Dr. Doddridge, in 1753 to Which are Prefixed, Memoirs of the Life of the Author Compiled by the Rev. George Burder* (London: J. Barfield, 1810), 1:xiv.

2 Watts, *Works*, 1:xv. Emphasis added.

3 Watts, *Works*, 3:4–5; Isaac Watts, *An Humble Attempt Toward the Revival of Practical Religion Among Christians, And Particularly the Protest Dissenters, by a Serious Address to Ministers and People in Some Occasional Discourses* (London: E. Matthews; R. Ford; R. Hett, 1731), 1–3. This conviction was common among his contemporaries. See David G. Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered 1674–1748* (Harpending, UK: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust, 1974), 83–86.

4 Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 3.

5 Bradley C. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 8. Emphasis original.

6 See Ryan M. McGraw, “What is Theology? A Puritan and Reformed Vision of Living to God, through Christ, by the Spirit,” in *Puritan Piety: Writings in Honor of Joel R. Beeke*, ed. Michael Haykin and

John Calvin affirmed that piety (or, spirituality) is “reverence joined with love of God, which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, he viewed spirituality as a “quickenning movement,” arising from the Holy Spirit’s illumination of the understanding and inclination of the heart.<sup>8</sup> Like Calvin, the English Puritans emphasized the cognitive, affective, and volitional aspects of communion with God as the genesis of Christian experience.<sup>9</sup> They were convinced that “we must experience an affective appropriation of God’s sovereign grace, moving beyond intellectual assent to heartfelt dedication to Christ.”<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards adopted the same paradigm: “For who will deny that true religion consists, in a great measure, in vigorous and lively actings of the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart?”<sup>11</sup> In a similar fashion, George Whitefield emphasized the

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Paul Smalley (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2018), 36. McGraw notes, “While some might think that experimental piety was a Puritan emphasis, in reality it characterized classic Reformed theology as a whole. Puritanism may have been distinctive in the extent to which it stressed personal piety, yet wedding personal piety with sound doctrine was one of the great strengths of Reformed theology as a whole.” See also Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 317–19. For additional examples of Reformed experimental theology, see Ian Hamilton, *What is Experiential Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 18–25; Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Theological Study From Our Reformed and Puritan Heritage* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2006), 425–43; W. Andrew Hoffercker, *Piety and the Princeton Theologians: Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1981); and J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990). For a contemporary treatment of the relationship between head and heart in Christian spirituality, see Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 81–99.

- 7 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.2.1.
- 8 Elsie Anne McKee, ed., *John Calvin, Writings of Pastoral Piety*, in *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001), 91.
- 9 Kelly M. Kapic and Randall C. Gleason, “Who Were the Puritans,” in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 25. Kapic and Gleason argue that, for the Puritans, “intellectual assent to Christian doctrine had to be balanced with practical outworking of God’s grace in life experiences.” See also Richard Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1979), 36.
- 10 J. Stephen Yuille, *Looking Unto Jesus: The Christ-Centered Piety of Seventeenth-Century Baptists* (Eugene, OR: Wipf&Stock, 2014), 23–24. For a survey of how experimental religion moved from the Puritans through to dissenting figures such as Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge, see Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, in *A History of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 1:53–60.
- 11 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *The Religious Affections*, ed. John H. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 2:99. It was Edwards’ experimental religion that made him a “theologian of the heart.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance

affective dimension of spirituality: “We can preach the Gospel no further than we have experienced the power of it in our hearts.”<sup>12</sup>

Watts stood firmly in this tradition,<sup>13</sup> championing an experimental religion that engages the Christian intellectually, affectively, and volitionally.<sup>14</sup> He penned, “I am

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of Revival,” in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 348–71. Edwards is one of the most influential theologians of the eighteenth century with respect to inward religion, as evident in his works on revival: (1) *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire in New-England*; and (2) *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. Richard Lovelace describes Edwards’ writings as “the foundational theology of spiritual renewal in English, and perhaps in any language.” Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 39–40. For more on Edwards, see William M. Schweitzer, “An Uncommon Union: Understanding Jonathan Edwards’s Experimental Calvinism,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 2, no.2 (2010): 208–19; Robert D. Smart, “Jonathan Edwards’ Experimental Calvinism: Pastors Learning Revival Harmony of Theology and Experience from a Leader in the Great Awakening,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 12, no. 3 (2003): 95–103.

12 George Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Journals* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 347–48. David Bebbington contends that eighteenth-century evangelical divines were deeply influenced by the Enlightenment’s empiricist method grounded in the thought of John Locke and Isaac Newton. Accordingly, “it is not surprising that Evangelicals frequently spoke of true Christianity as ‘experimental religion’ [because]...it must be tried by experience.” David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 57. In a similar vein, Alan Sell argues that the English Enlightenment “gave a boost to older notions concerning the right of private judgment.” This resulted in an increased emphasis on personal experience. Evangelicals “emphasized the individual’s personal experience as evidential of God’s activity within.” Alan P.F. Sell *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550–2000* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 106–08.

13 Many of Watts’ immediate contemporaries shared his emphasis on experimental religion. By way of example, see John Jennings, *Two Discourses: The First, Of Preaching Christ; The Second, Of Particular and Experimental Preaching* (Boston: J. Draper, 1740). Watts penned the preface to this work, noting, “Have not some of us spent our labour to build them up [Christians] in the practice of duties, without teaching them to search whether the foundation has been laid to an entire change and renovation of heart? Do we lead them constantly to enquire into the inward state of their souls, the special tempers and circumstances of their spirits, their peculiar difficulties, dangers and temptations, and give them peculiar assistance in all this variety of the Christian life? ... How much more powerful and more penetrating will our sermons be, when those who come into our assemblies shall be convinced and judged, and have the secrets of their hearts made manifest, and confess that God is in the midst of us a truth?” Isaac Watts, preface to *Two Discourses: The First, Of Preaching Christ; The Second, Of Particular and Experimental Preaching*, by John Jennings, ix–x (Boston: J. Draper, 1740). For more on Watts editorial involvement with Jennings’ publication, see Tessa Whitehouse, *The Textual Culture of English Protestant Dissent 1720–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150–56.

14 This is also seen in the works which Watts formally endorsed. See, for example, his “recommendatory epistle” in Thomas Halyburton, *Memoirs of the life of the Revered, Learned and Pious Mr. Thomas Halyburton, With a Large Recommendary Epistle by I. Watts* (London: R. Cruttenden, 1718), iii–xii. Watts notes, “I found here the inward and experimental work of Christianity described at large by a

well satisfied that the great and general reason [for the decline of the church] is the decay of vital religion in the hearts and lives of men, and the little success which the ministrations of the gospel have had of late for conversions.”<sup>15</sup> Watts’ use of the expression “vital religion” is significant.<sup>16</sup> He conceives of it as an inward sense of who God is.<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is an affective (not purely cognitive) knowledge of God.<sup>18</sup> For Watts, this knowledge includes the awakening of the soul to the seriousness of sin and the majesty of God; moreover, it is to experience peace with God, victory over temptation, faith in the unseen, and assurance in the person and work of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Watts remarks, “[The Christian] feels his inward powers sweetly inclined to virtue and holiness ... He knows that he was once blind and dead in trespasses and sins, but now he is awake, and alive to God and to righteousness; he

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wise, a learned, and ingenious man, who seems to have been a strict observer of his own spirit, and of all the secret motions of it, and more secret springs...though every Christian hath some inward sense of divine things, yet everyone has not so rich a variety of experiences; among those that have, few are of watchful as to take a due account of them; few so wise as to judge aright concerning them; and few so faithful and bold as to consign these things to the writing for use of others.”

15 Watts, *Works*, 3:2; Watts, *An Humble Attempt*, i–ii. This discourse was published in 1731, just prior to the New England revivals.

16 See Watts, *Works*, 3:18–19; Watts, *An Humble Attempt*, 54–57. Joseph Bellamy defines “vital religion” as “a vital sense of God in our hearts; a realizing, living sense of his being and perfections; that we see and feel there is a God.” Joseph Bellamy, *The Works of Joseph Bellamy* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853), 1:530.

17 Brad Walton notes, “The ‘heart’ has both a volitional-affective dimension, and also a cognitive dimension.” Brad Walton, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Affections, and the Puritan Analysis of True Piety, Spiritual Sensation, and Heart Religion, Studies in American Religion* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 2002), 153.

18 Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd describe Watts’ hymns as an “experimental theater” in which he celebrates various “aspects of Christian experience in this world.” Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 35. They add, “The primary purpose of Watts’s hymns, in theory and practice, was the controlled education of the religious sensibility of his singers. The passions are rehearsed in response to the affecting scenes. The visual precision of these hymns is essential to their purpose, making visible and immediate what through time or distance or distraction may have become obscured. Such visibility and immediacy—of God in heaven, Bible stories, the working of the Sacrament, the ecstasy of divine love—are intended to rouse in the singers the pious passions of love, fear, hope, desire, sorry, wonder, and joy. These hymns [Watts hymns] called for clear, powerful poetry, finely tuned to the common psyche.” Marshall and Todd, *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century*, 56. In respect to the general aim of eighteenth-century hymn writing, Tom Schwanda notes, “Evangelical hymns served two purposes: to instruct and to inspire. Hymns taught the content of the gospel...[and] also provided an experiential means of response. The union of text and tune evokes the affections and inspires the possibility of a deepened experience around the content of the hymn.” Tom Schwanda, ed., *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton, and Whitefield* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 14–15.

19 Watts, *Works*, 3:19–20; Watts, *An Humble Attempt*, 55–56.

is born again, he dwells, as it were in a new world, there is a mighty and surprising change past upon him, even from death to life.”<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, Watts describes this spiritual life as “eternal life begun,”<sup>21</sup> explaining, “The hidden life is that whereby he is a Christian; indeed, his spiritual life, whereby he is devoted to God, and lives to the purpose of heaven and eternity. And this is the same life, which, in other parts of Scripture, is called eternal life... The same life of piety and inward pleasure, which begins on earth, is fulfilled in heaven; and it may be called the spiritual, or the eternal, life.”<sup>22</sup> Watts’ view of the spiritual life as “eternal life begun” is critical to his spirituality. The spiritual life is eternal life active in the present.<sup>23</sup> It is not equal to eternal life, but it is the *beginning* of eternal life.<sup>24</sup> While acknowledging substantial overlap, Watts is careful to differentiate between the two. The spiritual life chiefly respects the soul; it is (1) attended with sorrows and difficulties, (2) pursued through labor and service, and (3) characterized by holiness (yet “mingled with defects”) and happiness (yet “surrounded with a thousand disadvantages and trials”).<sup>25</sup> Conversely, eternal life includes the body and soul; it is (1) attended with all ease and pleasure, (2) enjoyed as the great reward of faith, and (3) characterized by holiness (without any “defects”) and happiness (without any “disadvantages”). In short, the Christian enters eternal life when, “having surmounted every difficulty,” he shines and exults in “full joy and glory.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, despite these very tangible differences, Watts insists that the spiritual is “eternal life begun.” By this, he means that the Christian experiences the holiness and

20 Watts, *Works*, 1:23; Isaac Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for John Clark, E.M. Matthews, and Richard Ford, 1721), 1:63.

21 Watts, *Works*, 1:96; Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 1:273.

22 Watts, *Works*, 1:96; Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 1:272–73.

23 While Watts would have been unfamiliar with the expression “inaugurated eschatology,” he certainly affirms its major premise, namely, the Christian experiences the benefits of eternal life in the present. For more on “inaugurated eschatology,” see George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); and George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). For additional treatments, see Benjamin Glad, Matthew S. Harmon, and G.K. Beale, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Publishing, 2016); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Publishing, 2014); N.T. Wright, “Joy: Some New Testament Perspectives and Questions,” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Publishing, 2017).

24 This statement is central to this study. The objective is to determine Watts’ approach to the spiritual life, not provide a comprehensive analysis of his eschatology.

25 Watts, *Works*, 1:96; Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 1:275.

26 Watts, *Works*, 1:96; Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 1:275.

happiness of eternal life in the present,<sup>27</sup> and it is this experience that provides the basic contour of Watts' spirituality.

## 1.2 The Life of Isaac Watts

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton on July 17, 1674, the oldest of eight siblings. His parents belonged to an Independent congregation, pastored by Nathaniel Robinson—the ejected rector of All Saints Church.<sup>28</sup> His father (Isaac Watts Sr.) was a church deacon and trustee, as well as the leaseholder for the church property.<sup>29</sup> He was known as “a most pious, exemplary Christian,”<sup>30</sup> and as “a man of strong convictions...willing to suffer for the sake of his conscience.”<sup>31</sup> In a document entitled, “Memorable Affair in My Life,” the younger Watts (at nine years of age) makes mention of his father's imprisonment for nonconformity in 1683.<sup>32</sup> Two years later, while fleeing Southampton due to persecution, Watts Sr. penned the following to his children:

Though it hath pleased the only wise God to suffer the malice of ungodly men, the enemies of Jesus Christ (and my enemies for his sake), to break out so far against me, as to remove me from you in my personal habitation, thereby at once bereaving me of that comfort, which I might have hoped for in the enjoyment of my family in peace, and you of that education, which my love as a father and duty as a parent required me to give; yet such are the longings of my soul for your good and prosperity, especially in spiritual concerns,

27 Watts, *Works*, 1:1–20; Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 1:1–54.

28 As a result of Parliament's Act of Uniformity in 1662, approximately 2,000 ministers left the Church of England and became “nonconformists” or “dissenters.” For more on this, see N.H. Keeble, *“Settling the Peace of the Church”: 1662 Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Michael Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Geo Gould, ed., *Documents Relating to the Settlement of the Church of England by the Act of Uniformity of 1662* (London: W. Kent and Co., 1862); Peter Bayne, “English Puritanism: Its Character and History,” in *Documents Relating to the Settlement of the Church of England by the Act of Uniformity of 1662*, ed. Geo Gould (London: W. Kent and Co., 1862), 1–142; Edmund Calamy, *An Account of the Ministers, Lecturers, Masters and Fellows of Colleges and Schoolmasters, Who were Ejected or Silenced After the Restoration in 1660. By, or Before, the Act for Uniformity. Designed for the Preserving to Posterity the Memory of their Names, Characters, Writings, and Sufferings* (London: J Lawrence, J. Nicholson, and J. Sprint, 1713).

29 Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (London: Independent Press, 1948), 4. Very little is known about Watts' siblings. His oldest brother, Richard, was a prosperous London physician. A second brother, Enoch, was involved in producing Gibbons' biography on Watts. For more, see Davis, *Watts*, 6–7.

30 Thomas Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts* (London: n.p., 1780), 1.

31 Davis, *Watts*, 4.

32 Davis, *Watts*, 5.

that I remember you always with myself in my daily prayers addressed to the throne of grace.<sup>33</sup>

In the same letter, he encouraged his children to (1) read the Holy Scriptures, (2) consider their “sinful and miserable estate” by nature, (3) pursue the knowledge of God by his “glorious attributes and infinite perfections,” (4) remember God as their Creator, (5) worship God “according to the rules of the gospel,” and (6) obey all their “superiors.”<sup>34</sup> This godly influence was no doubt influential in Watts’ conversion. Apparently, he struggled with “considerable convictions of sin” before coming to a saving knowledge of Christ in 1688.<sup>35</sup>

I am a vile polluted lump of earth,  
So I’ve continued ever since my birth,  
Although Jehovah grace does daily give me,  
As sure this monster Satan will deceive me,  
Come therefore, Lord, from Satan’s claws relieve me.

Wash me in Thy blood, O Christ,  
And grace divine impart,  
Then search and try the corners of my heart,  
That I in all things may be fit to do  
Service to thee, and sing thy praises too.<sup>36</sup>

### 1.2.1 School Years

In the words of one of his biographers, Watts was “the little Puritan...the most diligent and advanced scholar, the beloved of his master.”<sup>37</sup> At four years of age, he began to learn Latin, and, three years later, he turned his attention to the study of

33 David G. Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered* (Harpenden, UK: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust, 1974), 17.

34 Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered*, 17–19.

35 Davis, *Watts*, 8.

36 Watts penned this acrostic poem when he was seven years old. Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 5. It is likely that his interest in poetic verse was first nurtured in the home. His father and grandfather were poets. The earliest record of Watts’ family is of his grandfather, Thomas Watts. He was a gifted man whose interest spanned all sorts of subjects. “My grandfather, Mr. Thomas Watts, had such acquaintance with the mathematics, painting, music and poetry, &c. as gave him considerable esteem among his contemporaries. He was commander of a ship of war in 1656, and by blowing up the ship in the Dutch war he was drowned in his youth.” Watts, *Works*, 4:494.

37 Edwin Paxton Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings, His Homes and Friends* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1875), 8.

Greek. By the time he reached thirteen years of age, he had also mastered Hebrew and French.<sup>38</sup> As a “pale child,” there was “certainly nothing robust about him, but all the indications of the future scholar.”<sup>39</sup> Watts’ formal education began in 1680 at the Free-School in Southampton, where he studied under the direction of John Pinhorne (1652–1714).<sup>40</sup>

Having completed his grammar school education, Watts was ready for the university. However, a university education was not available to nonconformists. “The avenues of prosperity and peace seemed to lie only in conformity to the Church of England.”<sup>41</sup> John Speed, a physician in Southampton, offered to subsidize Watts’ expenses at one of the universities. However, Watts was unwilling to “conform,” choosing instead “to take up his lot amongst the Dissenters.”<sup>42</sup> In 1690, he enrolled at Thomas Rowe’s Academy (associated with the Dissenters) in London.<sup>43</sup> During these formative years, Watts produced works on theology, metaphysics, and ethics.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, he developed his poetic gifting.<sup>45</sup> At twenty years of age, Watts formally ended his academic career and returned to his father’s home in

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38 Davis, *Watts*, 8.

39 Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings*, 8.

40 Davis, *Watts*, 8. Pinhorne was the Master of the Free-School, Rector of All-Saints, and later Vicar of the parish Eling in Hampshire. He was deeply influential in Watts’ life, and they shared a close bond. Watts’ affection for Pinhorne was so strong that he wrote a poem (in Latin) in his honor. He described him as the “faithful preceptor of my younger years.” Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 7–19.

41 Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings*, 13.

42 Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings*, 14.

43 The Reverend Thomas Rowe was Watts’ tutor and pastor during this period of educational training. At age 19, Watts “joined in communion with the church” under the pastoral care of Thomas Rowe. Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 20. Watts wrote a lyrical poem to Rowe, which reads in part: “I love thy gentle influence, Rowe, Thy gentle influence like the sun, Only dissolves the frozen snow, Then bids our thoughts like rivers flow.” Isaac Watts, *Horae Lyricae. Poems, Chiefly of the Lyric Kind. In Two Books. I Songs, &c. Sacred to Devotion. II. Odes, Elegys, &c. to Virtue, Loyalty and Friendship* (London: S and D Bridge, 1706), 154; Watts, *Works*, 4:466. For more on Rowe, see Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings*, 16–17.

44 Watts’ brother, Enoch, left two volumes of manuscripts to the biographer Thomas Gibbons. These contained twenty-two Latin dissertations, which Watts penned during his academic career at Rowe’s Academy. For the transcripts of two of these, see Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 21–37. In addition to these twenty-two Latin theses, Gibbons published two English dissertations related to student meetings in July 1693 and September 1693. For the transcripts, see Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 38–58. Gibbons also notes that Enoch provided him with Watts’ complete abridgement of Theophilus Gale’s three-volume work, *The Court of the Gentiles*. Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 59.

45 Much of Watts’ poetry from this period was composed in letters to his family. For an example, see Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 69–71.

Southampton.<sup>46</sup> For two years, he spent time in “reading, meditation, and prayer,” in order to prepare “for that work [i.e., the ministry] to which he was determined to devote his life.”<sup>47</sup>

### 1.2.2 Ministry Years

At the end of these two years, Watts accepted a position as tutor in the home of Sir John Hartopp in Stoke Newington.<sup>48</sup> After five years of tutoring, he formally entered the ministry, accepting the position of associate pastor at Mark Lane Congregational Chapel in London.<sup>49</sup> On March 18, 1702, Watts succeeded Isaac Chauncy (1632–1712) as pastor.<sup>50</sup> Due to recurring illness, Watts was absent from the pulpit for prolonged periods of time. His health became such an issue that the church hired Samuel Price to serve as an assistant. In September 1712, Watts suffered from a particularly difficult illness. He was “seized with a violent fever which shook his constitution and left such wakens upon his nerves as continued with him in some degree to his dying day.”<sup>51</sup> This illness kept Watts from engaging in public ministry until 1716. During this time, Price was formally ordained as the co-pastor of Mark Lane. Watts moved into the home of Sir Thomas Abney, where he lived for the

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46 In 1728, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Aberdeen conferred honorary Doctorate degrees upon Watts. David Jennings, *A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Late Reverend Isaac Watts D.D. Preached to the Church of which he was Pastor. December 11, 1748* (London: J. Oswald and W. Dilly, 1749), 26–27.

47 Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 92.

48 Two of Watts’ most well-known discourses were funeral sermons for Sir John Hartopp and his wife Lady Hartopp. For copies, see Watts, *Works*, 2:1–80; Isaac Watts, *Death and Heaven; or The Last Enemy Conquer’d, and Separate Spirits Made Perfect: With an Account of The Rich Variety of Their Employments and Pleasures; Attempted in Two Funeral Discourses, In Memory of Sir John Hartopp Bart. And His Lady, Deceased*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Barham Clark, Eman Matthews, and Richard Ford, 1724). For more on Sir John Hartopp and his family, see Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings*, 34–37.

49 Watts preached his first sermon on July 17, 1698 (his twenty-fourth birthday).

50 Watts, *Works*, 1:xiv. Watts accepted this call immediately following Chauncy’s resignation in January 1702. Thomas Rowe’s church provided a letter of recommendation for Watts. “For as much as our dear brother Mr. Isaac Watts who was with great satisfaction admitted a member amongst us, and hath since walked as becomes the gospel to the glory of God and to the honour of his holy profession, doth now desire his dismission from us, we do in compliance therewith discharge him from his membership among us in order to his being receive by you, praying that his ministerial labours, and those gifts and graces were with the Lord Jesus Christ, the great head of the church, hath been pleased so richly to furnish him may be abundantly blessed to the conversion of souls, and your edification, to whose grace and blessing we do from our hearts commend both him and you.” Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 97–98.

51 Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 100.

remainder of his life. The impact of Abney's kindness upon Watts was tremendous. One biographer writes:

Here he enjoyed the uninterrupted demonstrations of the truest friendship. Here, without any care of his own, he had everything which could contribute to the enjoyment of life, and favour the unwearied pursuit of his studies. Here he dwelt in a family which for piety, order, harmony, and every virtue was a house of God. Here he had the privilege of a country recess, the pure air, the retired grove, the fragrant bower, the spreading lawn, the flowery garden, and other advantages to sooth his mind, an aid to his restoration to health, to yield him whenever he chose them most grateful intervals from his laborious studies, and enable him to return to them with doubled vigour and delight.<sup>52</sup>

Due to his illness, Watts was obligated to pass most of his time “in retirement from the world.”<sup>53</sup> This allowed him to devote himself to writing. He published numerous poems and hymns: *Horae Lyricae* (1706) and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707).<sup>54</sup> Some of his most influential works were related to education: *Logick, or the Right Use of Reason* (1724) and *Improvement of the Mind* (1741). He also wrote on a vast array of subjects such as civics, metaphysics, and astronomy,<sup>55</sup> and he penned

52 Gibbons, *Memoirs of Isaac Watts*, 113.

53 Philip Doddridge and David Jennings, “The Preface, with Some Account of the Author's Life and Character,” in *The Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, D.D.* 6 vols, Rev. and corrected by D. Jennings, D.D. and the late P. Doddridge, D.D. (London: T. and T. Longman, J. Buckland; J. Oswald, J. Waugh, and J. Ward, 1753), 1:iii. Doddridge and Jennings noted, “Besides, as the Doctor's feeble state of health, through the greater part of his life...[caused] not so many incidents and changes...as generally furnished out a good part of such histories.”

54 For more on Watts' poetry, psalms, and hymns, see David W. Music, “The Early Reception of Isaac Watts's Psalms of David Imitated,” *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 69, no. 4 (2018): 14–19; Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts Hymnographer: A Study of the Beginnings, Development and Philosophy of the English Hymn* (London: Independent Press, 1962); Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1915), 108–216; Frederick John Gillman, *The Evolution of the English Hymn: An Historical Survey of the Origins and Development of the Hymns of the Christian Church* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927); Bonamy Dobree, *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century: 1700–1749* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 153–58; Bernard L. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts: Five Informal Papers* (London: Epworth Press, 1942); Kenneth Harrington Cousland, “The Significance of Isaac Watts in the Development of Hymnody,” *Church History* 17, no. 4 (December 1948): 287–98; Rochelle A. Stackhousset, *The Language of the Psalms in Worship: American Revisions of Watts' Psalter* (Landam, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997); Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

55 For a detailed discussion on each publication, see Watts, *Works*, 1:xix–xxxvii. For a chronological list of Watts' works, see Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1834), xvii–xxi.

several practical works for the common Christian: *A Guide to Prayer* (1715) and *An Exhortation to Ministers* (1731).<sup>56</sup>

Watts passed into eternal glory on November 25, 1748. In the funeral sermon, David Jennings spoke of Watts' piety, remarking, "The active and sprightly powers of his nature failed him... yet his trust in God, through Jesus the Mediator, remained unshaken to the last."<sup>57</sup>

### 1.3 The English Dissenting Church (1662–1740)

Ecclesiological upheaval marked the church era into which Watts was born. Parliament's *Act of Uniformity* in 1662 resulted in an estimated 2,000 ministers leaving the Church of England. Church historian R. Tudur Jones describes the religious period in the last quarter of the 1600s as an "attempt of the State to uproot Non-conformity" and cement a national religion.<sup>58</sup> Subsequent to 1662, the persecution of dissenters began to wane as the vacillation between degrees of penalties for dissenters caused consistency issues with regard to persecution. The harsher penalties, such as imprisonment and destruction of meeting houses, existed in some areas. Moderate discomforts, such as tension associated with meeting in secret,

56 The popularity of Watts' works extended well beyond the shores of England. Cotton Mather is credited with first introducing Watts' hymns to America as appendices to printed sermons and guides to prayer. Christopher N. Phillips, "Cotton Mather Brings Isaac Watts's Hymns to America; or, How to Perform a Hymn Without Singing It," *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (June 2012): 205, 210. According to the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge Among the Poor, Watts's *Hymns* (1710), *Divine Songs* (1715), *Psalms* (1719), *Prayers for the use of Children* (1728), *Short View of the Whole Scripture History* (1732), and *First and Second Set of Catechisms* (1730), "reached a larger audience than all other books including the Bible: by 1795 these totaled 163,914 copies." Isabel Rivers, "The First Evangelical Tract Society," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 1 (March 2007): 8–9. For a full listing of Watts' works printed and distributed by the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge Among the Poor in 1763 and 1795, respectfully, see Rivers, "The First Evangelical Tract Society," 19–22. For the more detailed work on the publication and distribution of evangelical dissenters in the eighteenth-century, see Isabel Rivers, *Vanity Fair and the Celestial City: Dissenting, Methodist, and Evangelical Literary Culture in England 1720–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

57 Jennings, *A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Late Reverend Isaac Watts*, 33. For additional funeral sermons on Watts, see Caleb Ashworth, *Reflections on the Fall of a Great Man. A Sermon Preached to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters at Daventry in Northamptonshire, On the Occasion of the Death of the Late Reverend Isaac Watts D.D.* (London: J. Waugh, 1749); John Milner, *The Rest and Reward of Good Men at Death. A Sermon Preached at Pekham-Surry, Dec. 11, 1748. Being the Next Lord's Day after the Interment of that Eminent, Faithful, and Useful Minister of Jesus Christ Dr. Isaac Watts* (London: J. Noon, 1749).

58 R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662–1962* (London: Independent Press, 1962), 63.