

WHO Seduced our Fathers away from Psalmody? ISAAC WATTS UNMASKED

REPRINTED from An Appendix to:

**AN APOLOGY FOR THE BOOK OF PSALMS, IN FIVE LETTERS, ADDRESSED
TO THE FRIENDS OF UNION IN THE CHURCH OF GOD.**

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Fourth edition. Philadelphia: Daniels & Smith, 36, North Sixth Street, 1852.

NOTE TO THE READER. It goes without saying that the writers of the Biblical Psalms were all unimpeachably orthodox in their theology. But what about the writers of the hymns we have been singing for two centuries and more? How much reader, do you know about the theological reliability of such feted hymnists like Watts, Doddridge, and the Wesleys? Begin here to learn something of Dr. Watts. We are grateful to Dr. Stephen Westcott for forwarding to us the material herewith printed.

What were the opinions of Dr. Watts on the subject of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ?

It would be pleasant, indeed, could we find him among the sound divines of England; but there is that, it is believed, in his works which will not allow him to be so placed. If any be disposed to distinguish between the practical faith of his heart, and the speculative articles of his creed, I have no objection. Believing, however, as I do that God has not constituted us arbiters of the state of men, I have only to do with the latter. Upon the former it is not mine to decide. The doctor's sentiments concerning the Redeemer will be found in his "*Discourses on the Glory of Christ.*" The edition of the Discourses now before me is that of 1746, but a little more than a year before the author's death. There you will find him zealously maintaining that the human soul of Christ, created before all worlds, is the Lord from heaven, spoken of in 1. Corinthians 15:47,¹ that in the image of this pre-existent spirit Adam was created,² that the sonship of Christ belongs, exclusively, to his human soul,³

¹Isaac Watts: *Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (Publ. 1746) pp. 175,176.

²Op. cit. p. 203.

³Ibid. p.201.

that the covenant of redemption was not made with a person who was the Father's equal, but was a created spirit ⁴.

Such are some of the views which this author supposes would make the Bible more defensible. His opinions on the doctrine of the Trinity may be gathered from the following address to God: : "Dear and blessed God! Hadst thou been pleased, in any one plain scripture, to have informed me which of the different opinions about the holy Trinity, among the contending parties of Christians, had been true, thou knowest with how much real satisfaction and joy my unbiased heart would have opened itself to receive and embrace the divine discovery. Hadst thou told me plainly, in any single text, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three real, distinct, persons in thy divine nature, I had never suffered myself to be bewildered in so many doubts nor embarrassed with so many strong fears of assenting to the mere inventions of men instead of divine doctrine; but I should have humbly and immediately accepted thy words, so far as it was possible for me to understand them, as the only rule of my faith. Or, hadst thou been pleased so to express and include this proposition in the several scattered parts of thy book from whence my reason and conscience might, with care, find out, and with certainty infer, this doctrine, I should have joyfully employed all my reasoning powers, with their utmost skill and activity, to have found out this inference, and ingrafted it into my soul.

"Holy Father! How can such weak creatures ever take in so strange, so difficult, and so abstruse a doctrine as this? And can this strange and perplexing notion of three real persons, going to make up one true God, be so necessary and so important a part of that Christian doctrine, which, in the Old Testament, and in the New, is represented as so plain and so easy, even to the meanest understanding?" ⁵

But to fully ascertain his views on the subject before us, the whole of the writings of Dr. Watts on the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Jesus Christ must be read. The vocabulary of his nursery creed, it is probable, to some extent, the Doctor retained, long after he had abandoned the creed itself. The ambiguity of his language, his manifest desire to be in good standing with men of principles very different from his own, his destitution of ecclesiastical character, and his defect in a well-settled principle of religious belief render it somewhat difficult to find his precise position. He often used the language of the orthodox, but claimed the right to explain the terms in his own way, and to press them into an agreement with his own peculiar opinions. So scraps taken from his works may be (as they have been- with what degree of intelligence and honesty we say not) adduced to prove him orthodox, while taken in their full and proper connexion they prove no such thing, but the reverse.

⁴. *Ibid.* pp. 180, 225.

⁵. Watts's *Works* vol. 7, pps 47-67, Leeds edition.

Whatever obscurity, from the ambiguity of his language and other causes, may hang over his views, the following facts admit of no doubt- and that is, that Dr. Watts was an **antitrinitarian** and that the distinct divine personality of the Son of God, as equal with the Father, had no place in his acknowledged creed. **The labours of his life, in which he manifested more than his usual mental vigour, were in direct opposition to the orthodox faith on this whole subject.** Thus the "Address" from which the foregoing quotation is taken, speaks in a style that forbids us to misunderstand him, and his "*Discourses on the Glory of Christ*", before mentioned, and his "*Useful Questions*" are all in the same spirit.

In the first of those Questions he asks "What is the true meaning of the name, Son of God, given to Christ in the New Testament?" He, in reply, adduces and remarks upon several scriptures, and adverts to the view of the orthodox as including an "eternal generation of the Person of the Son by the Person of the Father, in the sameness of the Divine Essence, consubstantial, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father." And then he adds: "I am persuaded this can never be the sense of this Name in those texts for, if this be never so true, yet it is confessed to be inconceivable: and I do not think the gracious God would put such a difficult task upon the faith of young disciples." Then he adverts to the referring of "the Sonship of Christ, rather to his human nature, or to his office as Messiah, than to such an eternal generation." He farther says "Christ, considered as the Son of God, is throughout represented as dependent on the Father for all, and receiving all from the Father, which is hardly consistent with the idea of supreme Godhead, if that were included in Sonship."

Again, in the same strain, he refers to 1. Corinthians 15:28 and Philippians 2 and asserts: "the Son of God is not depressed but exalted by the economy of the Mediatorial kingdom. That kingdom shall be given up, and then the Son of God, as Son, shall be depressed, and be brought down again to his original state of inferiority." Thus he writes: "Considered as a Son, he is naturally subject to the Father, and at the end of this economical exaltation he shall return to his natural subjection, and shalt be so forever." "His Sonship may be better referred to his inferior nature or to his office."

Dr. Watts, in his theory, admits the Son to be God, not "by nature" but as related to the Creator. This naturally inferior Son-Christ, as a distinct person, is thus only a creature, inferior to God, but, being related to the divine nature is, because of that created relation, called "God".

In the third of these "Useful Questions" the Doctor asks: "Could the Son of God properly enter into a covenant with the Father, to do and suffer what was necessary for our redemption, without a human soul?" He states the orthodox views of the subject; but proceeds to represent them as self-contradictory, and to be adandoned. According to him the covenant of redemption was made between the one Person in God- that is the Father, for he admits of only one Person in Jehovah- and his (the

Doctor's) supposed super-angelic spirit, created before all worlds, which, absurdly enough, he calls the human soul of Christ. Then he says "If we suppose the human soul of Christ to have a pre-existent state of joy, etc., before the world was created, these expressions (the scriptures that speak on the subject) are great and noble, are just and true." But if we take them in the orthodox view as to the divine Personality of the Saviour, he says "Then all these have very little justice or propriety in them", and he adds: "According to the common [the orthodox] explication of the doctrine of the Persons in the Trinity, we can have no ideas...of this transaction", and he adds: "One of these beings or Persons covenanting seems to be inferior to the other", "If we give ourselves leave to conceive of the human soul of Christ, in its pre-existent state, ad the prototokoi, the first formed of every creature, then here are proper subjects for these federal transactions."

In the fourth of his Questions he asks "is the Godhead of Christ and the Godhead of the Father one and the same?" This question he answers in the affirmative. But what does he mean? The ambiguity of his language and the confusion of his thought are well calculated to entrap and deceive the unwary, and to furnish a momentary countenance for an unfair advocate of his orthodoxy. The Godhead of the Father and of the Son is the same, he admits. The Godhead is a unit. It is one. According to his scheme in that Godhead, naturally and eternally, there is but one Person, the Father. The pre-existent soul, or spirit, of Christ is a mere creature and has no Deity of its own but as an exalted and favoured creature is related in a near friendship with the Father, and in virtue of this relation or created union can lay claim to deity. Strip this language of its ambiguity and his thought of its indistinctness and, in the scheme of Dr. Watts the question would be: "Is God the Father the Godhead of Christ?", and the answer would be, "yes". The Doctor's denial of distinct Persons, naturally and eternally, in one Jehovah, and his doctrine of the pre-existence of the human soul of Christ- which really is no human soul at all- fills his whole scheme with error, and spreads over it a bewildering confusion.

In his deprecations of tests of orthodoxy the Doctor was sufficiently explicit, and in his refusal of consent to such a measure, at the meetings at Salter's Hall where it was discussed with sufficient earnestness and urged **by** Mr. Bradbury and others, he was consistent. For him an orthodox test would not have been safe.

In a letter to Dr. Coleman of February 11th, 1747, accompanying his volume on "*The Glory of Christ*", Dr. Watts says: "I think I **have** said everything concerning the Son of God which Scripture says; but I could not go so far as to say, with some orthodox divines, that the Son is equal with the Father." And in his preface and introduction to his treatise on the Trinity, published in 1722, twenty-six years before his death, he admits of a Trinity, but mark his language: "Three such agents or principles of action, as may reasonably be called persons." Principles of action may be figurative, but they are not real, persons.

As an anti-trinitarian and opposer of the truth on the subject of the divine Personality of the Redeemer, he was understood by his contemporaries. The justly distinguished author of the volumes on "*The Great Mystery of Godliness*", the Rev. Thomas Bradbury⁶ charged Dr. Watts, in 1725, with "making the Divinity of Christ to evaporate into a mere attribute", and at a subsequent period he said to the Doctor: "It is a pity, after you have been more than thirty years a teacher of others, you are yet to learn the first principles of the oracles of God. Dr. Owen's church to be taught another Jesus? And that the Son and Spirit were only two powers in the Divine nature?"

Dr. Doddridge was (Watts's) personal friend, companion, and admirer. He was capable of understanding, and certainly cannot be suspected of any disposition to misrepresent, the principles of Dr. Watts, from which, perhaps, his own were not very different. Attend to the statement of Dr. Doddridge on this subject; "For as much as there is such a change and humiliation asserted concerning Christ, as could not properly be asserted concerning an eternal and immutable being, as such, there is reason to believe that Christ had, before his incarnation, a created or derived nature, which would admit of such a change."⁷ Again: "Dr. Watts maintained One Supreme God dwelling in the human nature of Christ, which he supposes to have existed the first of all creatures, and speaks of the divine Logos as the wisdom of God, and the Holy Spirit as the divine power, or the influence and effect of it, which he says is a Scriptural person, i.e. spoken of figuratively in Scripture, under personal characters."⁸ He also referred Christ's being the only begotten Son of God "to his being the promised Messiah, or to his extraordinary conception, and exaltation to his kingdom as Mediator". President Edwards thus understood Dr. Watts, and urges fourteen distinct arguments against his hypothesis concerning Jesus Christ. He has this remark: "According to what seems to be Dr. Watts's scheme, the Son of God is no distinct divine person from the Father"⁹. That his son, the late Dr. Edwards, viewed the subject in a similar light is more than presumable from the fact that he transcribes these arguments of his venerable father for the press. The same conclusion may be drawn in respect of Dr. Erskine of Edinburgh, from the interest he took in the publication of these Essays of the President of Nassau Hall, and from the special notice which he takes of that part of them containing the refutation of the scheme of Dr. Watts.

6. The advocates of Dr. Watts admit Mr. Bradbury to have been a 'man of wit', a man of genius but, to diminish the weight of his testimony, add, "he was a man of spleen". The enlightened and serious reader of the volumes on "*The Mystery of Godliness*" will not thus judge. In those volumes he will trace the operations of a mind, deeply imbued with a love of truth, and of a spirit that was no stranger to the tender sensibilities of evangelical religion.

7. Watts "*Dissertation on the Trinity*", "*Works*" Vol. 6, pps. 518-554. See also Doddridge, "*Family Expositor*" Vol. 2 page 154.

8. Watts, *op.cit.*, Vol 6, p. 630; Doddridge Vol 2. p. 178.

9. Jonathan Edwards, "*Essays*". (Unfortunately we are unable to give the reader a more precise reference than this given in the original by Dr. McMaster. *Ed.*)

In the same light are these writings of Dr. Watts understood by the venerable Dr. Anderson ¹⁰ "He taught," says Dr. Anderson, "that the Holy Spirit is not a person really distinct from the Father, but the divine power. That there was no real distinct persons in the Godhead." In the same point of view is the subject, contemplated by the Rev. James R. Willson, in his very interesting "History of Opinions on the Atonement". And hear the confession of another- it is that of Dr. Ely. "We cannot deny", says Dr. Ely, "that **Dr. Watts's treatise has wrought much mischief**. It was the book which first turned the head of the Rev. John Sherman. We wish the pernicious consequences of that treatise had terminated there."

In the same page we are informed that Mr. Allison, late chaplain to Congress, preached the same heresy to our representatives last January (1851), and gave Dr. Watts as the author of the doctrine.

Such were the opinions of Dr. Watts, written and left on record by himself, and thus have these opinions been understood by Bradbury, Doddridge, the two Edwards, Erskine, Anderson, Willson, Ely, etc., and it is notorious that every anti-trinitarian who reads his works claims him as of that school. His solemn address admits of no explanation. If ever man is serious in the expression of his sentiments it is when he addresses God: and if ever he expresses those sentiments with precision it is when he writes them. Dr. Watts has done both. He ventured to tell his Maker that the doctrine of three real Persons in the Godhead is a strange and perplexing notion, which we cannot receive, and which is not even inferable from the whole contents of the Book of God!

The truth is "comparatively few divines, of any class, at the darkened period when Dr. Watts lived and wrote, held out the glimmering lamp of sound evangelical instruction" Giving too much way to the gambols of imagination, it "occasionally carried him out (say his friends) into moral and sentimental excursions, beyond his usual limits of plain evangelical truth." And, according to the historian of the English dissenters (Bogue), from these excursions it was no easy task to bring him back. Childishly fond of something new, over the creatures of his own fancy he doted with an overweening affection, not because they were legitimate, but because they were his ovary.

What upon this fundamental subject were the views of Dr. Watts? Certainly not those of Christianity. They might be those of a slightly modified Arianism, but not less gross or erroneous than those of the Alexandrian presbyter. The scheme of both was really a form of the old Oriental Gnosticism. The super-angelic spirit of Arius and Watts was but an Aeon of the Gnostics. The scheme of Watts may be Gnosticism, but Christianity it is not. We understand his scheme as did Bradbury, Doddridge, Edwards, and, perhaps, as everyone understands him who attentively reads his works. Why then be specially reproached for understanding what they

¹⁰. Anderson: *Vindiciae Cantus Domine*", p. 221.

understood, and for saying what they said? That these vagaries of the Doctor were neither the fruits of youthful indiscretion, nor the infirmities of advanced years, he assures us himself. In the preface to his "Useful Questions" he certifies his readers that: "These papers are the product of that part of his life when his powers of mind and body were in full vigour." That he abandoned them at a late period of his life it would be grateful to be assured of, but of the fact no evidence has been given. The well-meant attempt of Mr. Toplady to prove it, it is well known, was a failure. And his permission of the continuance of the orthodox phraseology in his poetry will not do it. The Doctor's correspondence with Mr. Martin Tomkins, an anti-trinitarian, will explain why he did not alter, as he wished to do, the sentiments in his religious poetry. The language of poetry is no certain index of the principles of the poet. The modern transcendentalist is often poetic in his theology, and in an evangelical strain he can take the language of Rutherford, and Owen, and Edwards and talk of a close walk with God, and of intimate communion with him. The pantheism of transcendentalism allows them thus to speak a very spiritual language, while they may mean no more than their exposure to a July sun or a December frost, to a gentle shower or to a storm of hail. The poetry of fancy will not do away the heresy of prose. This brings to mind a remarkable coincidence. Bardesanes of Edessa, of the second century, and Watts of Southampton, of the eighteenth century, were both distinguished for their advocacy of error, and both were poets. And they are the only poets, as far as recollected, who attempted the imitation of the Book of Psalms, each in a book of 150 hymns. If history be credited, the Gnostic, as a poet, was not inferior to him of Southampton.

But why should the suggestion of a doubt as to the orthodoxy of Dr. Watts produce so much sensibility? Why not contend, with equal zeal, for the soundness of Robinson and Priestly? No man will hesitate to place Robinson, the author of the "Village Sermons" and Watts in the same rank, as to orthodoxy. The same Robinson, the author of "Ecclesiastical Researches", and Priestly, the historian of "Early Opinions", were fellow labourers in the same cause of heresy. Why then separate Watts, Robinson, and Priestly? They were all learned and able men; and all equally mistaken in the first principles of true religion- the object and medium of worship.

Is it because Watts gave a book of 'Psalms'(sic) to orthodox churches?

To the religious principles of her 'psalmist' the church *cannot* be indifferent. And to none of his works are they likely to be indifferent. The works of Dr. Watts are in the market; and in the gossip of the religious newspapers of the day his name is celebrated as divine. The title by which the Spirit of God has designated an inspired poet and Prophet has been transferred to him- "The sweet Psalmist of Israel"- and his verses have been elevated to the place of the displaced Psalms of inspiration. Yet where is the enlightened Christian of any name who, knowing what he was doing,

would put in the hand of his son, or into that of any serious enquirer after fundamental truth, the "Useful Questions concerning Jesus Christ" by Dr. Watts, or his more ingenious and laboured work; "The Glory of Christ"?

By those in the use of his hymns in the Psalmody of the Church no note of warning is sounded indicating the danger of his errors. His works have for a time perplexed many, and finally perverted others, and when the temptation to heresy has the sanction of the name of the "sweet Psalmist" of the church the evil work among her members will take its course.

These considerations justify this notice of these fatal errors. The interests, too, of historical verity have some claim to our regard. The defence of reputation against unfounded imputations may be left to time without further remark. It ought to be felt by Christians that the leading psalmist of their church should have been a professed believer and advocate of the truth respecting the God of Israel. The influence which his name is likely to exert upon the faith of the church demands this.

FOOTNOTE: Isaac Watts (1674 - 1748) was an English non-conformist, and is listed in Schaff-Herzog's *Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge* as the one who "opened up a new path" for worship by his Hymns, which were "without precedent or rival", and by which he "won the epithet, 'the inventor of English hymns'", though he was not the first Englishman to write hymns. Whereas "previously only psalms had been sung in public worship: he introduced hymns" via his book of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* published in 1707. In 1719 he published his *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* which he "considered his most important work, and indeed it effected the reformation (sic) of English psalmody". This book was indeed a fateful mollification and quite free paraphrase of the original Biblical Psalms, and it effectually acted as Watts intended it, to be a stepping stone from Psalmody to outright "hymnody". Of the Biblical Hebrew Psalms, Watts said:

"What need is there that I should wrap up the shining honours of my Redeemer in the dark and shadowy language of a religion that is now for ever abolished, especially when Christians are so vehemently warned in the Epistles of St. Paul against a Judaizing spirit in their worship as well as doctrine?"

Watts also considered the singing of Psalms to promote "hypocrisy", insisting that "the curses, Hebraisms, and Jewish intricacies" and the many "deficiencies of light and glory" are effectively "stopping the worshippers hearts on their ascent to heaven." **ALL THIS FROM AN ANTI-TRINITARIAN !!!!!**