DBSJ 22 (2017): 91–103

WAS ISAAC WATTS UNITARIAN? ATHANASIAN TRINITARIANISM AND THE BOUNDARY OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

by
Scott Aniol[1]

Glory to God the Trinity,
Whose name has mysteries unknown;
In essence One, in persons Three,
A social nature, yet alone.

A more orthodox hymnic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity would be difficult to find than one like this from the pen of the Father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Indeed, many of Watts's hymns contain such Trinitarian language affirming the equal deity and praiseworthiness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet, despite this legacy of rich, Trinitarian hymnody, Isaac Watts's reputation has been plagued since his lifetime with charges that he was less than orthodox in his doctrine of the Trinity. The purpose of this paper is to investigate thoroughly Watts's mature thought concerning the Trinity to determine the purposes behind his thinking, and to assess whether any unorthodox views have been passed on through his most influential works—his hymns.

Several of Watts's biographers treat the subject at length, many without the benefit of all of the pertinent documents at their disposal.[2] Other hymn textbooks or biographers of Watts either briefly mention his Trinitarian problems without any evidence,[3] or they dismiss the charges without giving them the attention they deserve, mainly by citing examples of his Trinitarian hymns written and published early in his life, before debates about the Trinity grabbed Watts's attention.[4] Watts

[1]Dr. Aniol is Associate Professor of Worship Ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, TX, and is the director of Religious Affections Ministries (www.religiousaffections.org).

[2]See Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (London: Independent Press, 1943), 103–26; Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Thought* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2013).

[3]John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology: Setting Forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of All Ages and Nations* (London: John Murray, 1907), 1236. Interestingly, though, Julian's reference here is to an unknown work allegedly by Watts, *Speculations on the Human Nature of the Logos*.

[4]For example, see Douglas Bond, *The Poetic Wonder of Isaac Watts* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2013), 75.

published all his major hymn collections between 1707 and 1719, and he did not begin writing about the Trinity until 1722. Thus, a fresh consideration of Watts's Trinitarian views will be helpful in assessing his continuing legacy.

THE CASE AGAINST WATTS

As I will show, some of how Watts described the Trinity caused his views to be criticized during his lifetime, but claims after his death that Watts had become fully Unitarian at the end of his life stem primarily from Nathaniel Lardner (1684–1768), a Unitarian scholar who in 1768 made the following statement: "In the latter part of his life, for several years before his death, and before he was seized with an imbecility of his faculties, [Watts] was an Unitarian." Lardner further claimed that some writings composed "three or four years" before Watts's death, in which he allegedly articulated a thorough Unitarianism, were deemed unfit for publication and destroyed by the executors of his will.[5] Lardner's testimony was published in 1812 by Thomas Belsham, who also suggested that although many of Watts's earlier hymns expressed a robust Trinitarianism, Watts "would gladly have altered [them] if he had been permitted by the proprietors of the copyright."[6]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF UNITARIANISM IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

Part of the reason Watts found himself engaged in debates over the Trinity during his life was the emergence of tendencies in England at the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century toward *Unitarianism*, which at the time was a general term to describe views like Arianism and Socinianism that reject a traditional orthodox understanding of the Trinity. John Biddle (1615–1662) came to be known as the Father of English Unitarianism at the end of the seventeenth century due to his questionable views concerning the deity of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ, the latter of which he argued "hath no other than a human nature."[7] The major orthodox response to Biddle and others during this period came from George Bull, who wrote in 1685 his *Defense of the Nicene Faith*. Bull's aim was to prove the ante-Nicene church fathers held views perfectly consistent with the Nicene Creed.[8]

---

[5]Thomas Belsham, *Memiors of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey, M.A.* (London: J. Johnson and Co., 1812), 219, 221.

[6]Ibid., 216.

[7]John Biddle, "A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity," in *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion*, ed. David B. Parke (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985), 32.

[8]George Bull, *A Defense of the Nicene Creed Out of the Extant Writings of the Catholick Doctors, Who Flourished During the Three First Centuries of the Christian Church; In Which Also Is Incidentally Vindicated the Creed of Constantinople Concerning the Holy Ghost*, A New Translation (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1852), x–xi.

Debate reemerged with vigor once again in the early eighteenth century with Anglican minister Samuel Clarke (1675–1729). Clarke insisted that Athanasian Trinitarianism not be made a condition for subscription to the formularies of the Church of England since "the Bible, I say, the Bible only, is the Religion of Protestants."[9] This led him at very least to minimize the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. He wrote in his 1712 *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* that the biblical term *God* always ultimately designates the Father; neither the Son nor the Spirit are self-existent but rather are derivative of the Father, and supreme worship belongs to the Father alone.[10] Clarke's writings were opposed by orthodox Trinitarians—most effectively Daniel Waterland (1683–1740)—and officially condemned in 1714. Waterland critically evaluated views he believed were inconsistent with orthodox Trinitarianism, and in so doing provided a reasonable standard by which to judge orthodoxy in Watts's writing. Waterland argued that orthodox Trinitarians believe that the Son is consubstantial and coeternal with the Father, that the term *God* may be equally applied to each person of the Trinity, and that each person of the Trinity deserves equal worship.[11]

While Arianism plagued the Church of England in the early eighteenth century to some degree, English Nonconformity presented an even more fertile breeding ground for anti-Trinitarian sentiments, primarily due to the fact that most Nonconformists opposed creeds, considering them "human impositions." They taught that Scripture alone should mark the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, and to require subscription to a human creed was to create unnecessary division among Christians and contradict *Sola Scriptura*. Debate among dissenting ministers concerning the necessity of affirming creedal Trinitarianism climaxed in 1719 at the Salters' Hall Conference. The Conference divided between so-called "subscribers"—those who believed ministers should be required to affirm a traditional orthodox Trinitarian creed—and "non-subscribers." Notably, Isaac Watts sided with the non-subscribers in the debate, lending weight to charges that Watts sympathized with the non-Trinitarians. This debate sparked Watts's interest in the subject, and from that point to the end of his life, Watt's wrote several important treatises on the Trinity, to which I will now turn.

WATTS'S TRINITARIANISM

The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity (1722)

Watts's first major treatise on the subject is *The Christian Doctrine*

[9] Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1712), v, 21.

[10] See Thomas C. Pfizenmaier, *The Trinitarian Theology of Dr. Samuel Clarke (1675–1729): Context, Sources, and Controversy* (New York: Brill, 1997), 104.

[11] Daniel Waterland, *The Works of the Rev. Daniel Waterland, D.D.*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1823), 1:279–80.

of the Trinity, published in 1722.[12] In the preface, Watts states that he desires to plainly set forth the scriptural doctrine of the Trinity without appealing to or using any of the extra-biblical language of what he calls the "scholastic explication of this sacred doctrine"—i.e., creedal language used to explain the nature of the Trinity such as "consubstantial," "generation," or "spiration." Instead, Watts sets about to accomplish three primary goals: First, he wishes to explain, using "plain and express testimonies of Scripture," "that the same true Godhead belongs to Father, Son, and Spirit, and yet that they are three such distinct agents or principles or actions as may reasonably be called persons." Second, he aims to designate which "honors and duties" may be rightly applied to all three persons, and which are unique to each individual person. Third, Watts desires to demonstrate what aspects of this doctrine are necessary to believe according to Scripture "without enquiring into any particular schemes to explain this great mystery of godliness, to determine the manner, 'how one God subsists in three persons.'"[13]

Watts presents his thoughts in a series of twenty-two propositions. He meticulously outlines considerable evidence from Scripture that leads him to certain incontrovertible conclusions about the biblical teaching regarding the Trinity of God: First, many attributions given uniquely to God in Scripture apply equally to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Second, "since there is and can be but one true God, these Three, who have such a communion in Godhead, may properly be called the one God, or the only true God." Third, Watts articulates the distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit as one of "personhood," calling this the "custom of the Christian Church in almost all ages." Thus Watts clearly articulates a doctrine of Trinity as one God in three persons, consistent with the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.

Yet proposition fourteen introduces a particular aspect of Watts's beliefs about the Trinity that helps to explain his decision to vote with the non-subscribers at Salters' Hall. He states, "Though the Sacred Three are evidently and plainly discovered in Scripture to be one and the same God and three distinct personal agents or persons, yet the Scripture hath not in plain and evident language explained and precisely determined the particular way and manner how these three persons are one God, or how this one Godhead is in three persons." "Thence," he asserts in proposition fifteen, "I infer that it can never be necessary to salvation to know the precise way and manner how one God subsists in three personal agents, or how these three persons are one God." He insists in proposition sixteen, however, that "it is our duty to believe the general doctrine of the Trinity," and in propositions seventeen through twenty he affirms that any attribute or worship due to God should be directed to all three persons.

It is in this series of propositions, however, that two potentially controversial points emerge. First, in proposition eighteen, Watts

[12]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts*, 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 6:107–205.

[13]Ibid., 110–11.

addresses a corollary to his statement that all ascriptions of deity may be rightly attributed to each of the divine persons, namely, what to do with what he calls "some inferior character or office" attributed in Scripture to the Son or Holy Spirit, referring to language of submission by one member of the Godhead to another and to the humanity of Jesus. He insists that anything "properly ascribed to any of these sacred persons that is beneath the dignity of Godhead must arise from something external to God, something that is not essential to the divine nature." He easily explains some of these designations with regard to the Son as describing his human nature after his incarnation. However, Watts also notes that some of the "inferior" language used to describe the Son applies to before his incarnation, particularly the Son's submission to do the Father's will in being sent by the Father into the world. Watts answers this problem by proposing that the human soul of Jesus was united to the divine nature of the Son prior to his incarnation, and that this is what also accounts for the Son's appearances in the Old Testament. He also postulates the possibility that it is only in his office of mediator that the Son has a role submissive to that of the Father, not in his divine essence. He suggests the same possibility with regard to the Spirit, who has no inferior nature, and thus must be submissive to the Father and the Son only in role.

Second, in proposition twenty Watts wrestles with whether or not it is appropriate to address prayers or expressions of worship to the Holy Spirit, admitting, "I confess we cannot find in Scripture any such positive and express precepts or examples of petition and praise so directly addressed to the person of the Holy Spirit, as there are to the Father and to the Son." However, this position does not mean that Watts denied the deity of the Holy Spirit, and, in fact, he later insists that although no biblical example of praising the Spirit exists, he allows for it on the basis of inference from other scriptural statements about the Spirit.

Two general preliminary conclusions may be drawn from Watts's discourse in *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*: First, as of 1722, Watts clearly articulates an understanding of God as one in essence and three in persons, although he carefully avoids any creedal explanation that employs terms that extend beyond Scripture. Second, Watts insisted that such a philosophical formulation of the nature of the Trinity was not necessary for salvation as long as an individual gave each person of the Godhead due honor. Third, Watts's thoughts concerning the Trinity here were apparently orthodox enough to warrant official response from non-Trinitarians, most notably from Arian defender Martin Tomkins,[14] who penned in 1723, *A Sober Appeal to a Turk or an Indian, concerning the Plain Sense of Scripture Relating to the Trinity, Being an Answer to Mr. I. Watts's Late Book*.

[14]This work was originally published anonymously.

The Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith (1724); *Dissertations Relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity* (1725)

Watts's next major treatise dealing with the Trinity is *The Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith*, written in 1724,[15] to which he appended in 1725 *Dissertations Relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*.[16] In the former document, Watts clearly stated that Arianism was a "scheme which represents the blessed Jesus as an inferior god, and thus brings him too near to the rank of those inferior gods or heroes in the sense of the heathens; whereas the Scripture places him in a vastly superior character, as God over all blessed forever, and as one with God the Father."[17] He strongly affirmed the deity of Christ and the Spirit, asserting, "I am established afresh in the belief of the deity of Christ, and the blessed Spirit, and assured of it upon sufficient grounds, that they are one with the Father in Godhead, though they are represented in Scripture as distinct persons."[18]

Yet these dissertations do raise several concerns that brought criticism from orthodox Trinitarians of the time. First, Watts's failure to explicitly condemn Arianism as heresy renders him susceptible to the charges of Arian sympathy. He considered this work to be a sort of response to Tomkins's *Sober Appeal*, whereupon he specifically states, "I do not think that Scripture particularly refers to those that deny the Godhead of Christ [as heretics]."[19]

Second, Watts's defense of both the deity and humanity of Christ against the Arian denial of Christ's deity leads him to posit "two distinct persons, as God and man, being each of them a single intelligent agent." Watts admits that this sounds like Nestorianism, but insists, "I know of no manner of injury done to the Scripture, to the sacred truths of the gospel, nor to the common schemes of explaining the Trinity, by such allowance as this."[20] He also attempts to more fully reconcile here than he had in the previous work the "inferior" language ascribed to Christ before his incarnation. As he had already implied in *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*, Watts believed the human soul of Christ to be the "first created essence" of God, which was united to the divine Word. Ironically, it is here that Watts uniquely appeals to a church father, Origen, as support for the pre-existent creation of Christ's human soul.[21]

---

[15]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts*, 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 6:207–70.

[16]Ibid., 6:270–390.

[17]Watts, *Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith*, 250.

[18]Ibid., 210.

[19]Ibid., 207.

[20]Ibid., 233.

[21]Isaac Watts, *Dissertations Relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *The Words of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 6:325.

Third, this very line of thought leads Watts to adjust his sentiments from *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity* regarding the equal worship due all three persons of the Godhead. Instead, Watts claims that "there may be mediate or subordinate forms of worship paid to him that is true God, when in union with an inferior nature he condescends to take upon him the form or character of a Mediator," referring specifically to Christ in his mediatorial role.[22]

Fourth, in his attempt to defend the deity of the Son and Spirit, Watts's softens considerably his thoughts set forth in *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity* concerning the distinct personality of the Son and the Spirit: he simply cannot find a way to rationally reconcile both the literal deity and literal personality of Trinity. Watts claims that the language of "generation" and "procession" used to explain the nature of the Son and the Spirit are "popish, scholastic doctrines," and he compares by way of analogy the distinction of Word and Spirit in the Godhead to that of the mind and will of a human soul.[23] He prefers the designation "divine powers" to "persons," explains language of personality ascribed to the Word and Spirit in Scripture as only figurative, and questions "a real and substantial distinction…literally to be three proper, distinct, conscious agents, or three real, intelligent natures…united to compose one Godhead," for "fear of approaching to the doctrine of tritheism."[24]

Thus Watts's *The Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith* and *Dissertations Relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity* appear to be examples of what happens when one refuses to employ creedal formulations of biblical doctrine and insists that a central doctrine of the Trinity is nonessential to Christian faith—it leaves him open to charges of denying the biblical mystery of the Trinity as literally three divine persons in one divine essence.

And this is exactly what orthodox Trinitarians claimed in response to this treatise. In particular, Abraham Taylor wrote in 1728 *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity Vindicated: In Opposition to Mr. Watts's Scheme of One Divine Person and Two Divine Powers* as an explicit response to what he believed to be heretical concessions made to Arianism in Watts's writings to this point.[25] Taylor believed that Watts had too much allowed reason to lead him to attempt to explain what is "incomprehensible." He strongly declares that the Trinity "is a doctrine of the utmost importance; the salvation of men is most nearly concerned in this matter."[26] He further claims that in Watts's insistence upon avoiding a particular creedal scheme to explain the Trinity, Watts ironically

[22]Watts, *Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith*, 262–66.

[23]Watts, *Dissertations Relating to the Trinity*, 351, 365.

[24]Ibid., 274, 378.

[25]Abraham Taylor, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity Vindicated: In Opposition to Mr. Watts's Scheme of One Divine Person and Two Divine Powers* (London: J. Roberts, 1728).

[26]Ibid., 6.

"unwarily promoted an end contrary to his design"[27] by himself developing a new rational "hypothesis" that contradicts Scripture. Instead, Taylor insists that "the common orthodox way of speaking of the eternal generation of the Son, and the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, has countenance enough from Scripture to justify our keeping to this language, which has been long in use, provided we keep from explaining the modus of this generation and procession."[28] He claims that Watts's refusal to use such language leads him to deny any real distinction between the persons of the Godhead, particularly in his analogy of the human soul with its mind and will and his preference for the term "powers" in place of "persons,"[29] and Watts's sympathy toward viewing the deity and humanity of Christ as two distinct persons renders him fully Nestorian.[30]

Watts repeats in simpler form many of the central statements describing his Trinitarianism in a 1727 sermon, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Use of It" from Ephesians 2:18.[31] Watts does use the designation "persons" here, but he insists in a footnote that such language must not be taken literally lest it lead to the conclusion that there are "three distinct Spirits," and he also emphasizes once again the economic hierarchy of the Trinity. Importantly, however, he concludes the sermon with a new hymn not published in earlier collections, in which he expressly commends praise, honor, and glory to Father, Son, and Spirit.

Three Works in 1746

Watts did not write anything more of significance about the Trinity until just two years prior to his death. In 1746, Watts produced three works dealing with the subject. He first penned, *Useful and Important Questions Concerning Jesus the Son of God Freely Proposed: With a Humble Attempt to Answer Them According to Scripture*.[32] Interestingly, in the preface to this work, Watts "freely and delightfully confesses" agreement with the Athanasian Creed, though in the next breath he insists, "yet I take no human writings for a test of the divinity or truth of my opinions."[33] However, it does appear that Watts reverses some of his more questionable views from earlier works while continuing to insist that belief in a particular explanation of the Trinity is not necessary for

[27]Ibid., 25.

[28]Ibid., 15–16.

[29]See especially chap. 3, ibid., 27ff.

[30]Ibid., 80.

[31]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 2:1–27.

[32]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.,* 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 6:391–473.

[33]Ibid., 6:391.

salvation. He argues that, while he fully believes Christ to have a divine nature, the title "Son of God" in Scripture refers not to an eternal generation and consubstantial sonship, but rather only to Christ's human nature in his office as Messiah, which he once again asserts as existent prior to the creation of the world.[34] This leads him to the conclusion that it is unnecessary for salvation to believe Christ to be the "eternal Son of God as a distinct person in the same divine essence, proceeding from the Father by such an eternal and incomprehensible generation."[35] He presents this argument, not in order to diminish the deity of Christ, but in his way of thinking to actually bolster belief in Christ's deity and "remove any of the great impediments out of the way of the Arians or Socinians from believing the true deity of Christ."[36]

To his *Useful and Important Questions* Watts appended "A Charitable Essay on the True Importance of Any Human Schemes to Explain the Sacred Doctrine of the Trinity."[37] Herein Watts fully reveals the motivation that had driven his thoughts concerning the Trinity since at least Salters' Hall: he believes that particular "schemes of explication" concerning the Trinity may be helpful to the Christian Church but must be "proposed with modesty," must never be imposed on the conscience, and are not necessary for salvation. He insists, "I must believe that the great God will make merciful allowances to sincere souls for their different sentiments, or for their ignorance and darkness in so sublime and mysterious an article, which almost all parties allow to contain some unknowables and inconceivables in it."[38]

Finally, also in 1746, Watts produced a thorough treatment of the doctrine, *The Glory of Christ as God-Man Displayed: By a Survey of the Visible Appearances of Christ as God Before His Incarnation*.[39] In this work Watts most fully lays forth his belief that the human nature of Christ pre-existed his incarnation. He affirms Christ to be "God and man in two distinct natures, one person, that is, one complex personal agent,"[40] seemingly reversing his Nestorian leanings from years earlier. He further suggests that the "angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament was already a union of the divine and human natures. Interestingly, he cites early church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Athanasius himself, as recorded by Bull in his *Defense of the Nicene Faith,* in support of this view.[41] He argues that Christ's human nature

[34]Ibid., 446.

[35]Ibid., 396.

[36]Ibid., 425.

[37]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.,* 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 6:474–83.

[38]Ibid., 478–79.

[39]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.,* 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 6:484–648.

[40]Ibid., 485.

[41]Ibid., 516–18.

was created by God and united to the divine Second person of the Trinity prior to the incarnation, indeed, prior to the creation of the world. He once again roots this belief in the biblical texts that use language for appearances of Christ in the Old Testament that Watts believes to be "inferior to Godhead," such as being a messenger of the Father, emptying himself of his glory, having a will different than that of God the Father, and being sent by the Father into the world. He believes that this way of understanding the pre-incarnate appearances of Christ "enables us to defend the doctrine of the deity of Christ with greater justice and success against many other cavils of the Socinian and Arian writers," and is fully consistent with "any scheme that maintains the Godhead of the sacred Three."[42]

A Summary of Watts's Trinitarian Beliefs

Isaac Watts's beliefs concerning the Trinity at the end of his life may be summarized in this way: First, Watts always believed himself to be fully consistent with what was considered orthodox Trinitarianism in his time. In several writings through the course of his life, Watts explicitly sides with and liberally quotes George Bull and Daniel Waterland.[43] As late as 1746, he expressly affirmed agreement with the Athanasian Creed,[44] most of his Trinitarian writings were composed with a goal of combatting (and sometimes attempting to convert) Arians and Socinians. In his final Trinitarian treatise two years before his death Watts expressed assurance that his beliefs were consistent with confessional Trinitarianism, and compared with Waterland's description of what constituted unbiblical beliefs concerning the Trinity, Watts passes as sufficiently Trinitarian.

Second, Watts was determined to derive his Trinitarian beliefs from the texts of Scripture alone and not from any human explanation or

[42]Ibid., 585–96, 632–33. With regard to the claim that Watts wished to change the lyrics of his hymns later in life, not enough proof exists to provide an answer one way or the other. On the one hand, this accusation is made on the basis of hearsay only; nothing in Watts's own writings indicates as such. On the other hand, additional hearsay corroborates the claim that Watts wanted to alter some of his hymn texts, but only to root redemption in the love of God rather than the compassion of Christ, not to change the language to be less Trinitarian (Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times, and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* [London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1834], 281).

[43]Watts, *Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*, 144, 155; idem, *Dissertations Relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*, 275.

[44]This seems to contradict the supposition made by Lardner that Watts became fully Unitarian only three or four years before his death, and that his writings that reveal this were destroyed. Furthermore, although Watts did write "A Faithful Inquiry after the Ancient and Original Doctrine of the Trinity" in 1745, most copies of which were destroyed, and it was not published until 1802. Further, this treatise says nothing different from what Watts had already written, and it comes before his affirmation of the Athanasian Creed in 1746. See Francis Parkman, "Was Dr. Watts a Believer in the Supreme Divinity of Jesus Christ?," in Francis Parkman, et al., *An Account of the State of Unitarianism in Boston in 1812* [Boston, n.p., 1829], 2.

creed, although he was not averse to citing human authors in defense of his positions or even stating personal agreement with the Athanasian Creed. This impulse was partially due to his tradition of Nonconformity and partially out of a desire to convert those with Arian or Socinian leanings to a more biblical position. However, this aversion to using creedal language did at times lead him to contradict the creeds as he experimented with ways to best explain the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

Third, Watts was driven by a determination to protect both the unity of God and the divinity of the Son of God. Never were his somewhat unorthodox descriptions of his views motivated by a desire to argue against the Trinity or the full deity of Jesus Christ, as was the motivation of truly thorough Unitarians of the time.

Fourth, Watts strongly desired to uncover a rational explanation to reconcile Three in One. Partially as a product of his Enlightenment cultural climate, and partially out of desire to honestly understand biblical doctrine, Watts sought until the end of his days to articulate the truth about God in a way that made rational sense. This caused him, however, no small amount of grief. He cried out to God in 1745 the following in a posthumously published reflection:

> How shall a poor weak creature be able to adjust and reconcile these clashing ideas and to understand this mystery?... I want to have this wonderful doctrine of the all-sufficience of thy Son and thy Spirit for these divine works made a little plainer.... Surely I ought to know the God whom I worship, whether he be one pure and simple being or whether thou are a threefold deity.... Help me, heavenly Father, for I am quite tired and weary of these human explainings, so various and uncertain.... I entreat, O most merciful Father, that thou wilt not suffer the remnant of my short life to be wasted in such endless wanderings, in quest of thee and thy Son Jesus, as a great part of my past days have been.[45]

Finally, Watts refused to allow a particular human explanation of the Trinity or creed to be a test of Christian orthodoxy or fellowship. Again as part of his Nonconformist tradition, this concern appears to have motivated Watts above all others. At heart, Watts was a peacemaker who wanted to unify all of the various Christian factions. But in avoiding any creedal boundaries, instead of being a force for unity, Watts merely fueled the controversy.

One final consideration must be mentioned in determining Watts's deepest personal convictions regarding the Trinity. In 1740, Watts collected several miscellaneous works that had never before been published, but which he believed were worthy. Among the collection is a short reflection called "The Gift of the Spirit," in which he proclaims the following:

---

[45]Isaac Watts, "The Author's Solemn Address to the Great and Ever-Blessed God on a Review of What He Had Written in the Trinitarian Controversy," in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.,* 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 9:506–10.

> What is dearer to God the Father than his only Son? And what diviner blessing has he to bestow upon men than his Holy Spirit? Yet has he given his Son for us, and by the hands of his Son he confers his blessed Spirit on us…. How the wondrous doctrine of the blessed Trinity shines, through the whole of our religion, and sheds a glory upon every part of it![46]

Surely this thought, approved by its author near the end of his life, accurately reflects the innermost convictions of Isaac Watts upon the Trinity.

IMPLICATIONS

Several relevant implications may be drawn from Watts's debates over the Trinity. First, Watts's Trinitarian controversies illustrate well the importance and difficulties of determining the doctrinal boundaries of Christian orthodoxy and their effects upon ecclesiastical cooperation. This has been an issue, of course, with which Christians have wrestled since the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. In more recent times, the matter resurfaced with regard to the Fundamentalist/New Evangelical debates of the 1950s, the Southern Baptist controversies of the early 1980s, Evangelicals and Catholics Together in 1994, the Manhattan Declaration in 2009, and debates regarding doctrinal requirements for membership in ETS. The contemporary tendency toward doctrinal minimalism with regard to Christian cooperation may have something important to learn from Isaac Watts's doctrinal minimalism in early eighteenth-century Nonconformity.

This leads to a second implication of Watts's Trinitarian controversies, namely, the significance of church tradition and doctrinal creeds in articulating and protecting biblical orthodoxy. While it is certainly true that human creeds are fallible, Watts's Trinitarian controversies emphasize the need for care whenever deviating from historic confessional language in attempting to articulate biblical doctrine. The particular terminology and formulas in historic creeds emerged with special care given to avoid heresy, and one should therefore not be surprised when, in departing from historically accepted formulas, he falls under the charge of heresy.[47] This is particularly true with the doctrine of the Trinity and has notable relevance for recent attempts to explain, like Watts, the language in Scripture of Christ's submission to the Father.

Furthermore, claiming to have no creed but the Bible may sound noble and pious, but it is a fact of history that when individuals or

---

[46]In *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.,* 9 vols. (London: Leeds, 1813), 9:479.

[47]Taylor's admonition concerning Watts is worth considering here: "When a man goes beyond Scripture in explaining this mysterious part of our religion, under the pretense of giving a rational account of it, his nicest care will hardly exempt him from the inconvenience of having some names of modern or ancient error fixed on him; and the reason is this: it is hardly possible that there can be any mistake relating to the doctrine of the Trinity advanced now, which has never been started before; for as to this matter, it may truly be said, there is nothing new under the sun" (Taylor, *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity Vindicated*, 33).

groups completely reject confessional language, even with noble desires for Christian unity or biblical authority, they almost always end up with significant theological problems. And this is exactly the case with the Nonconformists in England following Watts: those who, like Watts, claimed to accept no human creed ended up fully denying the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and even the sufficient atonement of Christ.

Finally, the lasting legacy of Isaac Watts contains an irony relating to his Trinitarianism that uncovers another important implication for churches today. Isaac Watts is not most well-known today primarily as a theologian, much less as one with questionable Trinitarian views. Few Christians, even pastors, have read any of Watts's treatises on the Trinity. Rather, Watts's theological legacy comes from his hymns. Whether or not he regretted the clear Athanasian Trinitarianism in some of his hymns is irrelevant when considering his lasting impact; many of his hymns are strongly Trinitarian, and these have inarguably had a more lasting influence upon Christians and their worship than his treatises.

The irony here is that even the most anti-creedal free churches have been influenced theologically by creeds of another sort—hymns. A church's songs do indeed more potently impact the theology of a congregation than that church's confessional statements. Whether or not Isaac Watts described the biblical Trinity using language that could lead to theological problems, thousands of Christians who have never read a single one of his treatises have learned from "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" to call Christ the "Prince of glory" and "my God" and from "Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed" to call Christ "God the mighty maker." Rather than being negatively influenced by his philosophical musings about the nature of the Godhead, more Christians have been impacted by hymn stanzas like this:

Almighty God, to thee
be endless honors done,
the undivided Three,
and the mysterious One:
where reason fails with all her pow'rs,
there faith prevails, and love adores.

Many Christians are explicitly Trinitarian *because* of Isaac Watts, not despite him.