

ISAAC WATTS

This brief article is a sequel. In the previous article about Isaac Watts is this quote from the Rev. Adam Rankin. In May 1789 he rode on horseback all the way from his home in Kentucky to warn the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, to “*refuse the pernicious error of adopting the use of Isaac Watts’ hymns in public worship in preference to the Psalms of David*”. Watts hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”, for example, was considered controversial. Critics rejected it as “*man centered*” and “*focused on human experience*”.

That hymn by Watts about the “Wondrous Cross” was written in 1707 for use at a communion service. In contrast to the critical opinion of the Rev. Rankin, many, like Matthew Arnold, consider it to be the greatest hymn ever written in the English language. It first appeared in print in 1707 in a collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs. The original title was “*Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ*”. A different melody was given to the hymn in 1824 by Dr. Lowell Mason. Mason is often called the father of American public school and church music. That new melody contains only five notes and is known as the “Hamburg Tune”. The simplicity of the melody helps those who sing the hymn to focus on the message.

Watts’ music was first introduced to America in 1729 when Benjamin Franklin reprinted the *Psalms of David*. This volume had been printed 20 years before in England. Watts’ music was not generally accepted, however, until the 1740s. This came in association with the “Great Awakening”. The “dry metric Psalms” somehow didn’t fit with the lively preaching of men like George Whitefield. Whitefield toured all 13 colonies and is said to have preached in person to 80% of everyone in the entire nation. There was a great hunger for God in those days and some of the crowds numbered as high as 20,000 to 30,000. Whitefield’s use of Watts’ music played a great role in introducing hymn singing to New England. Jonathan Edwards said in 1742 that his congregation in Northampton “*sang Watts’ hymns almost to the exclusion of Psalms*”. The mutual respect these great preachers had for one another resulted in a shared influence on their individual congregations. Edwards used Watts’ music, and Watts read a book by Edwards to his own church. That book by Edwards was titled “*A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*”.

Several years ago I was privileged to listen to a dialogue on music conducted on a college campus in Mainland China. The history of China, as you know, dates many centuries before Christ. Yet, regardless of when it was composed, there is a certain “sameness” to Chinese music. American music, by comparison, is a blending of music from many cultures. America is a melting pot of many races, creeds, and nationalities. Consequently, American music is a mixture of music from all over the world. In American music you will find the African drum, the German polka, the Latin rhythm, and the Irish folk tune. The influence these many cultures have made on American music is basically without limit. There is no central planning in America to control music. Consequently American music is an amalgamation of music from all over the world.

Since the church of Jesus Christ is also composed of people from all over the world, it is logical to assume that Christian music should never be restricted to style used by the Hebrews centuries before Christ. Even the Psalmist made reference to a “new song”. Isaiah even indicates that God Himself wants a “new song” to be sung to the “ends of the earth” (Is. 42:10). New songs will be sung in heaven (Rev. 5:9; 14:3). No one yet knows how these “new songs” will sound.

Just as we can speak from our hearts (Matt. 12:34), we can also make music in our hearts (Eph. 5:19). The focus of our singing therefore should be on our heart more than our lips. It is possible, as you know, to honor God with your lips while your heart is far from him (Matt. 15:8).