

More Than a Hymnist

by Brian Daigle, Covenant Classical School

In the “great conversation” we call the Western tradition, the room always seems to be filled with chatter. And this chatter, for better or for worse, comes through different people and is spoken at different decibels. These conversations can also be steered by small whispers. Every now and again, the room will get silent and the whisper is again recovered and given the opportunity to be discovered. In a room full of bustling educators, Isaac Watts is such a guest.

It’s not often the church has within its fold a saint with such a magnanimous gift as Isaac Watts. Known as the father of modern hymnody, most of our interaction with him comes through his more familiar songs like “Joy to the World” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Along with these, he is credited with over 750 hymns. As James Montgomery once said, “We come to the greatest name among hymn-writers, for we hesitate not to give that praise to Dr. Isaac Watts . . .”¹ But what was behind the melodic poetry of this man? Was he solely a one dimensional composer? Anyone who reads through his hymns will see that something was driving this insuperable saint. As one biographer states it, “It is probable, nay it is certain, that the time bestowed by Watts upon poetry was very slight and insignificant compared with that which he devoted to the graver pursuits of life, and the various studies connected with philosophy, theology, preaching, and education.”²

Isaac Watts was born July 17, 1674, in Southampton, England, the same year John Milton died. His younger years, as well as his older, were littered with difficulty. Even before his birth, the events of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre drove his mother’s family from France to England. When Watts was just an infant,

genius, though naturally inclined, was fostered early on. His mother was known for trading a farthing for one of his couplets, and “. . . it is said that before he could speak plainly, when any money was given to him, he would cry, “A book! A book! Buy a book!”³ He was introduced to the classical authors at a young age while attending

So, what does Watts have to tell us of educating youth?

his mom would often cradle him, singing French Huguenot hymns as they sat outside a local gaol awaiting admittance to visit with Watts’s Nonconformist father. And throughout his later years, the younger Isaac Watts had to retreat from his vocation as a pastor and writer to nurse his own debilitating illnesses. As for his career, at the age of twenty-eight Watts accepted his first preaching position at the church that met on Mark Lane in London. In so doing, he followed in the footsteps of some of the most famous Nonconformist pastors, one of those being the well-known Puritan preacher John Owen. In Watts’s lifetime, he wrote noteworthy texts on logic, ontology, poetry, and in-depth children’s catechisms. With names like “The Skeleton,” “God in Vegetation,” “Food,” “Christ as a Sun,” and “A Plea for Christianizing Horace” his short essays are certainly worth perusing just as well. He proves just as copious a writer as he was a reader. And this level of

grammar school in Southampton under the guidance of a Rev. John Pinhorne. He also became quite proficient in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at an age when most kids are just learning fluency in their mother tongue. All of this and more is described in detail in Paxton Hood’s biography *Isaac Watts: His Life and Hymns*. We are also told that Isaac Watts the elder ran a flourishing boarding school, which could answer some of our questions as to why Watts the younger would have been so intrigued with a philosophy of education, and why Hood would say, “. . . without descending to adulation it may be fairly questioned whether any one individual in English literature has affected so much and such various work for the cause of education as Isaac Watts.”⁴ So, what does Watts have to tell us of educating youth? What can we as classical Christian educators learn from him? My focus here is to highlight how we can benefit from some of Watt’s ideas, some which our classical Christian schools are implementing well and some which we should consider anew.

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Educating Our Youth

“What shall we do to secure wisdom, goodness, and religion, amongst the next generation of men?”⁵ This quote is among the opening lines in Watts’s *A Discourse on the Education of Children and Youth*, his second work on education. After a brief overview of children from zero to three years of age, Watts begins with those who know the mother tongue. First, he reminds Christian parents of this great responsibility they have to properly raise the next generation. His wisdom to parents, not only here but throughout the text, is careful, gracious, and needed. What follows from the brief introduction is eleven sections of particular ways in which Christian educators and parents should seek to develop their children.

Upon reading these eleven sections, it was his fifth, ninth, and the tenth and eleventh (the last two combined as one) which most need face time amidst our education chatter.

Section five is entitled “Of Trade or Employment.” Here, Watts reminds us that in so providing our children with a rigorous liberal arts education, we must not forget that we are training our youth to serve. And this service is going to be a particular service that is unique to each graduating senior. So, while we want our students to grow in the great disciplines of reasoning wisely, speaking well, and loving to learn, we must not be hesitant to observe in our older students gifts and desires that will be a part of their person forever. Using these observations, along with wisdom from their parents, we should encourage each student in a particular direction. A constant interaction between

teachers and parents will allow all those in positions of authority over the child to be considering how God has so crafted them. Watts states, “In a good education it is required also that children, in the common ranks of life, be brought up to the knowledge of some proper business or employment for their lives; some trade or traffic, artifice or manufacture, by which they may support their expenses, and procure for themselves the necessaries of life...”¹² Another way to say this would be that though a lawyer may paint and a painter may read, primary gifts can be seen and established much sooner than the freshman year of college. Both history and experience seem to confirm this. In this area, modern trade schools have a tendency to be too precise while liberal arts programs have a tendency to be too broad. This can be alleviated in our present age by a number of creative ways, one being to offer a few distinct electives for upper students to gain credit in a more general field, having current teachers at the school offer a class within a field they are most talented (i.e. creative writing, printmaking, industrial design, farming, etc.). Another way would be to create apprenticeship programs, partnering with church or community leaders in a specific vocation to allow students brief experience in a field of their choice. We should be seeking to have great creativity and wisdom in not only training up children in the way they should go, but training up *this* child in the way he should go. Watts offers three criteria for how these concentrations should be selected for each student. First is the circumstance and estate of the parent. Second is the capacity and talents of the child. Third is the temper and inclination of

the child. Another area where Watts qualifies this element of education is in section six, entitled “Rules of Prudence,” where he discusses the vast importance of students knowing themselves, knowing mankind, and knowing the things of the world—the first being something John Calvin thought to be most imminent.

Section nine is entitled “A Guard Set on the Sports and Diversions of Children,” where Watts presents the necessity of children being disciplined in a right use of both work and leisure. In the opening lines he states, “Human nature, especially in younger years, cannot be constantly kept intent on work, learning, or labour. There must be some intervals of pleasure to give a loose to the mind, and to refresh the natural spirits. Too long and intense a confinement to one thing, is ready to overtire the spirits of youth, and to weaken the springs of activity by excessive fatigue.”⁷ There is a great balance to be found here, and if anyone has written well about the topic it is Watts. Not only does he continually affirm the great need for structure and discipline, but he compliments it well by adding that building mature Christians who love learning, their neighbor, and the Lord is wholly founded upon their ability to use leisure time appropriately. Leisure, by definition, does not fall under the realm of work. It is what occurs when work has temporarily ceased. Leisure is the time of our day and week when work stops. It is restorative. It is stress free. It is pleasurable, in its own right. In the end, it does not require a product. In fact, in the most glorious ways, it is often ignorant of time constraints and consequences. Leisure is what

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God did on the seventh day, after creating the world. It is to שבת (shâbath) from your labors. Thus, leisure, like work, is one of the most creaturely and obedient things we do, even if done disobediently. But just like we teach our students how to “work as unto the Lord” so we should be teaching our students how to take leisure as unto the Lord. It seems that leisure could consist of sleeping or slumbering, playing, mealtimes, conversations, prayer, singing, or just getting lost in a good story. But as we would expect, leisure takes time. And in order to allot time for such practices, we must reconsider how we are currently scheduling our school day and the classes therein. Are we scheduling them in such a way that truly matures our students in a love for learning and their neighbor? Or are we scheduling them in such a way that only frustrates, and ultimately eradicates, all that we are attempting to do with rigorous curricula? Along these lines Watts reminds us that “. . . a bow kept always bent, will grow feeble and lose its force.”⁸ Therefore, “Those children who are kept pretty close to learning in a school, should be directed to pursue their recreations, as much as may be, in the open air, and to exercise their limbs with vigour and activity, that their growth and health may not be impaired by study, and too much confinement to a book.”⁹

Lastly, in sections ten and eleven, we come to the end of Watts’s discourse, entitled “Of the Proper Degrees of Liberty and Restraint in the Education of a Son, Illustrated by Example” and “Of Proper Degrees of Liberty and Restraint in the Education of Daughters, Illustrated by Examples.” The broad stroke seen in these two sections is on the

topic of gender dynamics. Upon reading, it would be difficult for the reader not to conclude that lest we hope to create a generation of gender neutral rhetoricians, we must consider these issues. In both sections Watts presents some basic principles on biblical masculinity and femininity, through the story of someone who embodied these principles, possibly hypothetical . . . probably not. From these two stories, Eugenio the boy and Antigone the girl, we can conclude that gender dynamics matter. And not just in choosing whether girls should wear skirts or not, but in discipline, class management, and the overall social structure of the school. The daily tasks with which we award our students should be considerate of not only their intellectual frame, but their biological, spiritual, and future frame, knowing that there are some parts of the school where young ladies would do well to dabble in and other parts where the young men should be found. There should be tasks which young men should steer away from, and certain places where young women should be encouraged to avoid, and not just the other’s respective restrooms. If we are raising men for potential husbandry and fatherhood in a Christian manner, and even for a particular post within the church, and if we are raising women for their respective roles, we should be doing so intentionally. We are to be developing boys to be faithful sons, and future men. We are to be maturing girls to be gentle “helpmeets” who understand the right ways in which things and persons, especially themselves, should be beautified. Our schools should reflect this reality clearly and unapologetically.

Therefore, as classical

Christian educators, our greatest takeaway from Isaac Watts is threefold. First, our students “God-given, individual talents are to be fostered and challenged in our forms of education. Second, the duties of the teacher, even in instructing and maturing the mind, is wholly bound in instructing the whole person. Thus, reason without wisdom is folly and work without leisure is unproductive, and certainly unfaithful. Third, the instruction of a son and the instruction of a daughter should be considered as two distinct parts of a whole.

All three of these could be more specific contributions to the broader topic of “school culture.” And it would seem that creating a healthy academic and Christian culture for the next generation has everything to do with these three dimensions working together.

Not everything done in ancient or medieval classical education are things we need to be doing today, or even things we can do today. In fact, much of it would be counterproductive at least, detrimental at most. On this topic, Watts goes so far as to ask and answer the dilemma of “whether the teaching of a school full of boys to learn Latin by the heathen poets, such as Ovid in his Epistles, and the silly fables of his Metamorphoses, Horace, Juvenal, and Martial, in their impure odes, satires, and epigrams, &c. is so proper and agreeable a practice in a Christian country.” The alternative would be “. . .that for almost all boys who learn this tongue, it would be much safer to be taught Latin poesy (as soon and as far as they can need it) from those excellent translations of David’s Psalms...”¹⁰

Whether one agrees with

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this extent or not, it is clear that modern classical Christian education must be classical by degrees. The rub comes from deciding which degree that is and which direction the degree goes. It seems many schools and parents are still trying to figure this out. And that kind of wrestling is good. Thus, though we are classical by degrees, we are Christian in full. Isaac Watts knew this.

In modern hymnology, Watts was a main speaker. As a logician, the fact that both Oxford and Cambridge used his “System of Logic” for many years as their primary text speaks for itself. But in education, he has been the low whisper in the corner. Continuing to pass the microphone to men like Watts will only lead us to greater faithfulness in educating our youth.

NOTES

1. Paxton Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Hymns*, (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Int'l. :2001), 88
2. Hood, 57
3. Hood, 7
4. Hood, 273
5. Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind* (city: publishing, date), 285.
6. Watts, 309–310
7. Watts, 329
8. Watts, 329
9. Watts, 331
10. Watts, 68–69



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