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**Joy To The World**

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# to the world!

BY REV. DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,  
burst into jubilant song with music;*

**PSALM 98:4**

In 1719 the English hymn writer Isaac Watts published a collection of hymns called *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship*. Each of these compositions was based on one of the Psalms as seen in a Christian perspective.

Almost all the hymns in this collection have slipped into obscurity, except for one-half of one song. Watts composed a two-part hymn inspired by Psalm 98. The first part has long since been forgotten. The second part has become one of the most popular hymns of all time: “Joy to the world! The Lord is come!” Ironically, Watts did not intend this to be a Christmas carol. But popular usage in the Church, combined with a stirring melody composed by Lowell Mason in 1836, launched “Joy to the World!” into the songwriting stratosphere.



...we look forward to the day when the impact of sin will be erased, and all nations will prove the glories of God’s righteousness and the wonders of His love. In this hope we rejoice.

## Psalm 98: Our Basis for Joyful Worship

Psalm 98 celebrates God's saving work (v. 1). Yet, unlike the psalms that focus exclusively on God's revelation to Israel, Psalm 98 commemorates the fact that "the LORD has made His salvation known ... to the nations" (v. 2). Even the Gentiles have seen God's "faithfulness to the house of Israel" (v. 3). Therefore Psalm 98 invites everybody, Jew and Gentile alike, to "shout for joy to the LORD" (v. 4).

Psalm 98 obviously includes the Gentiles within God's salvation. In fact, He "comes to judge the earth" (v. 9). There is, at most, only a hint in Psalm 98 that the Gentiles will end up on the thumbs-up side of God's judgment. This psalm focuses on the rejoicing that will happen when God fulfills His promises to Israel.

And this is exactly what God did in Jesus. To be sure, He is the Savior of the whole world. Yet Jesus brought God's salvation to Israel in particular, though in a most unexpected way and, by many, an unappreciated way. He came both to execute judgment and to be judged and executed. As a result of His sacrifice, God's salvation is offered to all people, both Jew and Gentile.

Thus, from a Christian perspective, the vision of Psalm 98 is joyful news for all people. God has been faithful to His chosen people and, through them, for indeed Jesus was a Jew, God has been gracious to all humanity. As Isaac Watts wrote, all people ought to prepare room for Jesus, the King of the whole earth, and rejoice at His coming.

## The Joy of the Future

Like Psalm 98, "Joy to the World" looks ahead to the fullness of salvation yet to come. In our world, sins and sorrows still grow, and thorns still infest the ground. The curse of sin has been broken, but the results of sin are still with us. Thus when we sing "Joy to the World" we look back to the first coming of Christ, celebrating His birth and the salvation it makes possible. At the same time, we look forward to the day when the impact of sin will be erased, and all nations will prove the glories of God's righteousness and the wonders of His love. In this hope we rejoice.

## Christ and the Psalms

For twenty centuries, the Psalms have been a goldmine for Christian worship. The example of Isaac Watts encourages us, as worship leaders and songwriters, to delve into these divinely inspired riches. But his example also reminds us that we read the Psalms, not as Jews awaiting the Messiah, but as Christians who believe that He has already come and will come again. Therefore, as we use the Psalms, we should continually ask how they are transformed in light of Christ and how this transforms our worship.

One facet of this transformation is the expansion of worship in light of salvation in Christ. Whereas Psalm 98 invited the Gentiles to celebrate God's saving of Israel, through Jesus God offers grace to all peoples. Thus all the nations rejoice, not only because of Israel's salvation but also because of their own. 

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REV. DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

The Rev. Dr. Mark D. Roberts is a pastor, author, leader, speaker, blogger, and consultant for Christian organizations. Find out more here.

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This article was originally published in *Worship Leader* magazine Nov/Dec 2006 issue.

# WORSHIP

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SONG STORY

# JOY TO THE WORLD

*Truth and grace in the  
midst of worship wars*

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BY WARREN ANDERSON

Young Isaac Watts had a serious dilemma. The son of a church deacon, Watts loved the Church, and he loved its worship. But, oh, those congregational songs! He needed to do something about them.

English congregational songs in the early 1700s featured Psalm-singing almost exclusively. Following the teaching of John Calvin, most churches stuck solely to sung Scripture. “We shall find no better nor more proper songs ... than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit has spoken and made through him,” Calvin wrote, and thus it was so.

But because Calvin’s belief in the total depravity of man ran so deep as to include disdain for the musically ornamental in worship, lest such flourishes tempt the weak to sin, the tunes selected to accompany these Psalms, church musician Peter Lutkin (writing 100 years ago) tells us, “were of a sober, not to say forbidding, character.” Further complicating the matter was the scarcity of songbooks, which necessitated the practice of “lining out” the Psalms, whereby each line was sung first by the worship leader of the day and then sung back by the congregation. No, flow was definitely not present in the worship services in these instances.



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## It was inconceivable God could be glorified in the manner he deserves if Christians limited themselves to the Psalms...

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### Joyful Noises

As if all that weren't enough, Lutkin notes the "principle of individual license in praising God was carried to such an absurd extent that everyone claimed the right to sing as he pleased, and tunes were distorted with all manner of grotesque turns and twists, according to the whim of the singer." Your 21st century worship leader's occasional flights of vocal improvisational fancy can't hold a candle to those of the average English congregation in the 18th century—where, historian David Stowe tells us, members would, all at the same time, sing different notes, place words on different beats, sing similar words with different tunes, and slow the tempo down such that they might need a breath—or two!—in the midst of singing a single word.

No wonder, then, that Watts grew frustrated with such a racket. When his father responded with an exhortation to write something better, Watts did just that.

### The New Song of Christ

Watts focused his energies on three characteristics of the Psalms which, he felt, made them undesirable for Christian worship—and the first concerned that adjective Christian. For Watts, believers in Jesus Christ—who were redeemed by Jesus Christ, who prayed in the name of Jesus Christ—needed to sing music that extolled the life, mourned the death, and celebrated the resurrection of that same Jesus Christ, who, of course, does not appear (at least not in name) in the Psalms at all. As Watts saw it, David was Jewish and, hence, couldn't possibly praise God as a Christ-follower. In the preface to one of his major works, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Watts stated that he would rejoice to see "David converted into a Christian."

Second, Watts resisted language in the Psalms which was anachronistic and/or absent of the grace by which Christians are saved through faith. How can Christians sing with authenticity, he wondered, lyrics about psalteries and harps when in most cathedrals only the sound of an organ was heard, and most rural churches sang a cappella for want of resources? In addition, Watts despaired over reading the Psalms and coming across what he thought were expressions that ran counter to New Testament theology. He lamented that while reading about "the loving kindness of God, and the multitude of his tender mercies, within a few verses some dreadful curse against men is proposed to our lips ... which is so contrary to the new commandment of loving our enemies."

### Inspiration Outside the Inspired

Watts' third concern with using the Psalms in Christian worship dovetailed with his second; in addition to their often anachronistic nature, he believed they lacked immanence for the current day. It was inconceivable God could be glorified in the manner he deserves if Christians limited themselves to the Psalms—or even, for that matter, all of Scripture. Watts felt it did Christians no good to sing songs featuring "confessions of sins which you never committed, with complaints of sorrows such as you never felt, cursing such enemies as you never had, giving thanks for such victories as you never obtained." To rectify the situation, in addition to his psalm paraphrases, Watts also looked for inspiration outside of Scripture, not to supersede the sacred texts, but to complement them. Indeed, Watts felt the songs for corporate worship had to be—in the vernacular of today's seekersensitivity—"culturally relevant."



## THE SAVIOR REIGNS

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Watts effectively captured the breath, psychoemotionally as well as physiologically, of those who would sing his lyrics.

To that end, like Luther before him, Watts strove to utilize language accessible to the common man, and so, hymnologist Harry Escott says, he willingly submitted himself to an “artistic kenosis . . . lay[ing] his poetic glories aside and dress[ing] the profound message of the gospel in homespun verse and language of the people.”

Watts appealed to the common man not only with his style but also with his structure—making extensive use of the three most popular and easy-to-sing metrical patterns in hymnody: Common Meter (8.6.8.6: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”), Short Meter (6.6.8.6: “Come, We That Love the Lord”), and Long Meter (8.8.8.8: “Give to Our God Immortal Praise”). His short, succinct opening statements, in particular, could be sung in one breath, historian Stephen Marini notes. In other words, Watts effectively captured the breath, psychoemotionally as well as physiologically, of those who would sing his lyrics.

### Time-Honored Style

Out of such deliberations came a body of work that included a number of songs we still sing today—the ones noted above, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” and a song many of us will sing this December, perhaps several times: “Joy to the World,” a setting of Psalm 98. In typical Watts fashion, the text takes snippets of the psalm and embellishes them with literary devices that, although simple (as Escott correctly notes above) nevertheless attest to strong poetic sensibilities: personification (“rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy”), assonance (“the Savior reigns”), and alliteration (“sin and sorrow”).

An additional point of interest emerges when we study the tense of the verbs throughout. Though we sing this song at Christmas, celebrating an event that transpired over 2,000 years ago, we proclaim

that “the Lord is come,” rendering the sentence in the present tense while describing a past event. Such wordplay is especially frequent in Christmas carols: “All is calm, all is bright”; “What Child is this who, laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping?”

The theological term for this grammatical jury-rigging is anamnesis, which, with its relationship to the word amnesia, theologian Laurence Hull Stookey indicates, literally means “the drawing near” of memory—i.e., “the entrance into our experience of that which otherwise would be locked in the past.” Worshipers are, thus, invited into God’s understanding of time (kairos), which differs from our three-dimensional understanding (chronos). Events “that occurred only once,” Stookey concludes, “nevertheless become contemporaneous with us because the Risen One holds all time in unity, and by the Holy Spirit brings all things to our remembrance in this way.”

## The Critics Pan

Not everyone was a fan of Watts’ efforts. Thomas Bradbury snidely referred to Watts’ whims (as opposed to hymns), and one London rector of the era was moved to ask, “Why should Dr. Watts, or any other hymn-maker, not only take precedence over the Holy Ghost, but also thrust him utterly out of the church?” Nevertheless, 300 years later, Watts’ “hymns of human composure,” inspired by a Jewish king and translated for a Christian audience, full of personal and culturally relevant praise, echo throughout houses of worship. A previous generation’s worship wars spawned songs that have stood the test of time. Perhaps the same will be said of our skirmishes of recent years. May it be so, Lord. You do, after all, rule the world with truth and grace. 🕊



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### WARREN ANDERSON

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This article was originally published in *Worship Leader* magazine Nov/Dec 2010 issue.



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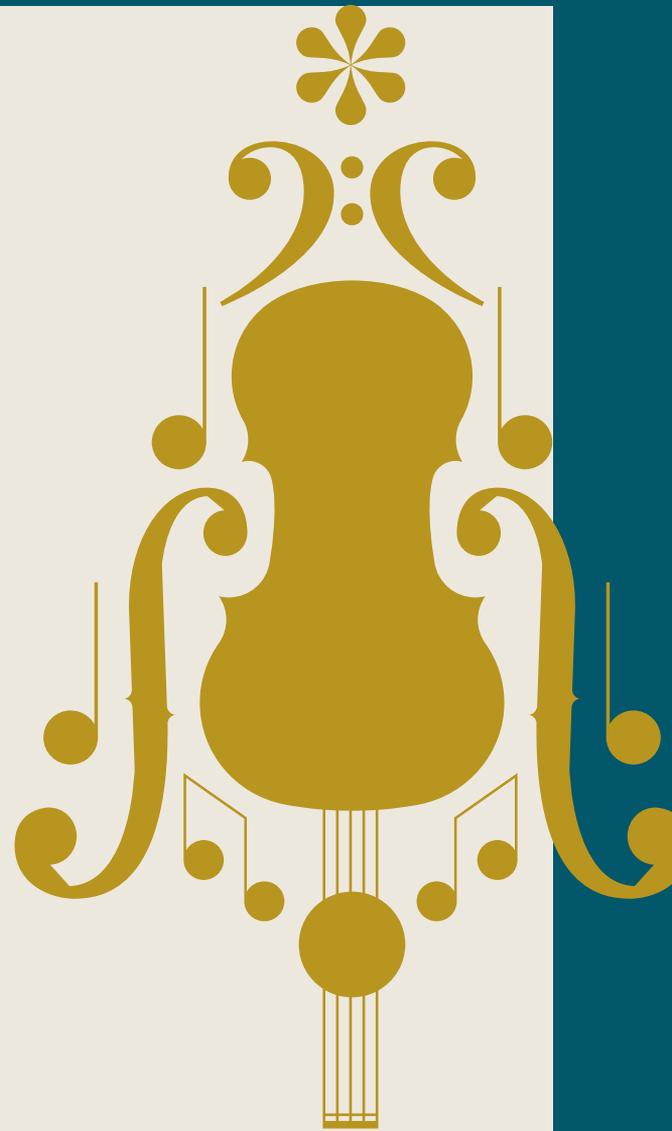
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# Though musical tastes differ, **singing** can still unify us all.

BY CHUCK FROMM

In my 20 years of work in music ministry, from the choir loft to the recording studio, I have yet to find an individual who is not a cultural bigot when it comes to music—including myself. In my earlier years, a clinical condition one would call “sound deficiency syndrome” stirred passionate debate. In the mid-’70s, an influential Bible expositor wrote a scathing letter decrying the use of guitar and drums in “sacred” music. To this person and many other church leaders, rock music stood for everything that was evil in society, and was the core motivation for youthful wrongdoing. Others made the point that if rock music is the source for youthful sin, perhaps the high incidence of white-collar crime should be attributed to elevator music and Barry Manilow.





Such arguments continued to rage on passionately in the '70s and '80s. In the early '80s, several evangelists started warning parents about evil messages on records that could only be understood if a record were played backward. This sinister-sounding plot—"backward masking"—was soon debunked when it was pointed out that the messages were evil enough when the records were played **forward**. You don't have to listen to, watch, or read filth backward to know it's dirty.

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We are all partially sighted and suffer from "Sound Deficiency Syndrome," both blessed and victimized by our "cultural conditioning."

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The '90s have brought respect to the music pioneers of the '60s and '70s. The talk is not about rock... it's contemporary music. And churches that are using contemporary music in worship are growing in number.

Music research tells us that our personal nostalgic music taste is formed in early adulthood, sometime between the ages of 28 and 23. Most of the "great hymns" of the church were published around the spiritual movements of more than a century ago. And the melodies of these hymns often were from even earlier sources. It's no wonder, then, that a tennis shoe company trying to reach the boomer market today would wrap its message in a Beatles tune—"Revolution"—and not "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."



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...singing is sacramental. It is a practice that invokes the presence of God and unifies the body as a multitude of voices becomes one.

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There is a sizable number of evangelicals who never listened to the music of their own culture, or at least the culture outside the church, then or now. The only sound they have heard or participated in was in the sanctuary or perhaps the Haven of Rest quartet via Christian radio. For them, nostalgia is generated by hearing "Just As I Am," not "I Heard It Through The Grapevine." Nevertheless, for evangelicals, singing is sacramental. It is a practice that invokes the presence of God and unifies the body as a multitude of voices becomes one.

The bottom line is that a great amount of understanding and patience is required by all of us. We are all partially sighted and suffer from "Sound Deficiency Syndrome," both blessed and victimized by our "cultural conditioning." But as Christians, we can all agree that one of the greatest cohesive forces and traditions—past and present—is Christians singing together, reciting their faith pilgrimage, giving praise, and affirming values no matter what the form of accompaniment.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you, Oh Lord. 🕊

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**CHUCK FROMM**

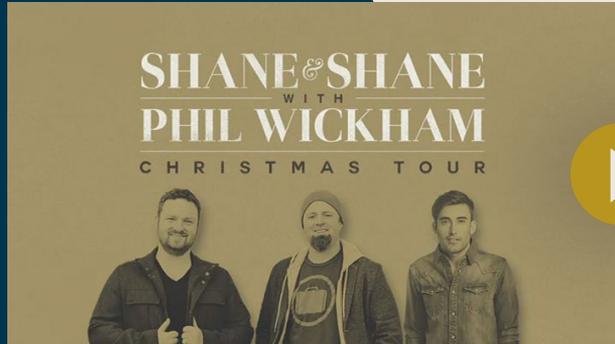
Founder of *Worship Leader* magazine.

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This article was originally published in *Worship Leader* magazine in 1993.

# Joy To The World

Discovering A New Version



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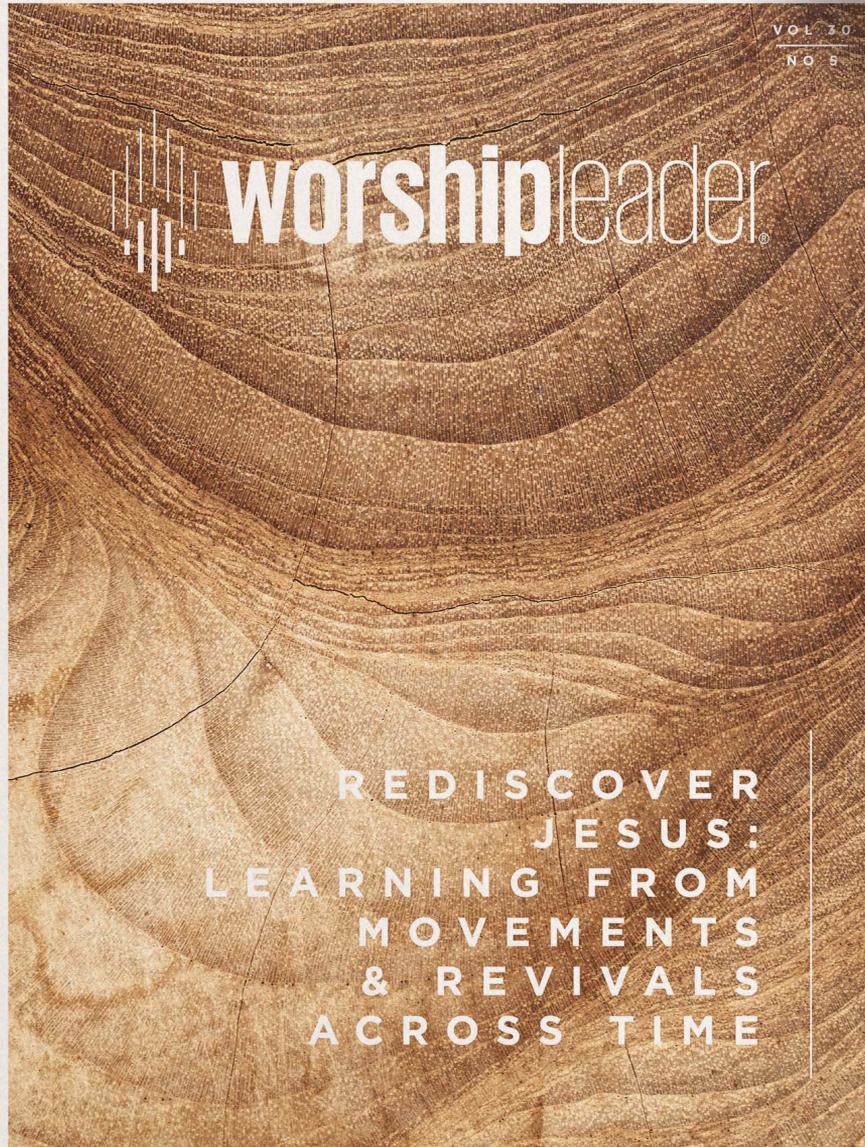
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