

Debating hymns

by [Mary Louise Bringle](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue



The [Presbyterian Hymnal Project](#)

Read the main article on [why hymnals matter](#).

Controversy sells. It sells newspapers, journals and movies. It may even sell conference registrations, to judge from the frequency with which I'm asked to speak at such events about "controversial issues" that confronted the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS) as it worked on the denomination's new song collection *Glory to God*.

Does controversy also sell hymnals? I'm not sure. But the *Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1874 came out in the midst of a controversy so intense that pamphleteers took to writing about the War of the Hymn Books. The war they had in mind was a campaign launched by disaffected members of the official hymnal committee who seceded to create a rival publication. In response to this campaign, the board of publication for the denominational hymnal took pains to report (in the January 1875 edition of the *Presbyterian Monthly Record*): "It will be gratifying to our Presbyterian constituency to know that the persistent efforts to prevent the adoption by the churches of the new Hymnal . . . fail to arrest its sale." Indeed, by June of 1875, the rate at which congregations were adopting the new hymnal was reported to be "without a parallel in the history of hymn and tune books." So maybe controversy does boost sales, even where hymnals are concerned.

Still, I am relieved to note that the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song has experienced nothing as dramatic as a secession and threatened publication war.

The most animated disagreements we experienced within our group were over matters of theology; our most animated disagreements with people outside our group have been over issues of musical accompaniments and (not surprisingly) of language.

Two examples of theological in-group disagreements stand out. The committee debated a long time over whether to include in *Glory to God* the American folk hymn “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.” The hymn does appear in the Lent section of the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal*, as well as in hymnals and supplements of several other bodies (such as the Disciples of Christ, Roman Catholics, Mennonites, United Methodists and Society of Friends). Yet opponents of inclusion argued that the text makes statements that are theologically questionable. How can Christians sing that “nobody else” can walk the lonesome valley with us or that we have to stand our trial “by ourselves,” when the very heart of the crucifixion narrative holds that Jesus walked—and continues to walk—alongside those who suffer and that he went on trial for our sakes?

Proponents of inclusion argued that the folk text is making an experiential rather than a theological claim: there are times when we *feel* as if we are starkly alone and to voice such a lament resonates with cries of forsakenness going back at least as far as the Psalms. Opponents of inclusion won (both on a first vote and on a later call for reconsideration), and the hymn will not appear in the 2013 song collection.

Even more sustained theological debate occurred after the conclusion of the committee’s three-and-a-half years of quarterly meetings in January 2012. We had voted for a song from the contemporary Christian canon, Keith Getty and Stuart Townend’s “In Christ Alone.” The text agreed upon was one we had found by studying materials in other recently published hymnals. Its second stanza contained the lines, “Till on that cross as Jesus died / the love of God was magnified.” In the process of clearing copyrights for the hymnal we discovered that this version of the text would not be approved by the authors, as it was considered too great a departure from their original words: “as Jesus died / the wrath of God was satisfied.” We were faced, then, with a choice: to include the hymn with the authors’ original language or to remove it from our list.

Because we were no longer meeting as a committee, our discussions had to occur through e-mail; this may explain why the “In Christ Alone” example stands out in my mind—the final arguments for and against its inclusion are preserved in writing.

People making a case to retain the text with the authors' original lines spoke of the fact that the words expressed one view of God's saving work in Christ that has been prevalent in Christian history: the view of Anselm and Calvin, among others, that God's honor was violated by human sin and that God's justice could only be satisfied by the atoning death of a sinless victim. While this might not be our personal view, it was argued, it is nonetheless a view held by some members of our family of faith; the hymnal is not a vehicle for one group's perspective but rather a collection for use by a diverse body.

Arguments on the other side pointed out that a hymnal does not simply *collect* diverse views, but also *selects* to emphasize some over others as part of its mission to form the faith of coming generations; it would do a disservice to this educational mission, the argument ran, to perpetuate by way of a new (second) text the view that the cross is primarily about God's need to assuage God's anger. The final vote was six in favor of inclusion and nine against, giving the requisite two-thirds majority (which we required of all our decisions) to the no votes. The song has been removed from our contents list, with deep regret over losing its otherwise poignant and powerful witness.

Stories like these reveal an array of serious issues involved in compiling a denominational song resource. I frequently say to groups, "We will inevitably have made some wrong decisions as a hymnal committee; but to the best of my knowledge we made no careless or cavalier ones."

This affirmation holds equally with regard to objections lodged by people outside our committee over matters of music and language. The issue at the top of this disagreement list, the one about which I most consistently field questions when I address church groups about *Glory to God* is the choice to create separate pew and accompaniment editions of the hymnal. People who look at our *Sampler* (a slim publication containing 43 items in the exact format in which they will appear in the final product) immediately note that just under half of the songs appear with a melody line only. The pew edition, like the *Sampler*, will contain only the parts intended to be sung; parts to be played on piano or organ will be located in the accompaniment edition.

While I label this issue of accompaniments an "extra-group disagreement," it was actually a matter we wrestled with as a committee longer than any other single issue. In nearly four years of back-and-forth deliberations, we recognized how handy

it is to be able to put a pew edition on a piano or organ's music stand and play directly from it. This will be possible with the pew version of *Glory to God* for all those hymns and songs written to be sung in parts (a clear majority of the hymnal); for these, the two musical staves of four-part harmony will be printed.

The trade-off, however, is that by deciding to print melody line only for those hymns intended to be sung in unison, we could include nearly 250 more pieces of music in a pew volume no thicker—and a couple of ounces lighter!—than our 1990 denominational hymnal. (To include keyboard accompaniments for some songs from the contemporary Christian genre would have required four or five pages, and hence multiple page turns, for a single item.) Our attempted compromise is to print guitar chords, where appropriate, for pieces published with the unison line only, so that a person with adequate keyboard skills can improvise a chordal accompaniment. (Some genres, such as the Native American, eschew any kind of accompaniment other than percussion, preferring the symbolism of singing “with one voice”; for these, no chord symbols are noted.)

Through the questions and objections that have arisen around this issue, it has been gratifying to learn how many people in the pews continue to enjoy singing in harmony. These members of the great congregational choir can rest assured that they will still be able to make beautiful, multipart music together!

No discussion of hymnal controversies would be complete without some reference to issues of language. Members of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (like our predecessors who created the splendid 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal*) have already been taken to task over matters of appropriate terminology for God and God's people. The one hymn about which we received the greatest number of textual objections was—perhaps surprisingly—not “Faith of Our Fathers” or “Onward, Christian Soldiers” (though we have been criticized, along with our earlier colleagues, for electing not to include either of these hymns) but “Be Thou My Vision.” While an alteration of the original translation's “man's empty praise” to “vain, empty praise” has slipped relatively easily into the singing vocabularies of Presbyterians in the pews, the shift from “High King of Heaven” to “Great God of Heaven” seems to have stuck in people's craws. Coupled with the old Irish folk tune “Slane,” the Celtic appellation of “High King” has resonated somewhere deep in the hearts and imaginations of a great majority of our correspondents about this hymn.

Given that our collection already included such well-loved traditional hymns as “Come, Thou Almighty King” (or Christmas angels singing “glory to the newborn king”), we decided that to insist on gender neutrality in this one hotly disputed text seemed less important than to offer a concession to those who felt their heart song had been violated by changes in wording. We returned the hymn to language more closely akin to that of the Presbyterian *Hymnbook* of 1955.

On language disputes like this one we will assuredly have made some wrong decisions; but again, we made no cavalier ones. Early in our work as a committee, we spent significant time refining a “Statement on Language” to guide our deliberations; the statement will be an appendix in *Glory to God*. In it, we articulate commitments to “inclusive language for the people of God” and “expansive language for God.” While the former of these is not beyond controversy (as, for example, in the objections to excluding “Faith of Our Fathers”), the latter is by far the touchier topic. Our carefully crafted compromise position asserts that:

the God who meets us so graciously and intimately in salvation history is at the same time one who is wholly other and beyond gender. Therefore, texts will reflect a strong preference for avoiding the use of male pronouns for God. . . . The goal is a collection in which traditional hymns and songs [e.g., ones referring to God as “Father,” “King” and “Lord’] are balanced with others that are more gender-neutral or expansive in their reference to God.

Even with this principle in mind, we note, the evaluation of individual texts inevitably involves issues of tradition, theological integrity, poetic quality and copyright. In some instances where we wanted to move to less gender-specific or archaic or potentially prejudicial wording (whether for God or for people), we were prevented by copyright holders from making modifications. In other instances, text writers graciously offered their own revisions to words or phrases we questioned.

Will we thus manage to satisfy all facets and factions within even the smaller body of the church universal known as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on matters linguistic, musical and theological? Assuredly not. But at least we can hope that no War of the Hymn Books will result from our labors and that future generations of singers and songbook creators will learn from our accomplishments as well as our mistakes.