

In satisfaction alone

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Boy, "In Christ Alone" just will not stay out of the churchy news. A few weeks ago it was [standing in for all hymnody ever](#) in the face of the chorus-singing horde; now it's standing in for confessional evangelicals' valiant defense against the liberal horde. Coming soon: "In Christ Alone" as a symbol of resistance to common-cup communion, or missional-everything fervor, or preaching from your iPad.

But about that liberal horde. Mary Louise Bringle, chair of the committee that put together the new PCUSA hymnal, [mentioned months ago in the *Century*](#) that the song was voted down because the songwriters wouldn't approve changing "the wrath of God was satisfied" to "the love of God was magnified." Much chatter ensued, a lot of it suggesting that this little tidbit reveals that the Presbyterians in question don't give a damn about traditional orthodoxy anymore. Never mind all the other songs they *did* include, or the fact that they only sought to change one phrase of a song packed to the gills with doctrine, or the fact that "the love of God was magnified" *is also orthodox*.

Then last week Timothy George [wrote about it](#) at *First Things*, and around we went again. I appreciate [this statement](#) from the committee, [this post](#) by committee member (and [CCblogger](#)) Adam Copeland, and [Bob Smietana's news story](#).

Now, [back at *First Things*](#), Matthew Schmitz accuses Bringle of "changing her tune" by telling Smietana that "satisfied," not "wrath," was the issue. Here's Schmitz:

Wrath and satisfaction shouldn't be severed in the way Bringle attempts—this isn't an either/or. Yet by Bringle's own account [in the *Century*], it was above all discomfort with the idea of an angry God that led the committee to nix "In Christ Alone."

Bringle's changing story muddies the historical record, of course. More regrettably, it obscures the real theological fault lines the decision exposed.

Better for those on both sides of the debate to have the courage of their convictions and argue honestly than to obscure the theology behind the headlines.

Um, no. Here's how Bringle characterized the theology in question in our pages back in May, in a passage singled out by Schmitz: it's "the view that the cross is primarily about God's need to assuage God's anger."

That's not a sweeping statement about "discomfort with the idea of an angry God." It's a specific statement about the satisfaction theory of atonement. (That's "satisfaction," the noun form of the aforementioned "satisfy.")

In fact, every sentence of Schmitz's above quote is wrong, so let me just rework it for him a little:

I don't want to talk about divine wrath as a larger category than the satisfaction theory (even though the biblical God gets mad about lots of things). So I refuse to accept Bringle's own, consistent account that it was above all the prospect of adding a new song promoting the satisfaction theory that led the committee to nix "In Christ Alone."

Bringle's unchanging story sharpens the historical record, of course. More regrettably for my purposes, it clarifies the relatively narrow scope of the issue at hand. Better to accuse Bringle of dishonesty and to continue suggesting that the hymnal committee's so-called God is 100 percent fun!! than for those on both sides of the debate to have the courage of their convictions and argue honestly.

What's striking about this whole episode is that the committee's conservative critics won't take a step back and look beyond the question of embracing vs. rejecting this phrase they like. Nope, it's satisfaction or it's nothing. And the liberals prefer nothing!

But there are many views of the cross in the New Testament—and many among Christians ever since. Presbyterian hymnody has no shortage of satisfaction-oriented songs; the committee decided against adding one more. And there's nothing inconsistent about Bringle's explanation as to why.