

# Presbyterians stir debate by omitting popular hymn

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue

Fans of a beloved contemporary Christian hymn won't find any satisfaction in a new church hymnal. The committee putting together a new hymnal for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) dropped the popular hymn "In Christ Alone" because the song's authors refused to change a phrase about the wrath of God.

The original lyrics say that "on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." The Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song wanted that line to read: "the love of God was magnified."

The song's authors, Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, objected. So the committee voted to drop the song.

Critics say the proposed change was sparked by liberals wanting to take God's wrath out of the hymnal. The committee says there's plenty of wrath in the new hymnal. Instead, the problem is the word *satisfied*, which the committee says refers to a specific view of theology that it rejects.

Debate over "In Christ Alone" mixes church politics, the touchy subject of updating hymn lyrics and rival views of what Jesus' death on the cross means.

The decision to drop the hymn wasn't made lightly, said Mary Louise Bringle, a religion professor at Brevard College, North Carolina, and a hymn writer who chaired the hymnal committee. She described the difficulties over "In Christ Alone" and other decisions in the May 15 issue of the *Century*.

The decision on "In Christ Alone" was complicated by a foul-up with the rights for the song. Committee members had found a version of the hymn with the alternate text in *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*, a Baptist hymnal published in 2010. They assumed the songwriters had already agreed to the change. "We had every reason to think that this was an authorized text because it appeared in a recent hymnal," Bringle said. When it asked for permission to use the song, the committee learned that the song's

authors hadn't approved the change.

Capitol CMG Publishing, which manages rights for "In Christ Alone," said it is working with the Baptist hymnal's publisher to fix the problem. Neither Getty nor the *Celebrating Grace* publisher was available for comment.

"We respect our songwriters and the integrity of their lyrics, and the intent of our request was to ensure the song retains the original lyrics as written by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend," Capitol said in a prepared statement. "Celebrating Grace Inc. is cooperating fully and is taking steps to make the correction in all distributed copies of the song, including the *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*."

That left the committee in a bind, Bringle said. The Presbyterians' new *Glory to God* hymnal, due out this fall, includes songs, such as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," which talk about substitutionary atonement—the idea that Jesus took the place of sinners on the cross. It also includes songs about God's wrath.

"People think that we've taken the wrath of God out of the hymnal," Bringle said. "That's not the case. It's all over the hymnal. The issue was the word *satisfied*." That term was used by the medieval theologian Anselm, who argued that sins offended God's honor, and someone had to die in order to satisfy his honor. The 15-member committee rejected Anselm's view and voted 9-6 to drop the hymn.

Chris Joiner of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee, agrees with that move. He said some of his church members are fans of the song and will be disappointed that it was dropped. But the words of the song don't work, he said.

"That lyric comes close to saying that God killed Jesus," he said. "The cross is not an instrument of God's wrath."

But Scott Sauls, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, disagrees. He said the word *satisfied* means that Jesus paid the whole price for sins. "There's no more work to be done," said Sauls, whose congregation is part of the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America. "It is finished."

Word about "In Christ Alone" being dropped spread slowly. Bringle's account for the *Century* and its posting on the magazine's website eventually captured the attention of the blogosphere.

Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, criticized the committee in an online column called “No Squishy Love” in the journal *First Things*.

George said he worries that the committee dropped the song because the idea of God’s wrath has become unpopular. “I don’t see this as an isolated case,” he said in a phone interview. “It fits into a wider pattern of downplaying parts of Christian doctrine that are offensive.”

Other bloggers such as David French of Columbia, Tennessee, also criticized the committee, seeing its ruling as a sign that the committee was abandoning Christian doctrine.

On August 1, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song issued a statement defending its decision. Eight days later, Presbyterian News Service noted that three other PCUSA entities—the Office of Theology and Worship, the Presbyterian Association of Musicians and the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation—joined in the public statement and referred to Bringle’s *Century* article, [“Debating Hymns,”](#) for a “more detailed and nuanced account.”

Bringle said the controversy proves that hymns still matter. People care about them and get upset if someone tries to change a song they love.

Mike Harland agrees. He is the director of LifeWay Worship, the music department of the Nashville-based publisher affiliated with the Southern Baptists. He said he admires the Presbyterians for paying close attention to the lyrics of hymns because songs make emotional and intellectual connections with worshipers.

So the words in a hymnal matter. “The faith of current generations and future generations is shaped by what we say and what we sing,” he said. “That’s why you stress over every word.” —*USA Today*