

Revise us again: Should churches alter worship texts?

by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



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This past spring, Mary Louise Bringle [revealed in the *Century*](#) that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hymnal committee voted against including the popular song “In Christ Alone” after the copyright holder rejected a lyric change. Bringle’s brief reference to this in a sidebar provoked quite a reaction, focused mostly on the theological implications of the committee’s preference for saying “the love of God was magnified” at the cross in place of Stuart Townend’s original line, “the wrath of God was satisfied.”

What I found most interesting was the reason the committee didn’t anticipate any problem getting permission: the altered version of “In Christ Alone” had already been published in the Baptist hymnal *Celebrating Grace* (2010).

How did this happen? J. Thomas McAfee, president of the eponymous publisher of *Celebrating Grace*, declined to tell me. He did send a statement: *Celebrating Grace*

“apologizes that an unintentional mistake was made by using an unauthorized text.” The publisher is taking full responsibility; it’s also “diligently working to correct the error,” as the statement continues.

But even if McAfee personally redacts the offending line from every pew hymnal and PowerPoint in the land, churches may well keep singing it. In fact, while using an unauthorized alteration is an embarrassing oversight for a major hymnal publisher, it’s pretty routine in the local church.

It’s not hard to imagine why. The move toward eclectic, locally creative liturgy means doing less that’s by the already-rights-cleared book and more that draws from a variety of sources, some of which fit local purposes more neatly than others.

Meanwhile, music leaders are sharing music across theological lines. This is great, but it used to be simpler—say what you will about the content-light praise choruses of the 1980s and ’90s, but at least there wasn’t much to disagree with. Now that evangelicals are writing whole catechisms in four tuneful strophes, it’s not surprising to be drawn to the substantiveness yet take issue with some of the substance.

Then there’s the fact that hardly anyone reads music anymore. Printing words without notation makes more sense than ever, and once you’re working with words alone it’s easy to tweak them.

In short, it can seem pretty natural to treat a copyrighted song lyric or other text like a starting point, a recipe to adjust to taste. Visit a new church, and you may encounter a text you know in a variation you don’t.

How many churches print or project copyrighted texts with unauthorized changes? I was curious, so I did a quick survey via social media. Though it was hardly a scientific sampling process, I did hear from about 200 (anonymous) pastors and worship planners. While only 8 percent of them say they alter texts every week, 57 percent do so at least a few times a year. They do this for lots of reasons, but the biggest issues are gendered language (81 percent of those who change words at all) and other theological objections (65 percent).

Notably, only 6 percent of respondents cop to printing or projecting copyrighted texts without holding any kind of license. But 24 percent admit that if a given piece isn’t covered by whatever licenses they have, they include it anyway. And even among the majority who only print the licensed stuff, 53 percent regularly change

the words.

Of course, there's little excuse for skipping the license when the publishers have made it so reasonable: one stop, no fuss, a fair price. Getting permission to change a text is less simple, making it that much more tempting to just skip that step.

But according to my survey, the rationalizations that come up in church conversations about this—when such conversations even take place—are largely the same ones churchpeople use to resist copyright compliance generally: We're so small, who cares? We've always done this version. There are more important things to worry about. And anyway, why would people write something for communal worship use if they didn't want it to effectively belong to the community?

Yet it's reasonable for songwriters and liturgists to want some control over how their work is modified (as well as to be paid for that work). If they didn't want this, they probably wouldn't copyright it. After all, it's easy instead to license one's work for free use through Creative Commons—with or without allowing changes to it—and some choose this option. But if they do copyright it and people ignore this copyright, the fact that *it's for the church* doesn't somehow turn the law into a gray area.

I recently started sharing some original church music online, just lyrics and streaming audio for free. I considered Creative Commons but decided to copyright my work instead—because while I'm not currently licensing it or making any money off it, I might want to try later.

I've heard from a couple of people who seem friendly and kind and completely clueless about copyright. They go out of their way to tell me how much they like my songs—and that they've already used them in worship. One even indicated exactly how he changed a song to suit his needs, just as an FYI.

But others have asked permission first. And I've given it, without fee, adding only a reminder to credit me in writing. I'm unestablished in that world, happy to share my music and to help others out—and grateful to be asked first. Some of the people I surveyed have gone to copyright holders to request permission to make changes. All but one of them have gotten positive responses at least some of the time, and 60 percent have never gotten a no. But that's 60 percent of a relative few, because 78 percent of the survey respondents have never even asked.

If they did, they might find smaller-time, accessible songwriters and liturgists amenable to a variety of changes—changes they could then make, completely on

the level. Of course, they might also get shot down, making it a lot harder to plead ignorance or dismiss the issue as a gray area. Even as a newcomer with little leverage or reputation, it's easy for me to imagine changes I'd never approve. Ultimately I can't control it and can't afford to spend much time dealing with it, so I'd probably rather just not know. But as a worship planner, do I have the right to assume that other copyright holders feel the same way?