

Why Is A Major Church Denomination Banning Famed Hymn "In Christ Alone" From Its New Song Book?

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It's no secret that the Presbyterian Church (USA) — which is different from other branches of Presbyterianism — collectively takes a more liberal approach to theology.

Most recently, the denomination is gaining attention for its rejection of the hymn, "In Christ Alone." Rather than including the song in its new hymnal book, PCUSA axed it — an action that may leave some faithful believers scratching their heads.

After all, the song is robust with Christian themes of hope, strength and Christ's dying on the cross. So, why would the PCUSA turn its back on it? Here's why: There's one key line in the third stanza that created a barrier — and debate: "Till on that cross as Jesus died/the wrath of God was satisfied."

Originally, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS), the body that oversees music for PCUSA, asked the song's authors, Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend, to allow them to change the words to "as Jesus died/the love of God was magnified," as described by Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, on First Things. The songwriters' response? No.

So, with the authors doubling down on wanting the original wording kept intact, the committee voted nine to six to axe the song from the hymnal. Apparently, it is this invoking of "wrath" that has the liberal denomination less-than-content with the inclusion of the original lyrics.

George explains: Those who treat the wrath of God as taboo, whether in sermons or hymns, stand in a long lineage too, one that includes Albrecht Ritschl, Faustus Socinus, and the unnamed revisionists in the second century who followed the heretic Marcion. According to Tertullian, they said that "a better god has been discovered, one who is neither offended nor angry nor inflicts punishment, who has no fire warming up in hell, and no outer darkness wherein there is shuddering and gnashing of teeth: he is merely kind." The lure of such a gospel is unmistakable—it explains why neo-Marcionism (God's wrath in the Old Testament, his love in the New) is still flourishing today not only in popular piety but also among guilded scholars of religion.

Why do many Christians shrink from any thought of the wrath of God? R.P.C. Hanson has said that many preachers today deal with God's wrath the way the Victorians handled sex, treating it as something a bit shameful, embarrassing, and best left in the closet. The result is a less than fully biblical construal of who God is and what he has done, especially in the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ.

Earlier this year, Dr. Mary Louise Bringle, chairwoman of PCOCS, explained the two sides of the debate in detail in an article for the Christian Century. Her perspective offers up additional explanation surrounding how both sides felt, internally, about the matter:

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 ...

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