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Song dropped from hymnal sparks atonement debate

Bob Smietana USA Today Religion News Service | Aug. 26, 2013

The dispute over dropping a beloved Christian song from a new Presbyterian hymnal has widened into a multidenominational tussle, with Baptists joining the fray.

At issue are various Christian doctrines of the atonement, which attempt to explain why Jesus died and whether his death satisfies God's wrath over humankind's sinfulness. But some Christians warn that emphasizing these doctrines may have the unintended consequence of turning God into an angry deity who had to be appeased by shedding Jesus' blood.

That's the view taken by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song. The committee removed the hymn "In Christ Alone" from the new Presbyterian Church (USA) hymnal after the song's co-authors, Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, refused to change a line about God's wrath being satisfied.

Bob Terry, editor of *The Alabama Baptist* newspaper, stepped into a theological land mine when he wrote an editorial saying Presbyterians got it right. Terry said he believes Jesus' death paid the price for sin. But the song's lyrics went too far, he said.

"Sometimes Christians carelessly make God out to be some kind of ogre whose angry wrath overflowed until the innocent Jesus suffered enough to calm him down," Terry wrote.

That editorial, which ran in early August, touched a nerve.

In blogs, tweets, letters to the editor, and phone calls, angry Baptist readers accused Terry of being theologically liberal and abandoning the Bible. Some wanted him fired.

In an unusual move, the president of the Alabama Baptist State Convention and the executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions issued a statement that criticized the editorial.

"As Alabama Baptists seek to be true to Scripture, we affirm the essential and historic Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement," they wrote, referring to the doctrine that Jesus died as a substitute for humankind.

The fact that a Baptist newspaper editor sided with the Presbyterians made things worse, said the Rev. John Thweatt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Pell City, Ala.

Conservative Baptists have long viewed mainline denominations like the Presbyterian Church (USA) with suspicion, accusing them of abandoning Christian beliefs. Siding with them was a bad move for Terry, Thweatt said.

"He opened up a Pandora's box," Thweatt said. "I don't think he thought things through."

Thweatt is a fan of the song "In Christ Alone." He said he couldn't understand why anyone would want to change it.

The song's original lyrics say that as Jesus died on the cross, "the wrath of God was satisfied." The Presbyterian committee wanted to change that to "the love of God was magnified."

"To remove that line would gut the Gospel," Thweatt said.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., agreed.

Mohler said there is no contradiction between God's love and God's wrath. Both are needed to deal with human sin.

That's why he believes penal substitutionary atonement is essential. Critics who want to change "In Christ Alone" to remove the line about God's wrath have bad theology, Mohler said.

"It reveals deeper problems with what they believe about atonement," he said.

Mohler also gave some context on why penal substitutionary atonement matters to Southern Baptists. It was one of the issues that led to the conservative resurgence -- or fundamentalist takeover -- among Southern Baptists in the 1980s and 1990s, when some seminary professors began criticizing substitutionary atonement, leading to full-blown questions about biblical inerrancy.

Memories from that conflict are still fresh, he said.

But Jay Phelan, senior professor of theological studies at North Park University in Chicago, said too much wrath also leads to bad theology.

Phelan said Mohler and other critics are motivated by church politics as well as theology. They're part of the movement known as neo-Calvinism, which stresses God's anger over sin.

"You have all the neo-Calvinists who see any move away from strict satisfaction theory as the straight road to liberal hell," he said.

Phelan said the neo-Calvinist view of Jesus' death is too limited.

Most Christians believe in substitutionary atonement. But Christians have differing views on how Jesus' death forgave sinners, said the Rev. Morgan Guyton, a blogger and associate pastor of Burke United Methodist Church in Burke, Va.

Among them are the ransom theory, which holds that Jesus' death was taken to be a ransom paid to the devil to liberate human sinners from bondage.

No one theory can explain the atonement, Morgan said. And too much focus on wrath causes problems with the Trinity by making it appear God crucified Jesus.

Mohler argues that critics of substitutionary atonement forget God is always motivated by love, even in punishing sin.

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