

Worshipping Wrath: Is There Place for God's Anger in Congregational Worship?

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In 2013, the worship committee of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to remove the Getty/Townend hymn 'In Christ Alone' from its newly published hymnal, the denomination's official sung worship collection. What swung it was the line, "Til on that cross as Jesus died / The wrath of God was satisfied." An attempt to include an amended version saying 'the love of God was magnified' was refused outright by the songwriters, so the committee vetoed the song. As a 'sign-of-the-times' headline, the story made several mainstream news outlets.²

Do we have a problem with wrath? Should we? I am going to address the context of worship as both a way into, and an application of, how Christians deal with the concept of the wrath of God.

A wide spectrum of views exists on the wrath of God, but I see two broad approaches. One might be called the 'personal' view or 'anthropomorphic' view: wrath is an emotion (at least analogous with human feelings) that God 'feels' because he is a person. Wrath is also associated with the effects of this feeling: God's righteous acts of direct judgement. Authors like John Stott are quick to point out that the wrath is not some capricious lashing out, but rather a steady, constant and just opposition to sin.³ Those who accept this view of wrath tend toward a penal view of the Atonement, though there are notable exceptions.⁴

We could call the other stream the 'impersonal' or 'cosmic' view: wrath is the inevitable consequence of sin, to which God consents or 'gives us over'. This language of 'giving over' has a good biblical pedigree, notably in Isaiah 64 and Romans 1. Crucially, this view of wrath is seen to *develop* throughout Scripture. A.T. Hanson demonstrates that in the OT, wrath *is* often personal and anthropomorphic. But this gradually gives way to the impersonal view that he says dominates

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² For example, see Bob Smietana, 'Presbyterians decision to drop hymn stirs debate', *usatoday.com*, August 5, 2013 <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/08/05/presbyterians-decision-to-drop-hymn-stirs-debate/2618833/>. For further reflections on the hymn selection process, see the article by the chair of the committee, Mary Louise Bringle, "Debating Hymns", *christiancentury.com*, May 1, 2013. <www.christiancentury.org/article/2013/debating-hymns>.

³ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (20th Anniversary Edition, Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 202.

⁴ Clark Pinnock for example. See *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 82-83.

the NT.⁵ A version of this is developed by my tutor at Westminster Theological Centre, Brad Jersak, who describes wrath as the result of 'divine consent' - God allowing us the freedom to sow and reap the destructive consequences intrinsic to sin.⁶

When we *worship* God, we typically speak of his majesty, his power, his goodness, and - the crowning essence of his nature - his love. His wrath doesn't often get a look in. Theologically though, both these approaches to wrath seek to reconcile God's wrath with his love.

In the 'personal' view of wrath, humans experience God's anger because he loves us jealously (in the biblical sense) - in Pinnock's words, he 'will not tolerate spiritual adultery.'⁷ The cross is a kind of God-switch, by which we are transformed from objects of wrath, to objects of love.

In the 'cosmic' view, God's wrath is also linked to love, but differently. The true free will that God gives us in his love, means he must allow us (at least partially) to bear the suffering, pain and destruction that result from our sin. "The wrath", as Paul impersonally calls it, gives God no pleasure. It is, not primarily a 'feeling' at all - it is the tragic cost of God's decision – indeed, his nature – to save the world through love not through coercion.⁸

Do our worship songs reconcile wrath and love? Mostly, they rather duck the issue. This creates something of a disconnect between what a churchgoer might read, say in the Psalms or in Revelation, and what they might sing on a Sunday morning. Before suggesting how we might remedy this, we should survey some of the songs in current use which *do* mention wrath. We have already introduced Stuart Townend and Keith Getty. Here are some others:

In Kristian Stanfill & Eddie Kirkland's 'I Need You', we hear:

"on the cross on our behalf
the Son of God bore the Father's wrath"⁹

⁵ A.T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, (London: SPCK, 1957) *passim*.

⁶ Brad Jersak, 'Wrath and Love as Divine Consent', *Clarion Journal of Spirituality and Justice* (July 23, 2012). The arguments here are developed in his forthcoming book *A More Christlike God*.

⁷ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 82.

⁸ Brad Jersak, in personal correspondence.

⁹ sixsteps Music / worshiptogether.com songs / Eddie Kirkland Music, 2009.

This is straight up anthropomorphic wrath in the context of penal substitutionary atonement. Note the use here of 'The Father's wrath' - a phrase which is *never* used in the New Testament. Defenders of the penal view would argue that this paternal touch makes God's sacrifice of his Son all the more magnificent; for critics it is all the more abhorrent.

Hillsongs' 'Man of Sorrows' is similar, though it retains the authentically biblical expression:

"Man of sorrows, Lamb of God
By His own betrayed
The sin of man and wrath of God
Has been on Jesus laid"¹⁰

Here I think the 'sin of man' is not seen as a manifestation of the wrath, as in the impersonal view, but rather as a separate entity, as in Romans 7:14, 17.

Here are two songs which use 'the wrath' in the more impersonal sense:

Firstly, 'Rock of Ages Cleft for Me' written in 1763 by the wonderfully named Rev. Augustus Montague Toplady:

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure."

A more recent example is 'Mercy' by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin:

"I will kneel in the dust
at the foot of the cross
where mercy paid for me
Where the wrath I deserve

¹⁰ By Matt Crocker and Brooke Ligterwood, (Hillsongs Music, 2012).

it is gone, it has passed
Your blood has hidden me"¹¹

Both simply refer, like Paul in Romans, to 'wrath' without making a direct ascription to God.

It is interesting that the worship songs which *do* mention the wrath of God do *not* seem to extol it as one of the 'perfections' of his character, like we so often do with God's love, justice, peace etc. Like 'In Christ Alone', these songs only address wrath in the specific context of the Atonement.

But must we embrace penal substitution if we are to express the wrath of God in atonement-focused worship? Can we really reconcile love and wrath at the cross, and sing about it with full voice? Hanson makes an interesting observation which might help us here. He says that wrath belongs to the '*law-sphere*'.¹² Luther also spoke of it in these terms: God's wrath was defeated at the cross: "As for us," he wrote, "we are obliged to preach the Gospel which offers to all men liberty from the Law, sin, death, and God's wrath."¹³

So when we address the question: 'should we worship God for his wrath?' the NT approach to Law is helpful. Jesus upheld the Law while also transcending it, and we know all about the tremendous ambiguity in Paul's writing about the Law: is Law really bad or good? Is it from God or from men? Should we *worship* God for his Law? The writer of Psalm 119 certainly does worship God for his Law:

Verse 20
My soul is consumed with longing
for your ordinances at all times.

Verse 31:
I cling to your decrees, O Lord

Verse 97:

¹¹ SHOUT! Music / Said and Done Music / sixsteps Music / Thankyou Music / worshiptogether.com Songs, 2013.

¹² Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, 74-5.

¹³ Discussing Galatians 5:13, *Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Trans. Theodore Graebner, Grand Rapids: CCEL), <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/galatians.html>>, 210.

Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.

One has to ask how comfortable Paul would be singing these lines in church! I would be so bold as to suggest that this Psalm represents a near-*idolatry* of Law, *unless* Law here is a cipher for God's very being. It's a difficult question. But because we are Christians and not Jews, we now have to read Psalm 119 in the light of the 'grace and truth' revealed in Jesus (John 1:17; cf Heb 1:1-2) and in light of his redefinition of the Mosaic Law, which continues in Paul.

This discussion about Law parallels the wrath question: is God's wrath really *good*, if it is proper to speak of it as 'God's'? Could 'wrath' be a code for God's own being, so as to be worthy of worship? I think not.

Clark Pinnock says that

'Wrath does not belong to God's nature in the way that love does. It arises out of the pathos of love. God becomes angry because he is love. He does not become wrathful spontaneously out of his nature. Rather, he reacts to evil and it is in his dealings with faithless creatures that God becomes what he was not previously, i.e. angry.'¹⁴

Pinnock's is still a fairly anthropomorphic view of wrath, but he makes essentially the same point Hanson makes: *In the NT at least, God is never described as being wrath in the same way that he is described as being love.*¹⁵

Worshippers should remember that we do not worship some *element* of God (like Law, or wrath) but God *himself*. However we understand wrath, the central message of the Bible is surely that *God has gone to the greatest lengths to ensure that wrath (personal or impersonal) is subsumed in love, because God is love*. This is surely the truth our worship songs need to proclaim.

Furthermore, if we want to address wrath in worship songs, and be truly biblical about it, then we should zoom the focus *out* from the Atonement. Going back to 'In Christ Alone', the song *does* in one way subsume wrath in love, at least in terms of its structure as a piece of art. The final verse

¹⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 83.

¹⁵ Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, 81.

adopts the twin metaphors of victory and sacrifice which together provide a pretty full model of the atonement on their own. But to bring in wrath and express it purely in terms of 'satisfaction' - a la John Calvin - is inadequate. In fact, it may well have been the idea of 'wrath' tied to 'satisfaction' which got the hymn into theological hot water in the first place.¹⁶

In Revelation 11, we have perhaps the clearest example of worship of God specifically for his wrath. In this vision from St John:

the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing,

“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. (Rev 11:16-19)

Interesting lyrics; and a fairly inscrutable response from God! Hanson notes that while on the surface, Revelation seems like a return to OT anthropomorphisms, it is actually the apogee of the impersonal conception of the wrath: the wrath of Revelation is 'the wrath of the Lamb' (Rev 6:16). Hanson's thesis is that the *Cross itself* judges, in that on Calvary God gives humanity over to wrath. It is *God's* wrath in that he hands them over to it, and yet at the cross it is most obviously *human* wrath which kills Jesus: the fruit of human sin. There is nothing violent or angry, then, in the love of God - rather, wrath comes in our human response to the radical love of the cross: 'For God's

¹⁶ See the quotations by Mary Louise Bringle, in the USA Today article cited above.

foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' (1 Cor 1:25).

If we view the Revelation passage in this light, we see how the elders *can* praise God for his wrath, since it is the tragic consequence of his choice to love: if he loves us, he'll let us go. Read carefully, the wrath of Rev. 6 is the Lamb's consent to human self-destruction. But can the complexities of this argument really translate into congregational worship?

At this point I need to be honest and personal. Exploring these issues has been a real struggle. Looking theologically at God's character has brought me to my knees in tearful prayer to ask: "God, who are you *really*? Are you the angry, punitive caricature of the conservatives? Or are you the benign yet suspiciously inert deity of the progressives? Do I even know you at all?" Ultimately I will choose to worship God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - whether or not I can ultimately conceive of his wrath in any meaningful way. In the words of Peter: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Having said all this, I will attempt to answer the original question: is there a place for wrath in worship?

If wrath is a personal attribute of almighty God - one of his 'perfections' - then we simply have no option but to worship him for it. Sure, we need to focus on his love, but we also have to become morally reconciled to the idea that, at one level, God feels what amounts to hatred toward us. That's not a jump I'm sure I can make. But there are many who do. One scholar concludes:

"The universalist is mistaken in thinking that God always loves, even in his wrath [...] It is genuine anger devoid of love [...] after death God no longer loves the wicked, nor is he prepared to act on behalf of the wicked."¹⁷

John Piper writes:

"There was only one hope for me—that the infinite wisdom of God might make a way for the love of God to satisfy the wrath of God so that I might

¹⁷ William V. Crockett, "Wrath that Endures Forever" *JETS* 34/2 (June 1991), 195-202.

become a son of God. This is exactly what happened, and I will sing of it forever."¹⁸

On the other hand, if wrath is the tragic by-product of God's kenotic love, then evoking the wrath of God in worship is probably too problematic for contemporary congregations. Pastoral theology cannot be divorced from doctrine, and ethical chasms cannot be skipped over with the sweeping adjective 'biblical.' I believe a hopeful and humane approach praises and invokes God's love - as in fact the vast majority of our worship songs do. There is space left *only* to *lament* the existence of wrath in the world, as we look forward to a story's end that is also wrath's end.

In the light of this, perhaps it would be wise to revisit the *poetics* of theological language in song lyrics. I mean poetics as distinct from hermeneutics: in worship contexts we are looking as much at the *effect* the lyrics have as the technical precision of meaning. Any word may have a precise meaning for the speaker (or singer) but we cannot control how our hearers or co-singers hear it. As biblical and theological surveys show¹⁹ - there is no single scriptural concept of the wrath of God, so we should not assume that worshippers will be able to engage helpfully with worship songs that use the term in an un-nuanced and unbalanced way.

Perhaps then, we ought to upgrade the *word* wrath (with its unclear, unhelpful popular connotations) and rather find words and images which reflect the range of theological truths connoted by the concept. On the anthropomorphic side, we might speak more of the 'grief' of God over sin; the 'shock' of God at human depravity; the 'resolve' of God to deal seriously with the problem of evil. None of these downplay the severity of sin (which is what conservatives fear), but neither do they make God a moral monster. Perhaps the word 'anger' shouldn't be totally outlawed, particularly as regards injustice and oppression; but in this case it needs to move beyond the troublingly retributive language of penal atonement.

Finally, the 'cosmic' side is perhaps best expressed by songs which draw on the parable of the prodigal son. In Jesus' story of tragedy and hope the father freely consents to his son's departure to wrath - the results of his rebellious living - but, in the end, graciously welcomes his son home to love. I'll let Michael Gungor have the last word:

¹⁸ http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/defending-my-fathers-wrath_

¹⁹ For example, Tony Lane, 'The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 138-161.

I've tasted Your glory and I left it there.
Your poured out Your Spirit and I didn't care.
Still you loved me
I've lived for myself with nobody to blame.
I took what You gave me and squandered Your grace.
Still You loved me.²⁰

²⁰ Michael Gungor, "Prodigal" (worshiptogether.com songs/ASCAP), 2007.