

WRATH IN WORSHIP?: An Analysis of the “Wrath of God” Controversy Surrounding Getty and Townend’s “In Christ Alone”

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Few topics cause such discord among theologians as the wrath of God. Jeremy Wynne declares it “one of the more elusive of scriptural themes.”² In modern hymnody, divine wrath has not only been an “elusive theme,” but a divisive and controversial one.

In 2010, the *Celebrating Grace* hymnal altered a lyric in Keith Getty and Stuart Townend’s “In Christ Alone.”³ The hymnal editors changed the line “Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied,”⁴ to read, “Till on that cross as Jesus died, the love of God was magnified.”⁵ Since the editorial team did not receive consent to the lyric change, they reinstated the original wording in 2013 and subsequent printings.⁶ Later hymnals, including the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.’s *Glory to God* (2013), did not include the hymn because some hymnal committees deemed the

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²Jeremy J. Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life*, T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 1.

³Collin Hansen, “Keith Getty on What Makes ‘In Christ Alone’ Accepted and Contested,” The Gospel Coalition, June 16, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/keith-getty-on-what-makes-in-christ-alone-beloved-and-contested/>.

⁴Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “In Christ Alone” (ThankYou Music, 2001).

⁵*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* (Macon, GA: *Celebrating Grace*, 2010), 569. In an email correspondence with Chris Fenner, David W. Music, a member of the *Celebrating Grace* editorial committee, stated “Some on the committee were uncomfortable with the many references to God’s wrath (and the penal substitution theory in general), not just in that hymn but in others as well, and the change was suggested as a way to lessen that aspect somewhat. The committee recommended it to the editors, who also approved it, pending permission from the copyright owners.” See Chris Fenner, “In Christ alone my hope is found,” Hymnology Archive, March 30, 2022, <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/in-christ-alone>.

⁶Hansen, “Accepted and Contested.”

song to contain questionable theology.⁷ Mary Louise Bringle, chair of the committee for *Glory to God*, cited the issue as the hymn espousing “the view that the cross is primarily about God’s need to assuage God’s anger.”⁸ Hymnologist C. Michael Hawn joined Bringle in denouncing the allusion to Anselm’s satisfaction view of the atonement.⁹ Many others have impugned the idea of God’s wrath, seeing it as incongruent with God’s love. Conversely, Timothy George responded by defending “In Christ Alone” and simultaneously denouncing the tendency of modern theologians to downplay God’s attributes of justice, wrath, and holiness.¹⁰

Keith Getty responded to the controversy in 2013, remarking, “We must sing wholeheartedly about concepts such as penal substitution, as well as the many other attributes of God that unfortunately go ignored in some churches today. The songs we sing have a powerful way of shaping our soul.”¹¹ Since worship songs do play a vital role in spiritual formation, it is worthwhile to consider the critiques against “In Christ Alone” afresh. By analyzing systematic theologies and biblical commentaries by Stanley J. Grenz, John M. Frame, Millard Erickson, John Grudem, and others, this article will first seek to answer important questions surrounding divine wrath. Is wrath an attribute of God? Is wrath an expression of other attributes? Additionally, this article will examine the views of those who oppose the penal substitutionary and satisfaction theory of the atonement, including C. H. Dodd, and describe how Leon Morris and John Stott’s assertions refute Dodd’s position. This paper will argue that God’s wrath is a redemptive mode of righteousness and that speaking of God’s wrath being satisfied at the cross ultimately upholds his love, holiness, righteousness, and other attributes in a biblical and laudable manner. This study will also draw further conclusions regarding biblical ways to sing about

⁷Greg Scheer, “Orthodoxy and In Christ Alone,” *The Reformed Journal Blog* (blog), August 6, 2013, <https://blog.reformedjournal.com/2013/08/06/orthodoxy-and-in-christ-alone/>. As Scheer notes, the PCUSA received voluminous criticism over their decision to exclude “In Christ Alone.” In this blog, Scheer both defends the hymn and the committee that rejected it, disagreeing with those who labeled the hymnal as “unorthodox” for excluding the hymn. Though Scheer was right at the time (in 2013) to call for a de-escalation of judgment and emotion surrounding the topic, now is an appropriate time to revisit the subject of “wrath in worship.”

⁸Mary Louise Bringle, “Debating Hymns,” *The Christian Century*, May 13, 2013, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-04/debating-hymns>.

⁹C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘In Christ alone my hope is found,’” Discipleship Ministries, accessed January 29, 2023, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-in-christ-alone-my-hope-is-found>.

¹⁰Timothy George, “No Squishy Love,” *First Things*, July 29, 2013, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/07/no-squishy-love>.

¹¹Hansen, “Accepted and Contested.”

God's wrath in worship.

IS WRATH AN ATTRIBUTE OF GOD?

Theologians throughout history have explicated diverse interpretations of the wrath of God. The following tables summarize various theologians' answers to the question, "Is wrath an attribute of God?" Those individuals examined include Protestant theologians from the Reformation through the modern era. Table 1 includes influential theologians who disagree with the satisfaction or penal substitution theory of atonement. As will be discussed, many of these theologians do not believe God exhibits wrath at all. Some do not consider wrath an attribute, yet still believe it exists, despite opposing the satisfaction/penal/objective theory of atonement.

TABLE 1. THEOLOGIAN'S OPPOSED TO THE SATISFACTION/PENAL/OBJECTIVE THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT.

Theologian	Wrath is an attribute.	Wrath exists, but it is not an attribute.	God does not exhibit wrath.
F. D. E. Schleiermacher			x
Albrecht Ritschl			x
C. H. Dodd			x
Nels F. S. Ferré			x
A. T. Hanson			x
Ernst Käsemann		x	
William M. Greathouse		x	
Stanley J. Grenz		x	

Table 2 includes theologians who all affirm some form of the satisfaction/penal/objective theory of the atonement. Some of these consider wrath an eternal attribute or perfection of God, while others believe God exhibits wrath even though it is not part of his eternal nature.

TABLE 2. THEOLOGIANS AFFIRMING SOME FORM OF THE SATISFACTION/PENAL/OBJECTIVE THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT.

Theologian	Wrath is an attribute.	Wrath exists, but it is not an attribute.	God does not exhibit wrath.
John Gill	x		
James Leo Garrett Jr.	x		
John M. Frame	x		
Wayne Grudem	x		
Martin Luther		x	
Herman Bavinck		x	
Millard Erickson		x	
Anthony Thiselton		x	
Gerald Bray		x	
Timothy George		x	
Jeremy Wynne	x* ¹²	x*	

Perhaps the most influential modern theologian who did not believe wrath is an attribute of God was C. H. Dodd (1884–1973). Dodd maintained that the concept of the wrath of God is “not to describe the attitude of God to man, but to describe an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.”¹³ He depersonalized wrath and removed it from God’s character and nature to defend God from being characterized as angry, hateful, and wrathful. A. T. Hanson (1916–1991) followed Dodd and asserted that the biblical writers felt “that to attribute wrath as a normal emotion to God is too anthropomorphic.”¹⁴ F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) simply ignored discussing wrath

¹²The asterisks are present because of Wynne’s nuanced approach to wrath as a “perfection” but not an “eternal perfection” of God. “Scripture, we will argue, points to wrath as proper to God’s character, not in the same manner as the righteousness that overflows from eternity in the triune life of God, but nonetheless as the righteous God who is present in opposition to all human opposition.” Wynne, *Wrath among the Perfections of God’s Life*, 13.

¹³C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1932), 23.

¹⁴Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957), 22.

with any frequency. Still others, such as Nels F. S. Ferré (1908–1971), exclude divine wrath as an attribute in deference to a predominant emphasis on God’s love.¹⁵

Whereas several modern theologians seek to remove wrath from God entirely, many others, both historical and modern, consider wrath an attribute of God. John Gill (1697–1771) considered wrath an attribute because God is displeased with all sin.¹⁶ According to John M. Frame (b. 1939), wrath is an attribute grouped with God’s goodness and control.¹⁷ Wayne Grudem (b. 1948) considers wrath as one of God’s moral attributes.¹⁸ James Leo Garrett Jr. (1925–2020) claims that jealousy, anger, and wrath are all attributes related to holiness.¹⁹

Numerous other scholars/theologians do not remove wrath from God entirely; rather, they explain wrath as an expression or aspect of God’s other attributes. For example, Martin Luther (1483–1546) considered God’s wrath as his “alien work” rather than his “proper work” of love and mercy from eternity. Wrath is God’s “alien work” because it is not in his eternal nature but is rather a response to human sin or the affliction and suffering of God’s people.²⁰ Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) declared “God’s wrath is terrible” yet is not an attribute in and of itself. Wrath is part of righteousness and justice because “righteousness . . . has a broader meaning as the sum of all divine virtue.”²¹

Millard Erickson (b. 1932) defines God’s wrath as his displeasure with sin, commenting, “God looks with disfavor upon sin, . . . [and] sin occasions anger or wrath or displeasure within him.”²² He links wrath with God’s holiness;²³ however, he does not consider wrath an attribute of God. When discussing the alleged problem for Dodd and others of wrath versus love,

¹⁵James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 227.

¹⁶John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or, A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures*, new ed. (London: Printed for W. Winterbotham, 1796), 75–76.

¹⁷John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2002), 399.

¹⁸Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 166.

¹⁹Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:225.

²⁰Scott A. Ashmon, “The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview,” *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 4 (October 2005): 348–58.

²¹Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 206.

²²Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 552.

²³Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 550.

Erickson declares, “The offer of Jesus Christ as the atonement for sin means that both the *justice* and the *love* of God have been maintained” (emphasis original).²⁴ Perhaps his word choice of justice, instead of wrath, makes his theology more palatable to a broader group of people.

While Gerald Bray (b. 1948) affirms God’s wrath towards sin, he does not consider wrath an attribute of God because it would violate God’s simplicity. He explains, “Simplicity also makes it impossible to say that God is wrathful by nature. Wrath is the way disobedient people experience God’s justice, but it is not a divine attribute. If it were, God would be angry with everybody all the time.”²⁵ Timothy George (b. 1950), who agrees with the Getty and Townend lyric, does not list wrath as an attribute. However, he states, “Apart from God’s acquittal in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to guilty sinners, there is no escape from the righteous wrath of God.”²⁶

An evangelical scholar who affirms divine wrath but disagrees with penal substitutionary atonement and the satisfaction view is Stanley J. Grenz (1950–2005). He considers love to be the fundamental divine attribute because it “is the eternal essence of the one God.”²⁷ He contends that holiness, jealousy, and wrath, the “supposedly ‘dark’ assertions concerning God,” are all attributes included within love. Grenz explains that whenever someone “seeks to injure or undermine the love relationship, he or she experiences love’s jealousy, which we call ‘wrath.’”²⁸

Grenz’s classification of wrath as an expression of love has merit. He is able to explain jealousy and wrath as positive attributes of God, maintain the doctrine of eternal hell, and frame all God’s expressions of righteousness, jealousy, and wrath as functions of the eternal Trinitarian love. However, as John Frame warns, focusing on one central attribute of God is often linked to theological error.²⁹ Grenz does not fall prey to all the pitfalls of Ritschl or Ferré, but he rejects the vital doctrine of Christ’s substitutionary and satisfactory atonement.

Perhaps the most helpful answer to the question “Is wrath an attribute of God?” comes from the work of Jeremy Wynne (b. 1976). Wynne’s thesis

²⁴Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 268.

²⁵Gerald Lewis Bray, *The Attributes of God: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 28.

²⁶Timothy George, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 179.

²⁷Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 72.

²⁸Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 73.

²⁹Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 393.

is that wrath is located “among the perfections of God,” and is specifically “a redemptive mode of his righteousness.” Furthermore:

Scripture, we will argue, points to wrath as proper to God’s character, not in the same manner as the righteousness that overflows from eternity in the triune life of God, but nonetheless as the righteous God who is present in opposition to all human opposition.³⁰

Systematic theologian Anthony Thiselton (1937–2023) similarly posits that “the wrath of God is not a permanent quality or characteristic, like his love or righteousness.”³¹ God does exhibit wrath, and Thiselton believes the biblical authors used words for wrath deliberately. The primary five Hebrew words for wrath, ‘*aph*, ‘*chēmâ*, ‘*chārôn*, ‘*ēbrâ*, and ‘*qetseph*, along with the New Testament Greek terms *orgē* and *thymos*, describe dispositions arising from God in specific situations.³²

Wynne helpfully connects wrath directly to God’s eternal attribute of righteousness primarily by appealing to Romans 3:21–26 and Exodus 34:6–7. First, he declares that wrath is a personal attribute of God, and, contra Dodd, “cannot be cogently attributed to ... the fabric of creation itself.”³³

Wynne further explains why Romans 3:25 inextricably links wrath and righteousness. Although some explain the atonement only by describing the positive aspect of how Jesus provides forgiveness, Wynne articulates, “Undeniably, this singular act has forgiveness as its end, but it secures this end precisely as it incorporates, rather than excludes, the punitive or negative dimension to God’s righteous work.”³⁴ In other words, because God is righteous, he had to punish sin, and he did so at the cross. Wynne’s explanation of wrath as a redemptive mode of God’s righteousness harmonizes particularly well with the substitutionary and satisfaction theory of the atonement.

Now attention will be given to opponents and adherents of the substitutionary and satisfaction view.

³⁰Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life*, 13.

³¹Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 370.

³²Thiselton, *Systematic Theology*, 367–71.

³³Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life*, 155.

³⁴Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life*, 149.

GOD'S WRATH: SATISFIED AT THE CROSS

The satisfaction and substitutionary theory of the atonement, sometimes called the objective view, is the position presented in "In Christ Alone." Proponents of this view believe God's wrath was satisfied at the cross. As previously noted, some theologians oppose the idea of God's wrath completely. However, there are many theologians who affirm the wrath of God generally but dissent to God's wrath as expressed in the satisfaction and substitutionary view. After briefly considering Anselm's satisfaction theory,³⁵ two interpretations of the Greek word *hilastērion* in Romans 3:25 will be reviewed. Then the argument in favor of singing about the satisfaction and substitutionary theory of the atonement will be articulated.

THE SATISFACTION AND PENAL SUBSTITUTION THEORIES OF THE ATONEMENT

Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote about his influential satisfaction theory in *Cursus Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man) in the eleventh century, building upon themes set forth by Tertullian and Cyprian.³⁶ His theory moved the atonement discussion away from the prominent medieval ransom theory with its "bait and switch" imagery, "while providing an explication of the work of Christ that takes human sin seriously and offers a reasonable explanation of how Jesus' death satisfies the demands of God's honor."³⁷ Anselm's satisfaction theory has been restated and adapted by many. John Calvin's penal substitution theory also includes aspects of Anselm's thought. However, for Calvin, "satisfaction . . . was never the satisfaction of God's honor and always the satisfaction of God's justice or judgment."³⁸ The penal substitution theory has been the "quasi-orthodox doctrine of the atonement" for Protestants and Evangelicals ever since Calvin.³⁹

PROPIATION OR EXPIATION?

Dynamically connected to the penal substitution theory is the notion

³⁵Besides the historical theologians who oppose Anselm's position, it should be noted that worship scholar and hymnologist C. Michael Hawn also opposes Anselm's satisfaction theory. Hawn, "History of Hymns."

³⁶Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 342.

³⁷James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Justification: Five Views*, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 22.

³⁸James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2, 4th ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 23.

³⁹Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 345.

of propitiation. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson define propitiation as

the satisfaction of God’s wrath, particularly through Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross, which is the basis for God’s declaring sinners righteous in Christ (justification) (Rom 3:25–26 ESV; 1 John 4:10 ESV).⁴⁰

There are many who are uncomfortable with such definitions. Derek Kidner wrote an illuminating paper in which he noted conservatives tend to defend “propitiate,” while others rally around the word “expiate.”⁴¹ Beginning with Dodd, translators opposing the satisfaction and penal substitution theory rendered all the words related to *hilastērion* in the New Testament as “expiation” rather than “propitiation.” “Expiation” means “the removal of guilt through the payment of a penalty or the offering of an atonement.”⁴² Kidner expressed how Dodd argued against the “placating or appeasement of wrath” by using “both theological and linguistic arguments which have had considerable influence on a generation of translators and exegetes.”⁴³

Kidner observed Dodd’s prominent influence on exegetes and translators in 1980, but Dodd’s influence has persisted into the twenty-first century. Takamitsu Muraoka published *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* in 2009, in which he cites Dodd as a reference for the word ἐξιλάσκομαι (*hilaskethai*). Echoing Dodd’s rendering of “to expiate,” Muraoka provides “to purge” as one of the definitions. Additionally, the *Common English Bible* translates *hilaskethai* in Hebrews 2:17 as “wipe away,”⁴⁴ denoting expiation rather than propitiation.

Dodd asserts that the usage of the *hilastērion* word group in the Septuagint differs from its usage in pagan sources. Therefore, when Paul uses the term in Romans 3:25, “the meaning conveyed is that of expiation, not that of propitiation. Most translators and commentators are

⁴⁰Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 139.

⁴¹Derek Kidner, “Sacrifice - Metaphors and Meaning,” *Tyndale Bulletin* (1982): 119.

⁴²R. C. Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2007).

⁴³Kidner, “Sacrifice - Metaphors and Meaning,” 120.

⁴⁴“Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way. This was so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, in order to wipe away the sins of the people.” *Common English Bible* (2011).

wrong.⁴⁵ His concern is two-fold: first, to avoid projecting pagan notions of capricious wrath onto the God of the Bible, and second, to maintain his position of “the wrath of God” as impersonal.

Dodd’s position was refuted quite convincingly by Leon Morris (1914–2006). Morris explains: “There is a consistency about the wrath of God in the Old Testament. It is no capricious passion, but the stern reaction of the divine nature to evil in man. It is aroused only and inevitably by sin.”⁴⁶ Morris translates *hilastērion* in Romans 3:25 as “means of propitiation.”⁴⁷ More recently, Dirk Büchner has argued that expiation or cleansing is not even a faithful translation when considering the original context of the LXX. Büchner builds upon both Morris and Kidner to explain Dodd’s errors: “Up to the time of the LXX, and even after it, the use of the verb does not support a semantic development that includes ‘purge’ or ‘expiate’ in the Hellenistic world of sacrifice. Instead a sacrifice acceptable to a deity results in propitiation.”⁴⁸

Morris, along with several others, also repudiates Dodd’s interpretation of God’s wrath as “impersonal.”⁴⁹ German theologian Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998), although he favors expiation over propitiation in Romans 3:25, states that “God himself is at work” in Romans 1, where Paul writes, “For God’s wrath is revealed from heaven on every ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who with unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18).⁵⁰ Nazarene pastor and scholar William M. Greathouse (1919–2011) also believes that the “impersonal” and “natural consequences” view of Dodd does not do justice to the idea of *orgē theou* (wrath of God) in Romans 1:18. “The manner in which Paul places the wrath of God against his ‘righteousness’ in v 17 and uses the dynamic term being revealed in both cases suggests that wrath represents something in the attitude and purpose of God.”⁵¹

Thus if “the wrath of God” is “God himself at work,” against sin and

⁴⁵C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), 94.

⁴⁶Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 131.

⁴⁷Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 169.

⁴⁸Dirk Büchner, “Ἐξίλα ἁ Σασθαί: Appeasing God in the Septuagint Pentateuch,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 248.

⁴⁹Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 166.

⁵⁰Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 36–37.

⁵¹William M. Greathouse, *Romans 1–8: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. George Lyons, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008), 70–71.

evil, why do others besides Dodd still favor the term expiation over propitiation? This article will next explain arguments in favor of expiation as articulated by Greathouse and Grenz. Then, their arguments will be countered, substantiating the argument in favor of singing about propitiation and the satisfaction and substitutionary theory of the atonement.

Greathouse opposes what he calls “extreme views of propitiation,” stating:

It evokes images of a vindictive deity prepared to throw a temper tantrum, placated by a display of sacrifice that melts his hard heart, satisfies his craving to punish someone, and render him incapable of doing what justice otherwise demands. And it makes the death of Christ akin to divine child abuse.⁵²

The first defense against this accusation comes from Anselm himself. It is a false depiction of propitiation or the satisfaction theory to claim, “God killed Jesus,” or “God the Father abused Jesus the Son.” In fact, Anselm taught Jesus’ sacrifice satisfied the honor of the whole Trinity. The offering Jesus made “was to his own honour as well as to the Father and the Holy Spirit; that is, he offered up his humanity to his divinity, the one selfsame divinity which belongs to the three persons.”⁵³

Anselm’s clarity here is one which must be captured in worship. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all share the divine attributes. If God exhibits wrath as a redemptive mode of God’s righteousness, as Wynne states, then the Father, Son, and Spirit all exhibit wrath.

Randolph Tasker (1895–1976) explains the Trinity’s shared quality of wrath in his monograph *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*. He disproves the second-century heretic Marcion’s position that the Old Testament reveals a God of wrath and the New Testament a God of love by quoting numerous scriptures about the Father and Son’s wrath and love

⁵²Greathouse, *Romans 1–8*, 129. This accusation of “divine child abuse” was shared by Chris Joiner of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee, who agreed with the PCUSA’s decision to omit “In Christ Alone” from their hymnal. “That lyric comes close to saying that God killed Jesus,” he said. “The cross is not an instrument of God’s wrath.” Bob Smietana, “Presbyterians Stir Debate by Rejecting Popular New Hymn,” *Religion News Service* (blog), August 6, 2013, <https://religionnews.com/2013/08/06/presbyterians-stir-debate-by-rejecting-popular-new-hymn/>.

⁵³Anselm, *Curs Deus Homo in Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, reissue ed., Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 305.

in both Testaments.⁵⁴ Getty and Townend's lyrics do not state "Till on that cross as Jesus died, *the Father's wrath* was satisfied;" therefore, if one believes they imply it is only the Father's wrath dealt with at the cross, it is due to a misunderstanding of the satisfaction and penal substitution theory, not due to the lyrics themselves. Indeed, John Stott (1921–2011) clarifies that the cross was

not a punishment of a meek Christ by a harsh and punitive Father; nor a procurement of salvation by a loving Christ from a mean and reluctant Father ... the righteous, loving Father humbled himself to become in and through his only Son flesh, sin and a curse for us, in order to redeem us without compromising his own character. The theological words *satisfaction* and *substitution* need to be carefully defined and safeguarded, but they cannot in any circumstances be given up. The biblical gospel of atonement is of God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us.⁵⁵

Grenz argues that *hilastērion* means "mercy-seat" in the Septuagint and "expiation" in the New Testament. Accordingly, he asserts *hilastērion* "suggests that Christ's work is directed toward human sin, not God's wrath."⁵⁶ However, George asserts "the cross involves both expiation, which means proving a covering for sin, and propitiation, which means averting divine judgment. The semantic range of the Greek words *hilastēmos/hilasterion* includes both meanings."⁵⁷ It has already been stated that Kidner and Büchner favor the translation of propitiation over expiation. Furthermore, Stott argues that "mercy-seat" and "expiation" do not fit the context of Romans 1–3: "In these verses Paul is describing God's solution to the human predicament, which is not only sin but God's wrath upon sin (1:18; 2:5, 3:5)."⁵⁸

Clearly, the New Testament idea of propitiation is a positive one of God substituting himself to bear his own wrath for us, and propitiation does

⁵⁴R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture (London: Tyndale Press, 1951), 27–37.

⁵⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 159.

⁵⁶Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 347.

⁵⁷George, "No Squishy Love."

⁵⁸John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 114.

not entail divine child abuse. Furthermore, propitiation is arguably the best translation for *hilastērion* in Romans 3:25 and other verses. Next, a strong case for the satisfaction and substitutionary view of the atonement will be constructed.

THE CASE FOR THE SATISFACTION AND SUBSTITUTIONARY VIEW OF THE ATONEMENT

What other reasons besides the translation of the word *hilastērion* as propitiation assist in building a positive case for the satisfaction and substitutionary view of the atonement? First, an outpouring of wrath against sin makes the most sense of Jesus's request at the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt. 26:39b), and his quotation of Psalm 22:1 during the crucifixion, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As Tasker explains, Jesus "had a priestly work to perform; a work which involved nothing less than drinking to the dregs the cup of divine wrath, 'the cup of his fury' as it is called in Isaiah 61:17."⁵⁹ Stott concurs that Ezekiel 23:32–34, Isaiah 49:12, Isaiah 51:17–22, Psalm 75:8, Jeremiah 25:15–29, and Habakkuk 2:16 all confirm that the cup Jesus asked to be taken away was the cup of God's wrath.⁶⁰

Curiously, Grenz shows the importance of Jesus's godforsakenness on the cross for reconciliation but refuses to recognize the role of God's wrath against sin in the process. He asserts that "Christ tasted alienation" and "the pain that has ensued from the fall" for us, but somehow Christ experiencing such horrible pain does not equal suffering under divine wrath for Grenz.⁶¹ On the contrary, Grudem argues that Jesus bearing the wrath of God makes the most sense of the physical pain he endured, the pain of bearing sin and becoming a "curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), and his feeling of abandonment when he quoted Psalm 22.⁶² Certainly Grenz is correct to assert the cross as means of reconciliation and expiation, but one cannot explain Galatians 3:13 and Jesus's cry in Matthew 26:39b without accounting for the wrath of God.

Secondly, Jeremy Wynne connects Romans 3:25–26 to Exodus 34:6–7 to explain how wrath is a redemptive mode of righteousness, which is also connected to God's patience. In Exodus 34:6–7, God declares his name as

⁵⁹Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, 34.

⁶⁰Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 78–79.

⁶¹Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 352.

⁶²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 496–98.

“merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Yet he also warns he “will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children.”

Wynne argues God displayed his patience throughout the Old Testament, but he also promised to “visit iniquity.” Therefore, Paul writes, “God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25–26). Paul shows how God’s wrath being satisfied at the cross fulfills God’s perfect patience and righteousness as they were declared in Exodus 34:6–7.⁶³

Finally, an account of God as the righteous judge must be present in a fully orbed understanding of the atonement and in biblical expressions of worship. The “impersonal wrath” view of Dodd and others “subverts the inextricably personal dimension of righteousness by excising the ruling judge,” as Wynne explains it.⁶⁴ The Psalms are replete with references to God as the righteous judge, including Psalm 7:11: “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day.” Calvin connects God’s righteousness to worship in a moving way:

God is just, not indeed as one among many, but as one who contains in Himself alone all the fullness of righteousness. He receives the full and complete praise which is His due only as He alone obtains the name and honor of being just, while the whole human race is condemned of unrighteousness.⁶⁵

Christians should retain lyrics about God’s righteousness, including his righteous wrath being satisfied at the cross, and give God his “full and complete praise.”

CONCLUDING IMPLICATIONS FOR WORSHIP

Before concluding this analysis of “wrath in worship,” additional implications will be discussed. First, although “Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied” is a biblically sound statement worthy of

⁶³Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life*, 180–83.

⁶⁴Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life*, 163.

⁶⁵John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. R. Mackenzie, D. W. Torrance, and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 77.

being sung, this analysis has highlighted the need to carefully articulate God's attributes in worship. Regarding wrath, John Stott cautions that worshipers should avoid singing about God's wrath in a way that portrays it like human anger.⁶⁶ Christians should therefore strive to sing about God's wrath in relation to his other attributes, not separated from or opposed to them.⁶⁷

Three Getty and Townend hymns succeed in this endeavor. The stanza referring to God's wrath in "In Christ Alone" shows connections to God's love and righteousness (emphasis added):

In Christ alone, who took on flesh,
 Fullness of God in helpless babe;
 This gift of *love* and *righteousness*,
 Scorned by the ones He came to save.
 Till on that cross as Jesus died,
 The *wrath* of God was satisfied;
 For every sin on Him was laid,
 Here in the death of Christ I live.

This hymn, which has been criticized for being "at odds with the ubiquitous references to the focus on God's love"⁶⁸ in other hymns, cites "love" three times.

Similarly, the refrain of "The Power of the Cross" is (emphasis added):

This, the power of the cross:
 Christ became sin for us;
 Took the blame, bore the *wrath*—
 We stand forgiven at the cross.⁶⁹

The song continues and refers to God's "selfless love" and exuberantly declares "What a love! what a cost! We stand forgiven at the cross."

Finally, the second stanza of "Gethsemane Hymn" reads (emphasis added):

⁶⁶Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 71.

⁶⁷Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God's Life*, 180.

⁶⁸Hawn, "History of Hymns."

⁶⁹Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, "The Power of the Cross" (ThankYou Music, 2005). In the first printing of this hymn in the *Celebrating Grace* hymnal, the mention of wrath was also altered. The changed lyric read, "Took the blame, bore the shame." *Celebrating Grace*, 190.

To know each friend will fall away,
 And heaven's voice be still,
 For hell to have its vengeful day
 Upon Golgotha's hill.
 No words describe the Saviour's plight—
 To be by God forsaken
 Till *wrath* and love are satisfied,
 And every sin is paid.⁷⁰

Again, the concern that Getty and Townend hymns overemphasize God's wrath to the exclusion of God's love is an unnecessary fear. In fact, these hymns connect God's wrath to his love and righteousness. The groundwork has been laid for this type of hymn, yet there is still room for future hymns to explain further connections between God's wrath and his holiness, justice, righteousness, jealousy, and love.⁷¹

Many studies have analyzed the avoidance of the topics of judgment and wrath in Christian churches.⁷² Stephen B. Murry argued for a reclamation of divine wrath in contemporary theology and preaching in his dissertation.⁷³ Such works help explain why wrath is such a controversial topic in hymnody today. Before some of the trends to relegate the final judgment to the realm of myth and the desire to move away from the idea of a wrathful God, hymns about wrath and judgment used to be much more common.

Perhaps the most famous of all medieval Latin hymns is the *Dies Irae*, which is about the “day of wrath” described in Zephaniah 1:14–18. John Newton, author of “Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)” (1773), wrote a hymn about the final judgment which begins with the words “Day of

⁷⁰Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “Gethsemane” (ThankYou Music, 2009).

⁷¹On a related note, there is currently a scarcity of songs about God's wrath being poured out at the final judgment. Tasker explains: “In the Apocalypse ... because Christ Himself has drunk the cup of divine wrath against sinners in His atoning passion, He has been entrusted with the task of being the agent through whom the divine wrath will be finally expressed.” Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, 46. A great multitude in heaven worship Jesus for his final outpouring of wrath, shouting, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality and has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (Rev. 19:1b–2). Why do churches not sing about this with anticipation and hope today?

⁷²Thiselton, *Systematic Theology*, 369. One particular work surveying the decline of divine judgment and wrath in theology Thiselton references is James P. Martin, *The Last Judgement in Protestant Theology from Orthodoxy to Ritschl* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), 87 and throughout.

⁷³Stephen B. Murry, “Reclaiming Divine Wrath: An Apologetic for an Aspect of God Neglected by Contemporary Theology and Preaching” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2004).

judgment, day of wonders” (1774).⁷⁴ Also, Charles Wesley, who is known for his hymns focusing on the love of God, penned these words:

Wherewith, O Lord, shall I draw near,
 Or bow myself before thy face?
 How in thy purer eyes appear?
 What shall I bring to gain thy grace?

Will gifts delight the Lord Most High?
 Will multiplied oblations please?
 Thousands of rams his favor buy,
 Or slaughtered hecatombs appease?

Can these assuage the wrath of God?
 Can these wash out my guilty stain?
 Rivers of oil, and seas of blood,
 Alas! They all must flow in vain.

Guilty, I stand before thy face;
 My sole desert is hell and wrath;
 'Twere just the sentence should take place;
 But Oh, I plead my Saviour's death!

Wesley's hymn was published ninety-seven times between 1739 and 1899 but it was published fewer than five times since 1900.⁷⁵

There was a significant break in time during which influential hymns addressing divine wrath were not written. One could argue that “In Christ Alone” is the most significant hymn addressing the wrath of God since the late eighteenth century. Also, perhaps Getty and Townend's hymn has influenced songwriting since its release in 2001. It seems to have laid the foundation for future songs, like Jordan Kauflin's “All I Have Is Christ” in 2008:

And I beheld God's love displayed—
 You suffered in my place.

⁷⁴John Newton and William Cowper, *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), Book II, 77.

⁷⁵“Wherewith O Lord, shall I draw near,” *Hymnary.org*, accessed October 4, 2023, https://hymnary.org/text/wherewith_o_lord_shall_i_draw_near.

You bore the wrath reserved for me,
Now all I know is grace.⁷⁶

Hymnwriters today would do well to continue the work of Getty and Townend, who reopened the topic of divine wrath in hymnody.

Finally, singing about wrath in a way that defines it as God's righteous hatred of sin and evil emphasizes the gravity of sin. As John Stott concluded, "For if there was no way by which the righteous God could righteously forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed."⁷⁷ Singing truthfully about God's wrath should naturally lead to humble recognition of the severity of human sin and the costly price Christ was willing to pay for our redemption.

Should believers sing about God's wrath in worship? Yes, because it is intrinsically connected to God's righteousness and our redemption. God's wrath is a redemptive mode of his eternal righteousness, and Jesus satisfied at the cross the wrath of the Triune God that is revealed against sinners to provide the means of salvation. If believers do not sing about God's wrath, their understanding of salvation and gratitude for redemption will remain incomplete.

⁷⁶Jordan Kauffman, "All I Have Is Christ" (Sovereign Grace Praise/BMI, 2008).

⁷⁷Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 85.