

Michael, Thanks for joining us.

Thank you; I'm flattered to be asked.

Michael, tell us a little about yourself.

Well, first of all, and most relevant, I am one of God's children, because of what He did through His Son, Jesus Christ. Everything else is significant only because of that.

I'm 34; I live alone in Southeastern Pennsylvania, in Northern Lancaster County, though I'm not Amish or Mennonite. I'm a Calvinistic, theonomic, postmillennial baptist, part of a congregation under the leadership of Bill Einwechter. I am a professional piano technician: tuning and repairing pianos keeps me alive. And an amateur music lover. In fact, I'd like stress that: I am an amateur in every sense: I love music, music theory, composition, history, musicology, but I have no formal training in any of those fields, and I do not earn income from any of my musical interests. I hope your listeners will keep that in mind as I give my opinions.

In your opinion, then, what is the importance of the Psalter in the life of the Church?

Well, Urie, the Book of Psalms holds a unique place in the Scriptures: it's the only book dedicated exclusively to two of the commands our God has given: praying and singing. It not only tells us to pray, and tells us to sing, it is itself a book of prayers and songs. In my opinion, the book of Psalms has two very important functions in the life of the church. One is historical and one is personal.

The personal reason, the function that's directed to you, as an individual, is that this book expresses every attitude and every emotion that you will ever have, and it tells you and shows you the right response to all those emotions. The psalms give us not only instruction, but example, for us to imitate, of the godly, constructive responses to all our desires and experiences. For instance, someone may object that one very common emotion is not mentioned at all: romantic love. It's true, Romantic love is not mentioned in the Psalter, as for instance Song of Solomon deals with virtually nothing else. But the category which romantic attraction belongs to: the fulfillment of social and physical desires, is a major theme in the Psalter, and Christians must be familiar with the Psalms in order to face this experience right, to treat it like it is: a good gift from God, and we must submit to Him if the gift is to remain good.

For another instance, there are many people, many Christians, many reconstructionists, who are what we might call conspiracy-thinkers: they believe that discovering and exposing the evil schemes of businesses and governments is essential to gaining dominion. The Psalter addresses that subject very minutely. Not only in the obvious places like Pss 2 and 83 which are about conspiracy, but in many other Psalms like 64 and 37 and 110, the correct attitude is not only given, but modeled, and we are invited to imitate it, by praying these psalms, and by singing them.

That's one benefit.

The other, as I see it, is historical and eschatological: These psalms have been used by God's people of all ages, and will be used till the end of time. And maybe beyond the end of time, if there is such a thing. This is especially important in our individualistic world. The book of Psalms connects each Christian with God's disciples in all ages. It emphasizes the church as a body. And especially so when the Psalms are read or sung, by groups of Christians. We become aware that God's people, before Christ as well as since, have had all the same struggles, and responded in the same way.

Michael, how did you become interested in singing the Psalms?

Well, that's been a rather roundabout path. When I was in my early teens, my dad bought of cassette of Psalm-singing. This was the first our family knew that there was such a thing as singing the Psalms, even though we'd been going to a reformed church for all of my life. The singing was rather poor, and the recording quality was abysmal, but we fell in love with it and listened to it many times. Then some time later we found out that the words and music were actually published: they were from

the Book of Psalms for Singing, which is a psalter published by Crown and Covenant from 1973. Then we discovered a congregation in our county which used that psalter exclusively, and we started attending their monthly psalm-sings.

Now I must confess, for many years what attracted me was not the psalms, it was the music. There's some great music in that book. It was only as an adult, suffering various defeats and disappointments, that I discovered the power, the relevance of the book of Psalms as a book of prayer. Then I finally made the connection, yeah! We can sing these too!

I have to give a lot of credit to the *Cantus Christi*, a Psalter-hymnal which was released by Canon Press in 2003. I already had a number of Psalters, but that one had a much wider variety of music and settings than any of the others. Including a great deal from the Genevan Psalter. And that was my introduction to the Genevan Psalter.

And now six years later you've begun a website devoted to the Genevan psalter, the Genevan Psalter Resource Center, at www.GenevanPsalter.com. So tell us, if you could briefly, what is the Genevan Psalter?

Well, very briefly, the Genevan Psalter is a set of tunes designed to be sung with metrical paraphrases of the Book of Psalms. Each psalm has a tune connected to it. So when we talk about the Genevan Psalter, we're talking about the book of Psalms, available to be sung to a certain set of tunes. All the tunes were composed in France and Switzerland in the mid-1500s.

So what's different about the Genevan Psalter as opposed to another Psalter?

Right. Of course any Psalter is going to be a set of music designed to be sung with certain Psalms. What sets the GenPs apart is first of all its age. 450 years later, those same tunes are still being sung those same psalms. That's highly unusual: any other Psalter you find will mix and match tunes with metrical psalms freely at the judgment of the editors. Some Psalters even print the words separately from the music, and cut the page in half so that the congregation can sing whatever psalm they want to whatever tune they choose. The Genevan tunes are connected intimately with their psalms, so that, for instance, no matter what language is being used, Psalm 38 will always be sung to the same tune: [demonstrate]. And of course if you have an English translation you don't like, you can look for another English translation which fits that same tune.

So what would you say is the benefit of using these Psalm tunes?

Well, first of all, I don't see any particular benefit to having everyone in the world singing each Psalm to the same tune. If the tunes were inspired, I'd make the same point I made earlier, the benefits of everyone using the same Psalms. But they're not inspired, and the fact that believers in China and Hungary and Turkey and England and Holland and Germany and France and Canada and the Czech Republic, all singing the same tunes, strikes me as interesting but not important in itself.

And likewise, the fact that these tunes have been used for so long is again, interesting, even amazing, but not significant in itself, I don't believe. We don't value anything just because it's popular, and we don't value anything just because it's old.

What is important about the long and wide use of these tunes, is what it tells us about the tunes. In every sense of the word, these tunes are durable. That is the benefit of the Genevan tunes. They work. They work in many contexts and for many purposes.

Furthermore, they work as music, no matter what you do with them. You can sing them fast, or slow, or very slow, and they make good music. You can sing them in unison, and they have power and beauty that will bring tears to your eyes. They've been used with many different harmonic settings, many different kinds of harmony. In some cases the melodies themselves have been changed slightly with sharps and flats for various reasons. And they've been used in several rhythmic forms. The original rhythms had a lot of variety, although none of them are too complex. Many times they've been

used with very simple rhythms, where all notes are the same length. And as for instrumentation, they make good music with anything from a solo recorder, to an organ and orchestra and a full choir.

Now of course saying that they work doesn't mean we'll all like them equally. You may prefer one form over another, and you and I may disagree over the best options. And if you use the tunes you'll have to decide what's the best harmony, and rhythm, and tempo, and instrumentation for your situation. And that's an important point, More than any other congregational music that I know of, the Genevan tunes are durable, they're flexible; it's very hard to ruin them. They will repay your effort.

What is the history of the Genevan Psalter?

Well, there're several ways to come at that. Where did they come from, why were they written, and where have they been since?

Where they came from is pretty simple. They were written in Europe during the protestant reformation, at the request of John Calvin. Why? Well, one of important truths that was rediscovered during the reformation was The Priesthood of All Believers, the belief that all God's people are equal before Him, and there is no distinction between clergy and laity. However, when the idea of the Priesthood of all Believers was fresh on their minds, one results was the reformers' teaching that the congregation should take part in the music of the church meeting, not just a choir.

All three streams of reformation therefore produced a type of congregational music, the Anabaptist Ausbund, the Lutheran Chorale, and the Calvinist Psalter. Initially, of course, the congregational music was very much like the popular music of the day: easy for non-musicians to sing, especially as a group, and often used a rather jaunty rhythm. The Lutheran and anabaptists, of course, had no limit to the number of tunes they could make. But the Calvinists didn't need more than 150 tunes because they were singing only the Psalms. (In the end, actually, they only came up with 126.)

Many of them were written by Louis Bourgeois, who was a Swiss Calvinist and musician. The rest are essentially anonymous, in that we don't recognize the names which are attached to them. Not all of them were written in Geneva, but all of them were used there, and published there, and that's why we call it the GenPs, and from there, the music spread throughout the rest of the reformed world. Reformed men from all over Europe spent some years in Geneva as religious refugees, and when they returned home they brought these tunes with them.

I wish I knew more about where these tunes have been since. I've read that the tunes were used, connected to their designated Psalms, in Holland, Germany and of course France and Switzerland, and eventually in Canada. England was a special case. Refugees from the British Isles also brought the Genevan tunes back home with them, but they made changes. They altered the tunes, and removed some, and added some, and switched the tunes with other Psalms, and produced what they called the Anglo-Genevan Psalter. I don't know much about it; I've never seen a copy. But I know that the Genevan tunes that came to America came from the A-G Psalter, not the original. For instance, the most popular of the Genevan tunes is the tune we use for Thomas Ken's Doxology [demonstrate]. It's called OLD HUNDREDTH. But in the GenPs it's the tune for Ps134. It was the A-G Psalter which used it for Ps100.

I wish I could tell you more about the history. I'm still studying. As I find more articles and get permission, I'll post them at the Resource Center.

As we close, Michael, what advice could you give to churches who are interested in singing the Psalms? Where should they start?

After all I've said about it, it may surprise you to hear that I don't think the Genevan Psalter is the place to start. There are too many other options which are more accessible, more suitable for starting out. The GenPs tunes are peculiar. They are not like the music most people know, and starting with them would present an unnecessary hurdle to psalm-singing. They are a worthy goal for an aspiring congregation. As you know I think they are powerful and beautiful, and more durable and flexible than

most available Psalm settings, but they are not as creative and interesting as some others. For instance, the Becker Psalter of Heinrich Schütz shows much more power and variety and creativity than the Genevan. But both those options are beyond the immediate use of non-musical congregations.

I would advise two things: first of all, which Psalters to use, and second, how to introduce them. The ones I've mentioned so far are the best available. Crown and Covenant's **Book of Psalms for Singing**, and Canon Press's *Cantus Christi*. The first is the complete psalter; all the psalms are in it. And the music is ordinary hymn tunes. True, many of the tunes are unfamiliar, and a large minority are boring, and not always well-matched with the words. But it's the best complete Psalter I know, and the most accessible. The *Cantus*, otoh, has a great variety of music, including selections from all three methods of psalm-singing, which I didn't have time to get into today: chant, through-composed, and metrical. The *Cantus* also includes hundreds of hymns, so it's a good choice for congregations which are not exclusively singing Psalms.

How to introduce the Psalms, well, first you'll have to convince a majority of the congregation, or at least the leadership, that it's a good goal. Some of the reasons I gave earlier may be some help. Then all you have to do is get some musical settings that your congregation can use. And assuming that everyone can read, that won't be a problem. The difficulty will be the music. There's no way around it; if a congregation is going to start singing Psalms, they'll have to learn new tunes.

I do not believe that Sunday morning is the time to learn new music. No matter what your theological understanding of the church meeting is, whether you think of it as worship, or as I believe the Scripture teaches, Formal Corporate Discipleship, learning a new tune is a difficult and distracting job for nearly everyone in the pew. The best way for the average non-musician to learn a new tune is to get together regularly with some a group including some musicians who can teach and practice, informally, a few new tunes. Five or six tunes every other week, or once a month, would be good progress. And of course this generation has an option no previous generation has had: there are so many recordings available that no one has an excuse. Recordings of the complete Genevan Psalter are available at the Resource Center. Though these recordings are designed to be utilitarian rather than entertaining, many people have said enjoy listening to them. And more recordings of selections from the two books I mentioned are becoming available. Check with Crown and Covenant Publications, and WordMP3.com.