

Two sections from
The Hymnody of the Christian Church
Louis F. Benson [Presbyterian] John Knox Press, 1927

VI. THE CALVINISTIC SETTLEMENT

We think of Zwingli and Calvin as taking Luther's place in the Churches we have agreed to call "Reformed." The name is unhappy. It was Luther, with his love of the Latin Church, who contemplated reforming it. Whereas Zwingli and Calvin had the vision of a primitive Church restored rather than an existing Church reformed.

But in discussing Calvin's settlement of church praise we must remember that his work at Geneva belongs to the second period of the Swiss Reformation, and was constructive, not iconoclastic.

When he comes on the scene a model of worship had been set up by Zwingli for the German-speaking cantons. In his church at Zurich, stripped and white-washed, the worshipers were auditors, except for a few responses, the Creed, Gloria, and a recited Psalm. These "ceremonies" were his concession to human weakness, but singing was not among them. Did Zwingli contemplate the anomaly of a religion without music? His most competent biographer thinks not.⁴⁴ The facts are against him. There was no music at Zurich for seventy years. And it is the facts that are Calvin's background.

At Geneva before Calvin came in July, 1536, they were using an order of worship made by Farel, an evangelist from German-speaking Berne to French-speaking cantons. Here, too, there was no singing, probably out of deference to Berne. But there was indeed nothing in French to sing.

After a survey of the situation Calvin drew up his "Essentials of a well-ordered Church," giving prominence to the Psalms "we desire to be sung in church," for these three reasons:

1. The example of the ancient Church and St. Paul's testimony.
2. The warmth and uplift they would bring to our prayers, now so cold.
3. The discovery of what benefit and consolation the pope and his partisans have deprived the Church, by appropriating the Psalms to be mumbled between them without understanding.⁴⁵ Calvin's thought was to begin by training the children to sing prose Psalms to some sober ecclesiastical chant; the people listening till they could grow accustomed to use their own voices in church. The scheme was rather in the air; Calvin's influence was waning and political considerations induced the Council to adhere to the church usages Berne was pressing upon Geneva. This to Calvin meant the supremacy of State over Church. Rather than yield he suffered banishment.

It is well to note that in his humiliation and his appreciation of the need of complaisance, Calvin none the less made it the *sine qua non* [necessary condition; "without which, not"-meo] of his return to Geneva that the singing of Psalms be made a part of public worship.⁴⁶ This purpose, indomitable and perhaps not without a touch of the heroic, is the historical basis on which the whole structure of Metrical Psalmody rests.

Calvin's banishment brought him at Strasburg the opportunity of hearing the Germans sing Luther's hymns; and convinced him that French Psalms could just as well be turned into modern meters and set to congregational tunes. He soon had his little flock of French refugees there singing after some fashion and in 1539 printed a little psalm book for them. In direct contrast with Luther's first booklet, its contents, excepting the Creed, were entirely Biblical: 17 Psalms in meter and one in prose, "Nunc dimittis" and the Commandments versified.

Calvin was back in Geneva by 1541, and could have anything he wanted, even Psalm singing. He proceeded to enlarge and improve his little Strasburg book. But his standard was so high that twenty-one years passed before he fulfilled his purpose to provide his people with a complete metrical version of the Scripture Psalms.⁴⁷

We have then the FOURTH, the CALVINISTIC SETTLEMENT of the relation of the hymn to Scripture: as conservative as the Judaizers in the Apostolic Church could have wished for, or as was laid down by the Council of Braga in the sixth century.

The hymn of human composure that had been sung so freely in the early Church, that had won so hardly a restricted place in the liturgy of the Latin Church, that had developed so phenomenally in the German Reformation, is now excluded from Reformed worship. The inspired songs of Scripture, substantially the Old Testament Psalter, furnish the exclusive subject-matter of praise. Translated into the vernacular, versified in modern meters, set to congregational tunes, they become the hymns of the Church.

The first question to emerge is whether Calvin aimed to lay down a hard and fast rule binding the Reformed Church for all time?

Undoubtedly all his arrangements at Geneva were by way of exemplifying "a well-ordered Church," and

among its essentials, he said, was “the singing of the Psalms” in worship. Just as he insisted on singing against Zwingli’s silence, so he emphasized psalmody against Luther’s hymnody.

Calvin of course was dealing with a situation rather than the future. Like Luther before him, and practically all the Psalm versifiers after him who disclosed their motives in prefaces, he was nauseated by the unseemly and amorous songs that were corrupting the youth of his country. He was offended just as much by the Latin hymns of the Church, because by his time they had become vehicles of Mariolatry, saint worship and other things he abominated. Obviously then songs of human composure, to say the best of them, were subject to the contagion of levity and heresy.

“What is to be done?” Calvin asks in his preface of 1543.⁴⁸ It is, he says:

First: To find songs not only pure but holy.

Second: But none can write them save he who has received the power from God Himself.

Third: “When we have searched all around, here and there, we shall find no songs better or more suitable than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit dictated and gave to him.”

Fourth: “And therefore, when we sing *them*, we are as sure that God hath put words into our mouths as if He Himself sang with us to exalt His glory.”

Expressions so cautious and considerate make us wonder if there were advocates of Lutheran hymnody at Geneva, whom it was prudent to placate.

In any event if Calvin felt more than he expressed, he kept it to himself. No one has produced any assertion that the canonical Psalter was the divinely prescribed hymn book for all time. On the contrary his *Commentary on Colossians* admits that St. Paul’s “Psalms and hymns and spiritual odes” covers “all kinds of song,” except that “spiritual” excludes “frivolities and trifles.” Calvin rested his cause (and won it) not on any divine prescription of the Psalter but on its inspiration. There is no evidence that he had scruples of conscience against the use of human songs. If he had he preferred to propose a counsel of prudence and not a case of conscience.

Most of us are likely to feel now that Calvin’s settlement of the matter lacks the finality that comes through comprehensiveness. But now is not then. As a handling of the situation it was masterly. In an emergency it is often the single-track mind that discerns the path ahead and commands the following. Calvin must have read deeply into the French character, and with some foresight of what French Protestants were to go through. If not, he was the unconscious instrument of a clear Providence.

In the Metrical Psalms he gave the people an appealing part of the Bible in their own tongue; which accounts for the thrill of Huguenot psalmody. In the little psalm books he gave it into their own personal possession. The humblest of them might have a copy of his very own: the symbol and vehicle of his personal communion with God.

Some sixty-four editions within four years, supplying Switzerland and peddled through France, show how wide that sense of ownership became, and explain how psalmody became a part of personal life. The metrical Psalter made the Huguenot character. No doubt a character nourished on Old Testament ideals will lack the full symmetry of the gospel. But the Huguenot was a warrior first, called to fight and suffer for his faith. And in singing Psalms he found his confidence and strength. Now that we have seen an idealized pugnacity and a stolid endurance combined in the French soldiery in their war against Germany, we can understand how the Huguenot found no Psalm too militant, no imprecation too severe, against his Lord’s enemies.

In the wars of religion the Psalms in meter were the songs of camp and march, the war-cry on the field, the swan song at the martyr’s stake.⁴⁹

⁴⁴Christoffel, *Huldreich Zwingli*, Elberfeld, 1857. English trans., Edinburgh, 1858, p. 150, n.

⁴⁵*Calvini Opera*, ed. 1863 seq., vol. Xa, 12.

⁴⁶“Alterum ut ad publicas orationes psalmorum cantio adhibeatur.”

⁴⁷The author gave a much more detailed account of the origins of the Reformed Psalmody in a former Stone lecture, printed in *Journal of The Presbyterian Hist. Soc.*, Phila., for March and June, 1909.

⁴⁸*Calvini Opera*, vi, 165-172.

⁴⁹This phase of the subject is popularly portrayed in Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life*, var. eds.

V. THE GENEVAN MELODIES

Calvin's problem at Geneva was to find popular melodies that would carry the difficult measure of Marot's Psalms. His attempt to solve it has been treated by a succession of historians as a blot on the record of sacred music.

What Calvin did may be summed up in a sentence. Lacking Luther's equipment he singled out a competent musician, Louis Bourgeois, living at Geneva under needy circumstances, and put into his hands the preparation of suitable melodies. We may be quite sure that he impressed upon the musician just the sort of thing he wanted. Hence the long series of hymn tunes that graced the *Genevan Psalter* of 1551. After Bourgeois had left Geneva, the setting of the balance of the Psalter had to be committed to inferior hands.

When critics protest against Calvin's insistence on unison singing, his repudiation of "curious music," and his banishment of the organ, they are within their rights. Even so one could wish that they might add the historic sense to their critical equipment and, applying to Calvin's musical settlement William James' pragmatic test, acknowledge that "it worked."

Professor Dickinson in his very well-known *Music in the History of the Western Church* is somewhat alone in appreciation of the historical situation. But just what does he mean by calling the Genevan melodies "unemotional unison tunes that satisfied the stern demands of rigid zealots," "not having in themselves any artistic value"? Had Professor Dickinson any first-hand knowledge of this branch of his subject?

Let us turn without further remark to the present Poet Laureate [Robert Bridges], who has added a grace to our hymnody by his devotion to it, and whose *Yattendon Hymnal* is ample evidence of his musical taste. This is from his twice-printed *Practical Discourse on some principles of Hymn-singing*:⁷ "Bourgeois turned out to be an extraordinary genius in melody." Of his eighty-five tunes in the Genevan Psalter "almost all . . . are of great merit and many of the highest excellence. Bourgeois' tunes are masterpieces, which have remained popular on the continent from the first . . . and the best that can be imagined for solemn congregational singing of the kind which we might expect in England."

It was their beauty that made the Genevan Psalmody and gave it wings. If a hymnologist relied on the French Psalms to prove the power of the hymn to move and sustain the heart, a musician might urge that it was the tunes that won French hearts. He might go further and say that they carried the psalmody across the borders and opened the hearts of many who could not read French. The proof is that it became necessary to translate the Genevan Psalms into most European languages, always preserving the meters and rhythms so that they might be sung to the original melodies.⁸

The Reformed Churches, then, have a musical inheritance of their own; spiritual, artistic. In English-speaking communions it lies practically unclaimed. Among ourselves it has left no traces beyond a reminiscence embodied in the familiar "Autumn" and the survival of the 134th Psalm melody (our "Old Hundredth"), which, like so many chorales, has been reduced to notes of equal length.

The question arises how this loss happened. It was the hearing of the Genevan song that inspired the English exiles of Mary's reign to undertake an English psalm book. Why did they make so little use of what they heard? The answer is quite simple. No one of them could imitate the delicate French lyrical meters which carried the Genevan tunes. They were hard put to get the Psalms into English measures which would pass for verse at all. Their disability finally determined the character of the English Psalm tune as embodied in the *Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter* of 1562; for the most part a rather dull performance; regrettably so because dull tunes are fated to become in time the mother of a dogged congregational hymnody.

Is it worthwhile for English-speaking Reformed communions to claim a musical inheritance so distinctive and so beautiful? Speaking for his own Church of England Dr. Bridges is an enthusiast for the revival of the Genevan melodies, as "thoroughly congenial to our national taste," whereas the failure to bring German chorales into general use testifies to "a difference in the melodic sense of the two nations." The primary difficulty of finding words to fit the French measures Dr. Bridges has begun to meet with some lyrics of his own in his *Yattendon Hymnal*. The editors of *The English Hymnal* have taken up the task, and given currency to sixteen of the melodies. The late Dr. Burnap of Brooklyn was equally anxious to become a pioneer in introducing them into American hymnals. He found the books inhospitable, and the leaders of church music indifferent. It may possibly be that an adequate presentation of the Genevan Psalmody with some simplification of its rhythms might awaken in Reformed Churches something of the pride Lutherans have in their great inheritance. "These tunes," says the Poet Laureate, "in dignity, solemnity, pathos, and melodic solidity leave nothing to be desired."

⁷In *The Journal of Theological Studies* for October, 1899, and separately by R. H. Blackwell, Oxford, 1901.

⁸There is a bibliography in F. Bovet, *Histoire du Psautier des Eglises Réformées*, Neuchâtel, 1872; continued in O. Douen, *Clément Marot et le Psautier Huguenot*, Paris, 1878-9. The last named is the fullest presentation of the Genevan melodies and the subsequent harmonizations of them.