

The Genevan Psalter and its Use at Providence Church¹

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The Genevan Psalter

The *Genevan Psalter* was developed and used in Geneva, Switzerland in the days of John Calvin, to provide a way for Calvin's congregation (and others) to sing the psalms in their own language (French). The first complete edition was produced in 1562; earlier editions preceded it in 1542 and 1551.

The *Genevan Psalter* contained a melody (no harmony) for each of the psalm texts. Some melodies were used for two or more psalms. The main composer of the Genevan melodies is thought to be Louis Bourgeois. The texts were rhymed versifications of the Psalms (in French), by Clement Marot, Theodore de Beza, and a few by Calvin himself.

The Genevan Psalms were later harmonized in two complete volumes by the gifted Reformed composer Claude Goudimel, first in 1564 in a simpler hymn-like style, and then in 1568 in a more ornamented style. In worship, the Psalms were sung in unison, unaccompanied. The harmonizations were used in family and private gatherings. (More on the Goudimel harmonizations below.)

The Influence of the Genevan Psalter

The Genevan Psalter became *the* music of the French Reformation. The Genevan Psalms were so well loved by the French Protestant Huguenots that even whistling the tunes was forbidden by the Roman church.

The Genevan Psalms soon spread outside French-speaking lands and influenced other Reformed communities, most notably the Dutch Reformed churches, which have used the Genevan Psalter (translated into Dutch) for hundreds of years. English hymnals also show the influence; for example, the tune used for the Doxology and for the hymn "All people that on earth dwell" is a Genevan psalm tune (Psalm 134).

Genevan Psalms in North America

As Dutch Reformed believers migrated to Canada and the U.S., they brought the Genevan Psalms. The Canadian Reformed Church, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Reformed Church in America are churches of Dutch heritage which have historically used the Genevan Psalter, or psalter/hymnals containing some of the Genevan Psalms, either in Dutch or English.

The Anglo-Genevan Psalter (*Book of Praise*)

In 1972, the Canadian Reformed Church (www.canrc.org) published an English version of the complete Genevan Psalter called the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*. This wonderful volume contains all 150 Genevan Psalms in English, along with the Genevan melodies for each. To my knowledge, it is the only complete English translation of the Genevan Psalter. It also contains several hymns, as well as several classic Reformed confessions and other liturgical material. It has undergone several editions; I believe we use the 1985 edition. There were several translators, including Dr. William Helder of Hamilton, Ontario.

Book of Praise Online

Online versions of the psalms and hymns in the *Book of Praise* can be found here:

http://www.canrc.org/resources/bop/BOP_Psalms.pdf

http://www.canrc.org/resources/bop/BOP_Hymns.pdf

And see <http://www.canrc.org/resources/bop/copy/index.html> for the following information:

- the copyright notice for the *Book of Praise*
- how to order the *Book of Praise*
- whom to contact for permission (or other) requests

Genevan Psalms at Providence Church

We use the *Book of Praise* (henceforth *BoP*) in our weekly worship, in addition to the *Trinity Hymnal* (1961). We sing the Genevan Psalms in unison, as they appear in the *BoP*, but with accompaniment at the organ or piano using the four-part, hymn-like harmonizations of Claude Goudimel from 1564 which were mentioned above.

Our edition of the Goudimel harmonizations contains not only the four-part music, but also the full English texts of all 150 Genevan Psalms, straight from the *BoP*. Basically, it's a harmonized version of the *Book of Praise* (the psalm portion) – very convenient for accompanying the congregation as they sing. It also provides a means for singing the *Book of Praise* texts in four-part harmony (by choirs, congregation, or in private use).

Dr. Louis Schuler

This unique edition was produced in 1993 by Dr. Louis E. (“Duck”) Schuler, Jr.², who was music director at Providence Church from 1986-1991, and who introduced us to Genevan psalm-singing and the *BoP*. As far as I know, his volume is the only work in existence which contains all 150 Genevan Psalm tunes in harmony, with complete English texts from the *Book of Praise*. Every church which uses the *Book of Praise* needs this volume, unless the church prefers to sing the psalms unaccompanied or with unison accompaniment.

Getting a copy of the Schuler volume

In order for Dr. Schuler to include the copyrighted *BoP* psalm texts in his harmonized psalter, he requested and received permission from the copyright holders (Dr. William Helder for several texts and the Canadian Reformed Church *BoP* Committee for all others) to produce a limited number of copies of his edition. Our church was a fortunate recipient of one of those copies.

But that's not the end of the story. I myself have requested permission from the *BoP* Committee and Dr. William Helder for Providence Church to produce and distribute unlimited copies of the Schuler edition – for church use, home use, etc. I have received permission from the *BoP* Committee for their texts, and am still corresponding with Dr. Helder regarding his texts. I hope that soon Providence Church will have permission to reproduce the entire Schuler edition to whoever would like a copy.

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¹ I am stating the history of the Genevan Psalter and the *Book of Praise* to the best of my knowledge. I could certainly be wrong on a number of particulars. There are many good web sites with much more information on the Genevan Psalter and the *Book of Praise*, and I commend them to you.

² Dr. Schuler's latest work is a fantastic Psalter/hymnal published by Canon Press, called *Cantus Christi*. It contains several of the Genevan Psalms, as well as a wealth of other psalms, hymns, and service music. Order a copy at <http://www.canonpress.org>. Also, read Dr. Schuler's article on the life and music of Claude Goudimel: <http://www.credenda.org/issues/11-5musica.php>.