

The Genevan Tunes An Introduction

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Every loving husband believes his wife to be beautiful. The loving wife thinks her husband to be smart and good looking. Loving parents are sure that their children are the smartest kids around. And we know what we like to sing in Church! These are some of the most common subjective areas of life. It is with respect to the singing of the Church that this article will deal. More particularly, in this article we hope to introduce the subject of the Genevan Tunes.

What are the "Genevan Tunes?" Are the so-called Genevan Tunes more "biblical" than other tunes? Is there some Bible base from which the Genevan Tunes derive? We shall seek to answer these questions and more in this article.

What are the Genevan Tunes? The simple and short answer is that the Genevans are those tunes that were composed for congregational singing in the Genevan churches at the time of the Reformation. This answer does not satisfy, however, since it is not altogether true. In fact, the Genevan tunes may have their genesis far earlier than the time of the reformation - but that is a subject that we will hold off until later in this article.

One of the great concerns of the reformers had to do with the music of the Church. The Roman Church had, through its insertion of a human priesthood into the life of the Church, turned the congregation of worshippers into an audience of passive observers, spectators to the ceremonies of the priests. (Some see this same danger appearing with the insertion of "Special Music" and "Choirs" into congregational worship today. But this is a topic for another article.) In addition to the priesthood a new form of Levitical choirs took over the singing of songs during worship. After all, the reasoning went, the congregation was understood to be "unworthy" of its own worship of God and, since most of them were illiterate they couldn't understand the Latin text of the music. This, then, required the worship of intermediaries in the congregation's behalf.

These abuses, among many others, contributed significantly to the need for reformation of music as well as doctrine in the Church. The music of the church was, in fact, a major concern for reformation for both Luther and Calvin among the other great reformers. Whereas in Lutheran Germany and elsewhere the Reformation opened the door to great sacred "Art Music," the reformation in Strasbourg, Geneva and Scotland, among other places, focused on music which was inherently singable by the untrained voices of the congregation.

Among the Reformed it was probably Martin Bucer in Strasbourg who did the most to return the singing of God's praise to the rightful voices, those of the congregation. By the first quarter of the 16th century Bucer had already produced books of metrical Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, the 10 commandments and the Apostles' Creed. And history records that it was in Strasbourg where John Calvin having heard congregational singing for the first time began a strong advocate of it thereafter.

It was not until Calvin came to Geneva the second time that he was able to publish and use in the congregations of Geneva a number of Psalms (and some hymns) which were set to music by Clement Marot. These selections form the foundation of what later came to be called the "Genevan Tunes." We must take careful note of the fact that the "hymns" which Marot (and even Calvin!) among others wrote bear very little resemblance to those hymns of the faith with which we are more familiar, most from the late 18th and the 19th centuries. Whereas the "hymns" of more modern times tend to stress the singer's personal experience of faith and personal adoration of God, the hymns from the reformation in Geneva and Strasbourg (often called "Cantica") were built upon texts which were taken directly from or were clearly derived from the Scriptures.

John Calvin, in what is arguably one of the most beautiful and uplifting parts of his Institutes of the Christian Religion, writes that at heart singing ought to be understood as prayer. The directing principle which Calvin laid down concerning the tunes which the Church ought to sing is that each tune must show its own character and have "dignity and majesty."

That the Genevan Tunes have a direct relationship to what is known as "Gregorian Chant" is

undeniable. However, as we hinted earlier, the combination of notes, many of the musical phrases and parts of tunes recognizable as Genevan are believed by some to actually have their root in the very music of the Psalms (and the rest of the Old Testament!) sung by David and the other inspired writers in the Old Testament. Some very good scholarship has been done which identifies the marking of the "Masoretic Text" of the Old Testament (the vowel and other pointings of the Hebrew text, produced in 900 AD in Tiberias) with musical formulae or parts of tunes which had been actually sung by the ancient people of God. We will not enter into this discussion here, but understanding this point of view can give us some appreciation for the passionate commitment to Genevan Psalmody which some hold.

The controlling principle for the "Genevan Tunes" was that they be "Simple," that is, singable by untrained voices, worthy of praise for God and majestic in form. The tunes identified as Genevan are generally constructed with a step-wise progression of notes and in simple, often common" meter.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty many of us have in singing' the Genevan tunes is that they were composed upon the "Church Modes," rather than in the major/minor tonality of modern (post-renaissance) music. To understand these "Church Modes," think of scales on the "white keys" of a piano or organ. If we play the 8 notes from "C" to "C" on the white keys, that is a "major" scale. If we play 8 notes from "D" to "D" that is a "Church Mode" called "Dorian Mode." If you go on up the keyboard playing the white keys for 8 notes (an "octave") you will hear 8 of the "Church Modes," the last one sounding like our "major" key. Thus, the tunes of "Gregorian Chant" and the "Genevan Tunes" are often built upon scales with the order of half-steps and wholesteps unlike the "major" or "minor" scales with which we are most familiar. The majority of the "Genevan Tunes" are constructed on the "Dorian" mode (c45 of the Psalm Tunes).

Members of our congregations love to sing in "parts." In most of our congregations when the organist cranks up PsH #350 ("When I Survey the Wondrous Cross") and other similar tunes there is a veritable competition between voices as Sopranos and Altos, Tenors and Basses sing out with joyous praise. And this contributes- to many of our perceived "problems" with the "Genevan Tunes." The Genevan Tunes were not composed to be sung in parts."

Since it is the text of scripture which is to predominate in the mind and heart and voice of the singing congregation according to the guiding principle of the Genevan tunes, part singing would be a distraction. Therefore, Genevan tunes are best sung in unison. In our "Blue Psalter Hymnal" the c.30 Genevan tunes are "harmonized" in order that they may be sung in parts. The majority of these harmonizations were done by Dr. Henry Bruinsma and, unfortunately (in our opinion), many of these harmonizations are virtually unsingable (at least the "parts" which are not the Genevan tune). And, several of the settings (not only of the Genevan tunes, but throughout the Psalter Hymnal) in the Blue Psalter Hymnal are set at too high a pitch to be comfortably sung by many in the church. This further contributes to our discomfort in singing these tunes.

Our Canadian Reformed brothers and sisters have long enjoyed singing the Genevan tunes. The Canadian Reformed and their sister churches in the Netherlands (among others of our Dutch heritage churches) have long practiced Psalm singing in family devotions around the Table at home. In this way the children were taught the tunes which they would sing in the worship of the church. This is a commendable practice for all Christian families and would certainly help to improve all of our singing in the worship of God.

While this writer would never advocate doing something just "because we've always done it that way," we nevertheless do have a rich and powerful heritage in the Genevan Tunes. Interestingly, even in much "modern" music ("pop" as well as "classical") there is an increasing interest in and use of the modal tonality called "Church Modes." We certainly benefit from and ought to consistently adopt for our own worship singing the principles which underlie these tunes in our worship of God. The Genevan Tunes are part of our reformed Christian vocabulary of worship and are, therefore, worthy of preservation and practice among us.

In closing we quote from Calvin's Institutes: "And surely, if the singing be tempered to that gravity which is fitting in the sight of God and the angels, it both lends dignity and grace to sacred actions and has the greatest value in kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray. Yet we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words . . . Therefore, when this moderation is maintained, it is without any doubt a most holy and salutary practice (Institutes, Book III, Chapter XX, 32)."