

Preface to the Psalter

As it is a thing much required in Christianity, and one of the most necessary, that every one of the faithful observe and uphold the communion of the Church in his neighborhood, frequenting the assemblies which are held both on Sunday and other days to honor and serve God: so also it is expedient and reasonable that all should know and hear that which is said and done in the temple, thus receiving fruit and edification.

UNDERSTANDING IS ESSENTIAL

For our Lord did not institute the order which we must observe when we convene in his Name, solely to amuse the world by seeing and looking at it; rather, however, he wished that profit would come from it to all his people: as Saint Paul witnesseth, commanding that all which is done in the Church be directed towards the common edification of all: this the servant would not have commanded had it not been the intention of the Master. But this cannot be done unless we are instructed to have intelligence of all that has been ordained for our profit. Because to say that we are able to have devotion, either at prayers or ceremonies, without understanding anything of them, is a great mockery, however much it is commonly said. This is a thing neither dead nor brutish, this good affection toward God: rather it is a lively movement, proceeding from the Holy Spirit, when the heart is properly touched, and the understanding enlightened. And, in fact, if one is able to be edified by the things which one sees, without knowing that which they signify, Saint Paul would not forbid so rigorously speaking in an unknown tongue: and he would not use this reasoning, that there is no edification, unless there is a doctrine. However, if we really wish to honor the holy ordinances of our Lord, which we use in the Church, the primary thing is to know what they contain, what they mean to say, and to what end they tend, in order that their usage may be useful and salutary, and consequently right ruled.

ELEMENTS IN WORSHIP

Now there are briefly three things which our Lord commanded us to observe in our spiritual assemblies: namely, the preaching of His Word, prayers public and solemn, and the administration of the sacraments. I abstain from speaking about sermons at this time, because there is no question about them. Touching the other parts which remain, we have the express commandment of the Holy Spirit that prayers should be made in a language commonly known to the people; and the Apostle has said that people ought not to answer Amen to that prayer which has been said in a foreign tongue. However, this is because that prayers are made in the name and person of all, that each should be a participant. Thus it is a very great impudence on the part of those who introduced the Latin language into the Church where it is not generally understood. And there is neither subtlety nor casuistry which can excuse them, because this practice is perverse and displeasing to God. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that God finds agreeable to him that which runs directly counter to his wishes, and, so to speak, in spite of him. And so nothing affects him more than to go thus against his forbidding, and to boast of this rebellion as if it were a holy and very laudable thing.

SACRAMENTS CONJOINED WITH DOCTRINE

As for the Sacraments, if we look thoroughly at their nature, we will recognize that it is a perverse custom to celebrate them in such a manner that the people may not merely look upon them, but may understand the mysteries which are there contained. Because if they are visible words (as St. Augustine calls them) it

Calvin – Preface to the Psalter

is necessary, not only that there be merely an exterior spectacle, but also that the doctrine be conjoined with it, to give it intelligence. And also our Lord in instituting them has well demonstrated this: because he says that these are testimonies of the alliance which he has made with us, and which he confirmed by his death. It is necessary, therefore, to give them their meaning that we might know and understand that which he has said: otherwise it would be in vain that our Lord opened his mouth to speak, if he had around him no ears to listen. And so there is no need for a long dispute about that. And when the matter is examined with common sense, there is no one who will not confess that it is a pure frumpery to amuse the people with symbols which have no meaning for them. Therefore it is easy to see that one profanes the Sacraments of Jesus Christ by administering them so that the people do not at all understand the words which are being said about them. And in fact, one may see the superstitions which arise from such practice. Because it is commonly considered that the consecration, for instance of the water for Baptism, or of the bread and wine of Our Lord's Supper, is like a sort of incantation; that is to say, when one has breathed and pronounced with the mouth the words, creatures insensible of feeling feel the power, although men understand nothing. But the true consecration is that which makes itself through the word of faith, when it is declared and received, as St. Augustine has said: that which is expressly contained in the words of Jesus Christ. Because he did not say to the bread that it is his body: rather he addressed the word to the company of the faithful, saying, take, eat, and so forth. If we wish therefore to celebrate truly this Sacrament, it is necessary for us to have the doctrine, by means of which that which is there signified is declared to us. I say that that seems very strange to those who are not accustomed to it, as it happens with all new things: but it is very reasonable if we are disciples of Jesus Christ to prefer his institutions to our custom. And that which he instituted from the very beginning ought not to seem new to us.

If that is still incapable of penetrating into the understanding of anyone, it is necessary for us to pray to God that it please him to illuminate the ignorant, to make them understand how much wiser it is that all the men of the earth should learn not to fix themselves on their own senses, nor on the single mad wisdom of their leaders who are blind. However, for the usage of our Church, it has seemed good to us to make public as a formulary these prayers and Sacraments in order that each may recognize that which he hears said and done in the Christian assembly. However, this book will profit not only the people of this Church, but also all those who desire to know what form the faithful ought to hold to and follow when they convene in the name of Christ.

TWO KINDS OF PRAYERS

We have thus gathered in a summary the manner of celebrating the Sacraments and sanctifying marriage; similarly the prayers and praises which we use. We shall speak later of the Sacraments. As for public prayers, there are two kinds. The ones with the word alone: the others with singing. And this is not something invented a little time ago. For from the first origin of the Church, this has been so, as appears from the histories. And even St. Paul speaks not only of praying by mouth: but also of singing. And in truth we know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels. But when anyone wishes to judge correctly of the form which is here presented, we hope that it will be found holy and pure, seeing that it is simply directed to the edification of which we have spoken.

EXPRESSION THROUGH SINGING

And yet the practice of singing may extend more widely; it is even in the homes and in the fields an incentive for us, as it were, an organ of praise to God, and to lift up our hearts to him, to console us by meditating upon his virtue, goodness, wisdom and justice: that which is more necessary than one can say. In the first place, it is not without cause that the Holy Spirit exhorts us so carefully throughout the Holy Scriptures to rejoice in God and that all our joy is there reduced to its true end, because he knows how much we are inclined to rejoice in vanity. As thus then our nature draws us and induces us to seek all means of foolish and vicious rejoicing; so, to the contrary, our Lord, to distract us and withdraw us from the temptations of the flesh and of the world, presents us all possible means in order to occupy us in that spiritual joy which he recommends to us so much.

IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC

Now among the other things which are proper for recreating man and giving him pleasure, music is either the first, or one of the principal; and it is necessary for us to think that it is a gift of God deputed for that use. Moreover, because of this, we ought to be the more careful not to abuse it, for fear of soiling and contaminating it, converting it our condemnation, where it was dedicated to our profit and use. If there were no other consideration than this alone, it ought indeed to move us to moderate the use of music, to make it serve all honest things; and that it should no give occasion for our giving free rein to dissolution, or making ourselves effeminate in disordered delights, and that it should not become the instrument of lasciviousness nor of any shamelessness.

POWER OF MUSIC

But still there is more: there is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men, as Plato prudently considered it. And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious. For this reason the ancient doctors of the Church complain frequently of this, that the people of their times were addicted to dishonest and shameless songs, which not without cause they referred to and called mortal and Satanic poison for corrupting the world. Moreover, in speaking now of music, I understand two parts: namely the letter, or subject and matter; secondly, the song, or the melody. It is true that every bad word (as St. Paul has said) perverts good manner, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart much more strongly, and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody.

WHY THE CHOICE OF THE PSALMS

What is there now to do? It is to have songs not only honest, but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to and praise God, and to meditate upon his works in order to love, fear, honor and glorify him. Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory. Wherefore Chrysostom exhorts, as well as the men, the women and the little children to accustom themselves to singing them, in order that this may be a sort of meditation to associate themselves with the company of the angels.

SINGING WITH UNDERSTANDING REQUIRED

As for the rest, it is necessary to remember that which St. Paul hath said, the spiritual songs cannot be well sung save from the heart. But the heart requires the intelligence. And in that (says St. Augustine) lies the difference between the singing of men and that of the birds. For a linnet, a nightingale, a parrot may sing well; but it will be without understanding. But the unique gift of man is to sing knowing that which he sings. After the intelligence must follow the heart and the affection, a thing which is unable to be except if we have the hymn imprinted on our memory, in order never to cease from singing. For these reasons this present book, even for this cause, besides the rest which has been said, ought to be singular recommendation to each one who desires to enjoy himself honestly and according to God, for his own welfare and the profit of his neighbors: and so there is need of all of it being much recommended by me: seeing that it carries its value and its praise. But that the world may be so well advised, that in place of songs in part vain and frivolous, in part stupid and dull, in part foul and vile, and in consequence evil and harmful which it has used up to now, it may accustom itself hereafter to the singing of these divine and celestial hymns with the good king David. Touching the melody, it has seemed best that it be moderated in the manner we have adopted to carry the weight and majesty appropriate to the subject, and even to be proper for singing in the Church, according to that which has been said.

From Geneva, this 10th of June, 1543

[John Calvin]

From the facsimile edition of: "Les Pseaumes mis en rime françoise par Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze. Mis en musique a quatre parties par Claude Goudimel. Par les héritiers de Francois Jacqui" (1565)

Published under the auspices of La Société des Concerts de la Cathédrale de Lausanne and edit, in French, by Pidoux, Pierre, and in German by Ameln, Konrad. (Baeroenreiter-Verlag, Kassel, 1935).