**The Story of the Church's Song**
Millar Patrick [Scottish Presbyterian]
revised James R. Sydnor
John Knox Press, 1927, 1962

## XII: Why the Reformed Church Did Not Use Hymns

IN THE CHURCHES of the Reformation there have been two main streams of church song. On the one hand, there has been hymnody, with Luther as its fountainhead; on the other, metrical psalmody, after the example set by Calvin. Luther carried on the tradition established by the Latin hymn; his exemplars were in the Breviary. Calvin gave his adherence to a still older tradition, which the Roman Church had maintained by the use of the prose psalms in its Daily Office; he went back to the primitive days when the Church had no other means than the psalms for the singing of its praise. These two streams ran parallel for many generations; then they converged and blended, and in most Churches of the Reformed order they run together today.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was born at Noyon in northern France, and was educated first for the priesthood, then for the profession of law. Study of the Bible, however, led him to throw in his lot with those who were working for a reformation of religion. Very soon he was widely known as one of the most learned of theologians and one of the acutest minds of the age. At twenty-seven, he published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a monumental systematization of the Reformed theology. In the same year (1536) he settled in Geneva, where his chief lifework was to be done. By the strength and trenchancy of his convictions and the dynamic force of his character, he soon acquired there a predominant influence. The civic life and the morals of Geneva were alike in parlous state; yet he succeeded in establishing a theocracy in the city which made it, according to Knox, "the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles." There also he developed the system of ecclesiastical government which we know as Presbyterian. He showed remarkable insight in this, for the Presbyterian system fell into line with the democratic ideas which were then beginning to ferment in men's minds, and were destined in succeeding centuries to permeate social and political thought and to mold the institutions and shape the future of nations as well as Churches. For this reason, Presbyterianism has far outstripped the more conservative Lutheran system in its spread throughout the world. But Calvin was a strange compound of liberalism and narrowness. He was a born censor of morals. At school he was nicknamed "the accusative case." His entire lack of a sense of humor and of the broad humanity which was Luther's increased the severity of his temper. But assuredly there was enough in the moral laxity around him to justify his strictness, and it was a corollary, besides, of his controlling faith in the sovereignty of God. His was a dedicated spirit. His seal was a hand holding out a bleeding heart, to symbolize his offer to God of a slain heart as a sacrifice; and his motto accorded with it, "I give Thee all; I keep nothing back for myself."

### CALVIN'S IDEALS OF WORSHIP

Calvin's Puritanism appeared in his ideals of worship. It was his aim to return as nearly as possible to primitive usage. Praise, to him, was just one form of prayer; it demanded, therefore, the utmost simplicity and reverence. He could find no materials of worship to satisfy his requirements in these respects except in the ancient Hebrew psalms. With his master Augustine he agreed that there is nothing worthy of being sung to God but what we have received from Him, and the only exceptions he allowed to the Psalter songs were versified versions of the Ten Commandments and the *Nunc Dimittis*. There was reason in his position. The Breviary hymns in use in the Roman Church had only to be looked at to show that there was grave danger of the dissemination of false doctrine through the medium of the nonscriptural hymn.[1]

### FITTING THE PSALMS FOR POPULAR USE

Two things were necessary, Calvin saw, to fit the psalms for popular use—metricization, and the provision of attractive and suitable tunes.

1. *Metricization*. The modern method of chanting the psalms in prose was yet unknown, and the

Roman liturgical chant made popular participation impossible. The one way open, if the people were to be taught to sing, was to turn the psalms into meter. Calvin himself began the process. During a two years' exile in Strasbourg he was much impressed by what he heard of the psalmody and hymnody in process of introduction there. "The German melodies," he wrote, "pleased me so much that I set myself to try what I could do in verse. Psalms xlvi and xxv were my first attempts. I afterwards added others. . . . I have determined soon to publish." But with all his extraordinary gifts, he had in no sense those of a poet. Bovet says that his versions "have not the elegance or the facility of Marot, but show the clearness and firmness which distinguish all his prose." More than these qualities is required, however, and the fact was brought home to him.

Clément Marot (1497-1544), a highly educated and accomplished man, was a *valet de chambre* to Francis I of France. Probably from Marguerite de Valois, the king's sister, he imbibed Huguenot views. Van Laun writes harshly of him that he was "at once a pedant and a vagabond, a scholar and a merry-andrew. He wrote the praises of St. Christina and sang the triumphs of Cupid." But there are plenty of parallels for the appearance of such opposites in a single character and history. Marot's was certainly a light nature; he was mercurial, gay, debonair. His verses are of the occasional, trivial order, clever, witty, satirical, such *jeux d'esprit* as a courtier throws off for the amusement of others and the increase of his own reputation as wit and poet. It may seem one of the strangest of ironies that it should have fallen to a man of this stamp to lay the basis of the praisebook of that Church, above all others, of whose rigorous severity, alike in faith and morals, Calvin presents the type. Yet it is not inexplicable. In so light a nature the rootage of religion might not be deep and yet be very real. Marot would not have risked so much as he did by his biting ridicule of the monks and his satires on church abuses, nor would he have borne as he did the hardships of repeated exile for his faith, if he had not been sincere. Nor would he have exercised his poetic gifts on the grave matter of the psalms. But he did; and his first translations, circulated in manuscript, created a sensation. They became the fashion of the hour; soon all the Court was singing them.

Some of them came into Calvin's hands while he was engaged in such work himself. He at once saw that they possessed a lyric grace to which his own versions were strangers. He had the good sense to cease his own efforts, and though in his first Psalter, issued at Strasbourg, along with eight of Marot's versions he included five of his own, he used the latter only because Marot could then supply him with no equivalents, and later he withdrew them. In 1543, at Geneva, Marot's *Fifty Psalms* was published.

Théodore de Bèze (Beza) (1519-1605), at Calvin's request, versified the remaining hundred. This was a man of a quality far different from Marot. In youth he also had written verses which he came bitterly to regret, but he had no lyric gift. His versifications are stodgy and graceless, and not seldom lacking in taste. In other directions he was a man of weight and power. He became Calvin's colleague in the chair of theology in Geneva, then first rector of the college there, and after Calvin's death was the foremost figure in Geneva, alike in Church in State.

2. *The Music*. Calvin himself was no musician, but he was alive to the power of music to move the heart, and, especially after his experience in Strasbourg, to its value as an aid in public worship. The Zwinglian inclination to exile music from the Church and substitute a kind of responsive recitative made worship too bald for him. Not that æsthetic considerations had any weight with Calvin, for he resented the intrusion of anything formal or artistic as being offensive to God. Instrumental aids he would not tolerate; they had been permitted in the Jewish Church only because the people were children, allowed to use childish toys. Nor would he consent to the introduction of part singing, because the interest of it might distract attention from the spiritual intention of what was being sung. But he believed in the people singing, and about the kind of tunes they should be asked to sing he was very deeply concerned. In the Roman Church secular songs of the most profane kind were introduced even into the service of the Mass, and the authorities seemed powerless to stop the abuse. The tunes, also, to which Marot's psalms were already being sung scandalized his rigorous sense of what was fitting for the worship of God. In the lack of anything better ballad airs had been called into use. Diane de Poitiers's favorite among the psalm versions was the 130th; she sang that penitential psalm to the air of a popular jig, and the other members of the dissolute court had each their favorites, which were trolled to airs equally jolly. This fashion proved infectious, and at the very outset of its use the new psalmody needed to be redeemed from the musical degradation to which it was being subjected.

In Strasbourg, Calvin had been impressed by the dignity and strength of some of the German melodies and of others composed by two ex-monks and choristers of the cathedral, Wolfgang Dachstein and Matthäus Greiter, who had embraced the Reformed faith. The latter was afterwards to recant and return to the unreformed fold, but first he wrote, among other tunes, the magnificent Psalm lxviii which

was to become the *Psaume de Batailles*, the Marseillaise of the Huguenot Reformation. This tune is PSALM 36 (68) in many Psalters [*Church Hymnary*, 217].[2] From the Strasbourg Psalter of 1539 comes the powerful melody GENEVA 130 (NC38). Tunes of that grave and noble type were what Calvin saw to be needed. To procure them he took the right course. He brought from Paris a musician of rare capacity and distinction, Louis Bourgeois by name (*c*. 1510-*c*. 1561).[3] Him the Consistory instructed to prepare music for the new use, the one requirement laid down being that "it should be simple, to carry weight and majesty suitable to the subject, and to be fit to be sung in church." Bourgeois found a psalter with thirty tunes; he left one with eighty-five. He had difficult masters to serve. On one occasion they threw him into prison for making some alteration, afterwards approved, in some of the Strasbourg melodies. But he served them magnificently. He organized musical education, training the students and the children so that by their singing their elders might be instructed. And he wrote glorious tunes, among them the following:

BOURGEOIS (E129)
COMMANDMENTS (P59, E179)
MON DIEU, PRÊTE-MOI L'OREILLE (P536)
NUNC DIMITTIS (P61, E176, NC72)
O ESCA VIATORUM (E192)
OLD HUNDREDTH (P24, E139, NC9)
OLD 107TH (abbreviated, P230)
OLD 124TH (P357, E536)
RENDEZ À DIEU (E195)
ST. MICHAEL (P493, E113)
TOULON (P144, E220)

Some of them, like Luther's, were adaptations of popular airs, "purified and baptized into Christian seriousness." Many of the best of them—no one can say which—were his own. Harmonized editions were issued from the first, but were excluded from use in public worship. His efforts to be allowed to introduce part singing into the church were steadily negatived, and at last, in disgust, he left the city.

Claude Goudimel also deserves honor in connection with the Genevan psalmody, not as a writer of original tunes but as harmonizer of those that were in use, in contrapuntal style. NUNC DIMITTIS (P61, E176, NC72) is one of them. Goudimel was one of the greatest of sixteenth-century tonemasters. For long it was believed that he had been Palestrina's teacher, but that attractive legend is now discredited. He wrote much for the Roman Church, and secular music besides, before the Reformed faith attracted him. His adhesion to the Huguenot cause cost him his life. When the massacre of St. Bartholomew took place in 1572 he was one of the victims. He was beheaded in the streets of Lyons, after brutal treatment, and his body thrown into the Rhone.

**THE POPULARITY OF THE PSALMS**

The popularity of the psalms to the new tunes was very great. A visitor to Geneva in 1557 has left an account of what he found there. "A most interesting sight is offered in the city on the weekdays, when the hour for the sermon approaches. As soon as the first sound of the bell is heard, all shops are closed, all conversation ceases, all business is broken off, and from all sides the people hasten to the nearest meeting-house. There each one draws from his pocket a small book which contains the psalms with notes, and out of full hearts, in the native speech, the congregation sings before and after the sermon. Every one testifies to me how great consolation and edification is derived from this custom." At first the Catholics had had no scruple about singing the new psalms, but the Sorbonne interposed its veto, and soon psalm singing became the badge of adherence to the Reformation. Among the Huguenots it was universal; indeed, a contemporary writer dates the foundation of the Huguenot Church by the introduction of this practice. All that is most splendid and moving in the history of that Church has some association with the psalms. Its soldiers sang them on the battlefield, its martyrs in the flames. Many of them are fragrant with heroic memories.

Let but one such memory be recalled, as Lord Ernle records it in *The Psalms in Human Life*: "In 1589 Henry gained another victory under the walls of the Château d'Arques, the picturesque ruins of

which are still standing in the neighbourhood of Dieppe. There the king and his Huguenot followers were threatened with destruction by the Duc de Mayenne and the army of the League. His forces were but few compared with the number of those arrayed against them; his reinforcements had failed him; the courage of his men was crushed by the weight of superior numbers. 'Come, M. le Ministre,' cried the king to Pastor Damour, 'lift the psalm. It is full time.' Then, above the din of the marching armies, rose the austere melody of the 68th Psalm [*Church Hymnary*, 217], set to the words of Beza [*Que Dieu se montre seulement*], and swinging with the march of the Huguenot companies. Pressing onwards, the men of Dieppe forced themselves like an iron wedge through the lines of the League, and split them asunder. The sea fog cleared away; Henry's artillerymen in the castle could see to take aim; the roll of cannon marked the time of the psalm; and the Leaguers were scattered."[4]

The popularity of the psalms extended to other lands. Ambrosius Lobwasser translated them into German, thus providing the Reformed Church in Germany and in German Switzerland with its authoritative Psalter. They were translated also into Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Bohemian, Polish, Latin, and even Hebrew, and they exercised a powerful influence on the shaping of the metrical Psalters of England and Scotland, which we now proceed to consider.

[1]The hymn "I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art" (P144) is attributed to John Calvin. For discussion of background and evidence, see pages 306-309 of Armin Haeussler's *The Story of Our Hymns*.

[2]Beza's version of Psalm 68 is *Que Dieu se montre seulement* ("That God may show Himself very God"). See article, "The Greiter Melody and Variants" by Walter H. Hohmann, in *The Hymn*, April 1961.

[3]A classic study of Genevan psalter melodies is W. S. Pratt's *The Music of the French Psalter of 1562*. See also Erik Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymnody*, chapters 4 and 8. Note especially Dr. Routley's observations on "Rhythm in the Psalm-Tunes."

[4]Rowland E. Prothero (Lord Ernle), *The Psalms in Human Life*, p. 152. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1903.