The History of the Genevan Psalter

Duck Schuler

Part 1

How did the Genevan Psalter, 1562, come into existence? It was a long process that took place over many years through the efforts of John Calvin. Yet, in the final edition, he penned neither metrical psalm text nor tune. But he had a desire to see the church sing the Psalms. The story is rather complex and involves a study of the thinking of Calvin in regard to music itself. Of all the great reformers, Calvin had the least training in music.

Our first insight into Calvin's thinking[1] on music is found in the Institutes 1536. At this point his thoughts are not highly developed. The reference to music and singing is found in chapter three on prayer. Calvin writes, "From this, moreover, it is full evident that unless voice and song, if interposed in prayer, spring from deep feeling of the heart, neither has any value or profit in the least with God."[2] The "this" referred to by Calvin is that prayer is "an emotion of the heart within."[3] He sees and discusses prayer more as a private activity than public. He also considers it generally in terms of being silent rather than vocal when he says, "unless voice and song." In Calvin's mind the music is only done as an aid to the emotions and should only be done if the heart is engaged. "Yet, we do not here condemn speaking and singing provided they are associated with the heart's affection and serve it... since the glory of God ought, in a measure, to shine in the several parts of our bodies, it is especially fitting that the tongue has been assigned and destined for this task, both through singing and through speaking. For it was expressly created to tell and proclaim the praise of God."[4]

At this point in Calvin's thinking, it is difficult to know exactly what he means by singing. This reference, however, is clearly understood in the light of private prayers, not public. Concerning singing in public, he makes mention of it in context of the taking of the Lord's Supper (Chapter 4). In preparation for the meal he says, "either psalms should be sung, or something be read."[5] After the meal he says, "At the last, thanks should be given, and praises sung to God."[6] What we don't see here is a well-developed theology of the use of song in worship or a burning need to have the Psalms be a major part of the lives of God's people.

There was a change by 1537. Calvin was not in France but in Geneva. No longer a scholastic having little or no contact with people, Calvin, along with William Farel, was now the pastor of the flock at Geneva. He had the task of changing the hearts and minds of people who did not necessarily want to be changed. In order to accomplish this task, he wrote the *Articles for the organization of the church and its worship in Geneva*, January 16, 1537. In the Articles Calvin instituted several steps for the people to "live according to the Gospel and the Word of God."[7]

The essentials included: (1) excommunication used as an effective tool of church discipline, (2) the singing of Psalms in public worship, (3) catechizing children in biblical doctrine to maintain the covenant, and (4) the drafting of ordinances for marriage.

Calvin makes it clear in these articles that congregational singing is foundational for the reform of the church. He writes the following: "it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be roused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with a common love."[8]

Here is the true beginning of Calvin's desire to see psalmody as a part of the life of believers. It grows out of a desire to see God's people sanctified. He also makes it clear that it is the Psalms that are to be learned and sung, although he does not say that other texts should not be sung.

"The psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardor in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of His name. Moreover by this, one will recognize of what advantage and consolation the pope and his creatures have deprived the church, for he has distorted the psalms, which should be true spiritual songs, into a murmuring among themselves without any understanding."[9]

Calvin wished to accomplish this, and he had the testimony and example of the Apostles to inspire him for the duty before him. He called for the Psalms to be sung by the whole congregation, not just the priests; and that they should be sung in a known language so that they could be understood.

Calvin also suggests that these be taught to children so that they could be part of the singing. "The manner of beginning in this seemed to us well advised if some children who have previously practiced a modest church song in a loud and distinct voice, the people listening with complete attention and following with the heart what is sung with the mouth until little by little each one accustoms himself to singing communally."[10]

I experienced this when I taught children in a school in New Hampshire. They learned the Psalms in school so well that when we sang it in the worship service, their voices could at first be heard above the adults. There was no excuse for the adults not to learn it after that. Eventually the adults were singing with the same enthusiasm. It is remarkable that at the same time, Martin Bucer had come to a similar understanding for congregational singing in Strasbourg. And it was here that Calvin would next find himself.

1. For a detailed analysis of Calvin's thinking on music, see Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 69, Part 4, 1979 (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979)
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1975), p. 100.
3. Ibid., p 99.
4. Ibid., p 100.
5. Ibid., p 153
6. Ibid., p 153.
7. Translations of the Articles are made by Charles Garside, Jr., op. cit,. p. 7.
8. Ibid., p 7, 8.
9. Ibid., p 10.
10. Ibid., p 10.

Part 2

Calvin was forced to leave Geneva on April 23, 1538 because the Genevan council had agreed to subscribe to a particular liturgical practice developed for several of the Swiss cantons. Calvin and Farel refused to comply and were thus exiled from the city. At first they went to Bern and then to the synod at Zürich in order to explain their reluctance to accept the practices. While at the synod, Calvin accepted the practices and at the same time, proposed fourteen articles for ecclesiastical reform in Geneva. Article 13 called for the singing of psalms in worship. These articles were approved unanimously by the synod, but Geneva refused to take Calvin back. So after five months, Calvin arrived in Strasbourg where he became the pastor for the French-speaking congregation.

Calvin was certainly influenced by Bucer in using the Psalms within the congregation. Calvin informed Farel in a letter dated October 1538 that he was using the Strasbourg liturgy for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. "For the first time, we have administered the sacrament of the Supper in our little church according to the custom of the place."[1]

This included singing the psalms in the vernacular as confirmed by Johannes Zwick in a letter to Heinrich Bullinger on November 9, 1538. By December 1538, less than four months after arriving in Strasbourg, Calvin announced to Farel that he was preparing a French psalter for his congregation. This psalter was published in 1539 as *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant*.

At this point we must back up in history and introduce another important figure in the history of the French Psalter, Clement Marot (c.1497—1544). Marot was the favorite poet of Francis I at Paris and of his sister Marguèrite d'Angoulême. He was imprisoned as a Lutheran in 1526 and again in 1527 but the king interceded for him and appointed him as *valet de chambre*. He began setting the Psalms to metrified verse (1532—33), even learning Hebrew to help him in his work. These settings became all the rage in the court and circulated outside of the court as well. Marot met Calvin in 1536 when Calvin was at the court of Renée of France in Ferrara. Marot had fled there fearing arrest for a poster campaign against the Mass. Although they had met, we do not know whether Calvin obtained Marot's psalms directly from him or whether he gathered them from other Protestants who collected them for their own use and worship. The latter is considered the most likely. The Protestants who wanted to sing psalms in their worship were inclined to collect such settings. Calvin collected these psalms as well, and placed thirteen of Marot's settings in *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant* (1, 2, 3, 15, 19, 32, 51, 103, 114, 115, 130, 137). Calvin himself tried his hand at writing metrical psalms, and the other six psalms and songs (*cantique*) in the psalter were probably by him (25, 36, 46, 91, 113, 138, Song of Simeon, the Decalogue, and the Creed). Psalm 113 and the Creed were not metered but written in prose.

The music for the psalter was composed by two very fine musicians in Bucer's church, Matthäus Greiter (c.1494—1550) and Wolfgang Dachstein (c.1487—1553). Both men were monks who had come to the Strasbourg Minster by 1520, Greiter as cantor and Dachstein as organist. Dachstein converted to Protestantism in 1523 and persuaded Greiter to convert in 1524. They played important parts in the writing of the *Strassburger Kirchenampt*, 1525. Greiter contributed seven hymns and four liturgical pieces including his most famous melody *Es sind doch alle selig* (Psalm 119) whose melody was taken by Calvin into the *Genevan Psalter* through *Aulcuns*

pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant as Psalm 36 and 68. Three psalm melodies were contributed by Dachstein. His most famous melody is *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* which is used for the hymn "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth." Their work in *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant* is such that we cannot distinguish which melodies they composed. The quality was so good, however, that they became the models for the rest of the Genevan Psalter, and most of them came into the psalter either directly or slightly reworked.

Bucer's influence on Calvin's musical thought is significant in that up to this point Calvin had not given music much thought with regards to theology, at least in writing. In Strasbourg, Calvin was able to see a Reformed liturgy which included psalm singing. He observed the effect it had on the life of the people and within four months he begin to prepare a psalter for the French-speaking congregation. This change of attitude is reflected in the 1539 revision of the Institutes. In 1536 Calvin had written the following statement, "Yet, we do not here condemn speaking and singing provided they are associated with the heart's affection and serve it."[2]

In the 1539 revision it was modified to, "Yet, we do not here condemn speaking and singing *but rather strongly recommend them*, provided they are associated with the heart's affection and serve it."[3] (emph. added). He had moved from a passive acceptance of psalms in worship to an active recommendation of their use in truly biblical worship. This change of thought would soon make psalm singing, next to the preaching of the Word, the hallmark of Reformed worship.

1. *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters,* edited by Henry Bevridge and Jules Bonnet, Vol 4, Letters, Part 1: 1528-1545, Translated by David Costable (Grand Rapids: baker Book House, 1983), 92.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1975), p. 100.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, JohnT. MacNeill, ed. (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1960), 894.

Part 3

After the publication of *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantiques mys en chant* (1539), the next important development toward the completed *Genevan Psalter* (1562) was the publication in 1542 of *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques, avec la maniere d'administrer les Sacremens, & consacrer le Mariage: selon la coustume de l'Eglise ancienne* (*The Form of Prayers and Ecclesiastical Songs, with the manner of administering the sacraments and consecrating marriage according to the custom of the ancient Church*). This book contains thirty-five psalms set to music and a Lord's Day liturgy, as well as a marriage service. It was a result of Calvin's return to Geneva on September 13, 1541. Without Calvin's leading, the Genevan church had deteriorated to such a condition that the city council urged Calvin to return in order to restore order to the church and city.

On the day of his return, Calvin insisted that certain conditions (his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances)* be approved so that restoration might take place. Music is mentioned twice in these *Ordinances*: "It will be good to introduce ecclesiastical songs, the better to incite the people to pray and to praise God," and "For a beginning the little children are to be taught; then with time all the church will be able to follow."[1] Calvin shows his practical wisdom here. I have found by experience that when the children of a congregation learn the psalms first and sing with enthusiasm, their less receptive parents are often shamed into realizing that singing psalms is really not that hard and can actually be a delight. The preface to *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques* contains Calvin's "Epistle to the Reader," which gives us more information about his theology of music. Calvin maintains that Scripture governs our worship, requiring "the preaching of the Word, the public and solemn prayers, and the administration of the sacraments."[2] Singing is included in the public and solemn prayers. "As to public prayers, these are of two kinds: some are offered by means of words alone, the others with song."[3] Calvin relies on Paul and Augustine to solidify his argument commending the singing of psalms. Thus he makes it clear to the people of Geneva that the singing of psalms is an important part of the reformation of the church.

And this is not a thing invented a little time ago, for it has existed since the first origin of the Church; this appears from the histories, and even Saint Paul speaks not only of praying by word of mouth, but also of singing. And in truth we know by experience that song 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. It must always be looked to that the song be not light and frivolous but have weight and majesty, as Saint Augustine says, and there is likewise a great difference between the music one makes to entertain men at table and in their homes, and the psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.[4]

Not only does he appeal to history, but he insists that the Psalms be sung not lightly and frivolously but with "weight and majesty." Our approach to God in worship is not to be taken lightly as is pointed out in Hebrews

12:22-29. Calvin is clear that there is a difference between what music is allowed in the church and what is used at home. And yet in the next paragraph of the epistle he encourages us to sing Psalms "in our homes and in the fields" as an "organ for praising God and lifting up our hearts to him, to console us by meditating upon his virtue, goodness, wisdom, and justice."[5] The Psalms are most valuable because "when we sing them we may be certain that God puts the words in our mouths as if [He] Himself sang in us to exalt his glory."[6] This epistle shows that Calvin's insight into the nature of music and its purpose in worship providentially reached maturity under the tutelage of Bucer in Strasbourg.

Thirty of the Psalms in *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques* were put into French verse by Clement Marot and the other five most likely by Calvin. The thirty by Marot were taken from his *Psalmes de David, translatez de plusiers autheurs et principallement de Cle. Marot* (Anvers, 1541). Marot originally gave the manuscript of these Psalms in 1540 to Emperor Charles V, who urged him to continue his work. The published form of his Psalms was somewhat corrupted but was revised in later editions after Marot had moved to Geneva in 1542. His move to Geneva came after the publication of the psalter that same year.

La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques also contained musical versions of the Song of Simeon, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed, a real blow for exclusive psalmodists looking for Calvin's support. The musical editor of the psalter was probably Guilluame Franc, cantor at St. Peter's in Geneva. However, the tunes most likely all came from melodies in use at Strasbourg written by Wolfgang Dachstein and Matthäus Greiter. These tunes set the standard of compositional style for all subsequent editions of the psalter.

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Goudimel

Duck Shuler

When musicians think about great church music, the qualifier "reformed" is not usually the first that comes to mind. More than likely they may think about the Lutheran chorale, or the Anglican anthem, or even the great Renaissance polyphony that adorned the motets[1] and the ordinary[2] of the Roman Catholic Mass. But reformed? Hardly. This is mostly the case because of reformed Christians' mistaken understanding of Calvin's theology of music. Often falsely cited as disdaining music, Calvin desired that music, in particular the Psalms, should have a major role in the liturgy of the church. To that end, he directed the assembling of perhaps the greatest single hymnal or psalter ever published in modern church history.

Calvin oversaw the development of the *Genevan Psalter* over the course of 23 years. Several incomplete Psalters were published, but the final completed version appeared in 1562. Within a few years all of Europe was singing the Psalms to Genevan tunes. What caused the *Genevan Psalter* to be so successful? For one thing the melodies are great music in simple form. But its success was also largely due to the work of Claude Goudimel, musician, publisher and Huguenot. Goudimel did not write a single melody for the *Genevan Psalter*, but he did harmonize the whole psalter twice and was in the process of writing motets on many of the Psalms when he died. It was through these published harmonizations, to be used in the home, that the Genevan Psalms were primarily disseminated.

To the best of our knowledge Goudimel was born in Besançon, France, somewhere between 1514 and 1520. His first published composition (1549) was a chanson written while he was a student at the University of Paris. Two years later he became a proofreader for the newly formed printing company of Nicolas Du Chemin. Thereafter Goudimel became his music editor and partner until 1555, bringing great success to Du Chemin in the music publishing business. Goudimel's musical output during these years and into the mid-1560's was tremendous and included four of his five masses, three Magnificats, nineteen *Chanson spirituelles*, dozens of chansons, eight books of psalms set in motet style, and two complete harmonizations of the *Genevan Psalter*.

The first of Goudimel's psalters was published in 1562 in Paris by Le Roy and R.[3] Ballard and at first contained only 83 psalms. The melodies were taken from the Genevan Psalter of 1551. With the completion of the Genevan Psalter in 1562, Goudimel was able to finish this psalter and harmonize all 150 psalms. His completed psalter was published in 1564. The melodies are found in the tenor, except for a handful in the soprano. The harmonizations are set in a note-against-note style, just as hymns are set.

The heirs of François Jaqui republished Goudimel's psalter in 1565 in Geneva. This edition (often called the Jaqui Psalter) seems to have been designed for use in the church as well as the home since it includes the *Forms of Prayers*, which is the Genevan liturgy. It also included the catechism, the creed of the Reformed Churches, and the full text of the metrified psalms with each musical setting. This edition is prefaced with Calvin's forward and Theodore Beza's epistle to the *Genevan Psalter*, 1562. The parts were not intended to be sung in church but at home. Goudimel makes this clear in his forward:[4]

To Our Readers:

> To the melody of the psalms we have, in this little volume, adapted three parts, not to induce you to sing them in Church, but that you may rejoice in God, particularly in your homes. This should not be found an ill thing, the more so since the melody used in Church is left in its entirety, just as though it were alone.

In spite of this, within a generation, the psalms were often being sung with all four parts in church and Goudimel's setting were those most often used. The harmonizations were so popular that even the Lutherans borrowed them almost verbatim for their German psalter edited by Ambrosius Lobwasser. Through the *Lobwasser Psalter* (Leipzig, 1573), the influences of the Genevan tradition are seen throughout the Lutheran hymnody of that generation.

In his second complete setting of the psalms, Goudimel used the traditional Genevan melodies. They were generally placed in the soprano voice while the other voices employed a more imitative counterpoint. However, the counterpoint was not so elaborate as to confuse it with the motet style. These delightful settings were published in 1568.

Goudimel was living in the Huguenot city of Metz when he worked on these psalters. He had become a Huguenot by around 1560. He left Metz in 1567 because of the new commandant who was hostile to the Protestants. He lived in his home town of Besançon for a short time but then moved to Lyons. During the firestorm that swept France in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, Goudimel was martyred when the massacre

came to Lyons between August 28 and 31 of 1572.

1. Motets are polyphonic (many-voiced) compositions in which each voice has its own melody. These melodies are usually imitative of each other. The music is set to a sacred text.

2. The ordinary are the parts of the Mass that are the same each week (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Angus Dei) as opposed to those parts which change each time according to the festival being celebrated or the church calandar.

3. Le Roy himself composed several exquisite settings of the Genevan Psalm tunes for lute.

4. The translation is from Oliver Strunk ed., *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1950), 349.