John Calvin on Psalms and Hymns in public worship

Introduction, sources, and influences

1. Introduction

The Genevan Psalter is enjoying a remarkable amount of scholarly and popular interest around the world. Earlier this year the second of three international conferences dedicated to the song book was held in Germany. The theme was the reception of the Genevan Psalter in Germany and the Netherlands during the sixteenth century, and presentations ranged in topic from the influence of John Calvin to the early Dutch psalters. This continued interest by theologians, musicologists and historians is of benefit to modern Reformed churches, including those in North America. Not only do the current studies serve to answer some longstanding questions about the Genevan Psalter, but they also remind our generation of the historical significance and present value of the song book. Like a gem inherited from distant ancestors, the Genevan Psalter continues to shine with unfading lustre. And given the increasing contact between churches of Reformed and other backgrounds, it is useful to know the exact worth of this psalter.

The Book of Praise used by the Canadian Reformed Churches and some of their English-speaking sister churches is a collection of psalms and songs from various ages and cultures, from the early Christian church to the English Puritans. The largest and most prominent section comprises the versified psalms of the Old Testament. Many of these appeared in the Genevan Psalter, published in definitive form in 1561. The single most important influence in the formation of the psalter was that of John Calvin, whose theological writings and systematic organization of the church greatly affected the composition of the book. Indeed, from the beginnings of the Dutch Reformed churches until the present, it is Calvin's influence which has affected the worship of the church in song.

While it is well-known that Calvin played a role in the formation of the Psalter, the principles and expressed basis for the songbook are not discussed frequently. The modern Reformed believer may know little of the reasons for the choice of songs in the psalter, of the music that accompanies it, or even why the psalms are so prominent. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief summary of especially the theological principles Calvin employed in promoting the Genevan Psalter. In the first part we shall consider the background to Calvin's thought, and note the various influences upon him; these include the Bible, church fathers, classical principles of music and song, and contemporary influences like fellow Reformers and personal experience. In the second instalment we shall examine Calvin's definition of psalm-singing, his understanding of the purpose and goal of congregational singing, the contents and form of the psalms to be sung, and some practical considerations.

2. Sources

Calvin's views of the nature and purpose of singing in corporate worship are expressed in a variety of sources, which should be noted briefly. The role of singing is mentioned first in the Draft Ordinances for the Organization of the Church at Geneva (1537), in which Calvin points out that "the psalms can incite us to lift up our hearts to God and move us to a zeal in invoking and exalting with praises the glory of His name." A first, small edition of some psalms appeared in 1539, and it reflects Calvin's early thought about singing in worship. Then there are the more developed Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, which were followed a year later by the Form of Prayers and Ecclesiastical Songs (1542) with an introductory "Epistle to the Reader." This preface is an
important source for our understanding of Calvin’s attitude towards music and corporate worship. Yet another important source is the Introduction to the *Commentary upon the Psalms*, which appeared first in 1557; readers of this magazine who possess the series of Calvin’s commentaries may wish to read this introduction. One could consult the commentaries also for Calvin’s observations upon several relevant texts in the Old and New Testament. And there are several sermons in which Calvin touches upon worship in the old and new dispensation. There are several sermons in which Calvin touches upon worship in the old and new dispensation; we shall have occasion to refer to his sermon on 1 Samuel 18:1-16. The commentaries and sermons are significant sources, for they concern the Reformer’s understanding of how Scripture applies to public worship. Lastly, we should note the *Institutes* (esp. 3.20.32), in which public prayers and singing are placed in Calvin’s broader theological system. Taken together, then, these writings provide a considerable body of evidence for Calvin’s thinking about the singing of psalms and hymns in public worship.

3. Influences

In developing his thoughts on the use of psalms and hymns in public worship, Calvin was influenced primarily by the Bible and the writings of the church fathers. Other influences include classical principles of music and song, the works of contemporary Reformers such as Martin Bucer, and Calvin’s own reaction to Roman Catholicism.

3.1 Scripture

As we shall observe below, Calvin extracted from the Old and New Testaments as much evidence as he could regarding corporate worship. While demoting the power of ecclesiastical tradition and canon law, Calvin promoted the significance of biblical teaching that pertains to communal singing. This desire to return to the source of the Christian faith was premised on the conviction that the old and new covenants were essentially one, and that the Old Testament continues to inform the current worship of the church. Furthermore, Calvin sought to place the singing of psalms and hymns in the broader context of the relation between God and the chosen people who worship Him. An appreciation of Calvin’s interpretation of the relevant Bible passages is useful for the modern Reformed believer, for it helps one to understand the scriptural grounds on which the views were based. Later in this article we shall see the number of occasions Calvin uses Scripture for the basis of his writing on psalm-singing.

3.2 Church fathers

Calvin found confirmation of the importance of biblical teaching for corporate worship in the writings of the church fathers, especially Jerome, Hilary of Poitiers, and Augustine. In their writings Calvin also was reminded of the abiding value of the Book of Psalms. In the preface to Jerome’s commentary on this bible book, Calvin could read that “although David wrote the Psalms, nevertheless they all pertain to the person of Christ.” This Christological interpretation, according to which the psalms are read as having an important function in the history of redemption and revelation, gives the psalms a role in the church of the second dispensation. Hilary of Poitiers had written in the introduction to his treatise on the psalms that “those things which are said in the psalms ought to be understood in light of the evangelical gospel.” By this he meant that the psalms speak not only of the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, but also of justification, sanctification, and other doctrines whereby believers conduct their lives.

Of the church-fathers it was Augustine who most influenced Calvin in the matter of psalm-singing. Augustine interpreted the psalms as expressing the bond between the Lord Jesus Christ and the church. The psalms are to be sung not only as the psalms of David, earthly king of the people of Israel, but as the songs of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the church that is his body. The psalms of prayer, of lamentation, and of praise lend voice to the prayers, laments and praises of Jesus Christ and of the church. This interpretation of the psalms is based upon biblical evidence: witness the many times when the Lord Jesus, or the apostles, or other believers in the New Testament quoted or referred to passages from the psalms in their times of distress, joy, or worship.

While the generation before Calvin had not employed the Psalms in a way that sees the unity of the old and new covenants, the Geneva Reformer understood that their catholic character leads to
a new appreciation of their current value. Perhaps there are believers today who question the relevance of the psalms for their own circumstances and the circumstances of the church. In contrast to scholastics and Anabaptists Calvin and the other Reformers argued that the substantial identity of God’s revelation to the Hebrew people and to the Christians proves the ongoing relevance of the psalms. Since the Old Testament is to be read together with the New, the prophecies and psalms pertain to current life. For matters of politics, history, culture, and so forth, the Old Testament remains relevant; the people of God today are one with the people of Israel. In practical terms, this means that the psalms address the entire life of the modern believer: the sorrow caused by sin, the plight and hardships of life in this broken world, the antithesis between faith and unbelief, forgiveness, and so forth.

This immediate relevance of the psalms is shown in the 1561 edition of the Psalter. In it each psalm is prefaced by a brief summary of its content and meaning. For Psalm 2, for example, we read that “here we see how David and his kingdom form a true image and sure prophecy of Jesus Christ and his Reign.” In other words, when the congregation sang a psalm, it knew its subject and theme, its historic and Christological context, and its application to the life of the believer. What is more, the edition has a two-page topical index, listing psalms appropriate for each circumstance. One will find a suitable psalm to sing in times of persecution, bereavement, or temptation. In the sixteenth century people were conscious of what they were singing.

We have lingered over the matter of the primacy of the Old Testament psalms for two reasons. First, it is characteristic of Calvin and the Reformed churches to see the Book of Psalms as the primary source of the songs of the catholic church. Second, the observations above help to explain why the Genevan Psalter and modern psalters based upon it, give pride of place to the versified one hundred and fifty psalms. When we recall the historical context in which David or another psalmist was inspired to compose the psalm, when we understand the prophetic quality in the psalm, and when we see the place of it in the history of redemption, we appreciate better its current value. Most importantly, perhaps, to grasp the role of psalm-singing in the liturgy, we need to recall the Reformed understanding of Scripture, of the unity of the testaments, and of the place of the psalms in the history of revelation. In an age of countless religious songs, we do well to sing the Psalms understandingly.

3.3 Classical principles

Regarding theories of music and song, Calvin was influenced especially by the Greek philosopher Plato. The ancient Greeks were interested in the relation between music and poetry, which often was sung to the accompaniment of an instrument. Plato had argued that there is a close parallel between music and the human soul; the ability of music to influence the soul, therefore, was considerable. Calvin was affected also by the simple statement that singing consists of two elements: music and text. Since the combination of music and text is a powerful one, great care should be taken to determine that both the content of the song and the nature of the accompanying music be beneficial to the soul. Plato – and Calvin following him – considered music secondary to the text; music serves as a means whereby the words touch the human soul more effectively.

Plato’s thinking affected Calvin also through the intermediate influence of Augustine, who in the Confessions (bk. 10, ch. 33) discusses the fine line between proper and improper worship of God in song. According to Augustine, singing affects the mind and the heart, and so alters one’s knowledge as well as feelings. He writes, “our spiritual feelings, in keeping with their variety, have corresponding modes of voice and song, and are excited by a kind of inner familiarity.” What he means is that the type of music which accompanies the text should be appropriate to the contemplation of God and the praise of his mercy. When the music is proper, it causes one’s spirit to rise and aspire to greater piety; when it is improper, music can cause the feelings to surpass the thoughts, and “when it so happens that I am moved more by the singing than by what is sung, I confess that I have sinned (247).” Augustine records the story of another church-father who held that the psalms of David should be recited and not sung, in order to avoid the danger of giving a dominant role to the emotions. Augustine concludes that we should be “not moved by the singing but by the things sung, when they are sung by clear voices and fitting modulation (247).”
It will be obvious to the reader that Augustine reflects ideas of his time, such as self-denial, the dominance of reason over feeling, and a general austerity in worship foreign to our normless age. To some extent he influenced Calvin with these values, and especially in the notion that music has a powerful influence upon the soul. Several times, when discussing the impact of bad music accompanying a good text, the Reformer quotes the saying that bad company ruins good morals. Calvin therefore makes a sharp distinction between music that serves as entertainment and music that supports worship. The song, he thinks, should be expressed in a manner that befits its nature and purpose. Stated positively, Calvin holds that singing may encourage the soul to aspire to greater devotion and piety. Indeed, when one considers that the purpose of psalm-singing is the glorification of God, the edification of believers, and the betterment of morals, one realizes how much care should be taken in determining the type of music that accompanies the text.

3.4 Contemporary influences

There are two major influences from Calvin’s own time that affected the Reformer’s thinking on psalm-singing:

1) the teaching of Martin Bucer and the practice of the Church at Strassbourg;
2) Calvin’s own reaction to Roman Catholic ideas about worship.

When Calvin was developing his own ideas, Martin Bucer already had formed a clear program for the public worship services at Strassbourg, where Calvin first was exposed to congregational song in 1538. Although it appears Calvin didn’t read German, it seems that Bucer’s model for the Reformed liturgy depicted in Justification and Demonstration from Holy Scripture (1524) was known to Calvin. This tract, which includes a discussion of the various elements of the worship service, concludes with a chapter on congregational prayer and song. With references to 1 Corinthians 14, Colossians 3:16, Matthew 16:30, and Ephesians 5:19, Bucer applies biblical teaching to his understanding of corporate worship. This scriptural basis for including both public prayer and public song in the service was later used by Calvin to justify congregational singing in Geneva. In a letter to his colleague Farel (1538), Calvin expresses the desire to compile a collection of psalms, and the little booklet that appeared in 1539 became the basis for the Huguenot Psalter.

It was also in response to Roman Catholic principles and practices of singing during the services that Calvin developed his ideas about corporate song. In Calvin’s time the view that psalm-singing belongs to the special office of priest was prevalent; believers had no active part in the offering of praise to God. Specially trained choristers would perform the Graduals and Alleluias, while worshippers listened. Contrary to this sacral view of singing, Calvin and the other Reformers stressed the priesthood of all believers, according to which everyone, as member of the body of Christ, should participate. Calvin did not promote choir-singing in worship services on the grounds that it suggests the active participation of the entire congregation is not required. Reformed worship involves the congregation in every element of the liturgy. For the modern Reformed church Calvin’s reaction is a healthy reminder that the worship service cannot be divided into sections in which certain people perform; rather, from the preaching of the gospel to glorification in song, the service requires the intimate involvement of all believers.

Meaning, purpose, and form

We shall examine some of the fundamental principles Calvin formed about congregational singing. An important starting point is Calvin’s definition of psalm-singing as the public offering of prayers. This definition determines what Calvin perceives to be the purpose of congregational worship in song, namely the glorification of God’s name, the edification of the church, and the inculcation of piety. Given this meaning and purpose of singing, Calvin readily develops his ideas about the contents and form of the “public prayers,” and he is very clear about the manner in which congregational singing should occur. We shall end by relating Calvin’s views about the place of choirs and instruments in the worship service.
4. **Definition of psalm-singing**

In the articles for the organization of the church Calvin advised that “there be singing of some psalms in the form of public prayers.” This phrase is significant for our understanding of Calvin’s concept of psalm-singing, for it reveals that he perceives the corporate song to be akin to corporate prayer. The basis for this definition is found in Scripture. Calvin had observed the statement at the conclusion of Psalm 72:20 that “the prayers of David, the son of Jesse are ended.” The contents of the Psalms also attest to their nature as prayer, for many consist of addresses to God in meditation. Prayers entail praise of God, request for forgiveness of sin, confession of guilt, and entreaty for the people of God. In the New Testament also prayers and psalm-singing are joined.

Calvin links prayer closely to the Psalms also in the introduction to his commentary on the Old Testament book (CO 31, p.16-35). As prayers, many of the psalms deal with the most intimate concerns of the individual human heart. Indeed, Calvin calls the psalms the “anatomy of all the parts of the soul,” for “the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the grieves, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men tend be troubled” (CO 31, 16). Therefore, “whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book” (CO 31, 18). For this reason, too, Calvin deems the psalms to be the primary source for the songbook of the church; they are a collection of prayers made public.

There has been some difference of opinion about what Calvin means when he uses the word “psalms” (pseaumes). Some suggest that he employs it in a general sense of spiritual songs (cantiques); others that he means any song performed in church, so that the term denotes the entire repertoire of psalms available at the time. As readers may know, the phrase “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in Colossians 3:16 has been debated. In his commentary on this text Calvin merely relates the distinctions commonly made in his time: psalms refers to singing accompanied by music, hymns are songs of praise, and odes (the “spiritual songs”) contain an element of exhortation. In his other writings, and especially when treating congregational singing, Calvin appears to use the word “psalm” to refer to the Old Testament psalms as they have been put to rhyme in translation.

For Calvin the Bible was the best source for the psalms of the catholic church. Like the church-fathers, he was convinced that the Book of Psalms contains in a nutshell the entire gospel of salvation; by singing the psalms the believer would better understand the message of Scripture. In the introduction to the commentary on the Psalms, Calvin writes that in them “we will also find that the free remission of sins, which alone reconciles God towards us, and procures for us settled peace with him, is so set forth and magnified, as that there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation” (CO 31,18). Calvin did not restrict the repertoire to the One Hundred and Fifty Psalms, however. For he knew that from the time of the exodus the people of God were acquainted with songs; witness the Psalm of Moses (Psalm 90). Calvin also refers to the songs of the prophets, and included in the psalters the New Testament songs (of Simeon, for example) and the catholic creeds. The main criterion for selection of material was the Word of God: “no-one can sing things worthy of God except what he has received from Him” (CO 6, 172).

5. **The purpose of congregational singing**

According to Calvin, congregational psalm-singing serves three purposes:

1) to glorify God;
2) to edify members of the church;
3) to meditate upon and foster Christian virtues.

In the Draft Ordinances Calvin writes that the psalms “can stimulate us to lift our hearts to God and rouse us to a zeal in invoking as well as in exalting with praise the glory of His name” (CO 10, 12). In the 1543 introduction to the psalter Calvin writes much the same: psalm-singing incites the believer to meditate upon God, to raise her heart to God, to console herself, and to contemplate the divine virtues of excellence, wisdom and justice.
The primary goal of corporate singing is not the expression of one’s response to the faith, or the sharing of one’s feelings, but the praising of God for his mercy and grace. Indeed, writes Calvin, “there is prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise” (CO 31, 18).

The focus of the corporate song is God, not man. After all, it is by singing that the church of the old and new dispensation brings praise to God. This main purpose of psalm-singing should be evident in the manner in which the psalms are sung. The weight of contemporary culture or the aesthetic values of a particular generation should not overburden the text or cause distraction from extolling God.

A second purpose for psalm-singing in the worship service is the edification of the believers. For this reason Calvin stresses the importance of the believer’s conscious exercise of the psalms in the relationship with God. Psalm-singing helps to take one’s mind off earthly things and to contemplate spiritual matters. By involving the minds and mouths of the believers, congregational singing draws attention to the divine Word. This Word works in the hearts of believers through the powerful combination of text and music. Since this text must be understood easily, it should appear not in Latin but in the common tongue. A French translation of the Hebrew psalms does not indicate a devaluing of Scripture; rather, it increases the meaning of the psalm for those who sing it.

Meditation upon the effects of God’s grace is a third reason for singing psalms. The psalms function as a tool to encourage and strengthen believers in times of doubt or sorrow. They also draw attention to one’s sins, Christ’s atonement, and the necessity of obedience. They point us to those qualities of patience, wisdom and equity that mark the life of the regenerated believer. In short, psalm-singing has a positive influence upon the moral behaviour of the believer. For this reason Calvin states repeatedly that “unless voice and song ... spring from deep feeling of the heart, neither has value or profit” (CO 1, 88). The desire to appropriate the Word of God and let it affect the soul is an important element in singing psalms.

6. Form: melody and text

Calvin’s ideas about the form of corporate psalm-singing were based on his concept of the relation between melody and text. Simply stated, music should support and promote the text. In the chapter of the Institutes (3.20.32) that deals with singing hymns in church, Calvin rejects “such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight of the ear” as “unbecoming to the majesty of the church” (CO 2, 659). Elsewhere he discourages the use of lyrics and melodies that are marked by musical ornamentation, for they detract from the majesty of the church and her worship. He writes, “regarding melody, it seemed best that it be moderated in a manner that we have adopted to carry gravity and majesty befitting the subject” (CO 6, 171-172). The “name of God should be praised properly with an articulated voice” (CO 31, 324). Following Augustine, Calvin advises that “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” (CO 2, 659).

There has been some debate in the last century about the sources from which Calvin, Marot and Beza drew their music. O. Douen had argued at the end of the nineteenth century that Calvin used three sources: the music of the Strassbourg Psalter, the imagination of the composers, and the popular, worldly songs of the late middle ages. In recent decades, however, it has been shown that while a very few tunes of secular songs were adapted for use in the Genevan psalter, the majority of tunes were not derived from the plain chant that was common at the time. In fact, there is very little evidence for the way in which the Genevan tunes were performed during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Some modern critics have suggested that Calvin wished to develop a special mode of music for use in the worship services. In comparison with Luther, who was not averse to adapting existing tunes and texts to the Reformed faith, Calvin strove to develop a form of “ecclesiastical music” that accorded with the purpose of the worship service. He certainly reacted strongly to the type of music associated with Roman Catholic worship, and in several places advises the readers to avoid listening to “vain” secular music. And so there is some evidence that Calvin wished a sacred style
of music to be composed. At any rate, he insisted that the music be “holy and pure, seeing that it is simply directed to the edification” of the church (CO 6, 169-170).

While music plays a critical role in creating proper effect, it remains secondary to the text. Since human beings are the only creatures endowed with speech, the peculiar gift of understanding words should be used with care.

Therefore Calvin discourages the use of polyphony, whereby the text may be confused and too much attention drawn to the music. The tune should be a simple means to convey the text. In Calvin’s view, chromatics, rhythmic variations, and other complications of the music hinder the impact of the text (CO 31, 324). To be sure, he did not oppose singing in two or more parts, but he did not deem it suitable for congregational worship. For Calvin was not so much concerned with the harmony of the sound, as with the harmony of the heart with God. Singing in unison heightens the effect of the text on the mind and the heart, and expresses the conviction that all worshippers belong to the priesthood of believers.

Lastly we shall relate some of Calvin’s observations about the use of choirs and instruments in the worship service. Calvin was not inclined to promote the use of choirs for both theological and practical reasons. In reaction to the Romanist view of hierarchy within the church and services, Calvin and the reformers stressed the unity of the people of God. Calvin wished to avoid the idea that the performance of music and song in itself was a sacred act that could effect grace. Furthermore, he was averse to the notion that mortals could please God by entertaining Him, as if they could “make him dance” by their music and song. Given his conviction that the congregational singing is a kind of prayer which has the purpose of glorifying God for his mercy, edifying the believers in the faith, and promoting Christian virtues, Calvin leaves no room to human gratification.

In a sermon on 1 Samuel 18:1-16, Calvin speaks about the tambourines, sitars, and flutes that make an appearance in the public worship there. He notes that these belong to the old dispensation, a dispensation of shadows and imperfect knowledge. “If today we should reinstate them as though necessary, we would return to the ancient shadows, and we would obscure and cover over that light which was revealed in the Son of God” (CO 30, 259). With the coming of Christ also the corporate worship has taken on a new, deeper meaning. Calvin alludes to 1 Corinthians 14:13-19, in which the apostle Paul admonishes the readers to worship God in a clear, understandable way that edifies the believers. For where there is no understanding there can be no edification. He goes on to say that “what was the custom in the time of the law, in no way has a place among us today; we must abstain from those things which are not only superfluous, but without substance. What should be sufficient is the pure and simple melody, one suited to the heart and the mouth of each one of us, of the praises of God. For indeed we know that our Lord God Jesus Christ has appeared, and that at his coming those shadows of the Law have dissipated” (CO 30, 259).

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1 Quotations of Calvin derive from the Works of Calvin (Opera Calvini = CO) within the series Corpus Reformatorum; the passage cited occurs in CO 10, 5.