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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## CALVIN AND HYMN-SINGING

In his book *Hymnody, Past and Present*, C. S. Phillips speaks about the tyranny of the Genevan principle of "The Bible and the Bible only" which is said to have prohibited English and Scottish churches from hymn-singing for about two hundred years. According to Mr. Phillips, Zwingli and Calvin frowned on anything save the metrical psalms, and it was Issac Watts who at last swept this tyranny away, as this Ambrose of the English tongue defended by teaching and example the principle that the hymns of Christians should freely express their own spiritual experience, not "the thoughts of David and Asaph".<sup>1</sup>

H. A. L. Jefferson in his *Hymns in Christian Worship* expresses the same view. He tries to point out that in the first days of the Reformation the Lutheran way of hymn-singing began to become speedily popular in this country, helped by the sympathy of Cranmer and by the work of Coverdale. But under the influence of Geneva and John Calvin the singing of the Psalms in a metrical version became "the one form in which a congregation could express the emotion of worship and devotion." This restriction was justified by the appeal to the Bible as the one source of authority by which, it was contended, only the singing of those hymns which the sacred book provided—namely the Psalms—could be allowed.<sup>2</sup>

This very common representation is but another example of unrighteous judgment about Calvin and his aims.

These are the facts:

1. In 1539 Calvin published a little book, *Aulcuns Pseaulms et Cantiques Mys en Chant*. It contained nineteen metrical Psalms and three *Cantiques* or Hymns—the Song of Simeon, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed.<sup>3</sup> By this fact alone it is made clear that Calvin did not even think of restricting the congregation to the singing of Psalms only or even to metrical versions of parts of the Bible; otherwise he would not have included the Twelve Articles of Christian Faith provided with a tune and thus made a hymn. In the many editions of the Genevan Psalter of 1562 the Grace before and after meals is always included and set to music as a hymn.

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Phillips, *Hymnody, Past and Present* (London, 1937), pp. 123 f., 167.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. L. Jefferson, *Hymns in Christian Worship* (London, 1950), pp. 31 f.

<sup>3</sup> E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin* (Lausanne, 1902), ii. p. 511.

2. In one of his letters Calvin wrote:

What is to be done? It is to have songs not only pure, but also holy, which would be to us like spurs to incite us to pray and to praise God; to meditate on His works, that we may love, fear, honour and glorify Him. Now, what St. Augustine says is true, that nobody can sing things which are worthy of God except those which he has received from God Himself. Therefore, when we have gone round everywhere to search, we shall not find better songs, nor more suitable ones to do that, than the Psalms of David, which were dictated to him and composed by the Holy Spirit.

Is this a principal edict in favour of the singing of Psalms only? In our opinion it is not. Doumergue, the famous French expert on Calvin, has made it clear<sup>1</sup> that in this letter the Genevan Reformer did not at all mean to make a statement of principle. He says on the contrary that he has searched everywhere to find something suitable, and that in looking here and there he came across the Psalms and became enthusiastic about translating them into French. The fact that the Psalms were inspired by God is the reason there are no better songs, but this, of course, does not imply that only these are fitted for congregational singing.

3. There is a further indication that for Calvin there existed no dilemma between congregational psalm-singing and hymn-singing, and that the issue for or against hymn-singing, as a question of principle, had not yet come into the ken of Reformed thought. In his commentary on Eph. v. 19 and Col. iii. 16 he applies the apostolic directions for the singing of Christians to their singing in general, without special mention of church practice; and by the word "psalms" he does not even think of the Psalter but of hymns with musical accompaniment!

4. The preponderance of psalm-singing in early Calvinism was not due to a theory, but simply to the fact that the French Reformation was fortunate enough to benefit by the gifts of the great poet Marot. He worked at the court of the King of France and psalm-singing became really fashionable there. The lascivious king chose Psalm xlii as his favourite song, and his mistress, Diana of Poitiers, Psalm cxxx! The first martyr, Leclerc, sang psalms at the stake, and the Huguenots used them as their battle-songs. The flames of this enthusiasm spread widely, when the French Psalter was translated into twenty-

<sup>1</sup> Doumergue, *op. cit.*, p. 507.

two languages, including English, Dutch, Danish, Hungarian, Italian and Portuguese.

It was due to this excitement over psalm-singing that it took some time before the need for hymns was felt. Doumergue says, very aptly: "The Psalms with their cries of humiliation, their appeals in times of danger, their confidence in the Sovereign God, were not they *par excellence* the songs of the Church of the sixteenth century?" (It is a pity that in some churches this excitement over the Psalms seems to have been extinguished.) One could not tackle everything at once, and a new tradition had to be built up, because in Roman Catholicism congregational singing had come into disuse.

5. After Calvin had passed away in 1564, Theodore Beza continued his work in the same spirit. In 1592 there appeared the book *Saincts Cantiques recueillis tant du Vieil que du Nouveau Testament, mis en rime françoise par Th. de Bèze*. In this Beza finished the work of Marot on the Psalter and continued straight on with the rhyming of Biblical passages other than the Psalms. From this fact again it appears clearly that the Calvinistic Reformation did not even think of the alleged restriction of vocal worship.

6. We venture to say that the Dutch Reformed Church was one of the most Calvinistic in early days, and this Church started the introduction of hymns very soon. This was due to the favourable fact that as early as 1540 a Dutch translation of the Psalms appeared, soon to be followed by a London rhyming of the Psalter made by Utenhove, an elder of the Dutch refugee church at Austin Friars, and by the translation into Dutch of the French Psalms by Dathenus. In 1574 the Synod of Dordrecht decided, as a preliminary measure, that for the time being they should be satisfied with the Psalter of Dathenus, until the next General Synod should decide otherwise. The Provincial Synod of Utrecht in 1610 appointed deputies for the compiling of a hymnal. However, this book, containing fifty-eight hymns, was not introduced because of the heated arguments with the Arminians, who composed hymns propagating their views. In the tension of the struggle the historic Synod of Dordrecht of 1618-19 decided that congregational singing should be from the Psalter and from a small number of hymns, apparently as a measure of transition. Nobody could have foreseen that the

Government would not allow another Synod to meet for two hundred years!

Our conclusion is that it is very necessary to distinguish sharply between the ideas of Calvin and those of his followers in later times, which were often stricter and narrower, and sometimes even bigoted. We should not confound Calvinism with Puritanism, as the case of hymn-singing plainly demonstrates.

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