

THE REFORMERS ON PSALMS AND HYMNS IN PUBLIC WORSHIP

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Introduction

Recent developments suggest that the selection of psalms and hymns in the *Book of Praise* may be re-evaluated in the near future. In the process towards union with the United Reformed Churches, an important step is adopting a common song-book for use in worship services. And, within the federation of Canadian Reformed Churches, there is a desire to increase the number of hymns. For the upcoming general synod will be requested to broaden the mandate of the committee for the *Book of Praise*, to include evaluating proposals for additional hymns. As the recent experience of the Dutch sister-churches reminds us, differences of opinion may arise when psalters undergo revision. It will be beneficial, therefore, to have a clear understanding of the Reformed criteria for selecting psalms and hymns. In fact, regardless of these developments, the inherent importance of congregational singing requires that all believers grasp its function. Singing is integral to public worship, and like the offering of public prayers and alms-giving warrants conscious exercise.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, the manner of public worship reflected Roman Catholic theology. The teaching of works-righteousness caused the liturgy to contribute to the merit earned by humans. Since the priest's daily sacrifice was considered crucial to human salvation, the omission of even one word from the mass was considered a grave sin. This overestimation of external features meant that singing acquired a sacred quality. There was a superstition that the performance of song was bound up with the salvation earned in the mass. As a result, the ritual chanting of the Psalms in Latin - unintelligible even to many who performed them - gave the impression of magic, and so reinforced the formalism of the mass.

“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your hearts”

It was in revising the mass that the reformers examined the role of congregational singing. They viewed psalms and hymns from the perspective of the teaching that true worship is based on God's grace in Christ to humanity. This doctrine denies that the liturgy of itself merits anything, suppresses the role of outward features, and rejects ornateness that draws attention from the proclamation of the Gospel. In going back to Scripture and the practices of the early church, the reformers sought to recover all the elements of true worship, especially preaching the Word, giving Christian alms, celebrating the Lord's Supper, and offering public prayers. They compared the role of singing in the Old Testament with that in the New, and read about worship in the age of the apostles and church fathers. In this return to the sources, the reformers found Ephesians 5:18-20 especially useful, for it is both concise and complete: “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your hearts, always and for

everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.”

As the Reformation developed, the mass gave way to the preaching of the Word and celebration of the Lord’s Supper; the introduction of metrical psalms and hymns also indicated a reforming congregation. Replacing the rote songs of the mass with psalm-singing, congregations renewed the exercise of personal faith in God through public praise, and practiced the corporate worship of the covenant community. An examination of the surviving psalms, hymns, and chorales would reveal much about the nature of Reformed worship in the sixteenth century. Of greater relevance, however, are the criteria which the reformers employed in compiling the psalters used in congregational worship. Of course, the principles that supported the introduction of the new psalters reflect the broader doctrinal concerns of the Reformation, but they also helped restore to the liturgy the important role of congregational singing. And since these principles are drawn from Scripture, they are not restricted to a particular time or culture, but remain valuable to the church of all ages, including the Reformed churches of the twenty-first century. The purpose of this article is to describe briefly what four leading reformers advised about compiling psalms and hymns, and to summarize the principles underlying congregational singing in the churches of the Reformation. In conclusion, we shall list the Reformed criteria for selecting psalms and hymns.

Huldrych Zwingli

Of the major reformers Huldrych Zwingli reacted most radically to the performance of song in the Romanist mass. Though a talented musician and author of several hymns, he did not advocate singing by the congregation. Indeed, the Zurich church-order of his day prohibits both organ-playing and congregational singing during the worship services. To be fair, Zwingli did not object to singing per se, but he was convinced that the reforming congregations needed to unlearn several Romanist heresies first. He did allow responsive recitation by men and women during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and the congregation spoke the Apostles’ Creed in unison. And Zwingli did not criticize the public singing that was taking place in Strasbourg. He simply felt that the Zurich believers were not ready for it, and it was not until 1598, well after Zwingli’s death, that the city’s churches resounded with song and music.

At the heart of Zwingli’s reaction was the conviction that the Romanist church had replaced the Word of God with the words of man. Zwingli held that preaching should be central in the worship service. The words of man to God are vain; the Word of God to man is a primary means of grace. Therefore using congregational song to enhance or to frame the proclamation of the Gospel would be Romanist. Instead, the Bible and the preaching should inform every aspect of the liturgy. The involvement of the congregation in the lessons, prayers, and recitations is only a way to God’s Word. Zwingli argued that if Scripture is neither the basis nor goal of public singing, then singing should be abolished.

True worship comes from the heart

Zwingli also responded to the external display of piety associated with the performance

of songs in the Romanist mass. He opposed the mindless chanting of texts and the superstitious singing of passages in Latin. When people do not seek to know the text of the song they are singing, he said, they cannot have their hearts directed to God, but must be concerned with their behaviour before fellow humans. In the *Sixty-seven Theses* that advanced the reform in Switzerland he writes, “those who act in order that they may be seen by men and secure praise during their lifetime are hypocrites. It must therefore follow that those who call on God in spirit and truth should do so without great publicity (44, 45).” From this reasoning he concludes: “choral or spoken church services that are performed without true intent but only for reward are carried out either for the sake of reputation or for profit (46).” True worship is a matter of the heart, and it is in this way that Zwingli interprets the phrase “making melody with your hearts” in Ephesians 5:19. Zwingli even interprets the context of Colossians 3:16 (“sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God”) as referring to private, not corporate worship.

While these views are somewhat extreme, they should be seen in light of the circumstances of the time. Moreover, as we shall see, Zwingli does share with the other reformers several important premises of public worship. These are that the Word of God permeates every aspect of the liturgy; that worship should be done in simplicity, and not for display; and, that congregational singing must come from the heart. Indeed, for Zwingli true worship is much more than giving expression with one’s mouth; it is the giving of one’s heart.

Martin Luther

Less radical than Zwingli in revising the mass, Martin Luther initially hesitated to reform the liturgy. While he knew that the heresy of the mass as sacrifice offered by humans had infused the singing with undue merit, he preferred to correct its meaning than to change its external form. Luther also was careful not to be moved by radicals seeking to introduce new features simply for their novelty. And in order not to rattle the faith of people in this time of reform, he differed with Anabaptists wishing to abolish the Romanist liturgy altogether. Luther’s attitude explains to some extent why the liturgy of the Lutheran churches developed differently from those of other protestant churches. Yet the changes he made to public worship in general, and to congregational singing in particular, influenced also the worship in Reformed churches.

Proclaiming the Gospel in song

Luther’s primary concern in reforming the church was to restore the preaching of the Word, and he subjected even congregational singing to this goal. In criticizing the Romanist mass, he said, “when God’s Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together.”¹ Luther defines the place of the Bible in congregational singing as follows: “the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely by proclaiming the Word of God through music”.² For this reason Luther disapproved of songs drawn from the experiences and writings of men; they

¹ *Concerning the Order of Public Worship* (1523), in *Luther’s Works*, vol.53 (ed.,U. Leupold; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 11.

² *Preface to Georg Rhau’s Symphoniae Iucundae* (1538), in *Luther’s Works*, vol.53, 323.

tend not to point to the Bible. Moreover, he thought, human compositions may lead to the belief that mortals of themselves can offer worship in spirit and truth. Thus, only the Bible determines the role of singing in public worship, and it is the only criterion for compiling psalms and hymns.

More specifically, Luther held that just as every sermon points to the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the Gospel, so too congregational singing should proclaim the Saviour. In the preface to the *Wittenberg Hymnal* (1524), to which he contributed 24 compositions, Luther writes: “we may now boast that Christ is our praise and song and say with St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 2, that we know nothing to sing or say, save Jesus Christ our Saviour.”³ It is well-known that Luther interpreted the book of Psalms in light of Christ’s work of salvation; similarly, he understood the singing of psalms as pointing to Him. And just as prayers are offered in the name of the Lord Jesus (John 16:23), so too songs are performed in His name. Luther supported this Christo-centric emphasis in psalm-singing by referring to the already-cited Ephesians 5:20 (“giving thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ”), and to Colossians 3:17: “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Therefore, in addition to the Psalms of David, Luther wished that congregations sing hymns based on the revelation of the New Testament. And he thus promoted versification of the songs of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79), and Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). Whereas the Psalms of the Old Testament are prophetic, the New Testament passages convey the fulfilment of prophecies. For this reason, too, Luther deemed the Nicene creed suitable for congregational singing: although not a passage of Scripture, it expresses the substance of the entire Gospel.

Psalm-singing is the sacrifice of thanksgiving

Like Zwingli, Luther reviewed public worship in light of the struggle against the Romanist teaching that one can obtain salvation by performing good works. For him, this meant rejecting any notion of righteousness obtained through the ‘good work’ of worshipful singing. Public singing must reflect the Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone. Therefore Luther removed the chants, choral songs, and other aspects of the Romanist liturgy that suggested one could obtain grace simply by performing them. Communal song was to be divested of its falsely based sacred status. Like the preaching of the Word and the use of the sacraments, congregational singing should turn attention from deeds of man to the deeds of God. Thus Luther repudiated singing not only as an act whereby the performer gains in the estimation of God, but also as an act whereby the performer obtains a sense of personal satisfaction. For Luther, congregational singing does not express human emotions, but a message, and that is God’s message of salvation by grace alone. Any emotions that do arise from singing must come from the faith grounded in the biblical text of that song, and not from the performance of it. For congregational singing is the response to the mercy of God as revealed in the Gospel and as illustrated in the sacraments. After all, faith comes only from hearing the Word proclaimed, and faith in turn evokes praise to God in song. Thus, contrary to the Romanist view, psalm-singing is not the offering of good works, but the sacrifice of thanksgiving for grace received. Singing regains its legitimate place in corporate worship as an act of self-denial, as a sacrifice of the natural man and the adoption of the new life in the

³ *Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal* (1524), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, 316.

Spirit.

Psalm-singing is not the offering of good works, but the sacrifice of thanksgiving for grace received

In accordance with these principles, Luther first expressed his wish for a vernacular hymn-book thus: “to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people [in the vernacular], that is, spiritual songs, so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music.”⁴ The biblical basis and content of the first collection of eight hymns published in 1523 is reflected in the title, “some Christian hymns, canticles, and Psalms made according to the pure Word of God, from Holy Scripture.” Thereafter Luther went on to compose some 30 chorales based upon the book of Psalms. Yet he also composed a number of festal hymns for special events in the liturgical year, especially those commemorating the acts of the Lord Jesus Christ, such as Christmas, Good Friday, and Pentecost.

Besides the biblical content of the hymn-book, Luther argues for its didactic function. Placing the Bible in the mouths of believers through song serves to implant the Word of God in heart and mind. The Bible text from which Luther argues that public singing should help to instruct in the faith is 1 Corinthians 14:26, in which the apostle Paul exhorts the churches that “all things be done for edification,” including congregational singing. Since psalm-singing serves to edify believers, the content of the songs should be the Word of God, in all its clarity and simplicity. While the Latin versions of the metrical psalms were unintelligible to most, the new songs in the vernacular would draw attention to the text. Indeed, Luther’s attitude towards the text of the metrical psalms was similar to that of the German translation of the Bible. He said: “only the simplest and most common words should be used for singing; at the same time, however, they should be pure and apt; and further, the sense should be clear and as close as possible to the Psalm.”⁵ He also agreed that those who turn the Psalms into verse “need a free hand here: maintain the sense, but don’t cling to the words; [rather] translate them with other appropriate words.” The text should be as literal as possible and as free as is necessary. And the music to which the psalm is sung should carry the message of the text; musical notation should be direct and uncomplicated. In this way, Luther envisaged that the youth would first learn the songs in school, teach them to their parents in the home, and in due time congregations would sing in public worship.

Martin Bucer

Thanks to the efforts of Martin Bucer, Strasbourg was one of the first cities to produce a song-book in the German language for use in Reformed worship. As early as 1523, Bucer had criticized the abuse of the Latin chorales, and he had expressed the need for metrical psalms in the common tongue. Bucer rightly observed that congregations were being

⁴ Letter to George Spalatin (1523), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 49 (ed. G. Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 68.

⁵ *Luther’s Works*, vol. 49, 69.

prevented from using the biblical Psalms, which had been reserved for the priests in the mass and the daily offices of the Romanist church. Bucer's own commentary on the Hebrew text of the Psalms, as well as the publication of a psalmody devised by the church-father Athanasius, aided the development of a German psalter in Strasbourg. By 1524 the congregation was reciting a church-hymn, and when in 1525 the *German Service Book* appeared, it was singing metrical psalms and some rhymed versions of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. The psalters published in Strasbourg influenced those compiled in several different places, including England, France, and the Netherlands.

The Holy Spirit edifies the body of Christ through congregational singing

Singing serves to edify the congregation

1 Corinthians 14:1-6 is fundamental also to Bucer's view of the goal of congregational singing. There we read that communal worship should be conducted in such a way "that the church may be edified". When they address one another in spiritual songs, believers pursue what makes for mutual upbuilding. In fact, it is the Holy Spirit who edifies the body of Christ through congregational singing. Therefore, like the catechism, the hymn-book is a means of instruction in the faith; it assists in gaining a better knowledge of Christ, and helps to effect a life of Christian piety. For this reason, too, the Strasbourg hymn-books, like many of their modern counterparts, contained also the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, and the like. And they were to be used as teaching manuals in school as well as church. In fact, in order to help the youth appreciate the gift of song, the schools in Strasbourg made the practice and theory of music part of the curriculum. It is to the sixteenth century that modern Reformed schools trace the worthy exercise of memorizing the text and music of the church's psalter. By storing the Word of God in their minds through music, children may worship God in song both at home and in church. Bucer knew that one believes with the heart, and so is justified, and confesses with the mouth and so is saved (Romans 10:9).

Bucer agreed that the Book of Psalms, since it was inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the best source of material for the song-book of the new dispensation. However, like Luther, he did not object to a judicious selection of songs based upon other Scripture passages, so long as they edified the congregation and promoted a desire for godliness. Thus, while the earlier edition of the Strasbourg psalter contained mainly metrical psalms, the publication of 1537, entitled *Psalms and Spiritual Songs*, included hymns and songs for festal occasions. This edition contains also the liturgical texts for the Sunday and forms for the two sacraments and marriage, so that the psalm-book became an important document in the public worship. This hymnal anticipated the definitive, 'great' hymn-book of 1541. It is not surprising to learn that when John Calvin first heard the believers in Strasbourg singing God's praises, he was moved to produce a similar hymn-book for the French-speaking refugees under his care in that city.

John Calvin

For John Calvin, Ephesians 1:3-6 is an important text for our understanding of congregational singing. There we read that in his love God destined us to be his children through Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace. We worship God because He has created

us to worship him. Beginning with the characteristic emphasis on the doctrine of predestination, Calvin views worship in light of God's election of humans to serve his glory. In other words, true worship is an act of obedience to God, who commands us to have no other gods before Him. And congregational singing is the sacrifice of thanksgiving brought to God by his church, the gathering of the elect. Therefore, while congregational singing is subservient to the Word of God, it in no way is secondary to, or dependent upon preaching. As in the old, so too in the new dispensation, praise is an essential action of the liturgy, and contributes to worship in a way different from preaching and the use of sacraments. It is the special offering of glory to God, the true doxology.

Calvin treats congregational singing as a form of the public prayers that are offered by the believers. He does so on the basis of the association which the Bible makes between song and prayer. Of the numerous texts in which they are linked, we note only James 5:13. And like the other reformers, Calvin observes that prayers and songs are offered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; as agents of his will, the elect proclaim, confess, and praise the Lord. While Romanist theology makes a sharp division between laity and clergy, the Reformed faith teaches that all believers possess the spiritual office. Therefore congregational singing is not included in the liturgy merely to allow some 'audience participation', but it is the duty of all God's elect. Prayers, almsgiving, and congregational singing are to be offered by all involved in worship.

Musical accompaniment should draw attention to the text of the psalm

The Holy Spirit effects true worship in congregational praise

Even more than his predecessors, Calvin stresses the operation of the Holy Spirit in congregational singing. Just as the proclamation of the Gospel can be done only by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, so too public prayers and songs are presented to God by his working. In Romans 8:15-16 we read of prayers that are offered by the power of the Spirit; indeed, "the Spirit himself is bearing witness with our spirit" when we pray. It is out of faith worked by the Spirit that believers can offer true worship as an act of obedience to God. Ephesians 5:18-20 states that true congregational singing occurs when believers are "filled with the Spirit". In other words, there is an intimate relation between faith and the form of worship which expresses it: both are effected by the Holy Spirit. And it is only in this way that congregational singing becomes an integral part of worship, for the Holy Spirit is operating in the body of Christ for the glory of God the Father.

There has been considerable debate concerning Calvin's view of compositions not based upon the book of Psalms. On balance, the evidence suggests that while Calvin has a high regard for metrical psalms, he was not an "exclusive psalmodist", as some have alleged. Like the other reformers, Calvin does make a clear distinction between the psalms inspired by God, and those of "merely human composition". And he makes an eloquent argument for the primacy of metrical psalms. In the preface to the *Genevan Psalter* (1543) he writes: "the psalms incite us to pray to God and praise Him, and to meditate upon his works in order to love, fear, honor and glorify Him.... no-one can sing things worthy of God save what he has

received from Him.”⁶ Therefore, “we shall not find better songs nor songs more suited to that end than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and uttered through him (348).” When we sing the psalms of David, Calvin goes on to say, we sing songs that come from the Holy Spirit himself, so that God is putting his Word into our mouths, “as if He himself sang in us to exalt his glory (348).”

Another reason for Calvin’s high regard of metrical psalms is the unity of Scripture: the Psalms given to the people of God in the Old Testament are those of the new dispensation also. And whereas the history of revelation developed in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ is the substance of both the old and new covenants. The numerous quotations of the Psalms in the New Testament attest to their abiding value and their role in the church of the new dispensation. Thus, while the psalters associated with Geneva are indebted to those of Strasbourg, they contain a greater number of metrical psalms, and fewer hymns.

The first French edition of metrical psalms appeared in 1539 (*Aulcuns Pseaulmes*), and it contained 18 psalms. It was followed in 1542 by the *Genevan Psalter* (also called *Huguenot Psalter*), which became a classic in its time and influenced Reformed churches for centuries. For both the text and the musical notation, this *Genevan Psalter* garners praise from many critics of ecclesiastical liturgies. This edition, too, contained a few canticles of the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the like, but was mainly a collection of psalms based on the Old Testament book. Thirty of the metrical psalms in it were the composition of the leading French poet of the time, Clément Marot. Influenced by the successful practice in Strasbourg of composing metrical versions of the Psalms, Marot interpreted the Psalms using the commentary of Bucer and writings of the French Hebrew specialist, François Vatable.

Like the other reformers, Calvin held that the purpose of musical accompaniment is to carry the text forward, not to distract from it or to replace it. Ideally, he thought, there should be a simple melodic line, with one note to each syllable, designed to be sung in unison without accompaniment. In the preface to the 1543 edition of the *Genevan Psalter*, Calvin advises “that the song be not light and frivolous but have weight and majesty; ... 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 (346)”. Like Luther, Calvin advised against lyric tunes, which do not force the singer to focus on the words of the text; the melody should be “moderated ... that it may have the weight and majesty proper to the subject (348).” The definitive edition of 1562 contains fifty-two Gregorian tunes, and thirty-eight tunes in major keys, thirty-five in minor keys. Widely used throughout France, this psalter became the hallmark of Huguenot worship in home and church. It was translated into Dutch by Petrus Datheen in 1566, and into German in 1573; thus the *Genevan Psalter* enjoyed even wider circulation in those languages than in the original.

⁶ Preface to 1543 *Genevan Psalter*, in O. Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History*. (New York: Norton, 1950), 348.

Conclusions:

This brief survey of the development towards a Reformed psalter in the sixteenth century reveals the individual emphases of four major reformers. From initial reaction to Romanist liturgy, through the stress upon the Gospel of Christ, to the formation of the Reformed church and the place of congregational singing in the system of theology, the contributions of each reformer are evident. Yet, since common principles support the arguments of each, there are a number of general statements that may be made about the Reformed perspective on congregational singing of psalms and hymns. And so we may define the criteria for selecting material appropriate to the psalter that reflects the Reformed faith as follows:

- 1) Like prayer and almsgiving, congregational singing is subservient to the proclamation of the Gospel. In itself, singing is not a means of grace and adds nothing to the Word of God; by repeating Scripture in musical form, it puts the Word on the lips of believers.
- 2) In placing the Word of God in believers' mouths, psalm-singing promotes the faith of the congregation. By helping believers commit the Bible to their hearts and lips, communal singing edifies the congregation. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is at work when psalms of praise are sung.
- 3) Psalms and hymns help believers profess the knowledge and firm conviction that God has saved his people by the death of Christ. True congregational singing arises from God-given faith and not from human emotion. Feelings of self-fulfillment are not a motivation for congregational singing; rather, joy results from the faith that is expressed in what is sung.
- 4) Therefore the congregation sings only in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as other elements in the liturgy are offered in his name, so too in communal song believers do the will of Christ. Denial of oneself and acknowledgment of the all-sufficient power of Christ's death form the proper basis for singing praises to God.
- 5) Singing in the name of Christ is not a natural human undertaking; it can be done only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as true prayer is the work of the Spirit (Romans 8:15-27), so too He fills the hearts of believers when they address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:18-20). Worshiping in spirit and truth is not the activity of mortals, but of God the Spirit.
- 6) Because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, the biblical book of Psalms provides the best material for congregational song. Hymns based on other inspired Scriptures (The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Song of Simeon, etc.), and a careful selection of hymns closely following them (the Apostles' Creed) also belong to the catholic church. Songs not drawn from the Bible are of a status different from the Psalms inspired by God.

7) Communal singing, as an act of doxology, is essential to public worship in the old and new dispensation.

8) The goal of congregational singing is to offer praise to God: by means of psalms and hymns the congregation brings a sacrifice of thankfulness. Hebrews 13:15 says, “through him [Christ] let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”

R. Faber

Some Psalters of the Reformation

1523 Wittenberg: German *Hymnal of Eight* (four by Luther)

1524 Wittenberg: *Wittenberger Hymnal* (38 polyphonic motets)

1525 Strasbourg: German *Service Book*

1537 Strasbourg: *Psalms and Spiritual Songs*

1539 Strasbourg: *Aulcuns Pseaulmes* (for the French refugee church)

1541 Strasbourg: the ‘great’ Hymn-book for church and school (psalms, hymns, choir-songs)

1542 Geneva: *Genevan Psalter* (or *Huguenot Psalter*, first complete edition of metrical psalms in French)

1562 Geneva: *Pseaulmes de David*

1566 Petrus Datheen provides Dutch translation of *Genevan Psalter*