

Luther and Calvin on Music and Worship

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Few composers of church music have received more attention than has Martin Luther.¹ As early as 1501, the Bohemian Brethren had printed the first Protestant hymnbooks. "By re-introducing public worship, the reformers displaced virtually overnight a thousand years of high church ritual. The Reformation fathers condemned the Gregorian Chant for some very telling reasons, revealing along the way their own evolving concepts of music. They objected to the distractions of elaborate vocal and instrumental music, the dangers of overly theatrical performances, the unwarranted expense of elaborate ceremonies and enormous pipe organs and the uselessness of text unintelligible to the common man. Contrasting with the high church's entrenched musical traditions was the simple and pragmatic approach of men like Martin Luther. Luther's stated goal was the restoration of true worship. He understood the tremendous benefit resulting from hearing the Word of God and then uniting as a congregation to offer thanksgiving in song. This stress on congregational participation in worship became a lynchpin of the Reformation."²

Not only did Luther exercise a profound influence on the religious and cultural life of sixteenth century Europe, but also he freed music from the domination of the Roman Catholic Church, opening the door to a revolution in music and in the arts generally. Luther began to compose hymns in 1523, the exact number of which has been, and remain, disputed. However, thirty-six hymns have survived. Additionally, Luther translated a number of Latin texts and used the psalms and poems as the basis for many other hymns. Luther completed his German vernacular translation of the New Testament in 1521. His

¹ For a select bibliography on Luther's music, see John Butt, *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, sixth ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 252-258. Joyce L. Irwin, *Neither Voice nor Heart Alone: German Lutheran Theology of Music in the Age of the Baroque*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1993). Robin A. Leaver, "Martin Luther," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2001 ed., vol. 11, p. 364-369. Michael Linton, "Bach, Luther, and the Magnificat." *Bach* 17 (1986) 3-15. Martin Luther, *A Compendium of Luther's Theology*, edited by Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., Ph.D. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943). Robert L. Marshall, *Luther, Bach, and the Early Reformation Chorale*, (Atlanta: Pitts Theology Library, 1995). Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, (New York: Russel & Russel, 1948). Carl F. Schaulk, *Luther on Music*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988). Joe E. Tarry, "Music in the Educational Philosophy of Martin Luther," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 21 (1973): 355-365.

² Chuck Fromm, "New Song: the sound of spiritual awakening", Part 1 in A Study of Music in Revival, paper presented to the Oxford & Reading Research Conference, July 1983.

most enduring musical contributions were of course his chorales or hymns. His first congregational hymnbook, *Geystliche Gesangbuchlein*, was published in 1524.³ Just as the mass publications of the Bible for individual study fostered literacy in the Reformation countries, the mass distribution of hymnbooks encouraged musical literacy among all levels of society and thus was of enormous cultural value. Luther insisted that hymns be sung in every worship service for it was, according to him, the vigorous singing of simple hymns that could open the hearts and minds of God's people to embrace the Word of God. The Lutheran church's most important musical contribution was the German *Choral* or *Kirchenlied* (church song), in English, a *chorale*.⁴ Four collections of his chorales were first published in 1524.⁵ His *Deudsche Messe* (*German Mass*) was published in 1526.⁶ Luther's musical reforms included the use of instruments in worship. Through Luther's influence, a new spiritual movement, a new liturgical service, and many new musical practices were introduced that continue to inform the worship of present-day Christians.

Luther's coherent reasoning

Luther's mature exegetical approach, which was the tropological method of Bible interpretation (it emphasized the spiritual and existential side of Christian living), came to fruition between 1516-1519.⁷ It is a curious fact that virtually all of his output in music, including his written opinions of the important place of music in the life of the Church, took place *after* this period. An area that has not been sufficiently addressed by theologians and music historians is the interesting

³ One of Luther's first hymnbooks, published in collaboration with his composer friend Johann Walther. In the preface he commends heartily the singing of hymns and psalms and spiritual songs "so that God's Word and Christian teaching might be instilled and implanted in many ways." Preface, *Wittenberg Hymnal* (1524), *LW* 53:316. He further remarks that the songs in this collection were arranged "to give the young-who should at any rate be trained in music and other fine arts-something to wean them away from love ballads and carnal songs and to teach them something of value in their place." *Ibid.* A smaller collection containing only eight hymns, of which four were Luther's, had also been published in Wittenberg that same year; this larger one contained 32 hymns, 24 by Luther.

⁴ Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music*, revised edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), p.254.

⁵ Sources of Lutheran chorale melodies consist of original compositions, e.g. "Ein Feste Burg" ("A Mighty Fortress is Our God") adaptations from chant: "Veni Sancte Spiritus" transformed into "Komm, Heileger Geist", adaptations from non-liturgical sacred songs, and *contrafacta*: the adaptation of secular songs matched to spiritual texts.

⁶ Luther's Mass followed the main features of the Latin Mass, but with important modifications. The Gloria was omitted; the Proper was condensed; some new recitation tones were used that flowed better with the natural cadence of the German language; in many cases German hymns were substituted for the chant. That Luther retained areas of the Roman Mass shows his willingness to preserve tradition as well as break with it.

⁷ Though Luther's hermeneutic began in concert with the medieval tradition that envisaged the *sensus literalis* of scripture as fundamental, and although he never lost that commitment, he eventually came to embrace the tropological (moral) sense of scripture as the guiding principle in his interpretation of the Bible. See Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), p.153.

confluence of ideas between Luther's tropological method and his music. Luther is consistent inasmuch as his views in these areas serve to support each other. I have mentioned His *Deudsche Messe (German Mass)* published in 1526. The existential emphasis of the Mass is evident in the fact that it stressed the simple marriage of text and tune so that all people, especially the uneducated laity, could participate.

Luther's spiritualizing hermeneutic also informed his idea that worship outlined in the New Testament, and its affect on singing, is superior to the worship of the Old Testament. In his introduction to the *Bapstsche Gesangbuch*, he wrote,

...in the Old Testament, under the Law of Moses the church service was very cumbersome. The people had to offer many and varied sacrifices of all that they possessed at home and in the field. They did this unwillingly for they were lazy and avaricious and did these things only to obtain some temporal benefits...If there is such an unwilling and lazy heart, nothing, at least nothing worth while can be sung. Where one would sing, heart and mind must indeed be happy and full of joy. Therefore God has dispensed with such an unwilling and lazy service...The worship of the New Testament is on a higher plane than that of the Old. The Psalmist refers to this fact when he says, 'Sing unto the Lord a new song, sing unto the Lord all the earth.' For God has made our hearts and spirits happy through His idea Son, whom He has delivered up that we might be redeemed from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this sincerely and earnestly cannot help but be happy; he must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ. If any would not sing and talk of what Christ has wrought for us, he shows thereby that he does not really believe and that he belongs not into the New Testament, which is an era of joy, but into the Old, which produces not the spirit of joy, but of unhappiness and discontent.⁸

A further association is seen between Luther's highly subjective tropological method of Bible interpretation and his belief that polyphonic worship songs best facilitate the emotions. Musicologist Paul Nettl's translation of one of Luther's "Table Talks", in which he discusses his admiration of polyphony, is informative on this count.

How strange and wonderful it is that one voice sings a simple unpretentious tune while three, four, or five other voices are also sung; these voices play and sway in joyful exuberance around the tune...He must be a coarse clod and not worthy of hearing such charming music, who does not delight in this, and is not moved by such a marvel. He should rather listen to the donkey braying of the [Gregorian] chorale, or the barking of dogs and pigs, than to such music.⁹

⁸ WA 35, 476f

⁹ Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (Russell and Russell Pub; 1948).

Luther and “bar tunes”

A great deal of controversy has been generated over Luther’s adaptation of secular music. For instance, one writer insists,

None of the works dealing with Luther’s music can trace a single melody of his back to a drinking song...It seems obvious to this writer that using Luther’s music as an historical precedent for using rock and other worldly music in our churches today is completely incongruous with the facts of history. Luther did not use the barroom songs of his day, nor did he use even the worldly music of his day. In fact, he was extremely cautious in protecting the Word of God from any admixture of worldly elements. This can be seen in his words: “I wish to compose sacred hymns so that the Word of God may dwell among the people also by means of songs.”¹⁰

I have found that people’s adverse reaction to the marriage of secular tunes with spiritual words comes from their personal dislike for such a practice, rather than from historical research. The idea that people have confused Luther’s use of bar tunes with the fact that he wrote hymns using the metrical bar AAB or bar-form structure forgets that “A particularly important class of chorales were the *contrafacta* or ‘parodies’ of secular songs, in which the given melody was retained but the text was either replaced by completely new words or else were altered so as to give it a properly spiritual meaning. The adaptation of secular songs and secular polyphonic compositions for church purposes was common in the sixteenth century.”¹¹ Examples of beautiful *contrafacta* include *O Welt, ich muss dich lassen* (O world, I now must leave thee), taken from Isaac’s *Lied, Innsbruck, I now must leave thee*. A tune from Hassler’s *Lied Mein Gmuth ist mir verwirret* (My piece of mind is shattered by a tender maiden’s charms), which around 1600 were changed to *Herzlich thut mich verlangen* (My heart is filled with longing) and later to *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (O sacred head now wounded).¹²

Luther’s love for music

Luther’s compositions were the natural product of his great passion for music. He was accomplished at the lute, the flute, and was known to have a powerful tenor voice. He was so committed to the high place of music in the life of the Church that men had to demonstrate competency in music before they could be accepted for ministerial training. His attitude toward music is clearly set

¹⁰ Robert D. Harrell, *Martin Luther, His Music, His Message* (1980), p. 34-36.

¹¹ Grout, 255.

¹² *Ibid.*

forth in this well known *Forward* to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae*, a collection of chorale motets published in 1538.¹³

I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given to mankind by God. The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them.... In summa, next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits.... Our dear fathers and prophets did not desire without reason that music be always used in the churches. Hence, we have so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God. However, when man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with great surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God in music, which is, after all, His product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace. A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.

Note above that Luther did not envisage music as a human invention, but as a gift from God ("*Musica Dei donum optimi*"). Again, Luther said,

Music is an outstanding gift of God and next to theology. I would not give up my slight knowledge of music for a great consideration. And youth should be taught this art; for it makes fine skillful people.¹⁴

Luther also commented that music's power had often stirred him to proclaim God's Word. Luther said,

Music is God's greatest gift. It has often so stimulated and stirred me that I felt the desire to preach.¹⁵

Luther was keenly aware of the central role of iconography in the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Nonetheless, this did not keep him,

¹³ Rhau also published "The New German Sacred Songs" (1544), a collection specifically for use in the schools.

¹⁴ Weimar Edition of *Tischreden* (WT) 3, No. 3815.

¹⁵ Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says: An Active In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) p. 982.

like Zwingli, from recognizing the usefulness of all the arts in worship, especially music.

Nor am I at all of the opinion that all the arts are to be overthrown and cast aside by the Gospel, as some superspiritual people protest; but I would gladly see all the arts, especially music, in the service of Him who has given and created them.¹⁶

A year before his death, Luther supervised and wrote the introduction to Johann Walther's (1496-1570)¹⁷ hymnbook, *Geystlich gesangk-Buchleyen* (1545).¹⁸ The Church is forever grateful to the theological and musical leadership of Martin Luther. His musical innovations were later developed by German composers Hassler, Johannes Eccard, Leonhard Lechner, and Michael Praetorius, who in turn opened the door for developments leading to the Baroque style of the Protestant composer Johann Sebastian Bach. In concluding this section on Luther's love for music, it is worth our while to touch briefly on Christian foundation of the greatest of the classical composers and of Luther's influence upon his spiritual walk.

Johann Sebastian Bach – man of faith

There is no doubt that J. S. Bach (1685-1750) is one of the greatest musicians and composers that ever lived. There is also no question that he had a fervent faith in Christ. An orthodox Lutheran, Bach was versed in the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Upon his death, some eighty-three religious volumes were found in his personal library that included Luther's greatest works. Clearly Luther had a great impact on this musical giant. Music historians note that toward the top of most of his manuscripts, Bach wrote "S.D.G.," meaning Soli Deo Gloria: "Solely to the glory of God." Often at the beginning of a work he wrote the letters "J.J.," which stood for Jesu Juban, "Help me Jesus." Also, he offered many of his cantatas "I.N.J.," In Nomine Jesu, "In the name of Jesus." After his death, Bach's music was sorely neglected. A century later another devout believer, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) re-introduced Bach's music to the world with a performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in Berlin in 1829. Today, Bach's influence upon music is overwhelming. In his *Well Tempered Clavier*, he established the major-minor system, which supplies the tonal basis for all Western music. Also, Bach is considered the father of music theory and practice method.

¹⁶ Weimar Edition of Luther's *Works* (W) 35, 474.

¹⁷ Luther's close friend and musical adviser. He was the first cantor and composer of the Lutheran church. In his younger years, Walther published "Wittenberg Sacred Song Book," a collection of polyphonic settings of chorale melodies in 1524 under the guidance of Martin Luther.

¹⁸ A collection of 43 pieces arranged according to the church year. Walther also assisted Luther as he prepared the music for his German Mass (1526).

The Supremacy of the Word and the Spirit in John Calvin's Views on Worship

Largely due to the influence of John Calvin the Reformation in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France demonstrated a deeper reaction against the retention and use of images in worship than had been the practice of the Lutheran movement in Germany. Calvin's iconoclasm (his staunch opposition to images of the spiritual world) is seen in his comment,

We believe it wrong that God should be represented by a visible appearance, because he himself has forbidden it (Ex. 20:4) and it cannot be done without some defacing of his glory. And lest they think us alone in this opinion, those who concern themselves with their writings will find that all well-balanced writers have always disapproved of it. If it is not right to represent God by a physical likeness, much less will we be allowed to worship it as God, or God in it. Therefore, it remains that only those things are to be sculptured or painted which the eyes are capable of seeing: let not God's majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be debased through unseemly representations.¹⁹

To Calvin's restrictive view of images he added an equally restraining enforcement against the use of musical instruments in congregational worship. Calvin's views on this matter are most apparent in his commentary on the Book of Psalms.

To sing the praises of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law and of the service of God under that dispensation of *shadows and figures*, but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving²⁰...With respect to the *tabret, harp, and psaltery*, we have formerly observed, and will find it necessary afterwards to repeat the same remark, that the Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people, while they were yet tender and like children, by such rudiments until the coming of Christ. But now, when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the shadows of the law and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler form, it would be to act a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time²¹...We are to remember that the worship of God was never understood to consist in such outward services, which were only necessary to help forward a people as yet weak and rude in knowledge in

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book 1, Chapter 11, Section 12. For an excellent discussion on the use of images in light of the Second Commandment, see Ra McLaughlin, "Are Images of Christ Sinful? *IIM Magazine* Online, Volume 6, Number 6, February 25 to March 2, 2004. See also John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 362-378.

²⁰ On Ps. lxxi. 22.

²¹ On Ps. lxxxi. 3

the spiritual worship of God. A difference is to be observed in this respect between his people under the Old and under the New Testament; for now that Christ has appeared, and the church has reached full age, it were only to bury the light of the gospel should we introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation. From this it appears that the Papists, as I shall have occasion to show elsewhere, in employing instrumental music cannot be said so much to imitate the practice of God's ancient people as to ape it in a senseless and absurd manner, exhibiting a silly delight in that worship of the Old Testament which was figurative and terminated with the gospel.^{22,23}

Singing scripture superior

Calvin's other reform of congregational worship was his insistence that singing should include only the words found in the Bible. Luther wanted the hymns of the Church to reflect as closely as possible the exact words of scripture. Calvin went a step further. He felt that the singing of the express words of only the psalms, though he did permit the singing of other select scripture texts, ensured that Divine revelation was being put to music. The only notable musical contribution of the early Calvinist churches was therefore the Psalters, metrical translations of the Book of Psalms.²⁴ In 1524, Theodore de Beze introduced congregational psalmody to the German-speaking Calvinist churches in Strasbourg where he was pastor. In 1533, Calvin presented the Genevan Psalter that was followed by the editions of 1542, 1551. When Calvin became the pastor of the French-speaking congregation in Strasbourg in 1538, he introduced the French Psalter that was later published in its complete form in 1562. Clement Marot and Beza, the latter Calvin's eventual successor at Geneva, translated the texts from the psalms, with Loys Bourgeois composing the melodies using a simple chord style. Calvinist congregations sung the metrical psalms unaccompanied and in unison. In 1537, Calvin sought to codify the practice of exclusive psalmody citywide; he approached the city council of Geneva to present a set of Articles intended to bring the church at Geneva into conformity with what he viewed as the pattern of New Testament worship.²⁵ Later settings of

²² On Ps. xcii. 1.

²³ Calvin's stringent position on the use of musical instruments in public worship certainly had backing by the Westminster Assembly. On the 20th of May, 1644, the commissioners from Scotland wrote to the General Assembly and made the following statement among others: "We cannot but admire the good hand of God in the great things done here already, particularly that the covenant, the foundation of the whole work, is taken, Prelacy and the whole train thereof extirpated, the service-book in many places forsaken, plain and powerful preaching set up, many colleges in Cambridge provided with such ministers as are most zealous of the best reformation, altars removed, the communion in some places given at the table with sitting, The great organs at Paul's and Peter's in Westminster taken down, images and many other monuments of idolatry defaced and abolished, the Chapel Royal at Whitehall purged and reformed; and all by authority, in a quiet manner, at noon-day, without tumult."

²⁴ Metrical verses made the music more accessible to the people.

²⁵ For a thorough treatment of Calvin's views on music, see Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol.

the psalms were more contrapuntal: Claude Le Jeune exchanged the tunes and composed what have been equated to free motets.²⁶ Another important French composers of metrical psalms, was Claude Goudimel. Jan Sweelinck was the most important composer in the Netherlands. England, Germany, and Scotland developed their own versions and translations of the Principal French Psalter. The Principal French Psalter was also seminal in the creation of the first American Psalter, the *Bay Psalm Book*.

The principled reformer

It has been argued that Calvin's support for canonical psalmody was not based in his personal preference, but in two guiding values. The first one is his unique reading of the Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Luther was committed to the same doctrine and although he put some of the psalms to music ("A Might Fortress is Our God" is based on Psalm 46), he felt more freedom to exploit other musical forms. The Reformer of Geneva had reasoned that if the Word of God is the sole basis for faith and practice, then congregational singing should not merely be "based" on the words of scripture, but should incorporate the very words of scripture as God gave them to holy men of old. What better example do we have then the psalms of David?

His most thoroughgoing exposition on music for worship appears in his work of 1542, *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)*.²⁷ It contains thirty-five psalms set to music, a Lord's Day liturgy, and a marriage service. Clement Marot put thirty of the psalms into French verse²⁸ while Calvin, it is assumed, translated the other five. The preface to *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques* contains Calvin's

69, pt. 4 (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 7, 10, 17; Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia, edited by W. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke and Sons, 1863-1900), vol. 10, pt. 1, col. 12.

²⁶ See Anne Harrington Heider, "Preface," in Claude Le Jeune, Les Cent Cinquante Pseaumes de David, Recent Researches in the Music of the Renaissance, vol. 98 (Madison, Wisconsin: A-R. Editions, 1995), p. 10.

²⁷ At the behest of the Genevan city leaders Calvin returned to Geneva on September 13, 1541. *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques* was written largely out of an effort to restore order to both the church and city, both of which had deteriorated since his leaving. On the day of his return, Calvin presented his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* for approval. Music is mentioned twice. "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."

²⁸ The thirty by Marot were taken from his *Psalmes de David, translatez de plusieurs auteurs et principalement de Cle. Marot* (Anvers, 1541). Guillaume Franc, cantor at St. Peter's in Geneva, is believed to have served as the musical editor of the Psalter. The tunes in all probability came from melodies by Wolfgang Dachstein and Mattheus Greiter.

“Epistle to the Reader” where we find something of his positions on music. The Reformed principle of *sola scriptura* is foremost in his mind. Calvin maintains that for worship to be scriptural it must have “the preaching of the Word, the public and solemn prayers, and the administration of the sacraments.”²⁹ Singing is included in the public and solemn prayers. “He includes singing under 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.”³⁰ This is as close as Calvin comes to offering an exegetical basis for his position on the singing of the psalms, though he does look to Augustine and to Chrysostom for support. However, there may be a problem for those that look to Calvin for support of *exclusive* psalmody in worship. *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 Apostles Creed.³¹

Because the Book of Psalms is God’s words, Calvin viewed it as sacred. To sing the Psalms is to involve oneself in a mystical reciprocity facilitated by the Holy Spirit. In the preface to the Principle Genevan Psalter, he states,

What is there now to do? It is to have songs not only honest, but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to and praise God, and to meditate upon his works in order to love, fear, honor and glorify him. Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory. Wherefore Chrysostom exhorts, as well as the men, the women and the little children to accustom themselves to singing them, in order that this may be a sort of meditation to associate themselves with the company of the angels.³²

According to Charles Garside, “When Calvin proposed to re-order the whole vocal-musical life of the Christian community around the singing of the psalms, it was because the words of the Psalms were God’s words, put by God in the mouths of the singers, just as He had put them first in the mouth of David. Calvin’s vernacular psalmody in the last analysis is nothing other than a

²⁹ Op. cit. Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History*, revised edition edited by Leo Treitler (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 365.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ I owe some of the thoughts in this paragraph to Duck Schuler, “History of the Genevan Psalter”, Part 3, *Credenda Agenda*, Vol. 15, Issue 1. <http://www.credenda.org/issues/15-1musica.php>

³² Written from Geneva, June 10th, 1543. From the facsimile edition of: “*Les Pseaumes mis en rime françoise par Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze. Mis en musique a quatre parties par Claude Goudimel. Par les héritiers de Francois Jacqui.*” (1565). Published under the auspices of La Société des Concerts de la Cathédrale de Lausanne and edited, in French, by Pidoux, Pierre, and in German by Ameln, Konrad. (Baerobenreiter-Verlag, Kassel, 1935).

formulation, in uniquely musical terms, of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.³³ Richard Arnold reiterates this perspective on Calvin, “However Calvin’s enthusiasm for singing was subject to a crucial qualification: he restricted what was to be sung exclusively to the Psalms – these were, he writes in 1543, the songs provided by God and dictated by His Holy Spirit, and it would be presumptuous and sacrilegious for humankind to sing any words or arrangements of his of her own devising.”³⁴ So then, Luther wanted scripture itself put to music; he wanted worship songs to contain or to adhere as closely as possible to the ideas expressed in the Bible. But Calvin preferred the singing of the exact wording of scripture passages – specifically those contained in the psalms but not limited to the Psalms.³⁵

Second, Calvin’s devotion to the Book of Psalms was motivated by a degree of caution: his appreciation of the power of music, both in its ability to lead people to practice lascivious conduct or godliness.³⁶ In *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastique* Calvin appeals to Paul and to Augustine as he goes on to reveal his great appreciation for the power of music to inflame or to inspire the heart; all the more reason, says Calvin, that the Reformation of the Church must include the singing of the psalms. Also, in the preface to the Principle Genevan Psalter, he says,

But still there is more: there is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men, as Plato prudently considered it. And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious. For this reason the ancient doctors of the Church complain frequently of this, that the people of their times were addicted to dishonest and shameless songs, which not without cause they referred to and called mortal and Satanic poison for corrupting the world. Moreover, in speaking now of music, I understand two parts: namely the letter, or subject and matter; secondly, the song, or the melody. It is true that every bad word (as St. Paul has said) perverts good manner, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart much more strongly, and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody.

Calvin’s deep belief that the sacred nature of the Book of Psalms distinguishes them from all other types of music helped him remain steadfastly

³³ Garside, p. 29.

³⁴ Richard Arnold, *The English Hymn: Studies in a Genre* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 3.

³⁵ Walter Blankenburg also comments, “Finally, according to Calvin, the task of the service song necessitated a strong tie to the only text admissible in the service, the text of the Bible. This resulted in the exclusive use of psalms for singing, in addition to a few other biblical excerpts.” Walter Blankenship, “Church Music in Reformed Europe”, in Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1974), p. 617.

³⁶ Here Calvin follows the Renaissance “doctrine of ethos” that was first put forth by Plato.

devoted to their supreme usage in congregational worship, despite other musical innovations taking place during the early years of the Reformation. “Calvin had reflected upon the diversity of religious song in Strasbourg, and despite his indebtedness to Bucer, maintained certain reservations. He had embraced Bucer’s proposal that throughout society ‘all secular songs be eliminated and replaced by religious ones’; with this sweeping substitution Calvin clearly was in essential agreement. He adopted it, however, with one profoundly significant qualification. Bucer had spoken throughout the Foreword to the Strasbourg Song Book (1541) of psalms and sacred songs or spiritual songs, and in doing so, as he himself more than once acknowledged, he was following the tradition established by Luther of permitting all kinds of music and all kinds of texts to be sung in church as well as outside it. But what was variety for Luther and Bucer was promiscuity for Calvin. The psalms alone were sacred. For God and His angels as well now as for the world below, nothing else was, or even could be, appropriate, and with that decision Calvin’s valuation of vernacular psalmody had reached its apogee.”³⁷ Louis F. Benson comments on the difference of opinion between Lutheranism and Calvinism on the issue of what type of music is most appropriate for worship. “The people’s share in the Church’s praise had been won for them at the Reformation; but here, as at so many points, the Lutheran and Calvinistic Reformers had parted company. The Lutheran encourages the use of hymns; the Calvinistic turned to the inspired songs of the Holy Scriptures as the only proper subject-matter of praise.”³⁸

Calvin’s worship for today

The question of the pertinence of Calvin’s views on worship for our time is important for one thing is clear: there is little agreement among existing “Calvinists” on Calvin’s theology of worship. What we call “the regulative principle of worship” remains an area of hot debate, even among Reformed Presbyterians. I will admit that as a Reformed Presbyterian I do not agree with everything Calvin said about worship, but at the same time, I believe that I have come to understand Calvin, the theologian of worship, in light of Calvin, the man of his times. By this I mean that not only did his views on worship prove relevant for the culture of his day, but also the culture of Calvin’s day affected his perspectives on worship. Calvin’s disapproval of the use of images, musical instruments, and support for psalm-singing on the Lords’ Day were nurtured within a highly charged historical setting: the theological and ecclesiastical battles of the late Middle Ages. He claimed more than once that his was an effort to reform the worship of the Church according to the pattern of New Testament.

³⁷ Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536-1543. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Volume 69, Part 4, (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), p. 26.

³⁸ Louis F. Benson, *The Presbyterian Reformed Review* 8 (1897): 422.

While I heatedly concur with his New Testament principles of worship, I find it impossible to read him on the prescriptive elements of worship without sensing that his positions were at the same time highly colored by his deep antipathy toward Rome. Calvin certainly admitted as much. What I believe he would have been averse to admit, however is the extent to which his hatred for the idolatrous practices of Rome shaped his reading of parts of scripture that have to do with the continuity between the Old and New Testament patterns of worship (e.g. his argument, for example, that under the old dispensation musical instruments were “shadows of the Law” that have been fulfilled by Christ and are therefore of no use in New Testament worship).

One reason I detect this coloring aspect in Calvin’s reform program of worship is due to the lack of scriptural continuity between images, instruments, and the exclusive use of the psalms in congregational singing. Related to this is the lack of any concrete exegetical support for seeing musical instruments as part of the ceremonial law that Christ has fulfilled. And Calvin offered no such support. And while I agree that believers should not transgress the Second Commandment’s prohibition against the use of images as a means to worship God, I cannot find in the Bible a correlation between the commandment and the banning of instruments from congregational worship. An organ is not an image of God. In fact, I cannot even find a convincing secondary correlation that would place instruments and the singing of hymns in the same category as profane images. But the Roman Catholic churches of the sixteenth century had clearly transgressed the Second Commandment, used organs, and sang hymns. One cannot help but wonder if in his zeal for doctrinal and ecclesiastical purity the Reformer did not throw out the preverbal baby with the bathwater when he eliminated instruments as well as images from the worship of the churches under his care.

As for the regulative use of the psalms, I join Calvin in asserting the majesty of the psalms, their high status as revelation, and in singing them as means for praising God. But Ephesians 5:19, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (cf. Col. 3:16) broadens congregational singing beyond the prescriptive use of the psalms or even hymns and songs that contain the words of scripture verbatim. And the few articles that have been written to support the idea that “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” are merely different ways Paul uses to say “psalms” are woefully inadequate on scriptural grounds.³⁹

³⁹ Even Calvin would not have supported this interpretation of Paul, as seen in his commentary on Colossians 3:16. “He does not restrict the word of Christ to these particular departments, but rather intimates that all our communications should be adapted to edification, that even those which tend to hilarity may have no empty savor. Leave to unbelievers that foolish delight which they take from ludicrous and frivolous jests and witticisms; and let your communications, not merely those that are grave, but those also that are joyful and exhilarating, contain something profitable. In place of their obscene, or at least barely modest and decent, songs, it becomes you to make use of hymns and songs that sound forth God’s praise. Farther, under these three terms he includes all kinds of songs. They are commonly distinguished in this way – that a psalm is that,

A second reason I interpret Calvin's highly limiting positions on worship through the lens of his antipathy for Rome has to do with two of his works on the reform of worship. The first is his letter of considerable length, *On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly and Preserving the Purity of the Christian Religion* (1537). Written to those that had embraced the principles of the Reformation, but for various practical reasons had decided to remain within the Roman Catholic Church, he points them to their sin, the danger they face, and demands their exit from the Roman harlot. Second is *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543). The main points put forth by this treatise cover a defense of the doctrine of justification, the need to restore biblical doctrine, the proper means of worship, the biblical administration of the sacraments, and the government of the church. In both works Calvin's tone is tense, as he is concerned with saving souls from the Roman anti-Christ. But what is good about the anti-Christ? Nothing. It must all go. Certainly the words of any prophet must of necessity take place within the context of the rebellion of a people whom the prophet calls back to God. But the Old Testament prophets were careful to distinguish between the altar of the pagans and the true altar of God. With Calvin, there is no more "altar", a word that I use in the broad sense for *all* rites and practices not explicitly set down in the New Testament, and that Calvin deems as superfluous to worship "in Spirit and in truth."

On the other hand, the interpreter of Calvin would find himself seriously askew if he only sought to comprehend his doctrine of worship *contra* Rome, without also recognizing Calvin, the theologian of worship, as one that is honest to God's Word. Earlier I discussed how Luther's musical ideas harmonize with his tropological method of interpreting scripture. Calvin's thought demonstrates the same homogeneous relationship. He reads the New Testament as a blueprint for worship because he interprets the Bible according to the *sensus literalis*.

The same can be said regarding the area of Christian vocation. Just as Calvin thought that obedience to one's calling creates an orderly environment for the fulfilling of God's will and purposes in history, order, not innovation, should prevail in the worship of God. Luther had allowed for more freedom in the choosing of one's calling, but Calvin held that God ordered one's calling, including their place of service and their gifts. Note the *one-to-one correspondence* in Calvin's thought: as there is order in life, there is order in worship. God provides for order in life through providence and in our callings; we respond to God through worship according to, and in, the same manner of order. For Calvin, the New Testament is the worship "bulletin" defining that order.

in the singing of which some musical instrument besides the tongue is made use of: a hymn is properly a song of praise, whether it be sung simply with the voice or otherwise; while an ode contains not merely praises, but exhortations and other matters. He would have the songs of Christians, however, to be spiritual, not made up of frivolities and worthless trifles. For this has a connection with his argument."

As a Reformed Christian, and one that is musically active in my church, I believe that one must deal with Calvin's trenchant insights on worship, not bypass him, before one sets out to formulate his or her position on what the Bible says on this subject. The rites of pagan Rome may no longer provide the reader the contextual setting for working out his theology of worship. However, paganism, by whatever name, still crouches at the door of the Church. Add to this the deceitfulness of the human heart, and one can quickly appreciate the degree of care and caution one must bring to the scriptures in deciphering what form of worship God approves. Though one may disagree with Calvin on certain points of application, one cannot argue with him on this fact.

Personal Reflection

Calvinism's influence on sixteenth century European culture, and beyond, is a difficult proposition to assess. On the one hand, Calvin's declaration of God's all-embracing sovereignty in the world and his holistic view of vocation opened up endless possibilities for Christians to be active in society. Recalling Bavinck's quote, the key factor of the Reformation "was not a mere religious and ecclesiastical reform, but a moral reformation embracing the whole of life." Calvinism articulated this call more clearly than did any other expression of the Reformation. On the other hand, though Calvinism sounded the clearest bell for the renewal of the whole of life, the observation has been made that, from its inception, the movement tended to be more reactionary, or sub-cultural in spirit, than its Lutheran cousin. Regarding the Fine Arts many have thus interpreted Lutheranism, not Calvinism, as having stimulated a larger outpouring of creativity during the initial years of the Reformation. It is true that the first Calvinist churches were known for their stolid worship and vigorous opposition to the use of art and musical innovation in public worship. Nonetheless, while Calvin resisted the use of liturgical art, he encouraged its production and use in other venues.

And yet I am not gripped by the superstition of thinking absolutely no images permissible. But because sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I seek a pure and legitimate use of each, lest those things, which the Lord has conferred upon us for his glory and our good be not only polluted by perverse misuse but also turned to our destruction.⁴⁰

We do not know the precise affect that Calvin's words had on stimulating painters and sculptors to create top quality compositions; I am not aware of a relationship shared by Calvin and an artist or musician equivalent to that enjoyed by Luther and Dürer. But we do know that while many of the great Protestant artists and musicians of the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods found the source of their productive inspiration in the first phase of the Reformation led by Luther, Calvin's leadership in the second phase of the Reformation ultimately

⁴⁰ Ibid.

succeeded in invigorating the development of the visual arts in Northern Europe. This is mainly due to the fact that much of the inspiration for the Revolt of the Netherlands and for the French Wars of Religion came from the Protestantism of Geneva, not the Lutheranism of Germany. The Presbyterian organization and the teachings of Calvin were more appealing to city leaders throughout the Netherlands than was the enthused individualism of Luther. The door of government thus opened the way for Calvinism to make its imprint on Northern art.

Determining the exact nature of Calvin's influence on the work of the "Dutch Masters" is not known. But despite Visser't Hooft's denial of Rembrandt's Calvinism, the fact remains that Calvinism was the religious force that transformed Holland, the country of Rembrandt's birth, not only through politics, but also through the establishment of the Dutch Reformed Church. Calvinism continued to provide the spiritual and intellectual foundation of Holland for another three centuries, culminating in the cultural and national leadership of Abraham Kuyper. Unfortunately, Calvin was not motivated to promote a legitimate use of music. And unlike Luther he did not require would-be-pastors to pass a musical test before they could be accepted for ministerial training. That Luther did, and because his young men went on to start and to pastor churches all over Germany, and then throughout much of Europe, partly explains the early and rapid proliferation of the Lutheran style of music when no such comparable development took place among the Calvinist churches.

If early Calvinism is to be labeled a reactionary and intransigent spirit we should be reminded of scripture's teaching that before something can be rebuilt, often it first must be torn down (Isaiah 3:18-20). Calvin had much to tear down. Further, I am reminded of Calvin's own calling. I agree that Lutheranism took hold of a wider range of areas within European culture and did so much more quickly than did Calvinism. But this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that from the outset Luther's work was macro: his reforming work was national, indeed European, while Calvin's work was at first micro: he was called to pastor churches at two cities: Strasbourg and Geneva. Calvin even saw his effort to reform the city of Geneva as an extension of his primary calling as a pastor. But Calvin also did much to build up. Although he was not a gifted artist, or a musician like Luther, his genius at statecraft was felt not only in the immediate milieu of sixteenth century Geneva, but also Calvinism has been credited with having secured the liberty of England, in spite of the corruption of the Stuarts. Calvinism is also recognized as having laid the foundation for democracy in the early colonies and for playing an essential part in the winning of the American Revolution. It also provided the spiritual and intellectual energy for American's Great Awakenings and the sweeping social changes they engendered. Unfortunate indeed is the fact that the same dynamic vision of the transformation of society is missing from among so many professed Reformed Christians today.