

# JOHN CALVIN ON THE WONDER OF THE PSALMS

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## **The Wonder of the Psalms**

In the Preface to his commentary on the Psalms, John Calvin confesses that words cannot convey the wonder of this inspired book: “The varied and resplendid [i.e., resplendent] riches which are contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words ... the greatness of [the Psalms] does not admit of being fully unfolded.”<sup>1</sup>

For Calvin, the Psalms are a unique book in the canon of Holy Writ:

There is no other book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendour of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short, there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise (pp. xxxviii-xxxix).

The Psalms are full of the riches of biblical doctrine, and the saints find in them great blessedness and peace:

In one word, not only will we here find general commendations of the goodness of God, which may teach men to repose themselves in him alone, and to seek all their happiness solely in him; and which are intended to teach true believers with

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1993), 1:xxxvi. Pages given in Roman numerals in the text hereafter refer to this book.

## *Calvin on the Wonder of the Psalms*

their whole hearts confidently to look to him for help in all their necessities; but 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 here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation (p. xxxix).

The Genevan Reformer sees in the Psalms a training ground for vital Christian godliness, especially “bearing the cross.” Undoubtedly, he is thinking of the words of the Lord Jesus and the “whole course of the life of David” (p. xlv).

Moreover, although The Psalms are replete with all the precepts which serve to frame our life to every part of holiness, piety, and righteousness, yet they will principally teach and train us to bear the cross; and the bearing of the cross is a genuine proof of our obedience, since by doing this, we renounce the guidance of our own affections, and submit ourselves entirely to God, leaving him to govern us, and to dispose of our life according to his will, so that the afflictions which are the bitterest and most severe to our nature, become sweet to us, because they proceed from him (p. xxxix).

One outstanding feature of the book of Psalms, in Calvin’s estimation, is that it covers the whole range of Christian emotions and infirmities, exposing our hearts to the searching eye of our Father in heaven and calling or drawing us to self-examination. “I have been accustomed,” writes Calvin, “to call this book, I think not inappropriately, *The Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul*” (pp. xxxvi-xxxvii). He explains the reason for this insightful title:

... there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn ... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost

thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy (p. xxxvii).

## **The Psalms and Prayer**

Flowing from this, Calvin praises the Psalms for their teaching concerning Christian prayer. He speaks glowingly of the gracious access we have to the courts of the Almighty:

... it appeared to me to be requisite to show ... that this book makes known to us this privilege, which is desirable above all others—that not only is there opened up to us familiar access to God, but also that we have permission and freedom granted us to lay open before him our infirmities, which we would be ashamed to confess before men (p. xxxviii).

He proceeds to speak of the usefulness of the Psalms as an aid to true and earnest prayer, for “It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure” (p. xxxvii).

This is striking, since many see Reformed Psalm singing as a hindrance to real supplication. “True prayer,” they say, “is stirred by singing hymns (of human composition).” The great Reformer was of another mind: “In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God is taught us in this book” (p. xxxvii). The believer will recognise the truth of these words on the vital connection between the Psalms (read and sung) and fervent prayer:

Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need, and next, from faith in the promises of God. It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In

## *Calvin on the Wonder of the Psalms*

a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God is taught us in this book. And not only are the promises of God presented to us in it, but oftentimes there is exhibited to us one standing, as it were, amidst the invitations of God on the one hand, and the impediments of the flesh on the other, girding and preparing himself for prayer: thus teaching us, if at any time we are agitated with a variety of doubts, to resist and fight against them, until the soul, freed and disentangled from all these impediments, rise up to God; and not only so, but even when in the midst of doubts, fears, and apprehensions, let us put forth our efforts in prayer, until we experience some consolation which may calm and bring contentment to our minds (pp. xxxvii-xxxviii).

Calvin identifies the Psalms as the best help in prayer: “a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms” (p. xxxvii). On this basis, he reaches a significant conclusion:

In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms, it follows, that *in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine* (p. xxxvii).

If this is true, we must confess how much we need the Psalms! Can we ever have enough of them, if Christian prayer, which is “the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 116), is as strong or as weak as our heartfelt grasp of the Psalms? Calvin’s reasoning here ought to stir us up to read, sing and meditate on the Psalms. Is the Genevan Reformer here identifying the problem with prayer in our land: ignorance of the Psalms and the popularity of modern, uninspired hymnody?

Calvin identified essentially three elements in the public worship of God’s church: the Word (read and preached), the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) and prayer (spoken and sung—the Psalms!). Barry Gritters writes, “although singing is one of the two forms of prayer, and is itself worship, Calvin

claims that the singing-prayers stimulate more and deeper prayers and, thus, better worship.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin declares,

Furthermore, it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be roused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with common love.<sup>3</sup>

Thus singing the prayers of the Psalms stirs us up to further praying and praising.

## **The Psalms and Worship**

Of course, Calvin eulogizes of the Psalms not only with respect to Christian doctrine, piety and prayer, but also in connection with Christian worship. As well as regulating our adoration, the Psalms assure us that God delights in heartfelt, biblical worship.

Besides, there is also here prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise, which he declares to be most precious in his sight, and of the sweetest odour (p. xxxviii).

The Psalms not only teach us the acceptable way of praising God, they also quicken us in that calling by the Holy Spirit.

... in short, there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise (pp. xxxviii-xxxix).

Listen to Calvin extol the soul-stirring effect of believing Psalm singing in the vernacular:

The psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Gritters, “Music in Worship: The Reformation’s Neglected Legacy (1),” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1 (November, 2008), p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Articles for the Organisation of the Church and its Worship at Geneva* (1537).

## *Calvin on the Wonder of the Psalms*

arouse us to an ardor in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of His name. Moreover by this, one will recognize of what advantage and consolation the pope and his creatures have deprived the church, for he has distorted the psalms, which should be true spiritual songs, into a murmuring among themselves without any understanding.<sup>4</sup>

In our day, it is not only “the pope and his creatures” who deprive the church of comprehensible, congregational Psalm singing. In evangelical churches, uninspired hymns are far more frequently sung than the 150 Psalms and Psalm singing is often derided as “dead,” as if the Spirit of Christ’s inspired words are not “spirit” and “life” (John 6:63)!

Reading, preaching and singing the Psalms generated Calvin’s love for them. Herman J. Selderhuis states,

Three facts are brought forward by Erwin Mulhaupt in his [1959 work] to explain Calvin’s affection for this Bible book. First of all the Psalms were of special significance to Calvin personally. He recognised much of himself in David and in difficult times he found comfort and strength in this book of the Bible. Secondly the Psalms are the only book from the Old Testament from which Calvin preached on Sundays. Thus the Psalms were the only exception to his customary practice to preach from the New Testament on Sundays while the Old Testament was reserved for weekdays. Thirdly Mulhaupt mentioned that Calvin has furthered the singing of Psalms during the church service like no other.<sup>5</sup>

In a footnote, Selderhuis observes that, in a later book (1981), “Mulhaupt gives the same three reasons, but he then mentions the one of the *singing* of the Psalms *first*.”<sup>6</sup> Apparently, Mulhaupt came to see that Psalm singing *especially* increased Calvin’s love for the longest book in the Bible.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536-1543*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 69, part 4 (Philadelphia, PA: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms*, p. 14, n. 4; italics mine.

Calvin understood the implications of the excellence of the Psalms with respect to the content of the church's sung praise. In the Preface to the Genevan Psalter (1542), he argues,

Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate for the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.

In the terms of this statement from the French Reformer, modern hymns surely are not “worthy of God,” since they have not been “received ... from him.” “Searching high and low,” including through the myriads of uninspired hymnals, “we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate for the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him.” Singing the Psalms, unlike singing modern hymns, we have assurance that the content of our praise pleases and magnifies Him: “we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.”

Commenting on Paul's inspired words in I Corinthians 14:15, the Reformer writes,

When he says, *I will sing psalms*, or, *I will sing*, he makes use of a particular instance, instead of a general statement. For, as the praises of God were the subject matter of the Psalms, he means by *the singing of Psalms—blessing God, or rendering thanks* to him, for in our supplications, we either ask something from God, or we acknowledge some blessing that has been conferred upon us. From this passage, however, we at the same time infer, that the custom of singing was, even at that time, in use among believers, as appears, also, from Pliny, who, writing at least forty years, or thereabouts, after the death of Paul, mentions, that the Christians were accustomed to sing Psalms to Christ before day-break. I have also

## *Calvin on the Wonder of the Psalms*

no doubt, that, from the very first, they followed the custom of the Jewish Church in singing Psalms.<sup>7</sup>

No wonder Calvin laboured so hard in the face of much opposition to establish congregational singing in Geneva! This was even one of the essentials Calvin and Farel insisted upon in the *Articles for the Organisation of the Church and its Worship at Geneva* which they presented to the city council (16 January, 1537). In instituting church order for the people to “live according to the gospel and the Word of God,” Calvin’s *Articles* required (amongst other essentials): (1) citizens to subscribe to the confession of faith, (2) excommunication to be used as an effective tool of church discipline, (3) *singing of Psalms in public worship*, (4) catechizing children in biblical doctrine to maintain the covenant and (5) drafting of ordinances for marriage.

Calvin declares, “it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be roused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with a common love.” This statement, coming as it does in these *Articles*, makes it clear that, for Calvin, congregational Psalm singing is vital in the reform of the church.

Calvin also wanted quality tunes—grave and majestic—to which to sing the Psalms. Thus he states, in his Preface to the Genevan Psalter,

There must always be concern that the song be neither light nor frivolous, but have gravity and majesty, as Saint Augustine says. And thus there is a great difference between the music one makes to entertain men ... and the Psalms which are sung in the church in the presence of God and his angels.

In his early years there, Calvin was not impressed with the quality of the singing at Geneva, so he took the practical step of requiring that the catechism classes for the children include the memorizing and singing of Psalms. Church office-bearers and Christian school teachers had a role here. Calvin states,

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1993), 1:447; italics in the original.



## *British Reformed Journal*

Write a letter to the judges of the consistory to acquaint them with the fact that the Lord desires that the youth learn to sing the Psalms, and that the principal of the school and his headmaster teach the music of the said Psalms.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin's love for the Psalms led him to labour for many years in the production, enlargement and improvement of French Psalters. In Strasbourg in 1539, when he was about thirty, Calvin published his first Psalter, consisting of nineteen Psalms in French translation—six by himself and thirteen by Clement Marot. Calvin's first Genevan Psalter (1542) included seventeen more metrical Psalms by Marot plus revisions of earlier versions. The 1543 edition contained fifty Psalms. By 1551, this had grown to eighty-three. Marot died in 1544; his work was continued by Theodore Beza. Louis Bourgeois was the main musical editor but tunes in the Genevan Psalters were also supplied by Guillaume Franc (cantor and music teacher in Geneva), Pierre Certon and Maistre Pierre (probably Pierre Davantes).

Steadily expanding Psalters continued to be produced in Geneva: in 1562 [two years before Calvin's death and to his great delight] there appeared a metrical Psalter with all 150 Psalms. This Psalter was reprinted [an amazing] sixty-two times in its first two years and was translated into [an even more amazing] twenty-four languages.<sup>9</sup>

Following the Genevan Reformer, Holladay states, "it was the Calvinist movement that was the primary source for the adaptation of Psalms for congregational singing," before quoting two scholars to the same effect:

The singing of Psalms was one of the incontestably distinguishing marks of Calvinist culture in Europe and America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [though not, alas, today—to the great loss of many professed Calvinists] (Charles Garside, Jr.).

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ford Lewis Battles, *The Piety of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 199.

## *Calvin on the Wonder of the Psalms*

Calvinists were convinced that they could legitimately appropriate the psalms to themselves ... The psalms were *their* songs which they sang as the elect people of God in a covenant relationship with Him (W. Stanford Reid).<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, few today experience this living connection with the Psalms as “*their* songs.” Uninspired hymns are sung well nigh, if not wholly, exclusively, and the God-breathed Psalms are widely viewed as boring and (largely) irrelevant (contrast II Tim. 3:16-17). Our Calvinist forebears would have wondered if modern Christians’ knowledge of predestination and the covenant of grace were deficient. However, with the recovery of the truths of election and God’s covenant friendship comes the recovery of the singing of God’s Psalms, as not only “*their* songs” (the songs of the Old Testament and New Testament church, especially the Reformed churches) but *our* songs. We marvel and wonder at the rich treasury of the Psalter, and, as Calvin puts it, “we are certain that God puts [His] words in our mouths, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.”

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<sup>10</sup> Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, p. 198; italics in the original.