

CFBC Hymns Class 5

The Swiss and French Reformers and their approach to church music...Zwingli and Calvin

Reforming the Church's Singing

W. Robert Godfrey | April 2, 2012

“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord...” (Ephesians 5:19). This call of the apostle to sing reflects one important way that Christians express the Spirit filled life. ***Song is a central manifestation of Christian fellowship (koinonia) as believers together share in praise to God.***

By the late Middle Ages the biblical call to song had become muted. The worshiping congregation did very little singing - only a few responses like the Kyrie eleison, the Gloria in excelsis, and the Sanctus. Most singing was done by choirs composed of monks or clerics. Choir music - in the churches that had them - was often elaborate and sophisticated.

The Reformation made a big change in the church's singing. Congregational participation increased dramatically. Each of the major Reformers - Luther, Zwingli and Calvin – had musical training and had the skill to write poems and tunes. Yet each had significantly different attitudes to music and song in the church.

Today Martin Luther is probably the best remembered Reformer as a writer of hymn texts and tunes. His immortal hymn A Mighty Fortress is one of the best loved among Christians. He believed in the importance and power of song in the church. Luther taught that the praises of the faithful would drive away the devil. He also was convinced that hymns were a great device for teaching doctrine. Lutheran hymnody produced hymns that were at the same time devotional and doctrinal. Think of Ah, Holy Jesus, How Have You Offended or Jesus Priceless Treasure.

Ulrich Zwingli - probably the best musician among the major Reformers - had a radically different position from that of Luther. Zwingli believed that music was too powerful and too emotional to

be used in Christian worship. Under the strong influence of Platonic philosophy, he argued that music would too easily move people away from focusing on the Word and its meaning for them. ***As a result, in Zurich singing was eliminated from worship in Zwingli's day. No musical instruments, no choirs and no congregational singing were permitted. In the place of singing, Zwingli had the congregation recite Scriptural passages antiphonally.***

John Calvin's thought on music in worship was neither so positive as Luther's nor so negative as Zwingli's. Yet Calvin does not just take a compromise position between Luther and Zwingli. He has his own distinctive approach. He sought to be guided by the Bible alone in his thought on music.

Calvin saw congregational singing as a crucial part of the praise of God and of Christian fellowship. He gave it a central place in the Genevan service. He saw the songs of the church as "truly pleasant and delightful fruits" of the Spirit.

But what should the church sing? Calvin believed that Paul wanted "the songs of Christians to be spiritual, and not made up of frivolities and worthless trifles." His search for the spiritual led him to the Psalms. The inspired Word of God, for Calvin, was the proper source of song for the church. Calvin said of the Psalms: "there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror." The Psalms and New Testament songs became the divinely inspired praises of the Genevan church.

Calvin encouraged poets and composers to use their talents for the community to prepare the Psalms for worship. Clement Marot and Theodore Beza were notable poets, and Louis Bourgeois a great composer who contributed to the Genevan Psalter. The Anglican, Winfred Douglas, wrote that Bourgeois was "one of the best melodists who ever lived, a man whose unsurpassed musical contribution to hymnody is only now coming to general appreciation after centuries of neglect."

The Psalm texts and tunes were to be both memorable and singable. This goal was important because Calvin rejected the use of musical instruments to accompany the congregational singing. (He believed that musical instruments were part of the Temple worship of the Old Testament economy and were not warranted in the New Testament era.) The result was the beautiful, simple tunes of Bourgeois and others that were carried beyond Geneva to France, Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, England and America. Those

tunes carried the praises of the Reformed for centuries and continue to be a glory of Reformed Christianity. "The praise of God ... must be guided by God's own Word."

Calvin like Zwingli, feared an excess of emotion in the music of the church as a distraction from the Word. He wanted only unison singing by the congregation. He did not allow choirs, seeing them as too theatrical and as usurping the praises that all God's people together should be offering to God.

In our day we see many changes in church music. Change is sometimes good and sometimes bad. What we need is not change for the sake of change, but reform. As we seek to reform the music of the church, we must try to do that - as Calvin did - in a biblical way. We may need to relearn many of the lessons that Calvin taught us. The praise of God is not a matter of indifference, but must be guided by God's own Word.

Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

Zwingli's Plague Song 'Help, Lord God, Help' – evidence of the deeply formative experience of living in an epidemic

Rev Dr Martyn C Cowan 03.04.20



In August 1519, whilst Zwingli was visiting the spa town of Bad Pfäfers, news came to him that the plague which was sweeping through the Swiss Confederacy had arrived in Zürich. Zwingli had only been ministering in the city for a matter of months, having been installed as the Leutpriester (People's Priest) in January.

The Black Death of the fourteenth century had long passed, but across sixteenth-century Europe there were still devastating waves of bubonic plague. The symptoms included painful swollen lymph nodes (buboes) which gave the disease its name. ***Often those with the means to leave the city would have retreated, but Zwingli immediately returned to the city in order to minister to the sick and the dying.***

By mid-September, when the epidemic had taken some 2,500 lives, ***Zwingli and his brother Andreas contracted the disease and fell seriously ill.*** Over the course of several months, Zwingli battled the disease and he made a slow recovery by the spring of 1520. ***Altogether, the Zurich plague claimed the lives of over 7,000 people, a quarter of the population, including Zwingli's brother Andreas.***

Unsurprisingly, the whole experience had a significant effect upon Zwingli and his future ministry. According to Charles Garside, 'Perhaps no other experience in his life was to affect him quite so profoundly or quite so completely'. We are given an insight into this through the Pestlied (Plague Song) which he penned in 1520. It covers his experience from the time when the plague first struck, through the period when he himself was close to death, until the time of his own recovery.

Help, Lord God, help in this trouble! I think death is at the door.
Stand before me, Christ; for you have overcome him!
To Thee I cry: If it is Thy will, take out the dart, which wounds me,
Nor lets me have an hour's rest or repose!
Will'st Thou, however, that death take me in the midst of my days, so let it be!
Do what Thou wilt; me nothing lacks.
Thy vessel am I; to make or break altogether.

In this poem, Zwingli testifies to his conviction that in both life and death he was under the providential care of a sovereign God to whom he submitted himself.

This experience of suffering bore fruit in his own ministry; as he put it, he saw himself as a 'vessel' or instrument in God's hand. For example, Zwingli would go on to articulate this high view of divine providence in a significant treatise on the doctrine of providence. ***This experience was also deeply formative for Zwingli's preaching ministry. After the plague, as Farner notes, Zwingli's preaching 'reached the heights of absolute clarity and determination'. In particular, as Campi observes, after this profound experience Zwingli 'began to emphasize more strongly***

both human sinfulness and salvation through God's grace alone'. As he put it in the concluding words of the Pestlied, 'my lips must Thy praise and teaching bespeak more than ever before'.

Zwingli's experience, so poignantly captured in the *Pestlied*, demonstrates how harrowing experiences of suffering, such as a devastating epidemic, can be used by God to shape and mould individuals for effective Christian ministry. This reminder from history exemplifies how the fruit of affliction can be growing and maturing even in the most painful and trying of days.

<https://www.union.ac.uk/discover/news-events/blog/80/zwinglis-plague-song-help-lord>

Zwingli's Plague Song "Help, Lord God, Help"

Help me, O Lord,
My strength and rock;
Lo, at the door
I hear death's knock.

Uplift thine arm,
Once pierced for me,
That conquered death.
And set me free.

Yet, if thy voice,
In life's midday.
Recalls my soul,
Then I obey.

In faith and hope
Earth I resign.
Secure of heaven.
For I am Thine.

My pains increase;
Haste to console;
For fear and woe
Seize body and soul.

Death is at hand.
My senses fail.
My tongue is dumb;
Now, Christ, prevail.

Lo! Satan strains
To snatch his prey;
I feel his grasp;
Must I give way?

He harms me not,
I fear no loss,
For here I lie
Beneath thy cross.

After his recovery...

My God! My Lord!
Healed by thy hand.
Upon the earth
Once more I stand.

Let sin no more
Rule over me;
My mouth shall sing
Alone to thee.

Though now delayed,
My hour will come.
Involved, perchance.
In deeper gloom.

But, let it come;
With joy I'll rise,
And bear my yoke
Straight to the skies.

French/Swiss Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564)

Excerpts from “John Calvin on Psalms and Hymns in Public Worship”

Riemer A. Faber

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

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

Calvin writes that the psalms “can stimulate us to lift our hearts to God and rouse us to a zeal in invoking as well as in exalting with praise the glory of His name”. In the 1543 introduction to the psalter Calvin writes much the same: ***psalm-singing incites the believer to meditate upon God, to raise his heart to God, to console himself, and to contemplate the divine virtues of excellence, wisdom and justice.***

The primary goal of corporate singing is not the expression of one’s response to the faith, or the sharing of one’s feelings, but the praising of God for his mercy and grace. Indeed, writes Calvin, “there is prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise”.

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

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

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

The desire to appropriate the Word of God and let it affect the soul is an important element in singing psalms.

Calvin's ideas about the form of corporate psalm-singing were based on his concept of the relation between melody and text. Simply stated, music should support and promote the text. In the chapter of the *Institutes* that deals with singing hymns in church, Calvin rejects "such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight of the ear" as "unbecoming to the majesty of the church". ***Elsewhere he discourages the use of lyrics and melodies that are marked by musical ornamentation, for they detract from the majesty of the church and her worship.*** He writes, "regarding melody, it seemed best that it be moderated in a manner that we have adopted to carry gravity and majesty befitting the subject". ***Following Augustine, Calvin advises that "we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words".***

While music plays a critical role in creating proper effect, it remains secondary to the text. Since human beings are the only creatures endowed with speech, the peculiar gift of understanding words should be used with care. Therefore Calvin discourages the use of polyphony, whereby the text may be confused and too much attention drawn to the music. ***The tune should be a simple means to convey the text.*** In Calvin's view, chromatics, rhythmic variations, and other complications of the music hinder the impact of the text. To be sure, he did not oppose singing in two or more parts, but he did not deem it suitable for congregational worship. ***For Calvin was not so much concerned with the harmony of the sound, as with the harmony of the heart with God. Singing in unison heightens the effect of the text on the mind and the heart, and expresses the conviction that all worshippers belong to the priesthood of believers.***

Calvin was not inclined to promote the use of choirs for both theological and practical reasons. In reaction to the Romanist view of hierarchy within the church and services, Calvin and the reformers stressed the unity of the people of God. Calvin wished to avoid the idea that the performance of music and song in itself was a sacred act that could effect grace. Furthermore, he was averse to the notion that mortals could please God by entertaining Him, as if they could "make him dance" by their music and song.

Given his conviction that the congregational singing is a kind of prayer which has the purpose of glorifying God for his mercy, edifying the believers in the faith, and promoting Christian virtues, Calvin leaves no room to human gratification.

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

<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/john-calvin-psalms-and-hymns-public-worship>

Notes on “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art”

Ken Puls

One of my favorite hymns from the Reformation is “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art.” The words are attributed to John Calvin, from the *Strasbourg Psalter*, 1545. The tune (TOULON) was composed by Claude Goudimel, one of the musicians in Calvin’s church in Geneva. It was originally composed as the melody for Psalm 124 and included in the 1551 edition of the Genevan Psalter.

Calvin has been criticized regarding his convictions about music. One historian (Münz) wrote:

“The Pope of Geneva, that dry and hard spirit, Calvin, lacked the warmth of heart which makes Luther so lovable ... is the foe of all pleasure and of all distraction, even of the arts and music.”

A closer look at Calvin’s thoughts on music, however, reveals that this harsh judgment is unfounded.

During his ministry Calvin came to appreciate music as a valuable part of worship. He learned that music is a useful means to point our minds and hearts to Christ.

He desired the church to sing Scripture and employed the gifts of renowned French poets in his congregation to set all 150 psalms, some of the canticles, and the Ten Commandments into metrical French. Clement Marot began the work on the Genevan Psalter and Theodore Beza completed the work. Louis Bourgeois, Claude Goudimel and other musicians in the church composed tunes to fit the psalms. The first complete edition of the Genevan Psalter was published in 1562 and was widely used. By 1565 it had gone through at least 63 editions.

Calvin recognized the devotional value of music. He encouraged his congregation to sing praise to God, not just in the worship services at church, but in their homes and places of work. In the preface to the 1543 edition of the Genevan Psalter, he wrote:

The use of singing may be extended further: it is even in the houses and fields an incentive for us, like an organ, to praise God and to lift our hearts to Him, for consoling us in meditating upon His virtue, goodness, wisdom and justice, which is more necessary than can be expressed. Firstly, it is not without reason that the Holy Spirit exhorts us so carefully in the Holy Scriptures to rejoice in God that all our joy may be reduced to its true purpose, for He knows how much we are inclined to rejoice in vanity. So our nature causes us to look for all means of foolish and vicious rejoicing. On the contrary, our Lord, to distract us and draw us away from the desires of the flesh and of this world gives us every possible way to occupy ourselves in that spiritual joy which He desires for us. Among all other things which are proper for recreation of man and for giving him pleasure, music is the first or one of the principal and we must esteem it as a gift of God given to us for that purpose.

Calvin's hymn "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art" is a wonderful encouragement to remember and meditate on the gospel. It embodies a major theological emphasis of the Reformation: Solus Christus (Christ Alone). Our salvation is accomplished only by the mediatorial work of Christ. His sinless life and substitutionary atonement are alone sufficient for our justification and reconciliation with God. Indeed, "our hope is in no other save in Thee!"

<http://kenpulsmusic.com/blog/2017/10/i-greet-thee-who-my-sure-redeemer-art/>

I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art

Author (attributed to): Jean Calvin; Translator: Elizabeth Lee Smith (1868, alt.)
Tune: TOULON

1 I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
my only trust and Savior of my heart,
who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.

2 Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,
reigning omnipotent in ev'ry place:
so come, O King, and our whole being sway;
shine on us with the light of thy pure day.

3 Thou art the Life, by which alone we live,
and all our substance and our strength receive;
O comfort us in death's approaching hour,
strong-hearted then to face it by thy pow'r.

4 Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,
no harshness hast thou and no bitterness:
make us to taste the sweet grace found in thee
and ever stay in thy sweet unity.

5 Our hope is in no other save in thee;
our faith is built upon thy promise free;
O grant to us such stronger hope and sure
that we can boldly conquer and endure.

Source: Trinity Psalter Hymnal #282

Calvin quotes on the beauty and glory of Christ...

"I gave up all for Christ, and what have I found? Everything in Christ."

"Whoever is not satisfied with Christ alone, strives after something beyond absolute perfection."

"We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ [Acts 4:12]. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else.

If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him” [1 Corinthians 1:30]. If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects [Hebrews 2:17] that he might learn to feel our pain [cf. Hebrews 5:2]. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross [Galatians 3:13]; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.”

Heidelberg Catechism (1563)...

Q1...What is thy only comfort in life and in death?

That I, with body and soul (1), both in life and in death, am not my own (2), but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ (3), who with His precious blood (4) has fully satisfied for all my sins (5), and redeemed me from all the power of the devil (6); and so preserves me (7), that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head (8); yea, that all things must work together for my salvation (9). Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life (10), and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him (11).

1. 1 Cor. 6:19, 20.
2. Rom. 14:7-9.
3. 1 Cor. 3:23.
4. 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.
5. 1 John 1:7.
6. 1 John 3:8. Heb. 2:14, 15.
7. John 6:39. John 10:28, 29.
8. Luke 21:18. Matt. 10:30.
9. Rom. 8:28.
10. 2 Cor. 1:22. 2 Cor. 5:5.
11. Rom. 8:14. Rom. 7:22