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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CALVIN'S PREFACE TO THE FRENCH METRICAL PSALMS.¹

IN MAY of this year Presbyterians have been celebrating the three hundredth birthday of the Scottish Psalter which, first published in 1650, is still in regular use to-day. The story of the many labours of its compilation reminds us of how much it owed to earlier metrical versions in this country, and to its predecessors on the Continent, particularly to the rhymed French translations of the Psalms used as songs of praise in the churches of Geneva under Calvin. One of the earliest of these versions, a group of fifty psalms in French by Clément Marot, was published in Geneva in 1543, and was recommended in a preface addressed by Calvin "to all Christians and lovers of the Word of God". From the preface it is clear that this collection of psalms, arranged for congregational singing, was part of a general scheme for the education of the faithful in the religious observances proper to a reformed Church, including the forms to be observed in celebrating the Sacraments, in sanctifying marriages and in the offering of prayer and praise to God. For, as Calvin recognised, the reformed faith required a reformed expression. "As for the matter of Church order," he says in a letter about this time,² "had it been at all bearable, we might have been quite ready to leave it alone; but it was such a Babylonish muddle that the only cure for it was to rebuild from the foundation." Moreover, sound doctrine by itself could not create a proper Christian worship; there must always be conjoined with it that fervour of spirit which is the natural expression of deep personal conviction. In contrast with the ritual of worship under the Papacy, a thing "of external ceremonies and even superstitious practices", an order of service for use in the assemblies of the reformed Church must be in accord with the express commands of God as, for example, in celebrating the Supper, and must show a due concern for expression of the genuine feelings of the worshipper. "The reasons for making these changes are more than sufficiently urgent," he tell us. "It was not God alone that we then

¹ *Sur les Psaumes de David traduits en françois par Clément Marot. De Genève.* 10th June 1543.

² "To Monsieur le curé de . . .", 1542 or 3.

worshipped but wood and stones, pictures, relics of the dead and things of a like kind instead of Him." The prayers, always made in Latin, were for most hearers "but murmurings and vague, meaningless noises". The baptismal ceremonies in use were the foolish inventions of men lacking the divine authority, and the Holy Supper was even more profaned. Everything was done and spoken in an unknown language, "just like a magician uttering his charms". Similarly the beautiful public processions intended to stimulate the devotion of the onlooker had no relevance to the cause of Christ and His Church. "For what devotion is it," he asks, "to put your faith in candles and torches, in beautiful and sumptuous equipage, in images, in relics of the dead? All that sort of thing . . . befits pagan rather than Christian worship." Their elaborate musical performances he condemns with the remark: "They shout and sing well enough, but then, it is in an unknown tongue and so against the express command of the Holy Spirit."

To point out the error in these practices was easy enough, but to what pattern, then, was it all to be remade? To Calvin only one answer was possible. Everything said and done in public worship must conform to the Will of God. "In order to ascertain whether any practice is pleasing to God, inquiry must be made if it is according to His Will"; and the answer to that inquiry was contained in the Scriptures wherein men would find the Word of God. There the instructions for the celebration of the Supper, for example, were clearly and definitely set forth and ought to be followed exactly. As for the offering of prayer and praise to God, the Bible was full of teaching about the way of doing this in a manner pleasing to Him. It was in this fashion, then, that Calvin sought to build up a pattern of worship for use in the reformed Church in harmony with "the spirit of truth". "No one has yet shown us," he claimed, "that we have changed anything that was commanded of God or that we have introduced any novelty diminishing His authority, or that we have fallen away from the truth to take up any false doctrine. Rather it is matter of common knowledge that we have reformed our Church according to the divine teaching; and that is the rule by which to put it and to keep it in a healthy state."

In the Preface in which he commends Marot's translation of the Psalms to all Christians, Calvin once more sets forth with his usual clarity his conception of Christian worship. Worship, he

declares, engages and nourishes the whole man; heart and mind must be equally used and affected.

One of the most important demands of the Christian faith is the personal allegiance of each member to the Church community in his area, and his support of it by his attendance at the services both on Sundays and on other days to honour and serve God. On the other hand, it is only right and proper that each member should know and understand what it is that is said and done in church and so be able to receive benefit and edification from it. For our Lord did not institute an order to be observed when we meet in His name merely to provide us with an entertaining spectacle but rather intended that from participation should come benefit for every worshipper. But this cannot happen unless we have been made to understand in what ways the ordinances of the Church can be helpful to us. If anyone says he can be moved to piety by prayers or by ceremonies which he does not understand he is completely deluding himself, though the notion is common enough. True worship of God is not a dead or mechanical thing. It is a living response quickened by the Holy Spirit, by which the heart is genuinely stirred and a light of understanding breaks upon the mind. . . . And so, if we would duly honour those holy ordinances of our Lord in the Church service, we must first know what they are, what they mean, and what is their purpose.

What, then, are the essential features of this order of worship? "Our Lord has commanded," says Calvin, "that in our religious gatherings we should observe particularly three things: the preaching of His Word, the offering of the recognised common prayers, and the administration of the Sacraments." Regarding prayers and Sacraments and the part the congregation have to play in their observance, Calvin has very definite views. Public prayers, he insists, must be offered in the tongue the public speaks.

We have the command of the Holy Spirit that our prayers should be offered in the common tongue understood by the people; for as the Apostle said, the people cannot respond by an Amen to a prayer in a language unknown to them, and since prayer is made in the name of and on behalf of all, each member ought to be sharing in the offering of it. In that case it was a sheer impertinence to introduce Latin into the Church services when it was not the commonly understood tongue.

As for the Sacraments, instead of seeming to consecrate the water in baptism and the bread and wine in the Supper "by a kind of enchantment" effected by "pronouncing over them a few shapeless, incomprehensible mutterings", it must be recognised that true consecration comes through the hearing and receiving of the Word of God. Thus the words of Jesus are not spoken "to the bread to turn it into His body, but are addressed to the company of the faithful; to them He says, 'Take, eat'. I know this seems strange to those unaccustomed to it, but so it

happens with all changes. However, if we are to follow Jesus Christ, we ought to prefer His way to our own way of doing it; and we can hardly call that way new which was the original institution. For the proper conduct, then, of these matters we must both know and understand what is said in them. Our Lord will be opening His mouth in vain to speak to us if our ears cannot make sense of what He is saying ”.

Since the “human tradition ” of worship had diverged so very far from the original pattern, it seemed to Calvin that it would be helpful for the Church to have available a formulary of prayers and the Sacraments “so that everyone might know the manner in which things ought to be said and done in Christian worship. We have therefore,” he goes on, “set forth the way of celebrating the Sacraments and of sanctifying marriage, and have included some of the prayers and praises which we have been using”. Prayers, he affirms, have always been offered in two ways: either in words alone or in words set to music. The Psalms in this book are of course of the second kind, and in recommending them for popular use Calvin makes some observations on the power of music over men. “We know very well by experience how great is the power of singing,” he says, “to touch the hearts of men, and how it can stir them up to call upon God and to praise Him with a warmer and more eager zeal. It is important, of course, to see to it that the tune is not light or frivolous but has weight and dignity. We recall St. Augustine’s saying that there is a great difference between the music we enjoy as entertainment and recreation at home, and the music of the psalms we sing in Church in the presence of God and His angels.” In contrast with many foolish sources of enjoyment music “is to be regarded as a gift of God bestowed upon man to give him true recreation and pleasure. We do admit, as Plato justly observed, that there is hardly anything in the world that sways men’s actions more than music can. We certainly recognise that it has a mysterious and almost unbelievable power of affecting the feelings in one direction or another. For this reason we ought to be most watchful to employ it in such a way that it works to our benefit and not to our hurt ”. It was a realisation of this danger in music, he adds, which led the early leaders of the Church to condemn “lewd and wicked songs ” among their people, and to describe them, “not without cause, as a poison by which Satan sought to corrupt the world ”.

He agrees with St. Paul that all evil words corrupt good habits, but points out that "when these are joined to music they pierce the heart more keenly and reach deeper in; for just as we deliver wine into a container by means of a funnel, so by means of the melody the corrupting poison pours right into the depths of the soul. What, then, is to be done about it?" Clearly, if words are to be joined by so powerful an ally as music, they themselves must be of the highest virtue.

We must get hold of songs which are not only seemly but pious as well, words which will spur us on to prayer and praise of God, and to meditation on His works, so that we may love, honour, fear and glorify Him. It was St. Augustine who declared that no one can sing things worthy of God unless he has received them first of all from Him; and so, we may hunt high and low in every direction but we will find no better songs nor any better fitted to our purpose than the psalms of David. Here we have psalms which have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, and so when we sing them we are sure that it is God who is putting the words into our mouths, just as though He Himself were singing within us to show forth His glory. Chrysostom was thinking of this when he recommended that men as well as women and children should practise the singing of psalms, so that while thus engaged their thoughts might mould them into fit companions for the angels.

As for the melody, Calvin suggests, "the best thing would be to fashion it on the model which we have given in order to convey that weight and dignity suitable to the subject and appropriate for singing in Church".

Finally, he urges that just as the mind must be exercised in worship, the heart, too, must be active and its sentiments genuine. St. Paul, he reminds us, declares that our songs of praise must be sung with sincerity.

But sincerity implies that we have a grasp of the meaning. Therein lies the difference, according to St. Augustine, between the songs of men and of birds. The linnets and the nightingales may sing beautifully but their singing lacks significance. The songs of men are meant to convey some meaning to us; when we have understood we can pass on to appreciation and love. That can best be done if we learn them by heart; then the words will be as familiar to our minds as if they were part of our own thoughts.

Calvin thus commends the singing of the psalms as a proper part of the worship which God enjoins upon all Christians. He has also made use of the Preface, as we have seen, to set forth again the principles on which he believed the reformed order of service in the Church should be built. Mind and heart must both be occupied in worship. Prayers must be spoken in the common tongue, since the congregation must join fully in

prayers offered on their behalf; the "high mystery" of the Sacraments must be clearly expounded in the words authorised by Scripture, and the hearts of all must be poured out in songs of praise which will honour God and uplift the worshippers. Thus, like the Apostle, they "will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also".

Having in this manner expounded the individual church member's responsibility, he concludes his commendation of Marot's booklet with an exhortation to his readers to make a regular habit of singing the psalms. "This present book," he writes, "ought to be particularly welcomed by all who wish to sing God's praises in a suitable manner for their own and their neighbours' benefit. It stands in no great need of special recommendation from me, for it will be appreciated and treasured by reason of its own contents. Only let everyone see to it that instead of doing themselves harm by singing the popular songs which are often empty, frivolous and stupid, or even coarse and unseemly, they make a practice of singing these excellent divine lyrics with good King David."

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