

Musical Instruments and Reformed Worship

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), Vol. I,
537-539, emphasis added, English updated.

Although John Calvin held the use of instrumental music in public worship to be inconsistent with the genius of the Christian dispensation, he regarded the celebration of the praises of God with the melody of the human voice as an institution of great solemnity and usefulness. He knew that psalm-singing is sanctioned by the apostles, and that music has a powerful effect in exciting the mind to ardor of devotion; and to him belongs the merit of having, with the advice of Martin Luther, formed the plan of establishing, as a principal branch of public worship in the Reformed Churches, the singing of psalms, translated into the vernacular [commonly spoken] language, and adapted to plain and easy melodies, which all the people might learn, and in which they all might join.¹

Psalm 33:1-4

- 1 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous! *For* praise from the upright is beautiful.
- 2 Praise the LORD with the harp; Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings.
- 3 Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy.
- 4 For the word of the LORD *is* right, And all His work *is done* in truth.

1. *Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous.* Here the inspired writer addresses believers or the righteous by name, because they alone are capable of proclaiming the glory of God. Unbelievers, who have never tasted His goodness, cannot praise Him from the heart, and God has no pleasure in His name being pronounced by their unholy tongues. But the context shows more distinctly why this exhortation is suitable for believers only. Many, accordingly, expound the latter clause, *Praise is beautiful for the upright*, as meaning, that if the ungodly or hypocrites attempt this exercise, it will turn to the reproach and dishonor of God rather than to his praise; nay, more, that they only profane His holy name. It is, no doubt, very true, as I have already remarked, that God creates for Himself a church in the world by gracious adoption, for the express purpose, that His name may be duly praised by witnesses suitable for such a work. But the real meaning of the clause, *Praise is beautiful for the upright*, is, that there is no exercise in which they can be better employed. And, assuredly, since God by His daily benefits furnishes them with such matter for celebrating His glory, and since His boundless goodness, as we have elsewhere seen, is laid up as a peculiar treasure for them,

¹ Immediately upon the publication of Clement Marot's version of David's Psalms into French rhymes at Paris, Calvin introduced it into his congregation at Geneva, set to plain and popular music; and it soon came into universal use throughout the numerous congregations of the Reformed Church of France. At length Marot's Psalms formed an appendix to the Catechism at Geneva, and became a characteristic mark or badge of the Calvinistic worship and profession. Marot's translation, which did not aim at any innovation in the public worship, and which he dedicated to his master Francis I., and the ladies of France, received at first the sanction of the Sorbonne [the Roman Catholic university in Paris], as containing nothing contrary to sound doctrine. But Calvin knew the character of the book better than the doctors of the Sorbonne, and having, by his influence, obtained its introduction into the worship of the Protestant Church of France, it contributed so much, in consequence of its extraordinary popularity, to the advancement of the Reformed cause in that country, that it was interdicted [prohibited] under the most severe penalties; and, in the language of the Romish Church, psalm-singing and heresy became synonymous terms. — *Warton's History of English Poetry*, volume 3, pages 164, 165.

it were disgraceful and utterly unreasonable for them to be silent in the praises of God. The amount of the matter is, that the principal exercise in which it becomes the righteous to be employed is to publish among men the righteousness, goodness, and power of God, the knowledge of which is implanted in their minds. Following other interpreters, I have translated the clause, *Praise is beautiful*, but the word rendered *beautiful* may also be properly rendered *desirable*, if we view it as derived from the Hebrew word that signifies to *wish* or *desire*. And certainly, when God allures believers so sweetly, it is proper that they employ themselves in celebrating His praises with their whole hearts. It is also to be observed, that when the prophet, after having in the first clause used the appellation, *the righteous*, immediately adds the words, *the upright*, which comprehend the inward integrity of the heart, he defines what true righteousness is, or in what it consists.

Musical instruments were employed in worship under the old covenant.

2. Praise the Lord upon the harp. It is evident that the Psalmist here expresses the vehement and ardent affection which the faithful ought to have in praising God, when he enjoins musical instruments to be employed for this purpose. He would have nothing omitted by believers which tends to animate the minds and feelings of men in singing God's praises. The name of God, no doubt, can, properly speaking, be celebrated only by the articulate voice; but it is not without reason that David adds to this those aids by which believers were accustomed to stimulate themselves the more to this exercise; especially considering that he was speaking to God's ancient people.

New covenant Christians are not to use musical instruments in worship.

There is a distinction, however, to be observed here, that we may not indiscriminately consider as applicable to ourselves, every thing which was formerly enjoined upon the Jews. I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and the violin, and all that kind of music, which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile instruction of the law—I speak of the stated service of the temple.

Compare Psalm 71:22: "Also with the lute I will praise you -- *And Your faithfulness, O my God! To You I will sing with the harp, O Holy One of Israel.*"

To sing the praises of God on 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 thanksgiving. We are not, indeed, forbidden to use, in private, musical instruments, but they are banished out of the churches by the plain command of the Holy Spirit, when Paul, in 1 Cor. 14:13, lays it down as an invariable rule, that we must praise God, and pray to Him only in a known tongue.²

Compare Psalm 81:2: "Raise a song and strike the timbrel, The pleasant harp with the lute."

With respect to the timbrel, harp, and lute, 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 as 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

² Vol. 3, p. 98. 1 Corinthians 14:13: "Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret."

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 time. From this, it is apparent that the Papists have shown themselves to be very apes in transferring this to themselves.³

Compare Psalm 92:1-3: "It is good to give thanks unto the LORD, to sing praises to Your name, O Most High! To show forth Your lovingkindness in the morning, and Your faithfulness in the night, on an instrument of ten strings, on the lute, and on the harp, with harmonious sound."

. . . [The Psalmist] more immediately addresses the Levites, who were appointed to the office of singers, and calls on them to employ their instruments of music—not as if this were in itself necessary, only it was useful as an elementary aid to the people of God in these ancient times. We are not to conceive that God enjoined the harp as feeling a delight like ourselves in mere melody of sounds; but the Jews, who were yet under age, were astricted to the use of such childish elements. The intention of them was to stimulate the worshippers, and stir them up more actively to the celebration of the praise of God with the heart. 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 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.⁴

Christians have the liberty to enjoy musical instruments at other times, but even then they should seek music that is glorifying to God.

For even now, if believers choose to cheer themselves with musical instruments, they should, I think, make it their object not to dissever their cheerfulness from the praises of God.

Musical instruments, the burning of incense, the lighting of candles, and other such outward displays of old covenant worship are not appropriate for Christian worship. Christ has abolished these shadows of the law; today believers are to worship in spirit and truth, with simplicity. God has told us in the New Testament how we are to worship God rightly as new covenant believers.

But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law.

God is pleased when we worship Him in simplicity by only following what He commands.

³ Vol. 3, p. 312.

⁴ Vol. 3, pp. 494-495.

The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to Him. Paul allows us to bless God in the public assembly of the saints only in a known tongue (1 Corinthians 14:16). The voice of man, although not understood by the generality, assuredly excels all inanimate instruments of music; and yet we see what St. Paul determines concerning speaking in an unknown tongue. What shall we then say of chanting, which fills the ears with nothing but an empty sound? Does any one object, that music is very useful for awakening the minds of men and moving their hearts? I own it; but we should always take care that no corruption creep in, which might both defile the pure worship of God and involve men in superstition.

Moreover, since the Holy Spirit expressly warns us of this danger by the mouth of Paul, to proceed beyond what we are there warranted by him is not only, I must say, unadvised zeal, but wicked and perverse obstinacy.