

JOHN CALVIN
THE FORM OF PRAYERS AND SONGS OF THE CHURCH
1542

LETTER TO THE READER*

translated by
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As it is something very requisite and most necessary in Christianity that each believer keep and attend communion of the church in his place, frequenting the assemblies held both on Sunday as well as the other days to honor and serve God, it is also expedient and reasonable that all know and understand what is said and done in the church to receive from it benefit and edification. For our Lord did not institute the order to which we hold when we gather in his Name merely to amuse people in seeing and gazing upon it; rather, he willed that from it all his people might profit, as St. Paul testifies, commanding that everything done in the church be for the common edification /13/ of all (1 Cor. 14:26).

What the servant would not command, such was not the intention of the Master. Unthinkable would it then be for us not to be instructed to have understanding of all that has been ordained for our benefit. For to

*The translation of this "Letter to the Reader" was among the unpublished papers of Dr. Battles at the time of his death. It was thought fitting to offer it here to the reading public in view of Dr. Battles' great contribution to the Englishing of Calvin's works and of his growing interest in Calvin as above all a churchman. The tract which this "Letter to the Reader" introduces contained liturgical forms for the Morning Service on the Lord's Day (especially the prayers), Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the Celebration of Marriage in the worship service, together with a brief instruction to pastors for Visitation of the Sick. (These can be found in *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, Vol. II, tr. by Henry Beveridge, ed. by Thomas F. Torrance [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], pp. 100-128.) To these were added French versifications of Psalms 46, 25, 91, 138, 36, 120, 142, 43, 113, the Song of Simeon and the Ten Commandments (in that order) and the eight-stanza hymn "Salutation a Jesus Christ" ("I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art"), all intended for congregational singing. The French text used by Dr. Battles is that found in *Joannis Calvinii Opera Selecta*, ed. by P. Barth and W. Niesel, Vol. 2, 1952, pp. 12-18.

Editor.

say that we could have devotion either at prayer or at the ceremonial rite without understanding anything of it—that is a great mockery, as is commonly said. Good affection toward God is not a dead and brutish thing, but it is a lively movement proceeding from the Holy Spirit when the heart is rightly touched and the understanding illumined. Actually, if one could be edified by visible things without knowing what they signify, St. Paul would not so rigorously have forbidden speaking in an unknown language; and he would not have used the reason that there is no edification save where there is teaching. Moreover, if we wish duly to honor the holy ordinances of our Lord, which we employ in the church, the chief one is to know what they contain, what they mean and what their purpose is in order that their use may be profitable and salutary, and consequently rightly regulated. But to sum up, there are three things which our Lord has commanded us to observe in our spiritual assemblies. These are the preaching of his word, public and solemn prayers and the administration of his sacraments.

On this occasion I pass over speaking about the preaching of his word as this is not the topic at issue. Regarding the two remaining parts, we have the express commandment of the Holy Spirit that prayers be made in the common language known to the people. As the Apostle says, the people cannot respond Amen to a prayer made in a strange language (1 Cor. 14:16). But since one has done it in the name and the person of all, each one must participate in it. Hence, it is utterly shameful that some introduce the Latin language in the churches, where it is not commonly understood. And there is no subtlety or cavil whereby they can excuse themselves that this fashion is not perverse and displeasing to God. For one must then presume that God deems agreeable what is done directly contrary to his will, and as it were despite him. But one could not despise him more and go thus contrary to his defence and glory in this rebellion as if it were a holy and most praiseworthy thing.

As for the Sacraments, if we regard closely their nature, /14/ we shall recognize that it is a perverse custom to celebrate them in such a way that the people have nothing of it apart from merely seeing, without explanation of the mysteries there contained. For if they are visible words, as St. Augustine calls them, they must not be merely an outward spectacle, but the teaching must be linked with them to give understanding of them. And also our Lord in instituting them has clearly demonstrated that, for he said that these are testimonies of the covenant which he made with us and which has been confirmed by his death (Mt. 26:26ff.; Lk. 22:14ff.; 1

Cor. 11:23ff.). It is necessary, therefore, to accord them their place that we know and recognize what is said there. Otherwise it would be in vain that our Lord opened his mouth to speak, if there were no ears to hear.

However, there is no point to a long argument about it. For when the matter is judged by mere reason, there would be no one who would not confess that it is mere folly to amuse the people with signs, the meaning of which is not revealed to them. Therefore it is easy to see that in so administering the Sacraments of Jesus Christ they are profaned so that people do not comprehend the words spoken to them. As a matter of fact, one can see the superstitions which follow after them. For it is a matter of common belief that the consecration, both of the water of Baptism and the bread and wine in the Supper of our Lord, are a sort of magic, as if, when one breathes and pronounces these words from the mouth, insensible creatures feel the force thereof even though men understand nothing of it.

But true consecration is that done by the word of faith when it is declared and received, as St. Augustine says (*In Joh. tract. 80.3*, etc.). That is expressly comprised in the words of Jesus Christ. For he does not say to the bread that it is made his body, but he addresses his word to the company of the faithful, saying: "Take, eat, etc." If then we wish to celebrate the sacrament properly, we must have the teaching by which that which is signified there is declared to us. I well know that this seems very strange advice to those unaccustomed to it—/15/ as happens in all new things. But there is good reason, if we are disciples of Jesus Christ, that we should prefer his institution to our custom. And what he has instituted from the very beginning must not seem to us new advice.

If that cannot still enter into the understanding of each one, we must pray God that it please him to illumine the ignorant, to make them understand how he is wiser than all the men of the earth, in order that they may learn not to tarry any longer in their own sense nor in the foolish and mad wisdom of their guides, who are blind. However, this book will profit not only the people of this church, but also all those who desire to know what form the faithful ought to hold to and to follow when they gather in the name of Jesus Christ. We have therefore gathered together in a summary the manner of celebrating the sacraments, of sanctifying marriage and as well the prayers and praises we use.

We shall speak of the sacraments at some later time. As for the public prayers, they are of two sorts: some of them make use of speaking alone,

the others are with singing. This is nothing of recent invention. For from the very beginning of the church this was so, as the histories show (Eusebius, *HE* 5.28.5 etc.). And even St. Paul speaks not only of praying with the mouth but also of singing.

In truth, we know by experience that singing has great power and vigor to move and inflame men's hearts to call upon and praise God with a more vehement and burning zeal. One must always see to it that the singing not be light and frivolous but have weight and majesty, as St. Augustine says (*Aug. Conf.* 10.33). Thus there is a great difference between music that one makes to give joy to men at table and in their houses on the one hand and the Psalms, which are sung in the church in the presence of God and his angels. But when one wishes rightly to judge the form which is here set forth, we hope it will be found to be holy and pure, seeing that it is simply intended for the edification of which we have spoken, although the use of singing extends much farther. Even in houses /16/ and in the fields it would be for us an incitement and as it were an organ to praise God, and to raise our hearts to him for him to console us, as we meditate upon his power, goodness, wisdom and justice.

What is more necessary one could not say. First of all, it is not without reason that the Holy Spirit exhorts us so carefully by the holy Scriptures to rejoice in God and that our whole joy be directed there as to its true end. For he knows how we are inclined to rejoice in vanity. So completely does our nature draw us and lead us to seek after every means of foolish and vicious enjoyment. Also, to the contrary, our Lord, to distract us and draw us away from the allurements of the flesh and of the world, presents us every means possible in order to occupy us in that spiritual joy which he so much commends to us. But among the other things which are appropriate to recreate man and give him desire, music is either the first or one of the chief ones, and we must deem it to be a gift of God intended for this use.

However, we must guard against abusing it for fear of soiling and contaminating it and thus converting it to our condemnation when it is intended for our profit and salvation. If there were no other consideration than this one alone, namely that we must be moved to moderate the use of music, to make it serve all honesty and that it may not be occasion to unbridle us to dissoluteness or to weaken us to disordered delights, and that it may not be an instrument of fornication or any immodesty. But there is still another advantage. For there is scarcely anything in this

world more capable of turning or bending hither and thither the customs of men, as Plato has wisely remarked (*Rep.* 3.12, 401B; *Laws*, 2.8, 664B). And actually we know by experience that it has a secret power, almost unbelievable, to move morals one way or another.

Therefore we ought to be even more diligent to regulate it, to the end that it may be useful for us and not dangerous. For this reason, the ancient Doctors of the church oftentimes complained that the people of their times were given to dishonorable and immodest songs, which with good reason they considered and called deadly and devilish poison to corrupt the world (Aug., *Enarr. in Ps.*, 2.1; Chrysostom, *In Psal.* 41.1.2; *In Matt.*, Hom 68.4; 27.5). But in speaking now of /17/ music, I understand two parts, that is, the letter or subject and matter; secondly, singing or melody. It is true that all evil speaking (as St. Paul says) perverts good morals (1 Cor. 15:33), but when melody accompanies it, it pierces the heart much more strongly and so enters inside it. Just as by a funnel wine is forced into a vessel, likewise venom and corruption is distilled into the depths of the heart by melody. What then is to be done? We must have songs not only honorable but also holy, which are to be like needles to arouse us to pray and praise God, to meditate on his works, in order to love him, fear, honor and glorify him.

But what St. Augustine says is true, that no one can sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from him. For when we have searched here and there, we will not find better songs nor ones more appropriate for this purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit has spoken to him and made. Therefore, when we sing them, we are certain that God has put the words in our mouth as if they themselves sang in us to exalt his glory. Consequently Chrysostom exhorts both men, women and little children to learn to sing them in order that they may be like a meditation to associate them with the company of angels (Chrysostom, *In Ps.* 41.1,2).

Besides, we must remember what St. Paul says, that spiritual songs cannot be better sung than from the heart (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). But the heart requires understanding. And in that (says St. Augustine) lies the difference between the singing of men and that of birds (Aug. *Enarr. in Ps.* 81, 2.1). For a Linnet, a Nightingale or a Popinjay will sing well, but it will be without understanding. But man's proper gift is to sing, knowing what he says; after understanding must follow the heart and the affection, something that can only happen when we have the song imprinted on our memory never to cease singing it.

For these reasons the present book, even for this cause beyond the rest that has been said, must be especially recommended to each one who desires to rejoice honorably and toward God, with regard to his salvation and to the benefit of his neighbors. Thus I really have no business recommending it so highly on my own inasmuch as in them it carries its own value and praise; only that the world should be so well advised that in place of songs of a /18/ vain and frivolous sort, some stupid and dull, some coarse and vile, and consequently evil and harmful, used here heretofore, it should accustom itself hereafter to sing these divine and heavenly songs with good King David. With respect to the melody, it seemed best that it be moderate, in the manner that we have set it, to bear a gravity and majesty fitting to the subject and also to be appropriate to sing in the church, as has been said.

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