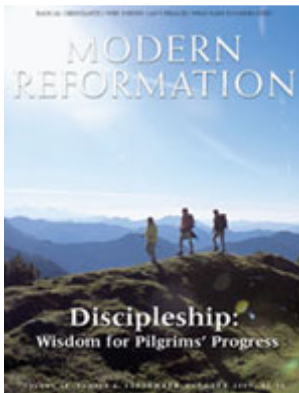


Celebrating Calvin

Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different Because of John Calvin

David W. Hall



Music in the Vernacular: The Psalter

One of Calvin's early initiatives was to translate music designed for use in public worship into the language of the day. Realizing that what people sing in a holy context has enduring impact on how they act, Calvin wanted worship—in all its aspects—to be intelligible. Shortly after his settling in Geneva, he urged a talented musician, Clement Marot, to translate the Psalms into mid-sixteenth-century French. Calvin wanted participants in worship, not only the clergy, to be able to understand and reiterate the truths of Scripture—this time in poetic structure. His democratizing of holy song and other elements of worship made parishioners participants in Divine Liturgy; simultaneously, it also boosted the endeavor of artists.

Hymns and songs powerfully lodged distinct ideas in the popular mind, especially when aided by reading the Bible in the common language and sermons that were understood by the masses. The singing of the Psalms afforded these Protestants the occasion to confess their beliefs, and some anti-Protestants even went so far as to view the singing of the Psalms as an inherently subversive act!

Marot never completed his translation and arrangement of the Psalms, but Calvin's disciple Theodore Beza was as committed—if not more so—to this project, which would both alter the nature of Protestant worship as well as further engrain scriptural teachings into the Puritan mind. Beza even sponsored a hymn-writing contest shortly after Calvin's death in his attempt to match the poetry of the Psalter with singable tunes.

Perhaps the largest single printing venture of the sixteenth century, Beza's French translation of the Psalms into metrical form went to press in Geneva's old town. This Psalter, which became the international songbook of expansionistic Calvinism, went through numerous editions (27,400 copies were printed in 1562 alone). Stanford Reid notes that to a greater degree than "all the fine theological reasoning, both the catechism and the Psalter entered into the very warp and weft of the humblest members' lives. For this the credit must largely go to the first pastor of Geneva."

Other importers of Calvinism to the West, besides the various Psalters, were the *Geneva Bible* and Beza's *New Testament Annotations*, which inspired readers ranging from Shakespeare (in his plays composed during the 1590s, Shakespeare quoted from the Geneva Bible) to American colonists with "scores of marginal notes on covenant, vocation...deposition of kings, the supremacy of God's Word [over human tradition], and the duty of orderly resistance to tyranny." Beza and Marot's hymnbook of metrical Psalms, which became surprisingly popular, paved the way for acceptance of other ideas championed by the enormously influential Beza. Accordingly, art was elevated and became useful for cultural progress.

When Puritan settlers colonized North America, one of the consistent best-sellers of the day was the Bay Psalter, a thinly disguised revision of Calvin's Psalter. Calvin's disciples knew that the faith that sings powerful truths will also pass those truths on to future generations, and worship music set in the vernacular was a strong step in that direction.

The Power of Publishing Ideas: The Genevan Presses

If Martin Luther seized on the potential of the printing press, Calvin and his followers elevated the use of the press to an art form. With the rise of the Gutenberg press, the Reformers seized the new media with a vengeance to multiply their thought and action plans. Perhaps no first generation Reformer seized the moment like John Calvin. Expressing his thoughts with clarity and regularity was part of his life.

The ability to defend the views of Calvin rapidly in print magnified the lasting impact of his thought. The number of books published in Geneva rose from three volumes in 1536 to 28 in 1554 and to 48 by 1561. The number of volumes printed in Geneva the five years prior to his death was a stunning average of 38 volumes per year (a tenfold increase in 25 years). The average dropped to 20 per year after his death. By 1563, there were at least 34 presses, many manned by immigrants. Shortly after Calvin's death, one contemporary wrote: "The printed works flooding into the country could not be stopped by legal prohibition. The more edicts issued by the courts, the more the booklets and papers increased."

Geneva also developed an extensive and efficient literary distribution system. A childhood friend of Calvin, Laurent de Normandie (who later became mayor of Noyon), developed a network of distributors who took Genevan Calvinist publications into France and other parts of Europe. Many of the books were designed to be small for quick hiding, if need be, within clothing. Thousands of contraband books were spread throughout Europe during Calvin's time, and several distributors of literature became Protestant martyrs.

So successful was Calvin's city at spreading the message that all books printed in Geneva were banned in France beginning in 1551. Calvin's *Institutes* (along with at least nine of his other writings) had been officially banned in France since 1542, but that could not halt the circulation of his books. As a result, Geneva was identified as a subversive center because of its publishing; and the 1551 Edict of Chateaubriand forbade, among other things, importing or circulating Genevan books. Distributing such works for sale could incur secular punishment. However, many books still filtered across porous European borders. Some shrewd printers, unwilling to be thwarted by state censorship, cleverly responded by employing typeset fonts that were commonly used by French printers and published under fictitious addresses. This new medium and its energized distribution pipeline allowed Calvin's message to transcend Geneva's geographical limitations.

Calvin's thought spread throughout Europe and sailed over the Atlantic with various colonists, cropping up frequently in sermons and pamphlets in different colonies. If English sermons in the seventeenth century were still referencing Calvin's *Institutes* as a robust source for opposing governmental abuse, American colonial sermons conveyed his sentiments even more. "Probably no other theological work," wrote Dartmouth historian Herbert Foster, "was so widely read and so influential from the Reformation to the American Revolution....In England [it] was considered 'the best and perfectest system of divinity' by both Anglican and Puritan until [Archbishop William] Laud's supremacy in the 1630s. Oxford undergraduates were required to read Calvin's *Institutes* and his Catechism in 1578." "Most colonial libraries seem to contain some work by Calvin," and "scarcely a colonial list of books from New Hampshire to South Carolina appears to lack books written by Calvinists."

Even the Scottish philosopher David Hume, a fan of neither Knox nor Calvin, admitted: "The republican ideas of the origin of power from the people were at that time [about 1607] esteemed as Puritan novelties." Calvin's ideas, then, took on a life of their own and became the actions emulated by many others, due in no small measure to the printing press and Calvin's wise employment of the latest technology. A strong case can be made that the most determinative religion at the time was Calvinism or one of its offshoots. Long after his death in 1564, Calvin would live on and continue to mentor many through his writings, which are still widely available today.

1 [[Back](#)] W. Stanford Reid, "The Battle Hymns of the Lord: Calvinist Psalmody of the Sixteenth Century," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1971), 43, 45. Reid comments: "Whether one thinks of the fourteen martyrs of Meaux who sang the 79th Psalm, the five scholars of Lausanne in Lyon who sang Psalm 9, or others who turned to other parts of the Psalter as they went to their deaths, one can see how in the last great struggle of faith, the Psalms indeed were true battle hymns" (46). These Psalms, once engrained, fit "every occasion and form of resistance."

2 [[Back](#)] E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), 181.

3 [[Back](#)] Reid, 36-54, speaks of the Psalms as the battle hymns of "one of the earliest modern resistance movements." Reid also describes Calvin's view of church music as a via media between Luther's liberal embrace of contemporary music and Zwingli's elimination of music at the Grossmunster.

4 [[Back](#)] See David L. Edwards, *Christian England: From the Reformation to the Eighteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 146. In "A Translation Fit for a King," *Christianity Today* (22 October 2001), David Neff argues how biblical translation powerfully aided the flow of liberty: "Logically, it is a fairly short step from the biblical language of liberty to the secular politics of liberty." For more, see: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/013/6.36.html>.

5 [[Back](#)] Robert M. Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1970), 40.

6 [[Back](#)] Herbert D. Foster, *Collected Papers of Herbert D. Foster* (privately printed, 1929), 93.

7 [[Back](#)] Alister McGrath contrasts Calvin's success with that of Zurich reformer, Vadian, and identifies Calvin's "extensive publishing programme" as one of the differences. Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 124-26.

8 [[Back](#)] Monter, 79.

9 [[Back](#)] Robert Kingdon explains that the number was likely more since some were co-opted by others. In 1562, neighbors complained that paper mills were running round the clock. Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1956), 94. Jean Crespin even contracted to purchase bales of paper from outside Geneva (95).

10 [[Back](#)] *Documents on the Continental Reformation*, ed. William G. Naphy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 87.

11 [[Back](#)] Monter, 82. Robert Kingdon notes that the books were so well circulated that as early as 1560 the cardinal of Lorraine had successfully collected twenty-two pamphlets that had criticized him. Kingdon, 103. Another historian in 1561 reported the spread to Paris of Beza's Psalter, catechisms, and popular Christian books, "all well bound in red and black calf skin, some well gilded" (103).

12 [[Back](#)] Monter, 82.

13 [[Back](#)] *Calvinism in Europe, 1540-1610: A Collection of Documents*, trans. and ed. by Alistair Duke, Gillian Lewis, and Andrew Pettegree (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 57.

14 [[Back](#)] McGrath, 12. See also E. Droz, "Fausses adresses typographiques," *Bulletin of Historical Research* 23 (1961), 380-86, 572-74.

15 [[Back](#)] Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 37. The sermon referred to by Foster is a 1663 sermon by British minister Robert South, who referred to Calvin as "the great mufti of Geneva." *Collected Papers of Herbert D. Foster* (privately printed, 1929), 116.

16 [[Back](#)] Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 37. Other historians argue that the Puritanism of New England was "patterned after the Westminster Catechism and embodied the type of Calvinistic thought current in all of New England at that time." See Peter De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology, 1620-1847* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 85. Foster, 79, lists the numerous Americans who owned copies of Calvin's Institutes. Patricia Bonomi has also firmly established that the majority of seventeenth-century Americans followed "some form of Puritan Calvinism, which itself was divided into a number of factions." See Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

17 [[Back](#)] Cited in Charles Arrowood posted at: http://www.visi.com/~contra_m/ab/jure/jure-chapter3.html.

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