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### The History of the Genevan Psalter

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Calvin was forced to leave Geneva on April 23, 1538 because the Genevan council had agreed to subscribe to a particular liturgical practice developed for several of the Swiss cantons. Calvin and Farel refused to comply and were thus exiled from the city. At first they went to Bern and then to the synod at Zürich in order to explain their reluctance to accept the practices. While at the synod, Calvin accepted the practices and at the same time, proposed fourteen articles for ecclesiastical reform in Geneva. Article 13 called for the singing of psalms in worship. These articles were approved unanimously by the synod, but Geneva refused to take Calvin back. So after five months, Calvin arrived in Strasbourg where he became the pastor for the French-speaking congregation.

Calvin was certainly influenced by Bucer in using the Psalms within the congregation. Calvin informed Farel in a letter dated October 1538 that he was using the Strasbourg liturgy for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. "For the first time, we have administered the sacrament of the Supper in our little church according to the custom of the place." <sup>1</sup>

This included singing the psalms in the vernacular as confirmed by Johannes Zwick in a letter to Heinrich Bullinger on November 9, 1538. By December 1538, less than four months after arriving in Strasbourg, Calvin announced to Farel that he was preparing a French psalter for his congregation. This psalter was published in 1539 as *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant*.

At this point we must back up in history and introduce another important figure in the history of the French Psalter, Clement Marot (c.1497—1544). Marot was the favorite poet of Francis I at Paris and of his sister Marguèrite d'Angoulême. He was imprisoned as a Lutheran in 1526 and again in 1527 but the king interceded for him and appointed him as *valet de chambre*. He began setting the Psalms to metrical verse (1532—33), even learning Hebrew to help him in his work. These settings became all the rage in the court and circulated outside of the court as well. Marot met Calvin in 1536 when Calvin was at the court of Renée of France in Ferrara. Marot had fled there fearing arrest for a poster campaign against the Mass. Although they had met, we do not know whether Calvin obtained Marot's psalms directly from him or whether he gathered them from other Protestants who collected them for their own use and worship. The latter is considered the most likely. The Protestants who wanted to sing psalms in their worship were inclined to collect such settings. Calvin collected these psalms as well, and placed thirteen of Marot's settings in *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant* (1, 2, 3, 15, 19, 32, 51, 103, 114, 115, 130, 137). Calvin himself tried his hand at writing metrical psalms, and the other six psalms and songs (*cantique*) in the psalter were probably by him (25, 36, 46, 91, 113, 138, Song of Simeon, the Decalogue, and the Creed).

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Psalm 113 and the Creed were not metered but written in prose.

The music for the psalter was composed by two very fine musicians in Bucer's church, Matthäus Greiter (c.1494—1550) and Wolfgang Dachstein (c.1487—1553). Both men were monks who had come to the Strasbourg Minster by 1520, Greiter as cantor and Dachstein as organist. Dachstein converted to Protestantism in 1523 and persuaded Greiter to convert in 1524. They played important parts in the writing of the *Strassburger Kirchenampt*, 1525. Greiter contributed seven hymns and four liturgical pieces including his most famous melody *Es sind doch alle selig* (Psalm 119) whose melody was taken by Calvin into the *Genevan Psalter* through *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant* as Psalm 36 and 68. Three psalm melodies were contributed by Dachstein. His most famous melody is *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* which is used for the hymn "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth." Their work in *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant* is such that we cannot distinguish which melodies they composed. The quality was so good, however, that they became the models for the rest of the Genevan Psalter, and most of them came into the psalter either directly or slightly reworked.

Bucer's influence on Calvin's musical thought is significant in that up to this point Calvin had not given music much thought with regards to theology, at least in writing. In Strasbourg, Calvin was able to see a Reformed liturgy which included psalm singing. He observed the effect it had on the life of the people and within four months he began to prepare a psalter for the French-speaking congregation. This change of attitude is reflected in the 1539 revision of the *Institutes*. In 1536 Calvin had written the following statement, "Yet, we do not here condemn speaking and singing provided they are associated with the heart's affection and serve it." <sup>2</sup> In the 1539 revision it was modified to, "Yet, we do not here condemn speaking and singing *but rather strongly recommend them*, provided they are associated with the heart's affection and serve it" <sup>3</sup> (emph. added). He had moved from a passive acceptance of psalms in worship to an active recommendation of their use in truly biblical worship. This change of thought would soon make psalm singing, next to the preaching of the Word, the hallmark of Reformed worship.

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