

## Why use Bible Songs and Genevan Tunes

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Indeed, why use two and three thousand year-old-poems and 450 year-old melodies? I'm not a poet in words nor in music. Nevertheless, let's look at the 'stuff' that apparently makes these word-poems and tune-poems so valuable, enduring, and so appropriate and endearing.

### Origins

We use words to formulate or describe things, issues, and thoughts. To be effective, however, such a formulation must include both context and content. For example, the term 'fire' may describe that something is *burning*. When we hear the word in the context of a store or a forest, it means more than that. It usually spells *danger*. To add content, the word must come from the heart. In that way it expresses emotion, feeling and passion. When the word 'fire' comes from the heart, it may be shouted and then it evokes *panic*. In other words, descriptive words form a *picture*, but the heart gives it *colour*.

A rhythmic presentation of words may result in a formula, a proverb, a curse or a blessing. Rhythmic words spoken with passion give birth to poetry, word poems or songs. A musicologist, Mart Lursen, showed that man's need to express his deepest, intimate and innermost emotions of the soul is the source of rhythmic sounds. The most beautiful sound, he said, is **tone**, the musical voice. Instruments try to imitate such rhythmic sounds when making music.

Scripture says, however, that the deeper source for making rhythmic sounds is not man's *need* to express himself. The Bible states, "In the beginning was the Word". God spoke first. He equipped man with ears to hear, a brain to understand and a heart to give life to expressions of the tongue, formed by vocal chords, moved by the breath of life. He gave that breath of life to man before man did anything. (Gen 2:7; Ezek 37:9,10). And what is man to do? He is called God's fellow worker, His co-creator, crown-prince, who is to have dominion over creation. He is to **promote** the work of creation and recreation to the glorification of God's name. God spoke – and so it was! He created and re-created by *speaking* (Gen 1 and 3:15). - Sound. - Rhythm. The whole, amazing beauty of creation was spoken or sung by the LORD. And what did Adam do in the first instance? He responded by giving it back in naming the animals (Milo).

God brought him the animals that were to serve mankind. He presented them to His co-worker to see what he would do. This was like a father giving his toddler a toy and then proudly watches what he will do with it. And how did Adam react? He used his intellect, his brain as well as his senses, to understand and interpret the nature of the animal. Then, from his heart he showed his comprehension by 'singing' and naming the animal. He acted like a toddler who rolls his new toy car while making engine noises. He did not act like the toddler who throws his new toy car like a ball. That would be totally inappropriate. In his book "Zangers en Speellieden", Oosterbaan, 1946, D.W.L. Milo shows that naming the animals indicates three things,

1. Adam's *authority* over creation as God's crown prince.
2. His co-creative *powers* as image bearer and ambassador.
3. His *confession* as a child of God, his Father.

In each name, Adam acknowledged God as Sovereign, Creator and Father. So God gave man the Word, that is everything He created by His Word, and man gave it back by 'wording' it, 'mouthing' it and 'singing' it from the heart. He named the animals and God gave His approval, for

"Whatever the man called each living creature that was its name" (Gen 2:19).

The origin and the effects of words *resound* first of all in what God accomplished. Moreover words were given to *man* and to no other creature. Faithful, truthful and proper use-of-words involve the brain as well as the heart, intellect and emotion. Bible songs are man's reaction to God, his heartfelt *response*. However, let's never forget that these poems from man's soul are found in the Bible. Therefore, they are above all *inspired* by the Holy Spirit, and so, spoken by Christ himself. In that way, they are most appropriate in the liturgy of reformed worship services, then, now and in the future.

## Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

In the Bible we come across rhythmic words, formulas, poems. For example, the blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 is a poem, a poetic formula (Milo). It consists of three lines, each starting with the words, 'the LORD'. In Hebrew, it also shows an increasing climax, by using first three times five letters, then four times five letters and ending with a line using five times five letters. In English, this can be shown by key words that include 'The LORD'. First three, then four and finally five key words.

“The LORD *ble*ss you and *kee*p you.

“The LORD *ma*ke *his* face to *sh*ine upon you and be *gr*acious to you.

“The LORD *tu*rn his face *to*ward you and *g*ive you *pe*ace”.

A climax is also shown in *alphabet* psalms. Each phrase or paragraph starts with the next letter of the alphabet (Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). Other poetic and symbolic uses of the *number* of letters, words or phrases are e.g. Psalm 19 (seven times 'LORD') and Psalm 29 (seven times 'Voice of the LORD'). The five Books of Moses are said to start in Hebrew with 7 words and end with 12 words, as the twelve tribes arrived in Canaan.

However, what is *more important* than the number of words or syllables is the Hebrew **word rhythm**. Hebrew poetry, I gather, is characterized by a *free-flowing rhythm*. Its poetic format is not shown by a fixed number of lines and syllables, nor by rhyming syllables and regularly recurring stresses (meter), but by a free-flowing *word rhythm*. The most important characteristic of Hebrew poetry is determined by the **content**, the thought or feeling expressed by words from the heart. It is non-metric. In all its variety, the basic characteristic is how the content is matched, echoed or contrasted from one phrase to the next, from one thought or idea to the next, regardless of the number of words or syllables. Some call this *parallelism* (see Keil-Delitzsch and TOTC by Kidner). After the initial sentence follows one that reinforces, explains, enlarges or opposes an expressed idea. By using synonyms or other words that echo or match the initial statement, a free-flowing, poetic way of expression is created. We Westerners are usually right-away inclined to separate ideas when different words are used. We tend to analyze, dissect or separate parts to understand the whole. But I read somewhere that Asian languages generally use other words as additives, to give the initial expression more meaning or colour. For example, Psalm 119 uses eight different Hebrew words to express God's self-revealing law. Each term may have a slightly different connotation, but the cumulative effect turns the law, as it were, into an eight-sided jewel. Each facet of a jewel *adds* to its overall beauty. Adding other expressions is intended to make it clearer, more colourful or more forceful. For example, the pairing of ideas in Psalm 8:4, man and son of man, or in Psalm 63:1, my soul and my flesh. Both expressions identify the whole person, soul and body or heart and mind. Psalm 145:18 shows a climax by *enlarging* an idea, in this case with one word,

“the LORD is near to all who call on him, *to all who call on him in truth*”.

Or in Psalm 92:9,

“For surely your enemies O LORD, surely your enemies will perish; *all evildoers will be scattered*”.

Here the idea is not only enlarged, but it is also expanded into a wider picture. So, misinterpretation is less likely. A *contrast* in Hebrew poetry is not just a contrast of words, but of whole ideas, whole sentences. This is often found in Proverbs and in so-called didactic psalms, or instructive songs. For example, Psalm 37:21,

“The wicked borrows and cannot pay,

but the righteous is generous and gives”.

Therefore, Hebrew poetry is characterized by **content** rather than by outward formats of sounds, rhymes and number of lines or syllables. This is a most marvelous thing, because such word content, such ideas, such truth can be taken over and translated into any kind of language without losing its beauty, its subtlety or force. Kidner (TOTC) concludes, that Hebrew poetry is therefore,

“well fitted by God's providence to invite ‘all the earth’ to ‘sing the glory of His name’” (Psalm 66).

Such is the music in a reformed worship service.

## Music in Worship

[Sacrifices were brought in response to God's gift of life since the days of Abel and Noah. *Our* prescribed

sacrifices today are the 'fruit of lips' for God said:

“Return, O Israel, ... Take words with you and return to the LORD” (Hosea 14:1,2).

He also said in the N.T., Hebrews 13:15, “offer to God ... the fruit of lips, that confess his name”.

Congregational singing with mind and soul are *now our offerings*. Music *instruments only* imitate the human voice and are as such *not* a requirement in a worship service. (For more information see my brochure 'Music in Reformed Liturgy' also published in my Psalm & Hymns 2015, Winnipeg, MB.)]

The Book of Psalms is a collection of five sets of songs used in public worship services since the days of David. Elsewhere in the Bible, we also find songs, poems, hymns or psalms. For example, in the book of Isaiah. Are the love song (5:1-7) and the song of praise (12:1-6) not also psalms? Another example is the song of Moses: Deut 32, (Hymn 12, Book of Praise). It is a psalm with prophetic power describing the future of Israel's history. It is like a window into the future. It pictures, just like a video, God's faithfulness and Israel's ingratitude.

Also in the New Testament we find such poetry, for example, Luke 1:46-55; 68-79; 2:29-32; and 1 Cor 13. Paul's dissertation in Romans 11 reaches a high point, a climax (33-36). It is as if he explodes into dancing and singing when the rhythmic sounds of well chosen words express from the heart,

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen”.

A musical song is basically, and perhaps in simplistic terms, no more than exalted-rhythmic-speech (Milo). Music in the worship service is not some added decoration. Calvin said music or singing is a gift of God, and God's gifts are for *life* and *service*. God's gift of singing is presented to the church and it must go from the church into the world. For a dozen centuries, the development of Western music came out of the Christian church. Faith appropriates that gift of life. Calvin showed that God brings recreation or *renewal* and *pleasure* in the worship service. The main components of the worship service, he said, are preaching, prayer and sacraments. He called congregational singing *public prayer in unison*. He added that it is the most important part of thankfulness (LD 45, H.C.). Also at the end of Psalm 72 we read,

“This concludes the ‘prayers’ of David son of Jesse”.

In the preface of the first published song book, 1542, Calvin writes that songs are the principal things that accomplish the purpose of the worship service, namely re-creation and pleasure. Regeneration, rebirth, renewal is what it is all about. God brings that to us in the proclamation of His Word. This results in pleasure and a life of joyful obedience. For that is how believers are *expected to react*. To glorify God and enjoy His presence, today and in the future, is not only our duty. It is also our delight, for it is God's gift in us, and so a fruit of faith (cf. LD 32, QA 86, H.C.). Therefore, Calvin searched for the most edifying way to have the congregation fully exercise their office of prophet, priest and king. He tried to ban from the church the rationalism and humanism of his days. So he did not pick and choose songs that might sound biblical, religious or pious, for they often tended to be subjective and man pleasing. He wanted *reformation*.

Responding to the message of salvation means professing faith, which appropriates the gift of faith in public prayer, in songs of praise. Songs of faith, written by “the men of old”, David, Moses, Mary, Paul, are *inspired by the Holy Spirit*. The church says ‘amen’, or makes a confession of faith, by singing a song provided by the Holy Spirit. God's people ‘give back’ what he gave them – the Divine Word.

Calvin agreed with Ambrose and Augustine to sing songs not about man, not even about God, but *to* God. A congregation should be able to do that together, in unison, and in their mother-tongue. Calvin wanted to return to singing the Word of God, and so pay back to God what is His, and in a most appropriate way.

## Characteristics of Genevan Tunes

Western poets attempted to reflect the Hebrew poetry and so did the music composers. Poets ‘*versified*’ the important content of Bible songs in the style of western poetry. The prosaic version of the translated Hebrew poems was recast, converted or versified into a poetic format of western meter or verse. Each verse or stanza had the same format as the initial one. While Calvin was forced to spend three years in Strasbourg, he had

learned, that versification was the way to go. Therefore, after trying it himself, he engaged competent and faithful composers of poetry and of music.

Music composers had to *reflect* the overall content of a versified song into *one* melody, one tune for all stanzas. A most difficult task, no doubt. Their melodies reflected the *whole* song. The composers made their tune-poems fit the French poems. These were so valuable that in other languages the versification of the songs was made to also fit *these* tunes. An opposite and more difficult task. (In the Netherlands, this resulted in singing the songs for over 200 years until the 1940's, on notes of *one* value, all long ones. So the Psalms were sung on what was called 'non-rhythmic' melodies).

Bible songs, inspired by the Holy Spirit, show a wide variety of emotions. They express truthful guilt and happiness, sincere anxiety and joy, ongoing doubt and confidence, etc. They faithfully address sin, repentance and redemption. Their world-view fits in the framework of true reality, i.e. Creation-Fall-Recreation. They acknowledge our misery, deliverance and thankfulness. To musically express *all* this variety seems rather impossible. Moreover, several songs *start* by voicing personal feelings of despair or regret, but *end* with communal praise after recounting God's deeds (e.g. Psalms 5, 64, 77). How can tunes be expected to reflect such variety?

To achieve all that, the Genevan tunes were not composed by using just the *two* series of building blocks of the day, the major and minor scales. The composers used *nine* distinct series. These so-called *church-modes* had developed in the western world from within the church since before 500 A.D. Their use also diminished the tension caused by the 'lead-tone', which had become popular and most prominently displayed in the new major and minor series of the fifteenth century. (For more information please refer to 'Notes' in my Organ Offertories or in The Hymns, both distributed by Inheritance Publications or my 74 page booklet Genevan Tunes in the Anglo-Genevan Psalter, 2013, originally "TUNES", 2005).

Bible songs, or songs in the divinely inspired Word of God, give peace, confidence and comfort. The quiet *pulse* of the melodies has a similar effect, for it slows down the heart beat. One pulsation of the heart consists of two parts, a contraction and an expansion. The 'Genevans' used the longer note to represent a complete pulse. This longer note is, therefore, the basic unit of the beat. It can be divided into two short notes, which are equal to each other. The one is not stressed over the other, as for example, in a march (**One**-two, **one** -two) or a dance (**one**-two-three, **one**-two-three). It is more akin to the beating of a heart. Therefore, the melodies are not divided into equal sections that emphasize the first beat of each measurement, and so, you will see no 'bar lines' in the music notation. In this way, the pulse of the Genevan tunes is regular, peaceful and undisturbed.

There are other peculiar aspects besides the use of nine mood-reflecting series and the two-note pulse that contribute to Calvin's 'poids et majeste' or gravity and majesty of these melodies. All tunes show *one note* for each syllable (except Ps. 2, 6, 10, 91, 138). Moreover, all songs *start* with a *long* note and never with a short, off-beat note. (Almost 60% of psalm tunes start with *one* long note, 18 melodies show *two* long notes at the start, 26 tunes have *three*, and one tune starts with *four* long notes (Ps 24/62/95/111), while seven tunes start with *five* long notes (Ps 1, 8, 10, 32, 57, 79, 104).

Another aspect of their unique style is the fact that the distances between notes or *steps* are small. They do not jump more than three notes (a fifth interval). In addition, these tunes never use the so-called 'sentimental' *sixth* interval, shown in a few hymns and loved by 'romantics' (e.g. appearing five times in Hymn 41, an 1870 tune and four times in Hymn 7, an 1866 tune).

The Genevan tunes have a numerical *variety* of syllables per line. They do not follow the usual pattern of 8 notes on 4 lines, like many other songs: 8,8,8,8, called the long meter, and 8,6,8,6, the common meter, etc. Those simple structures usually do not reflect the *content* of a song. Therefore, one melody can even serve several songs. Every Genevan tune, however, has its own *unique* structure that differs from any other. This helps reflect the *variety of content* from one poem to another. For examples, the Psalms 1 through 10 show the following patterns respectively,

(Ps.1) 10,10,11; 11,10,10 – (Ps.2) 10,11,10,11;11,10,11,10 - (Ps.3) 6,6,7;6,6,7 (2x) – (Ps.4) 9,8,9,9,8(2x)  
(Ps.5) 9,8,8,9,5 - (Ps.6) 7,7,6; 7,7,6 – (Ps.7) 9,9; 8,8 (2x) – (Psalm 8) 11,11,10,10 – (Psalm 9) 8,8; 9,9 –  
(Psalm 10) 10,10; 10,10; 10,11,11.

All the above factors or *standards* contribute to the original intent of the Hebrew poems. These tunes also promote the congregational, or 'en masse' singing with one voice, in unison. The Bible message, as well as the

melody aim to bring about a peaceful joy, a comforting happiness and a certainty of faith. Everyone is enabled to *participate*. Although composed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, these Genevan tunes are *ageless*. They incorporate styles, themes and building blocks from the days of Moses, the Davidian temple service, the Jewish synagogue and the early Christian church (see also Fulfill Your Ministry, Dr. K. Deddens, 1990, Premier Publ., p.107ff).

Genevan tunes are simple but not simplistic, unique but not difficult, characteristic but not odd, easy to learn but not repetitive, uplifting but not agitating, comforting but not boring, exuberant but not frantic, consoling but not intoxicating, edifying but not hysterical, emotional but not sentimental, lively but not restless, dignified but not haughty, majestic but not pompous, rhythmic but not metric, varied but not strange, joyful but not frivolous.

## Bible Songs

Music that comes from the heart reflects the *content* of the song. Apostate men also speak from the heart. They also bare the innermost feelings of their souls, but they become self-centered. They aim to honour man above all, for songs speak **to** the heart. They are directed to touch man's soul and to solicit sentimental piety. They satisfy *personal needs* and feelings (see Lursen's definition above). And so, they express their anger, misery or sing a lullaby to their own souls. They do not present to God the gifts He gave in His word, like the divinely inspired songs of old. Their melodies aim to do the same. Therefore, even with changing the *words*, their tunes are still *inappropriate* in a reformed worship service (e.g. Mozart's Ave Maria, a touchy tune). Such tunes detract rather than contribute to true worship. Prime examples of such songs are those of Joh. de Heer (from the thirties in the Netherlands) and the Wesley songs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Wesley, an English Methodist, published 7,000 autobiographical songs. Overall, they touch, stir and vibrate the soul to the honour of ...'man', the 'self'. They express what is learned experientially rather than what *God require* and *provides*. Bible terms may be used, but the content is warped and it does not fit a reformed framework. And the *music* reflects the same. It satisfies the flesh. Tunes in a reformed service should be *assessed* by the above mentioned standards of, for example, the Genevan tunes, as is also shown in songs like Hymns 24 or 51.

Believers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gave back what God gave them. They provided us with many songs throughout Scripture. Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs from the Bible are the *most appropriate responses* to the redemptive acts of the Lord God Almighty. Welling up from the heart and soul, these songs were *born of the Holy Spirit*, and they *are* part of God's divine Word. It has been said that these songs are the *orderly* reaction by God's people, responding together in one voice with the church of all ages, for they are divinely inspired. The church father Ambrose (fourth century) said that history instructs, the law teaches, prophecy announces, rebuke chastens, morality persuades, but in the Book of Psalms we have the fruit of all these. It is like *medicine* for the salvation of man.

Calvin said that in the Psalms prophets are holding *converse* with God, for they lay bare all their innermost feelings. In that way, Psalms invite and compel everyone to true self-examination. Calvin described the tremendous variety of moods and characters of the psalms by calling this collection the 'anatomy' of the soul and the greatest safeguard of our salvation. Did not Luther say, Satan is scared and chased away when he hears the congregation sing psalms? It is regrettable that the composition of bible songs was terminated by Calvin's early death (age 55).

Dr. Noordzij explains that in the Psalms, God and man have fellowship. They again *communicate* together (p.25). In the Psalms,

“...man speaks to God, because God first spoke to man. Man sings to God, because God taught him first of all. Man struggles with sin, because God first told him what sin was. Out of the darkness, man reaches for the light, because God did first of all put that light in his heart. How could man's soul sound more pure than after it had been loaded with God's message of salvation? How could man's soul sing a loftier song than after the sounding board had been made ready by God Himself?”

This applies not only to the Book of Psalms, but to all psalms or songs found in the divinely inspired Word of God. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they *resonate* what God provided. Thanks be to Him alone.

## Bring Lips

In the worship service, the proclamation of God's Word is central, and in response to that message of salvation, we cannot but praise Him. Calvin explains that the function of singing in the worship service is to make the preached salvation our own, in our heart and memory. Songs are like photographs to help us remember. We take pictures home and share them with others.

Singing these songs in the worship service is communicating in one voice with God. As his people, our singing (praying) is a response to His great deeds of redemption. That is how the church says amen. The church *professes faith* by giving back what the Father gave His children. The children resound or recount His deeds, His Word, to His glory and honour. By singing the *divinely inspired songs* in worship, each believer *responds* like Adam, as God's crown prince, ambassador and child. Under the Old Testament (and Romish) priesthood, God's people were restricted to singing the word 'Amen', "it is true and certain". In New Testament times and as prophets, priests and kings, the mature believers are privileged to *take all* God's Word on their lips.

After Christ's final offering on the cross, the ceremonial sin and guilt offerings were no longer required. However, one offering was maintained. Already in Old Testament times, this offering was the "crown of the worship service", writes Dr. Grosheide in his commentary on Hebrews. That burnt offering was the freewill offering of thankful praise (lof-offer). Leviticus 7:11-15 describes how to bring this peace or freewill offering of thanksgiving. The Old Testament believers, says Dr. Grosheide, did no doubt desire to bring that offering in the way we do today. But they could not do that. They had to slaughter an animal, for the blood of the Saviour had not yet been shed. But *now*, that freewill, burnt offering is

"the fruit of lips, that confess his name" (Heb 13:15).

This type of offering was already known in Old Testament times. Hosea 14:1, 2 reads,

"Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God...

Take words with you and return to the LORD".

In other words, *bring lips* instead of cattle. Also David said that a *song* of thanksgiving will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull (Ps 69:30, 31). The fruit of lips are the songs that acknowledge His name. The inspired songs of the Bible reflect, return or give back (confess) the Word of God to His honour and glory. Such a sacrifice pleases the LORD (Heb 13:15, 16). That is our duty and delight. Bring lips, together, in unison, inspired by the Spirit. That is the music required in our liturgy.

## References for further reading

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