

The Music God Likes and the Calvinist Tradition¹

John Barber, PhD

In 2010, I wrote a booklet, titled, *Art to the Glory of God*. The central theme of the booklet is that there is a type of art that, in comparison with other forms of art, has the capacity to glorify God in a unique way. In a brief time the work came to the attention of several art teachers who serve on the faculties of some notable Christian colleges and universities in the U.S. One assistant professor of art, thinking she was emailing a colleague within her department, inadvertently emailed me. The question she had intended for her associate was this, “What do you think of the dogmatic claim of an art to the glory of God?” “Dogmatic claim?” I mused silently. Underlying her question is a positive and categorical attitude that has become all too commonplace among Christians engaged in the visual and performing arts. We might state it thusly, “It’s enough for a Christian artist to seek great art in the values of beautiful colors, proportions, and shapes only.” But as for a specific type of art that stirs God and even prompts his approval, as a community of artists we very often find ourselves perceiving God as indifferent. “It’s sufficient that God has given us the gift of creativity” is our unspoken thought. “It is therefore ours to use at our discretion.”

¹ Delivered at The Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology, “Calvinism and Culture,” Princeton Theological Seminary, April 16th, 2011.

Though *Art to the Glory of God* is written principally with painting in mind, I am a degreed musician and so the subject we undertake here today is one of great interest to me. Taking the general idea of the booklet, that there is a specific art that glorifies God, and applying it to the discipline of music, can we say that since the period of prehistoric music and preliterate culture to Lady Gaga, God has been but a casual listener? Are we out of line to suggest that God has musical tastes, such that there is a form and function of music that glorifies God; indeed that God desires above all others? Or is such a claim, as the professor of art proposes, dogmatic?

In the conception of the relationship of music to God the Calvinist tradition offers important distinctions and pointers that move us toward the idea that God has musical preferences. This is a good a place as any to define more precisely the word “likes” in the title of this paper. One can like something for its appealing nature: it is cute, pleasing, or engaging. Following the Calvinist ideal, however, the word “likes” is taken here in a more restricted sense—that it is pleasing and acceptable to the Lord; it glorifies him. Given this understanding, then, the music God likes is shaped by two controlling factors: the moral dimension of music, which includes both text and tune, and the spiritual state of the musician. Let us begin with the moral dimension of music.

I

John Calvin’s iconoclastic and restrictive view of images, his equally restraining enforcement against the use of musical instruments in congregational worship, and his use of exclusive metrical psalms, sung unaccompanied and in unison in public worship, have been well documented by the literature on the subject. Influences weighing on Calvin’s decisions

to limit congregational singing to the psalms have received wide attention by scholars as well. Nonetheless, a few important points drawing from the historical and intellectual trends of Calvin's day can augment the connection between Calvin's positions on exclusive psalmody and his belief in the moral dimension of music.

Calvin's support for canonical psalmody is based first and foremost in a guiding principle of the Reformation: *sola scriptura*. The Reformer of Geneva envisioned that if the Word of God is the sole basis for faith and practice then congregational singing should not merely be *based* on the words of Scripture, such as Luther had thought, but should incorporate the very words of Scripture. After all, God has given us his own songbook in the middle of the Old Testament. Why look further?² Calvin's deep belief in the sacred and moral nature of the Book of Psalms, and that singing God's own words back to him is the preeminent way to glorify God in song, helped him remain steadfastly devoted to their supreme usage in congregational worship, despite other musical innovations taking place during the early years of the Reformation.³

Yet a point that deserves wider attention regarding Calvin's position on canonical psalmody focuses on the transposition of values shared between Calvin and Renaissance culture. Any assessment of music in Calvin's thought must consider not only Calvin the Protestant Reformer, but also Calvin the Christian humanist.⁴ The beginnings of Calvin's

² Calvin's love for and commitment to the Book of Psalms is noted in the preface to the Principle Genevan Psalter, written from Geneva, June 10th, 1543. See the facsimile edition of: "*Les Pseaumes mis en rime francoise par Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze. Mis en musique a quatre parties par Claude Goudimel. Par les héritiers de Francois Jacqui.*" (1565). Published under the auspices of La Société des Concerts de la Cathédrale de Lausanne and edited, in French, by Pidoux, Pierre, and in German by Ameln, Konrad. (Baerenreiter-Verlag, Kassel, 1935)].

³ On this point see Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Volume 69, Part 4, (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), p. 26. Also helpful is Louis F. Benson, *The Presbyterian Reformed Review* 8 (1897): 422].

⁴ E.g., "Between 1527 and 1534 . . . Calvin inhabited the Erasmian world of thought and breathed its spiritual atmosphere; he remained in major ways always a humanist of the late Renaissance" (William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: a sixteenth-century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13. I do not join Bouwsma in as far as

humanist sympathies trace to his legal education at the hands of humanist scholars who had abandoned the glosses of medieval copyists for the *fontes* of ancient Roman law theory. Becoming deeply familiar with the pioneers of biblical philology, such as Valla, Erasmus, and Lefevre, Calvin carried his early training into his work as a reformer. Scholars have noted of Calvin his “humanist linguistic and textual techniques for the interpretation of Scripture” as well as a characteristically humanist sense of “the importance attached to the study of the Fathers” and “the acceptance of a kind of Christian philosophy.”⁵

The humanist pedigree is evident in Calvin’s perception of music. We first see this connectivity in comparison with Erasmus. The conjecture that Erasmus broke away from the early medieval tradition that envisioned the psalms as a medium for praise and prayer to find in them a repository of prophetic indicators of Jesus Christ⁶ is an incomplete generalization of his position on the Book of Psalms. Erasmus also held to an equally important early monastic position, which viewed the psalms as the Word of God and as a medium for praise and spiritual growth.

In the preface to his edition of the Greek New Testament, he states,

I wish that even the weakest woman should read the Gospels—should read the Epistle of Paul; and I wish that they were translated into all languages, so that they might be read and understood not only by Scots and Irishmen, but also by Turks and Saracens. I long that the husbandman should sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plough,

he makes Calvin out to be too close to Erasmus in humanist affinities. The best study of Calvin and the French humanists remains Josef Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin: Studien zur Gedankenwelt des französischen Frühhumanismus* (Graz, 1950).

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford, 1990), 57; Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (Philadelphia, 1987), 181.

⁶ Howard N. Wallace is an example if this. See Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing), 10.

that the weaver should hum them to the tune of his shuttle and that the traveler should beguile with their stories the tedium of his journey.”⁷

Features of Erasmus’ wishes are certainly time-bound. Nonetheless, his comments on the import of the commoner to sing the Scriptures for moral edification append directly to Calvin’s desire to publish a version of the Book of Psalms for public praise and as an instrument for spiritual growth. The image painted by Roland Bainton of Erasmus as “a blend of Stoicism and the Sermon on the Mount . . . Syncretism, alegorization, moralization, the reduction of dogma, the spiritualizing of everything external,”⁸ in contradistinction to Calvin, the man of *sola scriptura* does not do full justice to this confluence of ideas shared by both men.

Other parallel developments were at work linking Calvin with his times, which are relevant to music. Bourgeoning musical changes were happening during the period of the European Renaissance largely due to the influence of humanism and its renewed interest in the Classical view of the dignity of man. The new program in music followed developments in other arts and sciences somewhat closely, especially the blending of religious and secular subject matter such as is heard from composers Dufay and Ockeghem. Calvin’s disapproval of the use of secular subject matter in music and musical embellishment has been well established before now. What has not been stressed enough by the standard literature is that before Calvin set out to codify Scripture into a clear and regular system of song singing, Renaissance humanism was already showing great interest in the psalms, and for a related reason.

⁷ Quoted in Frederick Seebohm, *The Era of the Protestant Revolution* (Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 92.

⁸ Roland Bainton. “Man, God, and the Church in the Age of the Renaissance,” in *The Renaissance: Six Essays* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), 93

Once Calvin was in exile in Strasbourg for three years he then found himself in a position to start work on the French Psalter, which he and Beza finished in 1562 in Geneva.⁹ However, after taking the original songs to his congregation in Strasbourg, Calvin felt that his work was of insufficient quality whereby he turned to the French court poet, Clément Marot for help. The point of importance is that Marot had earlier versified most of the psalms in French during the first part of the sixteenth century for princes and their courtiers. Marot's settings were central to the Renaissance ideal of the "finished man" who viewed music as a means of moral instruction and courtly sophistication. The process was simple. A man or woman of refinement communicated his or her favorite psalm to Marot and the poems were written. A common practice was then to have the song sung in the court or in the center city. Calvin must have been aware of the utilization of the psalms as a means of moral refinement, even entertainment, and in a secular setting no less, and of Marot's involvement. In fact, this could be a reason Calvin chose Marot.

Due to this transposition of values it is difficult to qualify Calvin's exploitation of the psalms as a means to nurture expressly Christian virtues as an inspired and original product of the central tenets of his theology. Although Calvin's codification of the Psalter draws currency from humanist, cultural developments, he still achieves a sacred end: the use of the moral dimension of music as an important catalyst for corporate worship—pleasing to God and uplifting to the flock.

Nowhere do we find Calvin's commitment to the humanist moral ideal for music more aptly expressed than in his appeal to the ancient Greek doctrine of ethos. According to this doctrine, to the extent one listened to good music, one became a good person; to the extent one listened to

⁹ Published in 1539 as *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantique mys en chant*, it contains metrical versifications written by Calvin himself.

bad music, one became a bad person. This simple idea was rooted in the ancients, principally Plato and Aristotle, who thought that music partook in a close association with mathematics. Because mathematics was understood to express the workings of the Universe, music was believed to articulate a primary reality.¹⁰ Greek philosophers were therefore keenly aware of the moral qualities of music and approached both musical style and musical instruments with a degree of caution.¹¹ On this basis Plato's *Republic* limits instrumentalists to the use of the lyre and cithara.¹² In Greek thought music therefore employs a spiritual dimension and functions as both form and forum for moral training.¹³

In the preface to the Principle Genevan Psalter, Calvin appeals to the Greek doctrine of ethos to reveal his great appreciation for the power of music to inflame or to inspire the heart as justification for the paramount need to sing the psalms.

But still there is more: there is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men, as Plato prudently considered it. And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious. . . It is true that every bad word (as St. Paul has said) perverts good manner, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the

¹⁰ Augustine took up this theory in his highly influential treatise, *De Musica*.

¹¹ The doctrine of ethos deals with the moral qualities of music and seems to be related to the idea of a cosmic dimension in music discovered by Pythagoras. The doctrine of ethos, however, goes beyond the Pythagorean conception that music merely shares in the greater cosmic order, and holds that it may also affect the universe in some way.

¹² See Smith's essay, "The Contest of Apollo and Marsyas: ideas about music in the Middle Ages," *By Things Seen*, David L. Jeffrey, ed. (Ottawa, Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), 81.

¹³ According to Dr. Grout, "The Greek doctrine of ethos, then, was founded on the conviction that music affects character and that different kinds of music affect it in different ways. In the distinction made among the many different kinds of music, we can discern a general division into two classes: music, which tended to produce excitement and enthusiasm. The first class was associated with the worship of Apollo; its instrument was the lyre, and its related poetic forms, the ode and the epic. The second class was associated with the worship of Dionysus; its instrument was the aulos, and its related poetic forms, the dithyramb and the drama" (Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, 3d ed. [New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980], 9).

heart much more strongly, and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody.¹⁴

Here Calvin makes clear the power of music to inflame the human heart with spiritual zeal or pernicious sensations. In reaction he wanted singing to be without accompaniment. In the original tunes by Louis Bourgeois the music is thus monophonic.¹⁵

II

Now how do the thoughts expressed thus far connect to today's church musician? In our own day the doctrine of *sola scriptura* continues to inform the fundamental structures of approaches to, and attitudes about, music for congregational use. Still, a lack of consensus on exactly *how* Scripture ought to enlighten the role of music in our devotional life together is seen optimally in the uneased tension called "worship wars." As a generalization the controversy is comprised of those who advocate for traditional music verses those who prefer a contemporary or edgier style of music in worship. The latter form is typically heard among Pentecostals and Charismatics, but not without its impact on many older, mainline churches. Representatives of contemporary music point to the pages of the Old Testament to prove the continuation of dancing and vociferous praise to enthusiastic praise bands. While the conventional group appeals more to the New Testament to support what it perceives as the proper interpretation of "the regulative principle of worship." Fundamentally the question both sides are asking is, "What music best glorifies God:

¹⁴ For Calvin's views on Jubal and the musical arts, in which he makes similar remarks, see his *Commentary on Genesis*, n. d., <<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/cvgn1-11.htm>> (accessed December 3rd, 2010).

¹⁵ Although Bourgeois did also provide four-part harmonizations, they were reserved for use *at home*. I will have more to say on the psalms for home use later in this paper. Many of the four-part settings are syllabic and chordal, a style which has survived in many Protestant church services to the present day.

traditional or contemporary?”¹⁶ “Which one does God like?”¹⁷ This point may seem counter-intuitive, but it is Calvin who proffers the contemporary¹⁸ church musician a degree of latitude. How so?

III

For one, it is significant that Calvin’s penchant for canonical psalmody was motivated not only by his ardent notion that the music God enjoys to hear most is that which he himself inspired holy men of old to compose. But also, as we have seen, Calvin’s choice of music was every bit as much actuated by the moral stress of Christian and Classical humanism—in short—the cultural trends of his day. This point really should not surprise us. From the earliest times church music has been influenced strongly by an exchange of ideas between Church and culture. Even more generally the precise relationship the Church has shared with her contiguous culture has always been one of mutual dialogue: the Church informing culture, and culture informing the Church.

The Huguenot, Renaissance composer Claude Le Jeune¹⁹ offers a particularly apt conjunction of the dialogue between Calvinist composer and cultural trends. In 1537, Calvin sought to codify the practice of exclusive psalmody throughout Geneva. They were to be sung in the metrical style and in unison. Before long, however, Le Jeune exchanged the tunes and composed settings

¹⁶ As there is likely no need to define further the nature of these two forms of worship, it is however important to note that there is a third soldier on the battlefield. This is modern Puritan who interprets even the traditionalist’s use of hymns, organs, and pianos as a departure from the guiding principle of *sola scriptura* or what is today called “the regulative principle” of worship.

¹⁷ This brief dissection does not consider “blended” services or those that still ascribe to Calvin’s practices.

¹⁸ In the original paper delivered at Princeton, I used the word “innovative” at this point rather than “contemporary.” The change has been made for the reason that, among other things, “innovative” may convey too open a position toward an avant-garde direction in sacred music without adequate concern for the regulatory principles of Scripture. Anyone who is familiar with my book, *My Almost for His Highest*, is aware of my aversion to unfettered innovation.

¹⁹ Le Jeune was the most famous composer of secular music in France in the late sixteenth century. In case it be said that the composer was dissonant to Calvin’s sweeping religious priorities he was discovered to have authored an anti-Catholic tract in 1589 whereby he was forced to flee Paris during the siege that year. Upon his death in Paris he was buried in the Protestant cemetery of La Trinité.

of the psalms in contrapuntal style, what have been equated to free motets.²⁰ Having produced 347 psalm settings, the most famous during his lifetime was his *Dodécacorde*, a series of twelve psalm settings published in La Rochelle in 1598.²¹ What is important is the fact that each of the psalms is set in one of the twelve modes first established by Renaissance theorist, Gioseffo Zarlino. Richard Freedman notes the importance of this move.

The *Dodécacorde* contains music of great subtlety, especially in the ways that it combines melodies from the Genevan Psalter with polyphony that vividly reflects the imagery and emotional aspects of those sacred hymns. As such the *Dodécacorde* can be understood as a culmination of a long process of elaboration of the monophonic Psalter. The *Dodécacorde* is also notable for the ways in which it reflects upon and accumulates a long tradition of musical thought, in particular the modal theories of Gioseffo Zarlino in the 1573 revision of the *Istitutioni harmoniche* . . . Le June took special care in his cycle not merely to select Psalm tunes that would illustrate this twelve-tone system, he actually revised the official Genevan melodies to make them correspond more neatly to Zarlino's theoretical ideal. This is a wholly remarkable and . . . unprecedented approach to this repertory of sacred tunes . . . Le June's use of this modal system as a framework for the

²⁰ See Anne Harrington Heider, "Preface," in *Claude Le Jeune, Les Cent Cinquante Pseaumes de David, Recent Researches in the Music of the Renaissance*, vol. 98 (Madison, Wisconsin: A-R. Editions, 1995), 10. The Renaissance period was a time when the motet blossomed for both worship and entertainment. Secular Motets were typically set to a Latin text in praise of a monarch, commemorating some public triumph, or as in the case of Dufay's motet *Nuper rosarum flores* (1436) written to commemorate the completion of Brunelleschi's massive dome atop the Cathedral of Florence Pope Eugenius IV.

²¹ Features of the music indicate his intent, which clearly exceeds Calvin's knowledge. His rendering of Psalm 52 uses sixteen voices while his collection of all 150 psalms, published posthumously, were set for four and five voices.

presentation of his spiritual polyphony also has direct analogies with an extensive Protestant tradition of inscribing new meaning in familiar forms.²²

As Freedman elucidates, Le Jeune's purpose in revising the melodies of the Genevan Psalter in accord with Zarlino's system was to bring out "the imagery and emotional aspects of those sacred hymns." Like Calvin, Le June wanted the sacred psalms to stir not merely the head, but more importantly the heart of the hearer. That Calvin would have disapproved of the use of polyphony is unmistakable. But does not Le Jeune follow the more important path of his predecessor with his desire for the psalms to inflame and inspire the heart with spiritual zeal? And like Calvin did not Le Jeune listen to the cultural trends of his day when giving shape to his new psalm settings? In these ways the Calvinist influence on church music is felt while remaining true to the fundamental goal Calvin set for music.

The dialogue between Calvinist priorities for music and culture is seen yet again. After Catholic Mary Tudor was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth in 1558 the Calvinist tradition of psalmody was reinstated. New metrical Psalters were produced during the period—most notably the New Version of the Psalms of David by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady first published in England in 1696. Tate was poet laureate of England, as well as being a playwright and an adapter of other's plays. Brady was an Anglican clergyman, poet, and author. The work of these poets opened the way for scriptural hymnody in English worship of the late 1600's. Also significant during this period was the devotional poetry of Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, Herrick, and John Donne.

²² Richard Freeman, "Le Dodécacorde de Le Jeune comme site pour des significations spirituelles." *Revue de musicologie*, 2003, vol. 89, no. 2, 297. For the importance of the twelve tones in Renaissance music, see Harold S. Powers, "Tonal Types and Modal Categories in Renaissance Polyphony." *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), 428-470.

But of particular interest is the work in 1697 by George Herbert: *Select Hymns Taken Out of Mr. Herbert's Temple*, with a preface expressing that they were for the use of "Private Christians . . . in their Closets or Families." Herbert's substitution of corporate for private worship in the preface to *Select Hymns* is significant for the reason that the place of the psalms in corporate worship was of utmost importance to Calvin. Also, Herbert's stress on interior worship was critical in the divide of the day between ceremonialists and Puritans over music. Both sides looked to Herbert as a spiritual son. According to Guibbory, "For [Henry] Vaughan in the early 1650s, Herbert's *Temple* took the place of the disestablished church, providing the forms and inspiration for worship" while at the same time Puritan "Richard Baxter praised Herbert's 'heart-work' . . . and "dissenters embraced Herbert as 'Our Divine Poet.'"²³ Herbert was manipulated by opposing forces to legitimize two differing forms of worship, both claiming the Reformed legacy. Noteworthy is the fact that the debate centered on a writer of hymns and paid little attention to the role of exclusive Psalmody.

Although Calvin would have been uncomfortable by high role of Hymnody in the seventeenth-century English Church, it is again his steadfastness to the moral and spiritual nature of music that carries through from Tate and Brady to Herbert, and from there splintering into ceremonialist and Puritan camps. This is yet another example of how the *spirit* of Calvin's desires for music continued even though the *letter* was in decline.²⁴ But had not Calvin himself opened the door to these innovations? The 1543 edition of the Genevan Psalter also contained

²³ Accsah, Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community from Milton to Herbert: Literature, Religion, and Culture Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

²⁴ By the 1690s, the use of exclusive psalmody was waning, though the Church of England and a few of the Calvinist congregations held fast to the Psalter. But the rise of Evangelical Protestants, all still claiming the Calvinist heritage, had created a fertile ground for Isaac Watts's first collection of hymns in 1707: the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

musical versions of the Song of Simeon, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles Creed.²⁵

III

Yet another way Calvin proffers the contemporary church musician of today a degree of latitude is seen in his celebration of the Reformation in a new liturgical design, in which original song-settings were crucial. In the main Calvin was not doing anything new. Throughout Scripture God's mighty acts are celebrated in song: Moses' Song of Deliverance, Deborah and Barak's Song of Victory, Hannah's Song, David's Song of Victory, Mary's Song of Praise, all fall on the heels of God's declaration to save his people, to do a new thing in the earth, or to recall his deeds of lovingkindness. Are we to say that Calvin's exploitation of the psalms of Scripture limits us in congregational singing to those same psalms? Or can we find in Calvin's replication of the scriptural pattern an encouragement to speak musically afresh in our own day in response to God's saving acts? Follow the Calvinist tradition and it is this latter course that represents the standard.

For example, in the year 1756, while attending an evangelistic meeting held in a barn at Codymain, Montague Toplady was converted. He became a strong Calvinist and the author of many popular hymns but none as memorable as "*Rock of Ages*" first published in 1776. Although legend has it that Toplady wrote the words to the hymn commemorating his escape from a violent storm into a cave for shelter, the words, *Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy Cross I cling; Naked, come to thee for dress; Helpless, look to thee for grace; Foul, I to the*

²⁵ I owe some of the thoughts in this paragraph to Duck Schuler, "History of the Genevan Psalter", Part 3, *Credenda Agenda*, Vol. 15, Issue 1. <<http://www.credenda.org/issues/15-1musica.php>> (accessed January 12th, 2011).

fountain fly; Wash me, Saviour, or I die” must also recall that night in the barn at the village of Codrington.

Due to the spiritual lethargy in England, the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield began preaching in England and eventually crossed over to the American Colonies during the first half of the eighteenth century to help spawn America’s Great Awakening. As almost on cue, the revival produced yet another, fresh outpouring of new hymns. Calvinistic Methodist, John Cennick, writer of hymns like “Jesus My All to Heaven Is Gone” and the Anglican preacher John Newton of “Amazing Grace” and “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken” are the two most important individuals in the creation of Great Awakening-era hymns.

The Second Great Awakening in America brought about a revitalization of hymn-singing and the introduction of new hymns once again. Though our minds tend to gravitate to the impact the Wesleyan tradition had on the creation of new hymns during this period, one of the most influential hymnbooks of the Second Great Awakening was Calvinist evangelist, Asahel Nettleton’s *Village Hymns*, and his companion tunebook *Zion’s Harp*, though Nettleton did not write any of the tunes.

As stated, Protestant churches of today are at conflict over styles of music. Shall we preserve the traditional hymns that have stood the test of time? Or should we engage our sensitivities in styles and sounds that reflect the times in which we live? We must remember that Calvin intended for the Reformation to be a continuing movement. We are *always* reforming. Ours is a need for sustained commitment to spiritual revitalization within our churches and to embodied, Christian living in the world. Is it not, then, oxymoronic that so many Christians who are hard at work to revive and reform Church and society are committed only to the songs of yesterday’s reformations and revivals? If we are truly committed to a program of on-going reform then we

must be ready to express our joy at the outcome in the form of a new collection of psalm-settings, spiritual songs, and hymns. We must be prepared to follow Calvin's main concern for the glory of God through the moral and spiritual integrity of music, but also to listen to the voice of culture, while not abandoning ourselves to whims of culture. We also must be willing to maintain our rich heritage in church music. It is a delicate balance, to be sure, but one we must embrace.

IV

We now move to the next main point of this paper, which is that in Calvin's thought the music God likes is conditioned by the spiritual state of the musician. As we shall see this idea opens up to us the wider consideration of secular music—although I use the term “secular” reservedly, for as a neo-Calvinist, I find the supposed *sacred-secular* distinction out of accord with Reformed, cultural theory. Nevertheless, I will use the term here for the sake of argument.

Appreciation for Calvin's view on the moral nature of music is increased by a deepened awareness of the spiritual relationship in which the musician stands to God. This parallel issue relates two theological tenets of Calvin's thought: the spiritual antithesis between God and non-Christian²⁶ and the doctrine of common grace.

By “spiritual antithesis” we should not here confuse Barth's idea that despite the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ the metaphysical polarity between God and the world is preserved. Calvin's view on the antithesis is in contradiction to the Roman Catholic belief that fallen man has lost only the *donum superadditum* (supernatural gift of God's grace) while in large part retaining his natural endowments. Quite the opposite, Calvin believed that total

²⁶ For more on this, see John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: an Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, P&R, 1995), 187-213.

depravity not only renders sinners unable to do anything profitable unto salvation, but also makes it impossible for even their natural gifts to produce anything truly good in God's eyes. It is with this idea in mind that he states,

Now the soul is not reborn if merely a part of it is reformed, but only when it is wholly renewed. The antithesis set forth in both passages [John 3:6 and Romans 8:6-7] confirms this. The Spirit is so contrasted with flesh that no intermediate thing is left. Accordingly, whatever is not spiritual in man is by this reckoning called 'carnal.' We have nothing of the Spirit, however, except through regeneration.²⁷

That nothing of the Spirit is in us except through regeneration led Calvin to insist that only Christian presuppositions should inform the elements of public worship, including music. Here, however, Calvin provides a way of thinking that appears to present a curious ambiguity. On the one hand, he is willing to make use of Plato's doctrine of ethos as a basis for restricting the use of instruments in corporate worship, while, on the other hand, he believed that Plato's philosophic insights were as a whole totally eclipsed by the gospel. Calvin appears to have resolved this seeming ambiguity through selective utilization of Plato as support for his more prominent position on the moral dimension of music.

V

Now Calvin's position on the antithesis leads rather naturally to the question of music more generally envisioned. Does Calvin completely disregard the music of non-Christians? No, in fact, he recognized God's presence in all things, but with an important caveat. Herman Bavinck's description of Calvin's position on the *semen religionis* (seed of religion) is explanatory.

²⁷ *Institutes*, II. ii i. 1.

Calvin, taking as his starting point ‘the seed of religion,’ saw incontrovertible signs and testimonies of God’s majesty in ‘every particle of the universe’; in the starry heavens, in the human body, in the soul, in the preservation of all things (etc.)’ but, having said this, he immediately reminds us that this ‘seed of religion,’ though ineradicably implanted in all humans, can be choked and cannot bear good fruit.

Humans, having lost the capacity to see God, need the eye of faith. In other Reformed theologians we see natural theology occupying the same place.²⁸

Bavinck’s distillation of Calvin centers on the fact that although the non-Christian is born in the *imago Dei*, and for that reason bears testimony to God’s majesty, such can only be conferred upon the unbeliever in a general sense. In the contracted sense of a life that *gives majesty* to God the non-Christian “cannot bear good fruit.” Musicians are not exempt. Calvin’s distinction that centers on the idea that the non-Christian *testifies* to God’s majesty while only the Christian *gives* majesty to God suggests that the act of doing music happens within a moral context shared by both musician and God. Music is simply a creative extension of a musician’s spiritual values and worldview, which help to define her relationship to God. Every note of the composer, even the tone one produces as a musician, must therefore be done with the quality of aesthetic deference to the Lord of all creativity for it to bear good fruit.

In the Stone Lectures delivered here at Princeton in 1898, Abraham Kuyper gave voice to the antithesis of consciousness that exists between Christians and non-Christians when he stated “. . . we, of course, have to acknowledge two kinds of human consciousness: that of the regenerate and the unregenerate; and these two cannot be identical . . .”²⁹ Though Kuyper’s remarks are set

²⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, God and Creation*, vol 2. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 78. Here Bavinck is referencing John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iv.1; I.v.1-10, 11-15.

²⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-Lectures*, “Calvinism and Religion,” Kuyper Foundation, Online Books and Essays, July 17th, 2003, <http://www.kuyper.org/main/publish/books_essays/printer_17.shtml> 137 (accessed

in the context of science they are no less profitable for our appreciation of the antithesis of consciousness between Christian and non-Christian musicians.

But if this be the case, are we to infer that only Christians are capable of composing and /or performing great music? Ludwig van Beethoven was enamored with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and is not thought of as a Christian. Yet he is considered one of the greatest composers of all time. Does God not think that Beethoven bore good fruit? Unquestionably Beethoven, and other exceptional unbelievers like him, demonstrated technical genius and aesthetic vision in their compositions and accordingly their life production was great. But in the Calvinist tradition “great” is interpreted in a particularized way.

Dutch Calvinist, Klaas Schilder, clarifies this particularization when he opposes it to the spiritual deficit in unbelieving artists. He observes, “Our conclusion then is that culture is never more than a mere attempt and that, since it is restricted to remnants only, it is a matter of tragedy. God has indeed left something behind in fallen man. But these are only ‘small remnants’ of his original gifts . . . they can never produce any work that is sound.”³⁰ The upshot of Schilder’s position is that except we receive back those elements of the *imago Dei* lost due to sin, *how* we produce the expressions of culture is by “small remnants” of that image whereby *what* we produce is not spiritually whole.

Bavinck explains the situation this way. “God is present in his creatures in different ways . . . There is a difference between his physical and his ethical immanence. To suggest an analogy: people, too, may be physically very close to each other, yet miles apart in spirit and outlook.”³¹ So then, God’s presence in Beethoven, Arnold Schönberg, and Lady Gaga, is due to a Divine

March 3rd, 2011). Op. cit. Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998), 183.

³⁰ Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture* (Winnepeg, Manitoba: Premier Printing, 1977), 59.

³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 2, 169.

physicality that gives them the continued ability to display the attributes of creativity. But it is the ethical presence of God in his redeemed creatures that brings their music before him in an enhanced way.

The neo-Calvinist, Cornelius Van Til, offers great insight into the nature of this enhancement. He argued that there is no such thing as a “brute fact”—a part of reality that somehow escapes Divine interpretation. Consequently, there is no such thing as *brute music*. The composing and playing of all forms of music, as they articulate some moral position, summon Holy judgment. Minus a redemptive relationship between musician and Creator, although the music one produces may reflect the interests of beauty in a broad sense, an issue we will take up momentarily under the heading of common grace, on the whole, the Calvinist view of the antithesis cautions us to determine the value such music has before God not only in terms of beautiful tones, harmonies and textures, but also according to the ethical *values* that flow from the musician’s heart as defined by her redemptive relationship to God.

VI

This current point having to do with the spiritual state of the musician is inextricably woven together with the deep-centered issue of motivation. Why do I play, compose, and sing before the public? To impress the music critics? To draw attention to myself? Or do I do it as an offering to God? These concerns bleed over to yet another, related issue: the moral statement all music makes. What was Richard Wagner really saying in much of his music about race relations? What was his motivation? Despite the July 2001 performance of the overture to *Tristan und Isolde* at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem, Wagner’s music has been unofficially banned in public in Israel ever since *Kristallnacht* in 1938. As much as I love the rich, soaring textures of the tones poems

of Richard Strauss, is the worldview of his famed *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in which he brings to mind the philosophical novel of Nietzsche by the same name one, as a Christian, I can support? Further, we may possibly ask, does God, understood as sovereign over the creation and who gave the Law at Sinai receive pleasure from the chance music of John Cage? If so, then God's delight in music would seem to be something other than a matter of moral degree, but a matter of relative focus. However one might answer these sorts of questions they are difficult to be sure and remain ones with which we ought to continually wrestle. The Calvinist stance that no offering of music is immune from Holy judgment may well provide us an important starting-point in addressing these concerns.

Reformed scholar, David Prowlson, looks to the Calvinistic worldview for such a starting-point. In speaking to the idols of culture he addresses not only our cultural impetus, but sets even this concern within the heightened context of our most fundamental loyalties.

The deep questions of motivation are not "What is motivating me?" The final questions are, "Who is the master of this pattern of thought, feeling or behavior?" In the biblical view, we are religious, inevitably bound to one god or another. People do not have needs. We have masters, lords, gods, be they oneself, other people, valued objects, Satan. The metaphor of an idolatrous heart and society capture the fact that human motivation bears an automatic relationship to God: Who, other than the true God, is my god?³²

In light of the antithesis, how then does Calvin account for human achievement among non-Christians? It is in the concept of God's universal or common grace to man. Though Calvin cannot be credited with having first coined the phrase "common grace," in fact he never used the

³² David Prowlson, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" n.d., *Restoring Christ to Counseling and Counseling to The Church*, <<http://www.ccef.org/idols-heart-and-vanity-fair>> (accessed February 15, 2011).

term; he is seminal in the formation of the idea. In explaining the honesty, courage, and other virtues exemplified by the Roman commander Camillus, Calvin reasons,

The most certain and easy solution of this question, however, is, that those virtues are not the common properties of nature, but the peculiar graces of God, which he dispenses in great variety, and in a certain degree to men that are otherwise profane.³³

Calvin's remarks, though centered on the heroic nature of those destined to command, are no less applicable to the gifted nature of those destined to music. In fact, Calvin's thought on what Kuyper later termed "common grace" had more to do with explaining all the positive cultural contributions of fallen men, while Kuyper looked to common grace more as a justification for Christian participation with non-Christians in a variety of cultural endeavors.

VII

At this instant is a suitable place to note a finer distinction still between Calvin and Kuyper on common grace. I have noted Kuyper's clarity on the antithesis in the area of science especially. Nonetheless, Kuyper's views on common grace do not seem to take into account adequately enough the import of the antithesis such as we find in Calvin. It could even be argued that Kuyper's position on common grace is oddly out of place with his own view on the antithesis.

Intrinsic to the Kuyperian notion of common grace is the belief that unregenerate people are properly competent to execute their cultural responsibilities without need of regeneration. Now Kuyper would *not* say that fallen people realize their cultural tasks to the glory of God.

Nonetheless, it was Kuyper and Bavinck, the latter whom I have also quoted in support of the antithesis, who used Revelation 21:24-26, which says "The nations will walk by its light . . . and

³³ *Institutes*, II, iii, 4.

the kings will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it,” to say that God is so pleased with the excellencies of unregenerate culture that He will gladly receive such products into heaven. Not only does this position raise insoluble philosophical problems in juxtaposition to the antithesis, but also is it not exegetically sound. Verse 27, which presents a continuance of the idea started in verse 24, is unmistakable that the nations and the kings that bring the glory of their cultures through the gates of the city are those that know the Lamb of God in salvation. It says, “[A]nd nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but *only* those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (italics added).

Calvin, in contrast, takes the antithesis to its logical conclusion. Nothing but that which proceeds from the Spirit of regeneration will enter heaven. In the same section of the *Institutes* most recently quoted, Calvin, though admitting that the unregenerate evidence “the peculiar graces of God” nevertheless cautions us against all spiritual presumption.

But because, however, excellent anyone has been, his own ambition always pushes him on—a blemish with which all virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favor—anything in profane men that appears praiseworthy must be considered worthless.

Besides, where there is no zeal to glorify God, the chief part of uprightness is absent; a zeal of which all those whom he has not regenerated by his Spirit are devoid.”³⁴

In support of Calvin’s position, I think of Jesus of Nazareth, who said, “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42). If we cannot so much as give a cup of cold water to a thirsty child and be rewarded by heaven lest we be his disciple, why do we think we can compose a symphony and have God receive it unto his glory lest we be his disciple?

³⁴ *Institutes*, II. iii, 4.

By way of summation, in its long history Calvinism has been a lightning rod. Perhaps no less controversial are the thoughts expressed by this paper, which lead inevitably to the view that an off-pitch melody warbled by a poor Dutch farmer to the glory of God is more pleasing to God's ear than is a top performance of *Nussun Dorma* sung by an unbeliever. Yet one thing we all ought to applaud Calvin in particular for bringing to our attention is the need for unrestricted zeal for the glory of God in all we do. As the first question of the Shorter Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" the answer that "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever" is a truth that always reminds us that no area of our cultural work, including music, is exempt from this fundamental claim. If such a position is to be viewed as "dogmatic" then let it be so. But dogma viewed simply as a system of belief is a regular part of life whether we like it or not.

Calvin's restrictions on music may not be your restrictions. But as we have seen even Calvin himself was not exempt from certain cultural influences. Should we also invest something from our culture into the patterns of our regular worship or decide that our music is best suited for the world stage let us always bear in mind two things: first, the moral nature of music; and second, the spiritual state of our own lives as musicians before God. In all, let it be our solemn declaration to sing, play, and compose to the glory of God. For according to Calvin this is the music God likes.