

Let the Families of the Lord Give Praise! Calvin's Piety of the Psalms as Prayer-Praise Generational Discipleship

By Timothy J. Gwin

When we consider the deep content and the vast breadth of Calvin's writings, a complex picture emerges of a theologian moved in his heart for the glory of God and the salvation of the lost. If instead we confine our study of Calvin to his controversies or his most famous work, the *Institutes*, we will glimpse only a fraction of that whole. The Reformer has been caricatured as an uncaring theologian fixated on select doctrines, the most infamous being reprobation and damnation. But a careful study of the *Institutes* reveals that he gave much less attention to reprobation and damnation than he did to prayer and other essential doctrines of the faith. Furthermore, when the Frenchman's sermons, commentaries, and especially his letters are considered as well, a portrait materializes of a deeply thoughtful and sensitive man striving to live out his own conversion to the God of Word and Spirit.¹

One primary subject of his heady theology was the Psalms. Even through a casual review of his life's activities, which centered upon leading worship, preaching, writing, lecturing, and counseling, the Psalms appear to have captured the Reformer's attention like the pole star holds the intense gaze of a ship's captain through the darkness. Why? Why did such a busy man with so much work already completed at the tender age of twenty-seven and with so much work yet to be done, return time and time again to the Psalms? This organic commitment to and fascination with the Psalms grew out of Calvin's experience of the Christian life—a life of daily self-denial and cross-bearing that he saw reflected in the psalms. Calvin writes:

Moreover, although the psalms are replete with all the precepts which serve to frame our life to every part of holiness, piety, and righteousness, yet they will principally teach and train us to bear the cross; and the bearing of the cross is a genuine proof of our obedience,

since by doing this, we renounce the guidance of our own affections, and submit ourselves entirely to God, leaving him to govern us, and to dispose of our life according to his will, so that the afflictions which are the bitterest and most severe to our nature, become sweet to us, because they proceed from him.²

What Pietist scholar A. H. Francke declared two hundred years after Calvin's conversion, the Reformer experienced personally. Francke writes:

The man who has not the Spirit of Christ, nor denies himself, nor daily takes up his cross and follows Christ, has no relish for the Psalms. They gladden not his heart, but appear to him as weathered straw—altogether stale. But let him be brought into similar courses of affliction and suffering, and experience the sneers and mockery of the world for righteousness' and Christ's sake ... yet serve the Lord God in spirit and in truth ... then he shall be like a tree planted by

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1. H. J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, Texts and Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 22. For an in-depth study of Calvin's personal correspondence see, Jean Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin: compiled from the original manuscripts and edited with historical notes*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Burt Franklin, 1858; reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007). Jean-Daniel Benoit and Richard Haig, *Calvin in his letters: a study of Calvin's pastoral counselling mainly from his letters*, Courtenay studies in reformation theology (Oxford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1991). Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in his letters* (London: J.M. Dent, 1909).

2. John Calvin, *Commentary On The Book Of Psalms*, trans., James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, XXII vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker; reprint, 2003), IV.xxxix. Hereafter *Psalms*, preface.

the rivers of water ... and experience the intensity of the struggle which is required, and learn rightly to understand the Psalm.³

Enlivened to the things of God via the Word and Spirit of God, Calvin walked the pilgrim path by living out God's truth through a life of piety. The Psalms became an important source of daily spiritual calories to empower an orthodox understanding and living out of true life. This life was not static or overly cerebral, or overly obsessed with the spiritual to the exclusion of the material. Rather, an orthodox life was rooted in the earthiness of God's creation and directed by the mind of God given to man through His special revelation. Such a holy revelation must be approached and handled with the greatest of reverence and care.

CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO THE PSALMS

Calvin interpreted the Psalms with great care, as he did the entirety of Scripture. He sought to allow the Psalms to speak without the intrusion of eisegesis or overzealous theological argumentation. With the rise of Protestant extremists on the one hand and the ongoing confrontation with Rome that would be codified afresh with the council of Trent, Calvin poured the majority of his reforming efforts into faithful Biblical interpretation.⁴ At the heart of his approach to Biblical interpretation, the self-explication of the Scriptural text itself maintained supremacy as Calvin sought a brief and clear commentary on the divine author's referent.⁵ Richard Gamble explains Calvin's exegetical and hermeneutical goals. He writes, "We should note here that Calvin sees the goal of a commentator as unfolding the mind of the Biblical writer; succeeding in this goal means the deletion of superfluous material which may lead the reader away from the meaning of the author."⁶ Such was Calvin's hermeneutical approach from his first commentary on the epistle to the Romans in 1540 to the penning of his last commentary. Within the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms one sees the exegetical methodology that Calvin outlined twenty-two years previously within the preface to his first commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans. The Reformed scholar never wavered from eight exegetical principles he deemed essential for faithful Biblical hermeneutics.⁷

First, Calvin always sought clarity and brevity in capturing and teaching his exegetical conclusions.⁸ Second, he always tried to determine the author's intent.⁹ Third, he investigated the historical, geographical, and institutional circumstances, which are determinative for the author's situation, such as solemn assemblies or public occasions of Thanksgiving.¹⁰ Fourth, Calvin followed the exegetical principle of setting forth the real meaning of the passage, or what he called the "original meaning," the "true meaning," or the "grammatical meaning" of a passage.¹¹ In order to follow this principle faithfully, Calvin concluded one must master the Greek and Hebrew languages.¹² Fifth, Calvin sought to establish the totality of each textual setting and context of the passage, which includes ascertaining the environment and direction in which the text's message flows.¹³ Sixth, at this point in his exegetical progression as Calvin attempted to determine the full sense of the text, he sought to establish the text within the extent of God's moral law in order to safeguard, not adding to or taking away from, the Ten Commandments.¹⁴ Calvin's seventh exegetical

3. Augustus Tholuck, *A Translation and Commentary of the Book of Psalms*, trans., Rev. J. Isidor Mombert (Philadelphia: William S. & Alfred Marten, 1858), 10.

4. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 63. For a scholarly overview of the Radical Reformation see, George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 1992).

5. Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 61.

6. Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," in *Calvin and Hermeneutics*, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: a fourteenth volume anthology of scholarly articles ed. by Richard C. Gamble, volume 6, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 34.

7. See Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," in *Calvin and Hermeneutics*, 6–12.

8. Jean Calvin, *Ioannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia.*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, 59 vols., *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 38.403. Hereafter CO.

9. *Ibid.*, CO 38.403.

10. *Ibid.*, 31.466. For specific examples in which Calvin employs this exegetical rule in determining the author's situation as times of solemn public assembly or Thanksgiving see, CO 31.231; 32.206.

11. To see how Calvin used these terms interchangeably to describe what he called "the real meaning" of a text see, *ibid.*, 31.800; 31.177. Cf. see the reformer's discussion of the word "is" in, Jean Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, trans., Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 Latin ed., *The Library of Christian Classics*; (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xvii.22.

12. See, Richard C. Gamble, "Exposition and Method in Calvin," in *Calvin and Hermeneutics*.

13. Gamble, *Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic*, 10. To study an example of Calvin utilizing his fifth exegetical principle, see his treatment of the Decalogue as he embraces the *complexio oppositorum* of where God publishes His "no" He has also "published" His "yes;" Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.8.

14. Gamble, *Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic*, 10.

step came into practice only if he confronted a metaphorical expression or figure of speech within the text. He would clarify the figurative language in the text so that metaphors were delimited on two sides: he asserted there are no allegories in Scripture and hyperbole belongs to poetry. Metaphorical language, such as "this is my body" must be understood in that the "name of the visible sign is placed alongside the same which is represented in the sign."¹⁵ Finally, Calvin's Christocentric investigation was his eighth and last exegetical principle. The Reformer held Christ Jesus to be both the sum and substance of God's Word, and as such, the Messiah maintains the heart of each text as well as the grand theme of special revelation.

After the Reformer diligently progressed through each aspect of his organized study of any Biblical text, he explored and plumbed the "scope of Christ" lying at the heart of the Scriptures both narrowly and broadly.¹⁶ The French pastor's well defined exegetical steps did not develop within a vacuum. Calvin was greatly influenced by Reformed scholars of his own day as well as men from ages past.¹⁷

The Reformer's commitment to a simple exegetical approach highlighting the literal sense of Scripture shows the influence of the great Antiochene John Chrysostom.¹⁸ Calvin consistently coupled this simple approach with a simple and brief teaching style that elucidated the literal sense within the historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts. By maintaining such a commitment to studying and teaching the Bible, Calvin's commentaries provided more light than confusion for his readers.¹⁹ In the preface to his Psalms commentary, Calvin emphasizes the same basic principles for hermeneutics and exposition he used throughout his literary endeavors from the point of his conversion. Calvin writes:

And, therefore, I have not only observed throughout a simple style of teaching, but in order to be removed the farther from all ostentation, I have also generally abstained from refuting the opinions of others, although this presented a more favorable opportunity for plausible display, and of acquiring the applause of those who shall favor my book with a perusal. I have never touched upon opposite opinions, unless where there was reason to fear, that by being silent respecting them, I might leave my readers in doubt and perplexity. At the same time, I am sensible that it would have been much more agreeable to the taste of many, had I heaped together a great mass of materials which has great show, and acquires fame for the writer; but I have felt nothing

to be of more importance than to have a regard to the edification of the Church.²⁰

"It seems to most scholars," writes Gamble, "that the hallmarks of Calvin's exegetical methodology are brevity and simplicity. Calvin makes his commentaries understandable to the dullest student and, as a hermeneutical principle, limits his discussions to text, unfolding the mind of the Biblical author."²¹ Such a hermeneutical approach, while attempting to bring clarity to the text of Scripture, seeks to free the reader from the addition of superfluous information that can become a stumbling block to understanding the Scriptures.

Calvin's exegetical and hermeneutical approach freed Calvin from the rigid and, at times, forced hermeneutical principle of Luther's antithetical "law and gospel" categories for Scripture, which would have a profound effect upon his handling of the Psalms. As Calvin allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture, he observed a vital organic union between the Old and New Testaments rooted in God's one covenant of grace for all—both Jew and Gentile.²² As such, the law of God did not function primarily as a restraint upon the Old Testament saints

15. Ibid., 11. To see how Calvin exegetes Christ's language in the institution of the Lord's Supper see, Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xvii, 21. Also, see his discussion on the Lord's Supper in John Calvin, *Commentaries On A Harmony Of The Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, And Luke*, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vols. XVI–XVII.

16. Calvin, CO 47, 125. See Calvin's comments on Colossians 2:3 in, Jean Calvin and others, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 11.

17. See Eells's work on Martin Bucer's great influence upon Calvin in, Hastings Eells, "Martin Bucer and the Conversion of John Calvin," in *Calvin's Early Writings and Ministry*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992). Also see Hobbs's dissertation on Bucer's exegetical approach to the Psalms, and his influence upon Calvin's approach to interpreting and applying the Psalms in, R. Gerald Hobbs, "An Introduction To The Psalms Commentary Of Martin Bucer" (Universite De Strasbourg, 1971).

18. See, CR 9.831–38. "There [Calvin's preface to the homilies of Chrysostom] Calvin speaks highly of Chrysostom's exegetical excellence and inserts that Chrysostom is to be preferred as a commentator over even Athanasius, Basil, and Gregory among other Greek Fathers. He is also to be preferred to Tertullian, Ambrose, and actually all the other patristic Latin Fathers including Augustine!" As cited in Gamble, *Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic*, 35.

19. Calvin followed the same hermeneutical methodology he used for the production of his commentaries in the completion of his *magnum opus*, the *Institutes*. See, *ibid.*, 40.

20. Calvin, Psalms, preface, xlix.

21. Gamble, *Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic*, 39.

22. Gamble, *Brevitas et Facilitas*, 35.

but served to foster hope of salvation in the promised Messiah.²³ Conversely, the moral law of God, or the Ten Commandments, was not limited in its scope and application to those in the Old Testament. On the contrary, God's Law emanates from the very character of His holy nature for the edification and instruction of all the elect. Calvin followed the *analogia fidei* of Scripture as it interprets itself in declaring the old covenant to be a shadow of Christ to come, clearly revealed and consummated in the inauguration of Jesus at His birth, in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. As Scripture itself testifies to its Christocentric reality, Calvin tirelessly asserted that God's justifying and sanctifying grace is in Messiah alone for both Old Testament and New Testament saints alike.²⁴ As such, the law does not fade away or thwart the grace of God, for Christ Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it.²⁵ This approach freed Calvin from the temptation to force Jesus Christ into the Psalms since David, as attested to by Scripture itself, points to Jesus as a "type" of the Christ to come.²⁶ Calvin maintained a commitment to the idea that David and his kingdom are shadows and types of Jesus Christ's kingdom.²⁷ Even though he viewed the centrality of Davidic typology for understanding the Psalms, the Frenchman showed interpretive restraint, unlike other theologians who habitually ignored the historical, redemptive, and covenantal contexts of the Psalms they exegeted.

The French Reformer also criticized the baseless allegorizing of the divine texts that led the Church away

23. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi.10.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.7.

25. Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 63.

26. *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), Matthew 5:17.

27. The messianic kingship of Jesus Christ revealed in the typology of David and his kingdom became a presupposition through which Calvin viewed the Psalms specifically and the Royal or Kingship Psalms in particular. For an example of this presupposition displayed in his exegesis see Calvin's commentary on Psalm 68:18 which he coupled with Ephesians 4:8.

28. Richard Gamble notes that Calvin agreed with Martin Bucer's firm rejection of the allegorical method as part of a reformed approach to studying the sacred texts. See, Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 64. For further study on Calvin's hermeneutical and exegetical approach to studying scripture see, Gamble, *Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic*, 35.

29. Thomas F. Torrance, *The hermeneutics of John Calvin*, Monograph supplements to the Scottish journal of theology (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988); Richard C. Gamble, *The whole counsel of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2009); Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," Paul Traugott Fuhrmann, "Calvin, The Expositor of Scripture," and T. H. L. Parker, "Calvin the Biblical Expositor," in *Calvin and Hermeneutics*.

from a literal sense of the texts.²⁸ Calvin allowed the Biblical author to express himself, which ultimately meant the spirit of Messiah spoke through David and the other psalmists. The Holy Spirit's words, which illumine the person and work of Messiah, were given to and drawn forth from the mind, heart, and mouth of King David. Calvin understood the ultimate significance and fulfillment of this divine word cast in experiential theology to be realized in the eternal King, Jesus Christ; nevertheless, he viewed the Psalms as essential for each Christian individually and collectively to understand and live the normal, everyday pilgrim life. The Psalms illustrate the marvelous and mysterious nature of God's Word and God's ways in celebrating both the lone voice of the unknown, an insignificant shepherd who pours his heart out to the Lord in prayer and praise, as well as the collective cries of God's people represented on earth by God's anointed one in the splendor of David and fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Such an understanding of the Psalms is paramount and instrumental to discipleship in the Christian life led Calvin to a rich, life-long study of the Psalms for his own growth in the knowledge and grace of God as well as the edification of the Church.

Calvin's approach to studying the Bible and writing theology lends itself richly to a study of the Psalms. His theology, with all of its narrowly argued points as well as its grand themes, centers upon God.²⁹ The revelation of God in Scripture does not arise from human argumentation but the self-attestation of God, by the authority of Scripture itself. As Calvin studied Scripture from the perspective of the unfolding of salvation and specific theological *loci*, God was his unifying obsession and the point of initial inquiry. The Psalms maintain this divine focus unlike any other aspect of Scripture while simultaneously engaging the worshiper with an experiential orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and doxology. As the Psalms blessed Calvin, his heart was enflamed by this special gift of God to be used to magnify the glory of God in His people.

In Selderhuis's work on Calvin and the Psalms, which benefited greatly from Erwin Mülhaupt's thesis that highlights Calvin's passion for the Psalms, he writes:

First of all, the Psalms were of special significance to Calvin personally. He recognized much of himself in David and in difficult times he found comfort and strength in this book of the Bible. Secondly the Psalms are the only book from the Old Testament from which Calvin preached on Sundays. Thus the Psalms were the only exception to his customary practice to preach from the New Testament on Sundays while the Old Testament

was reserved for weekdays. Thirdly Mülhaupt mentions that Calvin has furthered the singing of Psalms during the church service like no other.³⁰

Calvin's passion for the Psalms did not rest solely upon some utilitarian use of the Psalms; instead, he saw their fundamental usefulness in educating God's people in the truth, training them in the language of prayer, and filling their mouths with the gift of praise.

The pilgrim life, for Calvin, is growing in the knowledge of self and God through God's revelation through the Holy Spirit, which engages the soul in the experience of life. This pilgrim life is both physical and spiritual, involving the body, emotions, desires, and all that it means to be truly human as re-created in Christ Jesus. As Calvin's pilgrimage, or sanctification journey, continued throughout his life his understanding of piety deepened as his knowledge of God and self grew daily through both the extraordinary and mundane occurrences of life. As the Reformer sought deeper communion with the Lord throughout the providential trials of his ministry, the Lord provided Calvin, through the Psalms, a unique nexus to meet this need. He writes, "The Holy Spirit has here [in the Psalms] drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."³¹ The French pastor found within the Psalms a running experiential word picture or theological mosaic communicating distilled experiential Biblical theology presenting the Messiah in the shadows of David as well as in his own life.³² Calvin explains:

In reading the instances of his [David's] faith, patience, fervour, zeal, and integrity, it has, as it ought, drawn from me unnumbered groans and sighs, that I am so far from approaching them; but it has, notwithstanding, been of very great advantage to me to behold in him as in a mirror, both the commencement of my calling, and the continued course of my function; so that I know the more assuredly, that whatever that most illustrious king and prophet suffered, was exhibited to me by God as an example for imitation.³³

Not only did the Reformer see experiential instruction in the life of David displayed in the pages of the Psalms, but he also believed that as he approached the Psalms, he looked into a mirror reflecting his own life.

Calvin saw the Psalms as an anatomy of all parts of the soul as well as a mirror of self and experience cast in the life of David, God's sinner-saint called into

the servant leadership of Christ's Church. As the Reformer matured in his Christian faith, he found himself more and more drawn to the life of David, whose life so uniquely modeled the Frenchman's own trials, displayed experientially within the pages of the Psalms. Calvin rationalizes:

For although I follow David at a great distance and come far short of equaling him; rather although aspiring slowly and with great difficulty to attain to the many virtues in which he excelled, I still feel myself tarnished with the contrary vices; yet if I have any things in common with him, I have no hesitation in comparing myself with him.³⁴

No doubt as Calvin experienced the pain of being exiled from Geneva, he identified all the more with King David, who suffered greatly during his own exile from Jerusalem at the hands of Saul. His affinity for the Psalms grew as the tumultuous events of his own life waxed. As the young pastor-theologian reflected on the trials and personal attacks that he faced continually from both within and outside the church during the tumultuous years following his return to Geneva from exile in 1541, Calvin found great solace in the Psalms of David. Remembering these trying times years later while beginning to pen his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin writes, "In considering the whole course of the life of David, it seemed to me that by his own footsteps he showed me the way, and from this I have experienced no small consolation."³⁵ Such experiences, coupled with his hermeneutical approach to the Psalms, became a two-fold cord that bound his pilgrim life all the more to the study, preaching, teaching, and writing about the Psalms.

30. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 14.

31. Calvin, *Psalms*, preface, xxxviii.

32. For three important studies that provide insight into Calvin's experiential and typological approach to the Psalms see, Barbara Pitkin, "Imitation of David: David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms," *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXIV, no. 4 (1993). Richard A. Hasler, "The Influence of David and the Psalms upon John Calvin's Life and Thought," in *The Biography of Calvin, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: A Fourteen-Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles*, volume 1, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992). John Walchenbach, "The Influence of David and the Psalms on the Life and Thought of John Calvin" (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1969).

33. Calvin, *Psalms*, preface, xl.

34. *Ibid.*, IV.xl.

35. *Ibid.*, IV.xliv.

DAVID AS THE ARCHETYPE PILGRIM
UNLOCKING THE PSALMS

Notably, Calvin was not alone in crediting David as the chief author of the Psalms. Russell writes, “Calvin seems to accept as a general rule that if the superscription of a song refers to David, then it is by his hand . . . for this reason, Calvin, unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary, tends to assign most of the Psalms to David.”³⁶ Many Reformers of his day as well as theologians within the early church taught that David authored the Psalms. What distinguished the exegetical approach seen within the vast Reformed scholarship of the sixteenth century from that of Rome, however, was the Reformation appeal to the authority of the Bible above all other authorities. Because of the Bible’s absolute authority, the totality of its witness and message informs and clarifies each individual passage of scripture. *Sola Scriptura*, not ecclesiastical tradition, was the ultimate and final authority for faith and practice.³⁷ Calvin’s personal approach to David as the typological subject and primary human author of the Psalms did not distinguish him from the other Reformers; however, his commitment to the idea that David was both the example and mirror of *pietas* for his own life distinguished his use of the Psalms.³⁸ The Reformer perceived an intimate connection with David as he considered the mysteries of God’s providential workings, which elevated both men to ecclesiastical leadership and brought great spiritual warfare, too.

Calvin believed his experiential connection with the life and ministry of David was in itself part of God’s mysterious divine accommodation to elucidate the

Reformer’s own understanding of the Psalms. He could not separate his own life experiences from his reading of the Psalms. David went from the obscurity of humble beginnings tending flocks in the wilderness to achieving fame as Israel’s king. Calvin, too, had come from the anonymity of humble beginnings within a throng of erudite scholars, yet, providentially, he would be elevated to fame as a preacher and Reformer within the heart of Europe. Calvin writes, “But as he was taken from the sheepfold, and elevated to the rank of supreme authority; so God having taken me from my originally obscure and humble condition, has reckoned me worthy of being invested with the honourable office of a preacher and minister of the gospel.”³⁹ As David obeyed the orders of his father and found contentment serving God within the anonymity of the wilderness, Calvin also submitted to his father and followed his proscribed course of study that eventually led him to seek the quiet life of a humanistic scholar left to read and write in solitude.⁴⁰ Within the fingerprints of God’s providential works, which orchestrated young Calvin’s unexpected detainment in Geneva while in route to Strasbourg and the scholar’s life of solitude, he saw a parallel with David as both an exile and one snatched from the sheepfold and thrust into the struggle with Saul for the hearts and lives of God’s people. Of course, the French Reformer did not stand alone in the battle, as David appeared to at times. The struggle for the church in Europe included a constellation of men possessing both intellectual and spiritual maturity engaged in reform.⁴¹ In this manner, Calvin’s life differed greatly from David’s, yet he often felt alone and could easily identify with the isolated psalmist as he bore the weight of his people, while the Holy Spirit drew from his heart the anguish of laments and the longing for praise to the Lord.

Perhaps the most important and intimate experiential connection that Calvin observed in the life of David and felt within his ministry was betrayal and personal attacks from those within the visible Church. Quoting from Psalm 41 and 55, Calvin sees in David’s lament a mirror into his own experience. He laments:

But that those who shroud themselves under the name of brethren, and not only eat Christ’s sacred bread, but also administer it to others, that those, in short, who loudly boast of being preachers of the gospel, should wage such nefarious war against me, how detestable is it? In this matter I may very justly complain with David, “Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me,” (Ps. 41:9.) “For it was not an enemy that reproached

36. S. H. Russell, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms,” *Calvin and Hermeneutics*, VI, 262.

37. See the work of both Muller and Waltke: Richard A. Muller, “The Foundation of Calvin’s Theology: Scripture as Revealing God’s Word,” in *Calvin and Hermeneutics*, and Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*.

38. Hasler, *The Influence of David and the Psalms upon John Calvin’s Life and Thought*, 87.

39. Calvin, *Psalm, Calvin’s Commentaries*, IV.xl.

40. For a clear and concise précis of Calvin’s early life see chapter one of, David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

41. See chapter two in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Black Mountain, NC: Worship Press, 2004). Old’s research on the Patristic knowledge found within an impressive cross-section of first and second-generation reformers, which helped shaped their theology of worship is impressive but not exhaustive. Historians note the sizeable number of learned men actively exchanging ideas concerning the reformation of the church with the Disputation of Bern in 1528.

me; but it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company," (Ps. 55:12, 13, 14.).⁴²

Calvin contemplated God's providential works in his life through the lens of David's experience. Like David's, Calvin's life comprised a mosaic of experiences from difficult to sweet and everything in-between. As Calvin sought daily refuge in the pages of the Psalms, he learned how to think and act more faithfully as a Christian.

Calvin's own experiences seemed to be providentially and inextricably linked with many of David's life experiences. Through God's special accommodation of His Word through the Psalms, Calvin saw in David a luminous mirror for understanding the nature of the true life, the Christian life—the life of *pietas*, which is a life of cross-bearing and self-denial. Calvin writes of David's *pietas* on display:

This knowledge and experience have been of much service in enabling me to understand the Psalms, so that in my meditations upon them, I did not wander, as it were, in an unknown region. My readers . . . will observe, that in unfolding the internal affections both of David and of others I discourse upon them as matters of which I have familiar experience.⁴³

Thus the Psalms were intimately important to inform Calvin of God's truth while accommodating that truth to him through the life of David. The Frenchman sought to battle indwelling sin and to bear witness daily to the gospel within his individual life of piety and his corporate life of Christian leadership. These two spheres of piety, which are yoked together through union with Christ and His Bride, can never be severed, but comprise the holistic Christian life, even as a single coin unites two distinct sides.

The Psalms were certainly significant in Calvin's first pastorate as he sought liturgical reform. Their importance grew tremendously as he labored to serve the Lord by serving His Church over the next twenty-five years. Selderhuis explains:

For Calvin the book of the Psalms assumed greater and greater significance in his theological development. In the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) the Psalter is the least-quoted Biblical book, in the last edition it is quoted more than any other with the one exception of the epistle to the Romans.⁴⁴

When Calvin faced growing ministerial and personal trials, he turned to God's special revelation, especially the Psalms, to make sense of life and to grow in communion with the Lord. As the pressures of leadership grew alongside the ongoing spiritual warfare he faced in Geneva, he was driven to exercise the "chief duty of the Christian life," namely prayer, or what may be called the "exhalation of piety." When the French Reformer sought deeper intimacy with the Lord, he first listened to God through reading His Word, especially the Psalms, and then he prayed. Calvin writes:

Calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine. Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need, and next, from faith in the promises of God. It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book.⁴⁵

Calvin ardently and continually turned to the divine prayers to express his own pains, fears, joys, and praises. As he grew in this godly discipline of praying the Psalms, the pastor became more and more convinced of their necessity for all believers.

THE PSALMS AS THE HANDBOOK OF PIETY FOR THE CHURCH

Calvin did not share his unique experiential connection with David to suggest that he stood upon the stage of history as David's equal with some exclusive claim to the Psalms. Those closest to him knew the Frenchman's humility and willingness to admit his faults, yet he persisted in observing and testifying to the parallels between his experience and that of Israel's king.⁴⁶ These

42. Calvin, Psalms, preface, xlvi.

43. Ibid., IV.xlvii.

44. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 16. See also, Ford Lewis Battles and others, *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 145.

45. Calvin, Psalms, preface, xxxviii.

46. To gain a better understanding of Calvin's humility and

connections, however, brought courage to his heart and coherence between his reason and the ways of God in the lives of His saints. The primary emphasis that flowed from Calvin's unique connection and approach to understanding and applying the Psalms, which he never tired of laying before the Church, was his insistence that the Psalms are the handbook for *pietas*. Hasler writes:

David in the Psalms gave to Calvin a consummate model of faith and trust in God amidst the changing circumstances of life which was not only didactic material for his preaching and teaching ministry but was also one of the main sources of inspiration for his own religious experience even to the end of his life.⁴⁷

Specifically, for Calvin, the Psalms are the *enchiridion* for the authentic sinner-saint pilgrimage, with King David as the model of true faith and practice lived out within the ever-changing and often-tumultuous circumstances of life. The Lord sets this gift before His people as a unique accommodation of His special revelation in David's life experientially presented throughout the pages of the Psalms.⁴⁸ Calvin applied the Psalms personally and corporately as a special accommodation of God's special revelation. This special accommodation is paramount to the Reformer's understanding of the Psalms and the Christian life. Russell explains Calvin's unique approach to applying the Psalms to the Christian life. He writes, "David and his people are the type of Christ and his church, and, therefore, in interpreting the Psalms, we must apply the words to David, to Christ, and to his members."⁴⁹ As such, the Psalms distinctively educate the people of God in the ways of the "blessed man," who is the archetype sinner-saint justified in Messiah. G. Sujin Pak writes:

Calvin finds in David not only a teacher model for his own life but also a teacher for the church overall. And

personality see, Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, Living classics for today (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1997).

47. Hasler, *The Influence of David and the Psalms upon John Calvin's Life and Thought*, 15.

48. For a scholarly work that asserts Calvin's core exegetical approach to the Psalms lies in his affirmation that David is the paradigm of piety for the Christian life of faith see, Pitkin, *Imitation of David*.

49. Russell, *Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms*, 41.

50. G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates Over The Messianic Psalms*, Oxford Studies In Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.

51. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.x.15.

52. *Ibid.*, III.ii.17.

53. See Calvin, Psalms, *Calvin's Commentaries*, IV-V, Psalms 31:22, 42:5, 77:9.

indeed, his fundamental purpose in the Psalms commentary is to give a reading for the edification of the church through the person of David.⁵⁰

David's pious example illustrated within the Psalms contributed seminally to Calvin's comprehension of Christian piety for all believers.

Calvin's piety of faith and practice illustrated and mediated through the life of David bears both the elements of idealism and realism. While David sought to live faithfully before the Lord in the reality of this sin-broken world, his heart was anguished at the prosperity of the wicked while the righteous were cast down. David, however, knew that life without God leads to ultimate alienation and judgment. His hope was rooted in the final *shalom* of God's people, secured in the Messiah to come.⁵¹ In David's life, Calvin saw instruction for God's people in how one faithfully handles the tension between the way things are and the way things should be and will be in the final consummation of God's kingdom. As the Psalms display David's feelings within this struggle, the Christian's own feelings are freed to react within the sin-broken circumstances of life in the moment, yet steadied by the reality of the way things will be at the final consummation of Christ. Calvin considered the Psalms vital in instructing believers not only in correct faith and practice but also in correct feelings. Calvin found comfort in the midst of his own life's anxieties as he learned from David's life—a life that illustrated both emotionally and practically that the faithful experience anxieties that elicit a plethora of emotions. The Psalms show the tumultuous context in which true faith lives while demonstrating how truth faith acts and feels in the moment. Calvin directs believers to draw comfort from the Psalms, even as they learn how to live multi-dimensional lives. He writes:

Scripture sets forth no more illustrious or memorable example of faith than in David.... So David, even when he might have seemed overwhelmed, in rebuking himself did not cease to rise up to God. He who, struggling with his own weakness, presses toward faith in his moments of anxiety is already in large part victorious.⁵²

The shepherd king often experienced doubts, fears, and the anxiety of the unknowable immediate future. Nevertheless, he stood resolutely as the Lord sustained him by His word and promises.⁵³

Faith in Messiah to save and forgive maintains the central place within the life of piety. Calvin's devotion to the Psalms for all believers combined the need for daily

confession of sin that trusts in the Lord's merciful forgiveness. This trust centers upon the divine promises given in Scripture, which believers experience by the Holy Spirit's assuring love within the life of sanctification. As part of the Reformer's piety of the Psalter, the Church learns about true Christian penitence through David's emotions captured within the Psalms. Without the Psalms, David's hidden inner-man would not be available to instruct and comfort the hidden-life feelings within all God's people. While the historical events and some of David's feelings surrounding his great sin of adultery and murder are recorded in the histories, only the Psalms show clearly the whole of David's soul-anguish and soul-relief in dealing with the complexities of sin, its consequences, and repentance unto life. Calvin writes:

For he [the Lord] freely forgave David the guilt of his sin, but because it was appropriate both for the public example of all ages and also for the humiliation of David that such a crime should not go unpunished, he very harshly chastised him with his scourge.⁵⁴

As the federal head of God's earthly kingdom, David's sin, confession, and restoration are important illustrative and educational examples for God's people. The Psalms teach the elect not only about God's character but also about the Christian's right actions and feelings in response to the Lord's actions toward His covenant people.

When Calvin experienced the hardships of the pilgrim life, the Holy Spirit distinctively instructed him in the school of right faith, practice, and feeling as he gazed into the Scriptures. He became an instrument of accommodation in the hands of the Lord, prepared and qualified to preach, teach, and lead the people of God, who all bear the cross of discipleship as they individually and corporately walk the pilgrim path of *pietas*. Much of the Frenchman's instruction came from the Psalms, which include more than a didactic instruction concerning orthopraxy. Just as the Psalms revealed to Calvin a glimpse into the heart and soul of both the sinner-saint and the Redeemer, so too, do they reveal the solemnity of these things to the elect of every generation.

As the Church gathers in Christ and under the cross of discipleship, the Psalms serve as the experiential handbook of the Christian life, informing and empowering the Christian life. In order to experience the fullness of God's blessing for His people through the use of the Psalms, Calvin applied several important theological keys for understanding and applying them to the Church. According to the Reformer, the Psalms,

which are enlivened by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect, uniquely communicate and engender a life of *pietas* in diverse ways. As the holy handbook for *pietas*, the Psalms convey the best representation of true prayer to God and authentic trust in the God who providentially works for the good of His people.⁵⁵ The Psalms also represent the best picture of authentic faith that overcomes adversity.⁵⁶ The Psalms illustrate the best picture of God's consolation and encouragement to His elect in Christ.⁵⁷ The Psalms give the best reflection of authentic worship as well as guidance for true worship. And ultimately, the Psalms, as the handbook for the Christian life, show the path of true salvation for the elect in Messiah. Calvin explains:

In one word, not only will we here find general commendations of the goodness of God, which may teach men to repose themselves in him alone, and to seek all their happiness solely in him; and which are intended to teach true believers with their whole hearts confidently to look to him for help in all their necessities; but we will also find that the free remission of sins, which alone reconciles God towards us, and procures for us settled peace with him, is so set forth and magnified, as that here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation.⁵⁸

The entirety of the Psalms, edited and organized into the five books, function as a holy primer teaching the liturgy and the content of a doxology devoted to theology proper. Calvin writes:

There is also here [in the Psalms] prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise, which he declares to be most precious in his sight, and of the sweetest odour. There is no other book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendor of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth.⁵⁹

54. Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iv.35.

55. Calvin, *Psalms*, preface, xxxviii.

56. *Ibid.*, IV.xxxvii-xxxviii; xl.

57. *Ibid.*, IV.xli.

58. *Ibid.*, IV.xxxix.

59. *Ibid.*, IV.xxxix.

The Psalms teach the elect about God and His works of creation and redemption as part of His special revelation.⁶⁰

The holy education mediated through the Psalms, according to the French pastor, comes through a uniquely experiential theology cast in a Biblical doxology from the perspective of man's need and sinfulness before the great and mighty God of *hesed*, or covenant loving faithfulness.⁶¹ Calvin asserted that as the people of God read and sing the Psalms they confess who God is and what God does through His very words, which He puts into their hearts and mouths. The Psalms, as the divinely inspired "prayer-praises" maintain a unique place within the canon of Scripture. They are the divine medium and message of orthodoxy communicated with the full range of emotions shared by the Creator through His communicable attributes with his creatures. The Reformer writes, "There is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this exercise of piety."⁶² With even further sublime praise for the Psalms and their fundamental place in the Christian life, Calvin writes, "We are certain that God has put the words in our mouths as if they themselves sang in us to exalt his glory."⁶³ God's gift of the Psalms placed within the hands and hearts of His people give evidence of the Lord's grace that both warms the elect's heart to God's gracious gift of salvation in Messiah and stirs his or her heart to give praise to God with mouth and life.⁶⁴ As the Christian life ebbs and flows with hardship, temptation, and the pain of sin's temporal consequences, a daily diet of Psalm reading engages one in the complexities of the pilgrim life and provides a continual incitement to trust, obey, and follow the Lord.

Because Calvin tasted the hardships and the bitterness of living for Christ in a fallen world while leading God's people through necessary reforms, he personally

needed what the Lord's people have needed and received generation after generation both in and through the Psalms. Through the Psalms, God's truth is uniquely communicated from the perspective of the rocky pilgrim path upon which the man of faith, the blessed man of Psalm 1, must travel both when the providential blessings shine and when the darkness of confusion and trial surround the life of faith. As God's accommodation of His special revelation intersects with the individual pilgrim's path, the Lord more intimately works the mystery of His sanctifying love in the lives of His elect. Calvin writes:

The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed.⁶⁵

Using the Psalms, Calvin sought to lead the flock, hungry for communion with the Lord, to the verdant pastures available to them. The Psalms communicate experientially from within the individual pilgrim life as opposed to a distant didactic word from above.

Calvin experienced the daily struggle to live a godly life within the realm of his Christian calling personally and generally as well as specifically and corporately. For the French pastor, the godly life, or the life of *pietas*, which strives to think, speak, and act in obedience to God's special revelation, is not God's will solely for Christian leaders but for the entire body of Christ. As Calvin attempted to walk in humble obedience to the Lord as part of his own pilgrimage, he sought to inspire genuine piety in others. The Psalms maintained a central place within Calvin's life and ministry as he promoted an authentic Christianity, which begins with inspiration and revelation from God that engages the mind, heart, and will. Joel Beeke writes, "Calvin views the Psalms as the canonical manual of piety."⁶⁶ Because the Psalms contain a distillation of God's truth found in the totality of Scripture, which is communicated experientially through first person prayers of lament, praise, thanksgiving, and war cries, they distinctively function as the handbook for the Christian life that directs and fills the elect with right prayer and praise to God. Calvin did not approach the Psalms as some kind of tool to be used for the sole purpose of

60. James Denney, *The Letters of Prinsipal James Denney to His Family and Friends* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 9.

61. James Luther Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: The Preface as Introduction," in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1990), 201–204.

62. Calvin, *Psalms*, preface, xxxviii–xxxix.

63. John Calvin, "The Form of Prayers and Songs of the Church," *Calvin Theological Journal* 15, no. (1980).

64. Calvin, *Psalms*, *Calvin's Commentaries*, VI, Psalm 103:1–3.

65. *Ibid.*, *Psalms*, preface, xxxvii.

66. Joel R. Beeke, "Calvin on Piety," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137.

manipulating political, ecclesiastical, or doxological reform. The Reformer did not write about the transformation of culture or the Church without first looking through his theocentric worldview captivated by the sovereign Lord. For Calvin, in every matter, God is the Creator and King who rules the universe.⁶⁷ The importance of the Psalms for Calvin is not simply in the correct words prayed or sung according to a proscribed formula, but in the revelation of the glory of the God who speaks, creates, and re-creates in the Redeemer, who is worthy of true prayer and praise, and whose kingdom, shadowed in the Davidic kingdom, has come in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Reformer recognized the inscripturated prayer-praise of the Psalms as having been given to the Church by the living and moving God to reveal Himself to the Church individually and corporately as Creator, Redeemer, and loving Triune Lord. As the Reformer committed himself to the *dublex cognitio* from the outset of his *Institutes*, he explained that the Psalms, too, describe the complex relationship of God with humanity that begins with true knowledge of God and self.⁶⁸ While Calvin sought to know God in the complexities of life and to teach others about this living Lord, he gravitated back to the heart of the Bible, the Psalms, to inform and to give expression to his own Christian life. He discovered that the Psalms maintained a central place in the devotional practices of Christian discipleship within the earliest expressions of Christian community.⁶⁹ As he tapped into the spiritual soul food of the Psalms, which strengthened him on his own pilgrimage, he desired the Church to recover the whole counsel of God in order to be uniquely nourished and educated to spiritual maturity by the heart of the Scriptures.

Countless Christians have personally identified with many prayers in the Bible and have been compelled to pray them intimately so as to make the Biblical words their own.⁷⁰ Of these passages, the Psalms are the most loved and used prayers in the devotional life of individuals and the corporate Church. Calvin was not the only one to perceive the Psalms' uniqueness. Witvliet writes:

Indeed, the Psalter is the foundational and paradigmatic prayer book of the Christian church. Time and time again, worshiping communities have returned to the Psalter for inspiration and instruction in the life of both personal and public prayer. Some of the most auspicious liturgical reform movements in church history—including those of sixth-century monastic communities, sixteenth-century Lutherans and Calvinists,

and the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement—have called for a renewed appreciation for the liturgical possibilities of the Psalter.⁷¹

From one generation to the next, the Psalms connect the Church, a truth to which the Psalms themselves attest.⁷² Assuredly all Scripture is *theopneustos*, or God-breathed, but the Book of Psalms uniquely serves the Church as the inscripturation of the Holy Spirit's prayers to the praise of God.⁷³ Calvin learned this truth as he read the Psalms, experienced the Christian life, and read broadly and deeply from the works of Christians before him. The lofty perspective on the Psalms he witnessed throughout salvation and theological history supported his case for the absolute necessity of their use in discipling Christians in every generation.

Long before and after Calvin absorbed the Psalms as part of his pilgrimage of piety, Christians held them to be the prayers of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ In the 3rd century AD, Origen proclaimed, "Do you want me to show you how the fire goes out from the words of the Holy Spirit and ignites the hearts of believers? Hear David speaking in the psalm: "The declaration of the Lord has set him on fire."⁷⁵ In the twentieth century, Thomas Merton writes, "Nowhere can we be more certain that we are praying with the Holy Spirit than when we pray the Psalms."⁷⁶ In his own day, Calvin saw the impact of these inscripturated prayers of the Holy Spirit upon

67. Calvin, Psalms, *Calvin's Commentaries*, VI, 104:1.

68. Beeke, *Calvin on Piety*, 137.

69. Augustine's life and theological works, especially on the Psalms, had a profound impact upon Calvin. See, Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 15. Also see, A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

70. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Praying with the Bible* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1980), 28.

71. John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship liturgical studies series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 13.

72. *Holy Bible (ESV)*, Psalm 78. For a comprehensive study on the history and use of the Psalter see, William Lee Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

73. *Holy Bible (ESV)*, Acts 4:25; 2 Timothy 3:16.

74. For examples of early church scholarship on the Psalms representing the eastern and western churches see, John Chrysostom and Robert C. Hill, *St. John Chrysostom Commentary on the Psalms*, 2 vols. (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998). Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 1 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

75. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt and Thomas C. Oden, *Psalms 51-150*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 337.

76. Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956), 18.

Martin Luther. Scholars continue to affirm the profound influence the Psalms had upon Luther as the Saxon Reformer's work undergoes modern scrutiny. Bruce Waltke writes, "The Psalms remained the greatest influence on Luther's faith throughout his life. They were the sphere where the saints are always talking to God, himself [Luther] included."⁷⁷ For Luther, as with Calvin, the Psalms provide a crossroads for the heart and mind as well as Biblical truth for the experiences of life. Luther writes, "In the Psalms we have a view of the inner heart of the faithful. In this way it not only passes their words regarding their works on to us, but also opens their heart and the deepest grounds of the richness of their souls."⁷⁸ Just as Luther had discovered before Calvin, the prayers found within the heart of God's special revelation inform the heart-prayers of God's people. As the elect follow Messiah through a life of filling up the sufferings of Christ, the Psalms provide a full diet of situational and emotional realities that pilgrims experience along the pathways of this life, which leads to the life to come.⁷⁹ Both Calvin and Luther saw this view as an essential interpretive approach to understanding the Psalms in their historical context as well as in their application. As men converted by the Spirit of God through the Word of God to love the Lord Christ, Calvin and Luther approached the Psalms as an avenue to meet with Messiah through the Christological and experiential framework of the Psalms.⁸⁰ Through such daily meetings with the Lord Christ via His prayer-praises and His Spirit, God's people mature in true knowledge, faith, and practice.

Calvin ministered the gospel in an era of greater of Biblical illiteracy than ministers of the gospel face in the twenty-first century Western church. To attack this problem, he focused upon sustained exegetical preaching as primary to weekly public worship. He sought to engage the people of God with the full diet of Scripture

in order to engage them with and to grow them in the truth. At the heart of this spiritual educational program were the reading, preaching, and praying of God's Word, and especially the Psalms as they were sung in corporate worship. Through a sustained and persistent encounter with the Scriptures, and especially the experiential message of the Psalms, the people were actively disciplined by the truths of God's Word and pressed to live out these truths in their individual callings. As Christians in every generation face the debilitating effects of Biblical illiteracy upon the visible church, which leads to spiritual rigormortis, the Psalms become more and more important to the spiritual health and growth of the Church. When the Psalms are read, prayed, and sung generously, the people of God receive continual instruction in orthodoxy and doxology by the prayers of the Holy Spirit given through David and others to lead God's people in a life of orthopraxy. In and through the Psalms, the people of God are confronted by both the holy character and emotions of the divine speaker who created man in His image.⁸¹ God's holy nature is the basis for Scripture's authority, and concerning the Psalms specifically, provides a multidimensional learning experience as the truth of God is set on fire in the elect's experiences of creation, life, and worship. Through the gift of the Psalms and the Holy Spirit working together as divine instruction within the hearts of God's people, the subsequent gift of true prayer and praise rise to the Lord and bear witness to the world.⁸²

THE PSALMS AND WORSHIP: LEARNING WHILE DOING

Life and learning move together conterminously. As Calvin studied the Bible and served the Church, he grew in his understanding of the Psalms as necessary for learning about and experiencing authentic life. While he followed such giants of the Christian faith as Jerome in viewing David as the primary author of the Psalms, Calvin elevated David as a picture of authentic faith and practice for both Old Testament and New Testament saints.⁸³ Through God's providential work of accommodation, He coalesces the experiential faith journeys of all the psalmists and brings them to bear upon the lives of individual Christians, generation after generation. Witvliet explains:

The Psalms reflect an ancient, Biblical way of praying that continues to shape Christian worship, even when the Psalms are not used. Understanding the nature of that formation will help us both deepen our practice of

77. Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 61.

78. Martin Luther quoted in Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 21.

79. See Paul's use of the Psalms in describing the Christian life, *Holy Bible (ESV)*, Philippians 3:8–10.

80. Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 61.

81. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 14.

82. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.iv.

83. As Calvin studied the Psalms with a commitment to their historical meaning as well as covenantal unity he was able to press their experiential application in pointing to David as a paradigm for Christian faith. See, Pitkin, *Imitation of David*, 844. For further study see, Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's doctrine of faith in its exegetical context*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

worship generally and be better stewards of the Psalms themselves.⁸⁴

As God's people become better stewards of the Psalms, they are uniquely educated in the unity of God's covenants and the ways in which living faith correctly responds to the challenges inherent within the Christian life.⁸⁵ This holy education and orthodox response then manifests week-by-week as the faithful gather to worship.

When the people of God worship the Lord as directed and informed by the Scriptures, they learn as they simultaneously engage Biblical truth from both an emotive and experiential perspective. Calvin committed himself to such worship as he sought to reform the Christian community in Geneva; he devoted his energy to reforming worship according to the Word of God.⁸⁶ Introducing Psalm singing in corporate worship was central to Calvin's reform program.⁸⁷ As God's people gather to worship the Lord under His Word read and preached, authentic worship includes confessing and singing His Word back to Him. Learning while doing—dialogical worship—is at the heart of reformed worship and has been from the beginning of creation.⁸⁸

From the moment Adam opened his eyes following his creation, humans have been learning beings. Even as creation *ex nihilo* is miraculous, so too, is learning. Adam came into existence after being formed from the dust of the earth and filled with God's breath of life. Within the very moment of his creation and initial self-awareness, Adam also knew a situational and divine awareness that shaped the way he learned and interacted as a creature living in the very presence of the Creator. He was a living, breathing, dependent creature within a garden not of his own making. More than plants and animals surrounded Adam in this garden; he was also surrounded by words. The Lord God Almighty who created all things by the word of His power did not cease to speak after creating and blessing creation. As the Lord God communed with Adam, He continued to speak to the man in the "school-house" of His "garden-temple," teaching and training the man in the way he should rightly live in the fullness of community, comprising both the divine and the creaturely. God's words addressed more than Adam's mind, but also the entirety of his soul. Adam's purity and innocence within the sanctity of this garden-temple and divine schoolhouse did not last due to Adam's fall into sin. This cosmic rebellion profoundly affected Adam and all his posterity intellectually, volitionally, emotionally, and situationally. No longer was Adam able to worship the Lord rightly or to learn from the Lord. At the fall, Adam and

his descendants were at enmity with God, self, and the rest of creation. The Lord God, however, is gracious and immediately revealed that aspect of His holy character through His Word of promise, which would one day be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.⁸⁹ In the *proto evangelium*, the gracious promise of God is introduced. Eventually humanity's fall into sin will be overcome through the gift of Jesus Christ. As the fall brought new words of pain, brokenness, alienation, and judgment into human awareness, so too, did God's word of gracious promise in the gift of Jesus Christ bring new words of confession, forgiveness, petition, thanksgiving and praise into human's vocabulary. Adam's descendants, however, do not naturally know these words of promise, praise, and petition. Such language must be learned after the elect are born again to a living faith as a new creature in the resurrected Jesus. This gift restores a way to worship and learn from the Lord without denying the ugliness of sin or forgetting its horrific effects. It gives believers a greater covenantal vocabulary to praise God for His gift of grace and to cry out for help during the hard complexities of the pilgrim life. The Psalms, for Calvin, provided the necessary vocabulary while communicating the essential themes of orthodoxy to the Church. Therefore, the pastor desired to use the Psalms as fundamental to Christian discipleship and education in what it means to be in the school of Christ seeking to worship God and live faithfully.

Calvin asserted that the Psalms teach the elect in Christ about the nature of God and the nature of humanity's need for and dependence upon God. The Psalms display the Lord God's character as well as humanity's needs through a raw experiential perspective displayed

84. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, 15.

85. Pitkin, *Imitation of David*, 843–844.

86. See, Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship that is Reformed according to Scripture*, Guides to the Reformed tradition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984).

87. On January 16, 1537 Calvin insisted upon presenting to the little council of Geneva a list of reforms, which included the introduction of corporate psalm singing in worship. *Ioannis Calvinii opera selecta*, ed. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner, 5 vols. (Munich: Kaiser, 1926–1962), 1.375. See also, John D. Witvliet, *The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin's Geneva Conference* (10th Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society) David Foxgrover (Calvin Theological Seminary: CRC Product Services 1995), 95.

88. Calvin views worship as inherently an expansion of the nature and actions of prayer. Both are a holy conversation with God. See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xx.4.

89. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." *Holy Bible (ESV)*, Genesis 3:15.

within the complexities of redemptive history while enfolding all of history.⁹⁰ This grand history embraces the much smaller stories of individual Christians; however, instead of losing their identity and meaning, the elect see their stories in the light of redemption mirrored within the pages of the Psalms. The holy learning that takes place as God's people interact with the Psalms can then be reinforced as they reflect on their own lives that comprise a range of emotions colored by events corresponding to specific emotions and events displayed within the Psalm. As the elect experience the drama of a sin broken life alienated from God and at enmity with self and community, which then finds peace with God through the person and work of Messiah, the Psalms enliven them to the drama of redemption unlike any other aspect of Scripture. Calvin asserts the Psalms demonstrate God's goodness to fallen creatures, and through one's experiential reading of the text, the Lord lovingly invites humans to seek Him and meditate on His grace.⁹¹ As the Psalms experientially teach the elect about God's goodness and human need, they both teach and inspire a life of *pietas*. The Psalms reflect the individual story within the grandeur of God's great story of creation, fall, inauguration, redemption, and, finally, the consummation of God's kingdom. As the elect learn from God's handbook of piety, they are existentially engaged with redemptive history through the creation, fall, and re-creation of God's people in the person and work of Messiah, culminating in His kingdom. Messiah's redemptive work is followed by the continuation and growth of the Messianic kingdom that finds consummation in final judgment and glory, all of which may be learned from the

Psalms. Calvin affirmed that the Psalms teach God's people about faith-filled prayer. He also asserted that the Psalms provide an orthodox structure and glossary of words for true Christian prayer and praise.⁹² This divine existential primer on the pilgrim journey teaches the words and structure of prayer and praise that springs from a heart of thankfulness to God for His sovereign grace and patient sanctification.

Fundamentally, the Psalms present a unique theology proper and anthropology, but God's communication through the Psalms of who He is and what fallen man needs does not end with theology proper and anthropology, according to Calvin. The Reformer maintained that the Psalms communicate fallen man's need for God's grace and forgiveness in Messiah alone.⁹³ In the Psalms, one comes face-to-face with the sinner's divine remedy. Messiah, who is Jehovah's salvation, is presented in his three-fold office of eternal Prophet, Priest, and King. The Psalms present the uniqueness of Christ's personhood as the only eternally begotten Son of God as well as the uniqueness of Messiah's sufferings, death, resurrection, and ascension. This Biblical and experiential truth within the Psalms resonates with a strong call to come and receive God's salvation, through His gracious gift of faith in Messiah and the justifying power of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁴ The Psalms not only teach the right path to Messiah but also the right way to flee from sin and temptation. The Psalms instruct God's elect how to flee from sin and temptation to the Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of pleading prayer.⁹⁵ Even when the Christian seems overrun by demonic trials and the adversities that fill this fallen world, the Psalms train the heart of God's elect to commune with the Lord through bold prayer.⁹⁶ The Psalms show God's elect the glory of Christ's Bride as the living sons and daughters of God, who know the special blessing as God's flock—a concept repeated in the Psalms with the use of intimate personal pronouns for the relationship between the Lord and His people.⁹⁷ The Psalms display the full range of experiential theology found in the pilgrim life—faith, doubt, conviction, joy, spiritual fullness and exile—or, as Calvin writes, “an anatomy of all parts of the soul.”⁹⁸

Since sanctification is a work in progress, the Psalms do not hide the truth about the Church militant individually and collectively, but call the elect to self-examination. Ultimately, this call is never alone but comes coupled with the call to believe in the Lord God of promise who bestows grace to save and the Holy Spirit to live.⁹⁹ The Psalms lead the Church to a Biblically informed prayer and Holy Spirit heart-filled praise.

90. In Calvin's preface to the Genevan Psalter published in 1562 he maintains his strong commitment to the Psalms as an experiential handbook for the life of faith, which he had already richly developed in his Psalms commentary.

91. See Calvin's preface to the Genevan Psalter. CO 31.16–18. Pitkin, *Imitation of David*, 847.

92. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, 15.

93. See the reformers comments on Psalm 51 in *Calvin's Commentaries*, volume V.

94. Allan M. Harman, “The Psalms and Reformed Spirituality,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 53/2, no. (1994).

95. Calvin, Psalms, preface, xxxvi–xxxix.

96. *Ibid.* See Calvin's comments on Psalm 5:11; 118:5, *Calvin's Commentaries*, IV, VI.

97. *Ibid.* See Calvin's comments on Psalm 100:4, *Calvin's Commentaries*, VI.

98. James A. De Jong, ““An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul”: Insights into Calvin's Spirituality from His Psalms Commentary,” in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 1–14.

99. Calvin, Psalms, *Calvin's Commentaries on Psalms*, IV.xxxix.

Beeke summarizes Calvin's experiential theology of the Psalms: "The psalms of David, especially, are like a mirror in which we are led to praise God and find rest in his sovereign purposes."¹⁰⁰ As Calvin sought to walk in humble communion with the Lord in the grips of His divine grace, the Psalms loomed ever larger to the Reformer as fundamentally important for himself as well as the Bride of Christ. When the individuals begin living the true life within the community of the Church, they must necessarily begin learning the Word of God to inform their Christian life. Without the faithful words of God, no one can make sense of life, enter into true worship, or endeavor to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. For this reason, Calvin embraced the Psalms as central to his educational reform for the true worship and practice of the individual Christian as well as the corporate Church.

Ten years after his return to Geneva, following his exile, Calvin reflected upon his second attempt to reform the city. In his preface to Louis Budé's French translation of the Psalms, he placed the Psalms as the premiere book of the Bible that expresses both the grace of God and the necessary gratitude the elect owe God for His benevolent care. In the Psalms, God provides both the life and prayers of David as a mirror to show the elect what to pray and how to rightly praise the Lord for His acts of grace and mercy. It's here we find Calvin's famous statement describing the Psalms as indispensable and central to the life of piety as "an anatomy of all feelings of the soul." Selderhuis writes, "All emotions of the human heart—joy, anger, temptation and sorrow—can be found there [in the Psalms]. In stating this, Calvin repeats what Luther had said: that in the Psalms one can look into the inner heart of the faithful."¹⁰¹ Calvin contends that the Psalms teach the elect in a straightforward and striking way the experiential nature of sin that so easily remains hidden unless exposed by the Word of God. The Psalms, according to Calvin, uniquely teach the necessity of calling upon the name of the Lord for help against trials and Satan, the great enemy of the Church and the elect. The Psalms also teach the nature of God's absolute justice enacted and upheld through the person and work of Messiah. Such knowledge, insists Calvin, leads the Christian to pray for one's neighbor and the Church at large. As the elect feed upon God's truth through the Psalms, the Holy Spirit trains the Christian to embrace God's mercy offered in Christ, even in the midst of crushing circumstances so prevalent in this fallen world.

While Calvin grew in his own Christian life, the Psalms emerged as a peculiar and powerful gift from

God that leads believers deeper into experiencing God's grace, marked by a life of prayer and praise. The Reformer concludes his preface to Budé's French translation of the Psalms by asserting, "he who wants to make progress in the school of God needs the Psalms."¹⁰² For Calvin, "progress in the school of God" means growing more conversant with God in reverence and awe of the Creator-Redeemer, while using Biblical language to dialogue with the Lord through prayers and praises arising from hearts filled with thanksgiving, lamentation, confession, and petition.

CONCLUSION

As the Church faithfully labors to continually reform her faith and practice according to the Scriptures, she gathers and equips the saints to do the work of ministry and service. In this ministry of equipping, the body of Christ regularly manifests different characteristics, which are all yoked together through Her mystical union with Jesus Christ. At times, she looms large as a hospital where sin ravaged souls come for healing in Christ. At other times, she emerges like a great fortress where those declared righteous in Christ take refuge in the Rock of Ages. At still other times, she manifests herself as a mighty sending station deploying heralds of Christ to confront the world with the truth of God's holy kingdom and call sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus. But specifically in the Church's weekly gathering on the Lord's Day, she is a holy school house, teaching the divine Word to her members who must respond with prayer and praise. The Psalms distinctively accommodate the souls of pilgrims, wounded and worn thin by the fallen world and the ravaging influences of the old man, in the new language and ways of life in Christ, communicated within the complexities of this holy educational time, week-by-week. As Calvin labored faithfully to deploy the divine gifts to bring about reformation, he recognized the complexity of the human condition and the mysterious intricacy of true worship, enlivened by the Holy Spirit and reformed according to the Scriptures. For this reason, throughout his ministry he promoted reform that included the rich use of the Psalms in worship to deepen the living communion between God and His people. Witvliet writes, "There is nothing impersonal about Biblical faith, and nothing impersonal about Biblical

100. Beeke, *Calvin on Piety*, 137.

101. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 23.

102. See Selderhuis' English translation of Rodolphe Peter's work in, *ibid.*, 24.

worship. Worship is more than mere contemplation of timeless truth; it is a personal encounter between God and the gathered congregation.¹⁰³ Calvin insisted upon the continual and rich use of the Psalms in Christian community because God is inherently personal and desires deep communion with His people. The recovery

of and holistic use of the Psalms was central to Calvin's reforms designed to educate the heart and mind of the elect. The pastor was convinced that such a recovery of this special accommodation of God's special revelation would be blessed by the Lord and marked by the enlivened prayer-praises of Christ's Bride.¹⁰⁴■

In Brief: Calvin on Singing Psalms, Preface to the Psalter (1543)

... Now among the other things which are appropriate for recreating people and giving them pleasure, music is either the first or one of the principal, and we must value it as a gift of God deputed to that use. Wherefore that much more ought we to take care not to abuse it, for fear of fouling and contaminating it, converting it to our condemnation, when it was dedicated to our profit and welfare. If there were no other consideration than this alone, it may indeed move us to moderate the use of music, to make it serve everything virtuous, and that it ought not to give occasion for our giving free rein to licentiousness.... But there is still more. For there is scarcely anything in the world which is more capable of turning or moving morals this way and that, as Plato prudently considered it [(*Republic* 3.12, 401B; *Laws*, 2.8, 664B)]. And in fact we experience that it has a secret and almost incredible power to arouse hearts in one way or another.

Wherefore we ought to be the more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it be useful to us and not at all pernicious. For this reason the ancient doctors of the church complain frequently of the fact that the people of their times were addicted to unseemly and obscene songs which, not without reason, they judge and call mortal and Satanic poison for corruption of the world [(Aug., *Enarr. in Ps.*, 2.1; Chrysostom, *In Psal.* 41.1.2; *In Matt.*, Hom 68.4; 27.5)]. Moreover, in speaking now of music, I understand two parts, that is to say the letter, or subject and matter; second, the song or the melody. It is true that every evil word (as Saint Paul says, 1 Cor. 15:33) perverts good morals, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart that much more strongly and enters into it; just as through a funnel wine is poured into a container, so also venom and corruption are distilled to the depth of the heart by the melody. What is there then to do? It is to have songs not only seemly, but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to and praise God, to meditate on His works in order to love, fear, honor, and glorify Him. Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from Him [*In Psalmum XXXIV enarratio* 1.1].

103. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, 16.

104. Timothy Gwin, "Calvin's Conversion: *Pietas* takes root in his life," in *Mind and Heart Aflame: The Pilgrim Piety of John Calvin* (Orlando, FL: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2011).

Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose than the psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory. Wherefore Chrysostom exhorts men as well as women and little children to accustom themselves to sing them, in order that this may be, as it were, a meditation for associating themselves with the company of angels [(Chrysostom, *In Ps.* 41.1.2)]. As for the rest, it is necessary for us to remember what Saint Paul says, that spiritual songs can be sung truly only from the heart (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16). Now the heart requires intelligence, and in that (says Saint Augustine) lies the difference between human singing and that of the birds [(Aug. *Enarr. in Ps.* 81, 2.1)]. For a linnet, a nightingale, a parrot may sing well, but it will be without understanding. Now the peculiar gift of a person is to sing knowing what he is saying. The heart and the affection must follow after the intelligence, which is impossible unless we have the hymn imprinted on our memory in order never to cease from singing.

For these reasons the present book, even for this cause, in addition to the rest which has been said, ought to be under exceptional consideration by everyone who desires to enjoy himself self in seemly fashion and in accordance with God, to look to his salvation and to the profit of his neighbors. And so there is no necessity for it to be particularly recommended by me, seeing that it carries its own value and praise. Only let the world be so well advised that in place of songs in part empty and frivolous, in part stupid and dull, in part obscene and vile, and in consequence evil and harmful, which it has used up to now, it may accustom itself hereafter to singing these divine and celestial hymns with the good King David.... Geneva, 10 June 1543. [Charles Garside, *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee (Paulist Press, 2001), 94–97. This text differs significantly from that at ccel.org, which may be from Garside's 1950 bachelor's thesis. Selections cited by Robert Godfrey match the CCEL text. *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Crossway, 2009), 73. Two other translations provide the citations inserted in square brackets: Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, rev. ed. (1998), 364–67; Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin Theological Journal* 15:2 (1980), 160–165.]■