

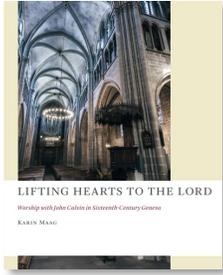
[Review] *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva*, by Karin Maag



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Maag, Karin. *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016. 223pp. ISBN 978-0-8028-7147-3.



In *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva*, Karin Maag, director of the Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, addresses ways in which the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer from Geneva can speak to Christians in all cultures regarding their cultural and musical choices for worship. The book is part of a series that uses case studies to discuss the history of Christian worship. This volume explores Calvin's teachings on worship, regularly quoting long sections from Calvin's primary materials, with commentary and thoughtful questions in the margin.

In Part One, "Locating the Worshipping Community," Maag provides a timeline that aligns events in sixteenth-century Geneva with historical events in the world. Listing these events and dates side by side, Maag gives the reader a framework for understanding Calvin within his historical context. This section also describes the wider liturgical landscape by helping the reader understand key components of Protestantism—such as reducing the seven Catholic sacraments to two. It also deals with significant themes of Protestant worship: piety, time, place, prayer, preaching, music, and people.

Part Two, "Exploring the Worshipping Community," makes up the main portion of the book and includes substantial sections from the writings of Calvin—this quotation, for instance, from Calvin's 1561 teaching on the Lord's Supper:

When I first came here, the Lord's Supper was observed only three times a year, and seven whole months intervened between the observance at Pentecost and at the Birthday of Christ. A monthly observance pleased me, but I could not persuade the people, and it seemed better to bear with their weakness than to continue arguing stubbornly. I took care to have it recorded in the public records, however, that our way was wrong, so that correcting it might be easier for future generations. (49)

To me, the quote shows not only his thoughtful care for future generations but also the grace he had for the current generation. It was difficult to change even the frequency of celebrating communion, but Calvin bore "their weaknesses." Maag comments: "a fascinating instance of Calvin's awareness of future generations and the dangers of enshrining practices 'because our



predecessors did it this way” (49). Additional marginal notes also comment on the primary sources and help the twenty-first century reader understand and apply the sixteenth-century ideas.

Calvin explains, for example, that when singing praise to God, Christians, who have the full revelation of Christ in the Gospels, should not sing praise to “produce a solemn ceremony as a meritorious work that we do for God. . . . We are told too that David sang with a musical instrument, let us carefully remember that we are not to make a rule of it” (105). Calvin is referring to how David came home celebrating with all the people that the Ark of the Covenant had been retrieved in 2 Samuel 6:5: “And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals” (ESV). David used many musical instruments in this worship experience, but Calvin doesn’t want the use of them in worship to become an immutable command. In short, he does not see a specific injunction from God to do so. In addition, part of Calvin’s hesitancy appears to be how such instruments are used by Roman Catholics:

In fact, the Papists were seriously deceived in their desire to worship God with their pompous inclusion of organs, trumpets, oboes, and similar instruments. That has only served to amuse the people in their vanity and to turn them away from the true institution which God has ordained. . . . In a word, the musical instruments were in the same class as sacrifices, candelabra, lamps, and similar things. There is nothing that the Papists have not turned to some use. Because there was the chandelier with the lamps (in the Old Testament), thus there had to be candles (in the church); because there was perfume then, there had to be incense now. There were ritual washings then, so there had to be holy water now. (105)

When Christians’ worship of God becomes more about the rules, the traditions, and the symbols than about the truth those symbols represent, then Calvin understood that the result may become a confusing mix of law and gospel, which serves to “bury our Lord Jesus Christ” (105). As with Calvin’s teaching on sacraments, so here he urges Christians to give thanks to God heartily—through some symbols as necessary, but never mistaking the truth for mere ceremony.

Calvin is also concerned with the “true use of hymns” in corporate worship (104). He relates this proper hymn singing to the church of his day:

When we pray to God here in the church, and sing the psalms, it is not to show ourselves off, as hypocrites do, but to declare that we seek nothing but that God may be glorified among us . . . people were not to sing hymns of praise to God for only a temporary period of time, but until the end of the world . . . the obligation to sing hymns of praise is common both to us and to the ancients. (104–5)

Calvin clearly encourages hymn singing, but a few paragraphs later he writes, “If we want to sing praises in the name of God, we will do much better to have psalms instead of common dissolute songs” (105). Calvin encourages praising the Lord heartily, but he makes a distinction in how this hearty praise should be practiced in the church: “We sing in order to give him thanks—not in order to produce a solemn ceremony as a meritorious work that we do for God” (105). Taking such an approach, Calvin says, is to be like the Jews in following the Law rather than making a rule that

completely covers the gospel of grace. In the Old Testament, people lived in the shadow of the Law, without a complete understanding of the gospel in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Calvin is arguing that David is singing heartily to the Lord in 2 Samuel 6, but the Catholic church has made worship into a work done for Christ rather than a celebration revealing Christ. He thus refutes making the ceremony of the church into a rule, teaching his newly-Protestant followers not to blindly continue the worship practices from which they have come.

Reading *Lifting Hearts to the Lord* has made me consider the solemnity and truth of worship and how that might apply in any culture. As I continue in my studies in worship and theology, I believe Maag's work will be a helpful resource for devotional reflections, deeper thinking, discussions about worship, and future research. Overall, Calvin makes a distinction between Law and Gospel, rules and grace, teaching his congregants to use discernment in deciding how to use symbols, music, and musical instruments in Protestant worship. Some missionaries in the past century have simply transferred their hymns and worship traditions from their own cultural context to others, often uncritically. According to Calvin, such oversight can obstruct the meaning of the gospel, leading to worship that can feel more an obligation than a celebration of grace. Calvin's writing on the true worship of God, along with Maag's interaction with it, is helpful guidance for missionaries and ethnodoxologists. Just as David celebrated heartily, so the people should celebrate the gracious work of God. Just as the ancients sang and played instruments, so present-day believers should do likewise, not making a "work" out of worship by keeping rules and traditions. Christian worship, founded on the gospel of Jesus Christ, should flow out in the giving of thanks to the Almighty God who has graciously saved us.

