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Missing in Action

Dr. Calvin Seerveld

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MISSING IN ACTION¹

There are two Genevan psalms that, I believe, should be part of a Reformed Church song book: the sad (Phrygian) Psalm 51 and the exuberant (Mixolydian) Psalm 89. Maybe these tunes are not fashionable today in the era of simple congregational choruses, but Genevan 51 and Genevan 89 are two jewels of the Reformation tradition that should not be forgotten and left to die out in ecclesial musical history.

Maybe you sing Psalm 51 in the USA only after a shooting massacre in your neighbourhood, when you plead with God for a clean heart and forgiveness for our somnolent complicity in the easy-gun culture of America. Maybe you sing Genevan 89 in Canada only when the Church is faced with public concentrated persecution in a foreign land, and we need to ask the LORD impatiently not to wait any longer with God's restorative action. But it would be good to have such sturdy edifying songs as Psalm 51 and Psalm 89 available in the musical repertoire of God's people.

I was told the story of a Jewish scholar, visiting a class at Calvin College once upon a time, who extolled the musical excellence of Genevan Psalm 51. He asked whether any students in the class knew the song. Stanley (Sietze Buning) Wiersma stood up and sang Genevan 51acappella, through all the verses, and then sat down. The

sad mournful tones reverberated in the ensuing respectful silence.

The Phrygian song mode in which David's desperate Psalm 51 plea is cast is sadder than a simple minor harmony. The very Phrygian melodic line is dominated by a *la-mi* (*a* to *e*) tonal grip, to which the wiry rise and fall of interconnecting notes return. The tune is impregnated with sorrow. Even when the cry goes up to a *c* (four times), it drops back to rest in a low *e*. The sadness in the melodic line is not sentimental, calling attention to itself, but acts more like the Blues-flattened notes in African American spirituals. The Phrygian grip on the melody has grit, and laments with the expectancy of God's response. There is a wrestled agonizing in the Genevan 51 melody that boldly insists on being quietly heard. The musical plea asks to be heard again, even when it finally settles down from a high *c* to the low resting point of a final *e*.

For a man honestly to recite Psalm 51 in public is a serious matter. Who dares to stand with David before God in the hearing of others asking, terrified, for absolution of murder and adultery? Maybe this is why congregations seldom dare to sing Psalm 51. We Westernized followers of Jesus usually hide our scarlet letter A in our underwear. And our murders are usually done by committing or believing a lie—you dispose of the other person without a tell-tale trace of your hateful involvement. To *confess* such sin by *singing* its relevance in a congregational setting certainly demands a tough melody. The Genevan Phrygian mode is able to embody such a complicated mixture of feelings not available to major and minor scales.

Be Merciful, Be Merciful, O God

1 Be mer - ci - ful, be mer - ci - ful, O God. Ac - cord - ing
 2 You want me truth - ful in my in - most heart; you teach me
 3 Cre - ate in me, O God, a new, clean heart and make my
 4 De - liv - er me from guilt of blood, O God. O God, you
 5 Be good to Zi - on; LORD, in mer - cy hear. The walls a -

to your stead - fast love, have mer - cy. Blot out my
 in my se - cret heart your wis - dom. To wash me
 ▶ spir - it pure and right with - in me. O do not
 are the God of my sal - va - tion. My tongue will
 round Je - ru - sa - lem lie bro - ken. Re - build the

sin in your a - bun - dant mer - cy. Wash all my
 clean a - gain, purge me with hys - sop and make me
 ▶ cast me help - less from your pres - ence. Your Ho - ly
 sing then that I am de - liv - ered. O - pen my
 walls, LORD: help us to re - build them. Be good to

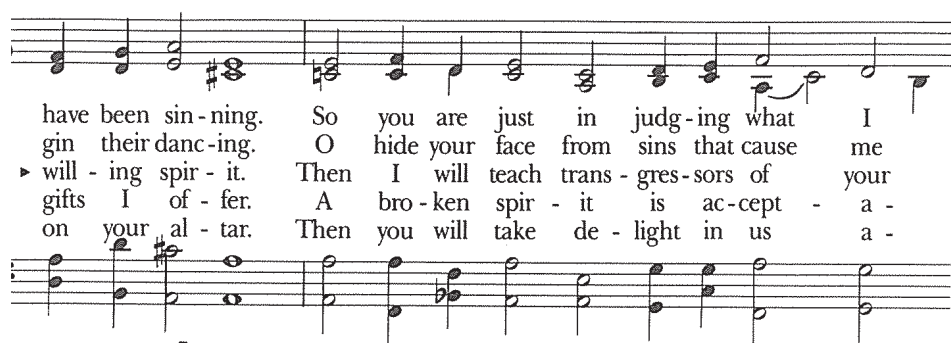
sin a - way and make me clean. I know my sin; it
 whit - er than new - fall - en snow. Fill me with joy and
 ▶ Spir - it must not go from me. Re - store to me the
 lips, O Lord, to sing your praise. For you take no de -
 Zi - on; LORD, in mer - cy hear. Then you will take de -

Text: Psalm 51; vers. Stanley Wiersma, 1980. © 1987, CRC Publications
 Tune: Louis Bourgeois, 1551; harm. Claude Goudimel, 1564
 Other settings of Psalm 51: 167, 255

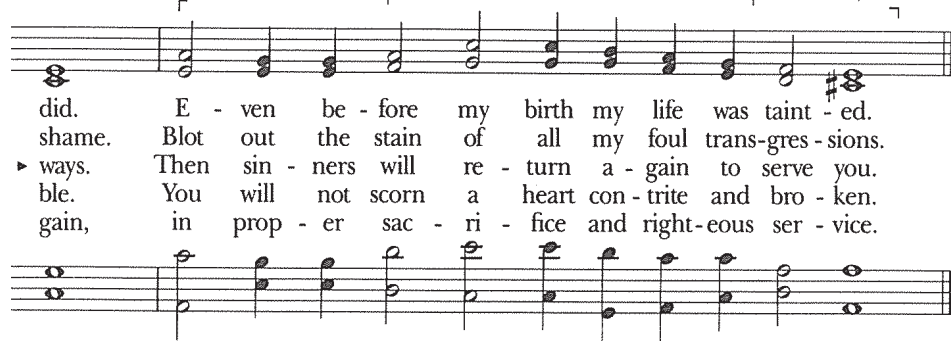
PM
 GENEVAN 51



will not leave my mind. A - gainst you, on - ly you, I
 glad-ness, make me sing, and let the bones you broke be -
 ► joy of be - ing yours. Up - hold me with a free and
 light in sac - ri - fice. You take no plea - sure in the
 light in us a - gain, in gifts we bring to lay up -



have been sin - ning. So you are just in judg - ing what I
 gin their danc - ing. O hide your face from sins that cause me
 ► will - ing spir - it. Then I will teach trans - gres - sors of your
 gifts I of - fer. A bro - ken spir - it is ac - cept - a -
 on your al - tar. Then you will take de - light in us a -



did. E - ven be - fore my birth my life was taint - ed.
 shame. Blot out the stain of all my foul trans-gres - sions.
 ► ways. Then sin - ners will re - turn a - gain to serve you.
 ble. You will not scorn a heart con - trite and bro - ken.
 gain, in prop - er sac - ri - fice and right - eous ser - vice.

Psalm 89 poses different difficulties for a contemporary congregation that wishes to sing the Bible's songs. Psalm 89 is like Psalms 68, 69, 78, 105 and 106, which celebrate and criticize the history of old Israel and mention David's name as being important in God's dealings with humans in world history. Yet we modern people are not as close to what took place in biblical times. Since Jesus Christ came into world history and brought us the Newer Testament, how relevant is the Exodus of the Jews from Pharaoh's Egypt, the conquering of Canaan as "the promised land," and the LORD God's allowing God's people to be punished for their sin with a couple of generations of being put in Babylonian exile? Psalm 89 is God's Word in the Bible, but do you need to *sing* it today, after Jesus Christ's resurrection and ascension?

It depends on how thick or how thin you want your faith to be. Most evangelical believers in North America who speak English are not accustomed to intone "David" rather than "Jesus" in their singing the gospel. And the Reformed wrinkle of our "covenantal" God is not as familiar to new converts to the Christian faith today. Fresh contemporary disciples of Jesus may feel closer to singing Leonard Cohen's one-word hit song "Hallelujah," or may be happily content singing "Holy holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy. I want to see you" repetitively in the vibrant "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord" 1997 chorus of Integrity's Hosanna!

But it has been the peculiar gift of Jean Calvin to highlight the songs Jesus Christ sang on earth—the Older Testament psalms—by Calvin's pressing great cantors and song writers like Louis Bourgeois, Theodore Beza, and others to produce a complete Psalter for everyday use by ordinary folks at home, in meetings, at church worship, and anywhere else. The Psalms themselves are brimful of history—of God's great deeds at the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai, and in

Jerusalem as Zion, and with David as lynch pin in the birth of Jesus Christ. Although our technocratic age seems lackadaisical toward remembering ancient historical events—it's the future that counts!—the Bible itself tells what happened to God's people in the past—how the LORD God spoke and dealt with "the chosen ones," executing punishment for sin and providing undeserved blessings out of grace—and thus is pertinent for making us wise today and for giving us disconsolate believers a difficult but sure hope (Romans 15:4-6, I Corinthians 10:1-13).

Genevan Psalm 89 has Ethan the Ezrahite celebrate God's merciful promises made to David, which we believers inherit. Genevan 89 is a carefully constructed tune with the first melodic line repeated, then the two next side lines adding colour and tentativity, with the final two lines emphasizing the Mixolydian² dominant high *d*, with its final resting tonic *g*, which gives a settling, secure, melodic conclusion. The syncopated rhythm, especially in the last line, provides an exciting, cheerful, and exuberant quality.

The modern 1960 Dutch version of Genevan 89 uses eighteen versified stanzas to cover the text thoroughly. The gray, 1987 *Psalter Hymnal* version uses eight stanzas (like the William Kuiper rendition of 1931 in the blue (1959) and red (1934) *Psalter Hymnals*).

I submit a condensed four stanzas here, in which the first two stanzas happily thank the LORD for God's covenantal faithfulness to those in the line of David, and where the last two stanzas give the famous psalmodic "BUT" complaint to God: "Why don't You, LORD, show us the steadfast love in *deed* that You promised to the generations of David's faithful children?" Genevan 89 catches poetically and melodically the rich, complicated nature of a robust faith in Jesus Christ's kingdom Rule a-coming in God's world troubled by lies, wars, and rumours of more disasters.

Genevan Psalm 89

LORD God, your cov - e - nan - tal love shall be our song.
 We do re - mem - ber, LORD, your prom - i - ses we claim:
 But, O my God, it seems your care has dis - ap - peared.
 How long, my Lord, will You stay hid from pub - lic sight?

Your faith - ful - ness re - mains for gen - er - a - tions long.
 "Da - vid and heirs shall rule for - ev - er in my Name.
 Your chil - dren's en - e - mies de - light in be - ing feared.
 We could all die be - fore your grace makes things come right.

Your might - y power con - trols all crea - tures, e - ven wea - ther!
 Though some may fail to keep the sta - tutes I ap - poin - ted,
 Do You not see the des - o - la - tion of your peo - ple?
 Could You not show the stead - fast love You pro - mised Da - vid?

You bring re - stor - ing jus - tice, mer - cy, both to - ge - ther.
 I swear as God to bless those whom I have a - noin - ted
 Have You in an - ger left us folk to suf - fer e - vil?
 to us who are a - noin - ted by your Ho - ly Spir - it--

Hap - py are all who live thank - ful - ly be - fore your face.
 to be my wit - nes - ses for just deeds I can nour - ish;
 God's ci - ty has no peace; its ci - ti - zens are ha - ted--
 Lord, please come quick - ly now so that your just Will be done,

Our safe - ty, health, and joy de - pend, God, on your em - brace.
 Mes - si - ah's prog - en - y shall al - ways, al - ways flour - ish."
 Have You not left in shame those You once con - se - cra - ted?
 so that your ser - vants scorned can cel - e - brate your king - dom.

Text: Psalm 89; vers. Calvin Seerveld © 2015
 Tune: Genevan Psalter, 1562

12 12 13 13 13 13
 Genevan 89

To help make the Genevan 51 and the Genevan 89 melodies more familiar to the up-and-coming generations, I wrote a lament text and a thanksgiving text for these two Genevan tunes. What normally happens in a congregation when one of its members is sent off by the police and civil courts to jail, or when one of its married couples undergoes a divorce? Do we just shamefacedly stay quiet, maybe gossip about the persons, and be glad it's not ourselves suffering prison time or having our married union torn apart with all its accompanying sorrow and recrimination?

Is it possible, I wondered, for a congregation of believers to be close and mature enough to surround the unfortunate ones with a communal lament that offers comfort and even tries to upbuild the hurting ones by asking our LORD God to repair the brokenness everyone in the congregation feels? Would not such a lament give voice to our being a genuine neighbour-loving congregation, which trusts that God's grace can touch and heal our lives when they are twisted out of shape?

A Congregational Lament, which I wrote to the mournful melody of Genevan 51, has an introductory stanza (1) and then choice of a second stanza: (2) for imprisonment of a fellow member, or (3) for someone coming down unexpectedly with a severe illness, like cancer, or (4) for a divorce happening among us faithful, or a stanza (5) for those faced with an untimely death of a loved one by accident, or (6) for an unspecified occasion of deep disaster.

I know that for us today, such a public lament would be unusual, but maybe singing together about the trouble could be a *more* honest and edifying way for a congregation to pick up and deal with the breakdowns and severe troubles we tend to let slip by liturgically.³

1 Why, Lord, must evil seem to get its way?
We do confess our sin is deeply shameful;
but now the wicked openly are scornful—
they mock Your name and laugh at our dismay.
We know Your providential love holds true:
nothing can curse us endlessly with sorrow.
Transform, dear Lord, this damage into good;
show us Your glory, hidden in this evil.

2 Why, Lord, must he be sentenced, locked away?
True, he has wronged his neighbour and has
failed You.

Yet none of us is innocent and sinless;
only by grace we follow in Your Way.
We plead: Repair the brokenness we share.
Chastise no more lest it destroy Your creatures.
Hear this lament as intercessory prayer,
and speak Your powerful Word to make us
hopeful.

3 Why, Lord, must she be left to waste away?
Do You not see how painfully she suffers?
Could You not change the curse of this
disaster?

Amaze us by Your mighty sovereignty.
We plead: Repair the brokenness we share.
Chastise no more lest it destroy Your creatures.
Hear this lament as intercessory prayer,
and speak Your powerful Word to make us
hopeful.

4 Why, Lord, must broken vows cut like a knife?
How can one wedded body break in pieces?
We all have failed at being pure and faithful;
only by grace we keep our solemn vows.
We plead: Repair the brokenness we share.
Chastise no more lest it destroy Your creatures.
Hear this lament as intercessory prayer,
and speak Your powerful Word to make us
hopeful.

5 Why, Lord, did You abruptly take him home?
Could You not wait to summon him before You?
Why must we feel the sting of death's old
cruelty?

Come quickly, Lord; do not leave us alone.
We plead: Repair the brokenness we share.
Chastise no more lest it destroy Your creatures.
Hear this lament as intercessory prayer,
and speak Your powerful Word to make us
hopeful.

6 Why, Lord, must any child of Yours be hurt?
Does all our pain and sorrow somehow please
You?

You are a God so jealous for our praises—
hear this lament as prayer that fills the earth.
We plead: Repair the brokenness we share.
Chastise no more lest it destroy Your creatures.

Hear this lament as intercessory prayer,
and speak Your powerful Word to make us
hopeful.”⁴

Various persons later asked me, “But what about the good times? Can our congregation also sing together about unexpected healing of someone in the congregation from an “incurable” disease? How about the joy among us as a body of believers when a member of the congregation who was a hostage in a foreign country is suddenly set free? Can the Genevan 89 melody celebrate when someone in the congregation finishes their M.D. or Ph.D. degree, finally obtains a good job suited to their gifts, receives a significant promotion in their business employment, or finds a marriage partner late in life?”

So I wrote *A Congregational Paeon* to help make the Genevan 89 melody become a “Happy Thankful Occasion Song” for a communion of the faithful followers of Jesus Christ:

- 1 How shall we thank you, Lord, for joy and
this surprise?
You have come through again to recreate our
lives.
We stand amazed: Your providential hand
looks after our struggling daily cares;
Your kiss fills mouths with laughter.
Hear our excited shouts, Lord; spirits now are
buoyant.
Your simple miracle turns trouble into triumph.
- 2 How good it is to see Your healing touch of
health
restore *Name’s* blood and breath to normal
life’s prime wealth.
Gone is the pain, the doubts, his feeling
unprotected;
You wiped away the tears when suffering was
expected—
praised be your Name, O Lord. You have
redeemed his story!
We cheer Your mystery and celebrate Your
glory.
- 3 How good it is to have all toilsome tension
past.
You have supplied a fruitful finish now at
last.

Struggles and setbacks plagued the arduous
undertaking,
but You ordained the outcome far beyond
our making—
praised be your Name, O Lord. You have
redeemed her story!
We cheer Your mystery and celebrate Your
glory.

- 4 How good it is to know Your grace fills out
one’s life
from solitary walk to wedded husband-wife.
Intimacy and passion joined by love are
gifted
by You, O God, with double power and joy
committed—
praised be your Name, O Lord. You have
redeemed their story!
We cheer Your mystery and celebrate Your
glory.
- 5 How good it is to see our brother face to face,
brought back from exile sound, kept safe by
Your embrace.
Captivity is cruel and breaks the best
communion:
God, swallow up our loss; begin with this re-
union—
praised be your Name, O Lord. You have
redeemed his story!
We cheer Your mystery and celebrate Your
glory.
- 6 How good it is to taste exultant jubilee!
You feed us from the honeycomb and make us
free.
Your generosity provides more than requested:
teach us to dance and sing, Your children glad
and festive—
praised be your Name, O Lord. You have
redeemed our story!
We cheer Your mystery and celebrate Your glory.⁵

I am aware that I am probably out of touch with the current generation of churchgoers and their preferred songs. It may be foolhardy to suppose Genevan tunes from the 1500s AD can be cherished today. I simply do not know how to make these more complex Genevan tunes win-
some to those who are under 60 years of age.

But I pray that the leaders of our Reformed Church Worship singing will have the vision andchutzpah to teach the coming generation the joyful gift of Genevan 51 and Genevan 89 melodies, strengthening our trusting the long-suffering, merciful, covenantal God, despite Satan's simplified distractions, before these two rich songs entirely disappear and become extinct from the mouths and memory of God's little people.

Endnotes

1. After Genevan Psalms 51 and 89 appeared in the gray *Psalter Hymnal* (1987), they disappeared from the song book of the Christian Reformed Church.
2. Some would diagnose the mode as hypoionian.
3. Ordinarily, two stanzas will be sung—the first introductory stanza and then one other stanza according to the particular need. A number of churches in the USA wrote to ask for permission to print and sing stanzas 1 and 6 after the 911 terrorist attack in New York City, in 2001 AD.
4. *A Congregational Lament*, in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1987), 576-577.
5. *A Congregational Paeon*, in Calvin Seerveld, *Biblical Studies & Wisdom for Living* (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2014), 72-73. Stanza 1 is usually sung first; then the congregation sings the stanza appropriate for the occasion: (2) for unexpected healing, (3) for completion of a difficult task, (4) for second, late, or remarriage in the Lord, (5) for release of a political captive or hostage, (6) for other special festive events, or use as a final stanza.