

A new Genevan Psalter

New Genevan Psalter. George van Popta, general editor. Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2015.

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MARIAN VAN TIL

This new Psalter comes from the Canadian Reformed Churches, from their Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise. Since 1972 they have published several English-language editions of the Genevan Psalter which originated nearly 500 years ago.

General editor George Van Popta explains in his preface that this new Psalter isn't a translation from the 16th century French but is "a new poetic rendering of the entire Book of Psalms" – and includes, as well, the four biblical canticles long associated with the Genevan Psalter (the 10 Commandments and the songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon). Its aim "was to improve the songs' lit-

erary quality and to bring them into greater harmony with the biblical text."

Does this Psalter achieve that purpose? Yes, it does, and it does so well. As a result, these Psalms make for excellent devotional reading and singing at home, quite apart from their primary intended church use.

It's not an easy task to write rhymed Psalm stanzas whose rhymes and meters are unforced even while their biblical message comes through comprehensively and straightforwardly. That's all the more true when the task is to rhyme the entire body of 150 Psalms. But this Psalter gets it right. Much of the poetic work was done by Dr. William Helder, we're told. If others were involved they aren't named, which is a shame.

Such work deserves note, and even Helder seems mentioned more or less in passing.

I would urge those who cherish and gain succor from the Psalms (which I hope all of us do) to buy a copy. I've long been an advocate of reading hymn and Psalm texts as poetry besides singing them. When you read poetic texts that you normally sing there are often elements, ideas and phrases that leap out at you, things you may have missed previously or that you suddenly understand in a different light. And the Psalms, whether read from an English-language Bible or from a Psalter like this, are the Word of God, after all. And the Spirit is always at work in the Word.

<< CONTINUED ON PAGE 31 >>

He's also, according to the plot summary on Wikipedia, a protector, provider, and teacher of the one-time naive Ana. He takes her gradually but surely deeper, not into wisdom and spiritual health, but into his own obsession.

Is this what women want? Yes and no. It's doubtful that the young, professional women reading *50 Shades* on the subway on the way to work are hoping *en masse* to replicate Ana's experience (hopefully not!). But what they are looking for is to be wooed, protected, provided for, and, yes, though they may not readily admit it, taught. There's been a paucity of giving women not just what they want, but according to the Bible, what they need and were made to receive from men. We can blame feminism or men's retreat as a result of feminism's cultural push, but that doesn't change how women were created to be with men, and men with women. And if women aren't experiencing it, they will look for it somehow and somewhere else, even if vicariously.

The Bible likens the male-female relationship to Christ's relationship with His Church and that of the Church to Christ. There is lordship, but it's not simply imposed; it's won through love and sacrifice. There is submission, but it's not rendered slavishly; it's given in response to that love and sacrifice. The Christian view of the male-female relationship is always about the other – only then does the self find satisfaction. *50 Shades* is about seeking satisfaction in the self to which there is no bottom, which is why it has to go ever further and darker, rendering the object of that self-satisfaction less than human in the process. Authority and submission are inescapable concepts. They will out one way or another. ♦

**Newsweek* recently reported that research shows most readers of *50 Shades* are women in their 20s and 30s living in or around major metropolitan areas.

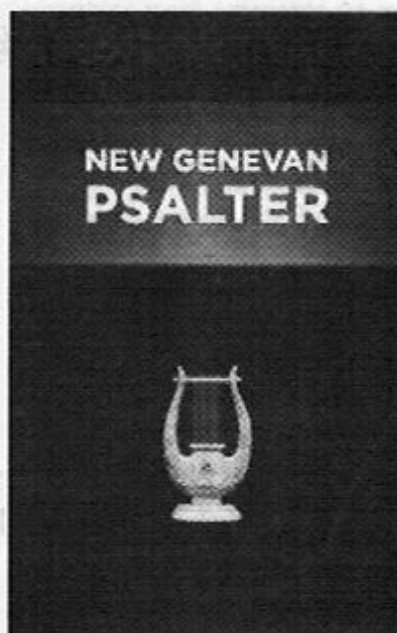
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'GENEVA JIGS'

Each Psalm here is set to the Genevan tune with which it has traditionally been associated. However, there are only 124 tunes, so some carry more than one Psalm text. Unlike many hymns and chorales, these sturdy, straightforward tunes didn't begin life as folk tunes. They were specifically written by excellent composers such as Louis Bourgeois, Guillaume France and "Maitre Pierre." And since they were written in the 16th century, before the development of the major-minor key system in music, they use modal scales (commonly called the church modes), nine of them across the whole Psalter. Each mode has a distinct character. Most sound, to modern ears, similar to the minor keys, and give the Genevan tunes a kind of medieval aura. Though these tunes don't have large ranges (they stick to about an octave) they aren't necessarily easy to sing if you're unused to them. Some do have unexpected leaps and quite a few make use of syncopation (displaced accents), which in Reformation times earned them the derogatory nickname "Geneva jigs."

From their inception the Genevan Psalms were sung *a cappella* (unaccompanied) and in unison, and they still work best sung unharmonized. Thus this Psalter provides only the text and tune of each Psalm. While that is the tradition, I think it's the major drawback of this book. It's true that how one accompanies Psalm tunes originally sung unaccompanied and in unison must be done very carefully in terms of musical style and harmonies chosen, lest it negatively alter the character of a Psalm. But singing in unison is one thing; being entirely without accompaniment is quite another.

Assuming that most congregations will want to sing these Psalms with organ accompaniment, those con-



gregations or their organists will have to do a little work to find them. The Psalter's online blog site recommends some available accompaniments, going back to the excellent work of Claude Goudimel, who was Calvin's contemporary. The suggested accompaniments need to be ordered from various sources.

In addition, harmonizations for all 150 Psalms are available at the site as a download (<<https://newgenevanpsalter.wordpress.com/harmonizations/>>), generously provided free by their composer, Dennis Teitsma. Teitsma's musical style and the harmonies he chose do "modernize" these still beloved 16th century tunes. That blunts somewhat the very modal starkness, peculiar melodic movement and syncopation that make the Genevan Psalms unique in the history of church music. But Teitsma's harmonizations are well-written and will no doubt be a boon to users of this Psalter. ♦

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