

When Civil Government is in Church Government:
A Study on How Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* Shaped the Office of
Geneva Church from the Perspective of Church-State Relationship

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CH620 History of the Reformation

January 23, 2023

All visible churches have to determine and clarify their relationship with the civil government. In particular, the office of the church should belong to the church only. This paper will focus on the church's offices in Geneva through the lens of church-state relations by analyzing the church constitution drafted by Calvin to prove that church offices should not become civil government departments. It will begin with a background to clear up some myths about Calvin's Reformation in Geneva to have a proper pre-supposition. Then there will be an analysis of the four orders of office specified in the Ordinances to know how civil government interfered. Lastly is the summary and application for today's church.

Background

First of all, it is not Calvin's Geneva. "Geneva, after the emancipation from the power of the bishop and the duke of Savoy, was a self-governing Republic under the protection of Bern and the Swiss Confederacy."¹ Before Calvin's Reformation, Geneva already had its authority organization. "Calvin did not change these fundamental institutions of the Republic, but he infused into them a Christian and disciplinary spirit, and improved the legislation."² It cannot be overlooked that Calvin was a Frenchman, and for Geneva, he was a foreigner. "Calvin was consulted in all important affairs of the State, and his advice was usually followed; but he never occupied a political or civil office...never appeared before the Councils except when some

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 463.

² Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, 464.

ecclesiastical question was debated, or when his advice was asked.”³ Thus, Calvin was the spiritual leader of Geneva, and in no way was he the one in charge of Geneva.

Second, even though Calvin was a spiritual leader, Calvin was not the Pope of Geneva. On the one hand, there was interference from the civil government. “Before Calvin’s arrival... the Council had constantly exercised this overseership; and it was unwilling to throw it up by resigning it afterwards to the ministers.”⁴ On the other hand, more importantly, it was the papacy that Calvin fought against in his Reformation of Geneva. “Calvin recognized only the invisible headship of Christ, and rejected the papal claim to world-dominion as an antichristian usurpation.”⁵ Calvin wanted the Geneva church reformed with Scripture as the principle and authority, not himself.

Lastly, for that purpose, Calvin drew up an ecclesiastical constitution according to the Bible, which is *the Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. “It is, therefore, important that this church should be organized in conformity with holy Scripture; and this is Calvin’s practical point of view in the new Ordinances.”⁶ However, this Ordinances was not the work of Calvin alone but had the involvement of the Council. The object of studying in this paper, *Draft Ecclesiastical*

Ordinances September & October 1541:

³ Ibid, 464.

⁴ J. H. Merle D’aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. 7, tran. William L. R. Cates (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1876), 95-96.

⁵ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, 473.

⁶ D’aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. 7, 77.

this document without any doubt the original minute of the draft ordinances, which was drawn up in conformity with the decision of the Council, taken at the session of September 13, 1541, by Calvin and his ministerial colleagues with a commission of six councillors nominated for the purpose.⁷

Thus, the document was inspired by a high view of the responsibility of the ministry of the gospel⁸ and the result of some compromises and interventions. “The initial draft made explicit the church's freedom in its own sphere; the final version was less clear about magisterial oversight.”⁹ In short, this document was shaped by Calvin and the Council together, which is necessary to have this presupposition to analyze it.

Analysis

First, about Pastors, *the Ecclesiastical Ordinances* provided the ordination and discipline of pastors, in which the council took an important place. About the order in which pastors are ordained:

The order is that ministers first elect such as ought to hold office; afterwards that he be presented to the Council; and if he is found worthy the Council receive and accept him, giving him certification to produce finally to the people when he preaches, in order that he be received by the common consent of the company of the faithful.¹⁰

This is different from Calvin's argument in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

We therefore hold that this call of a minister is lawful according to the Word of God, when those who seemed fit are created by the consent and approval of the people; moreover, that

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 56.

⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, 476.

⁹ Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *The Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

¹⁰ Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 59.

other pastors ought to preside over the election in order that the multitude may not go wrong either through fickleness, through evil intentions, or through disorder.¹¹

It is clear that the ordination of pastors needed the acceptance of the council of Geneva, and the people were put last. Because the churches in Geneva were state churches, the pastors became civil servants. “Assuredly the right of the church was hereby *curtailed*...the consent of the people was an empty ceremony and was ultimately dispensed with.”¹² Afterward, the pastors had to swear in front of the Seignery. In the *Form of Oath prescribed for Ministers, July 17, 1542*:

Finally, I promise and swear to be subject to the polity and constitution of this City, to show a good example of obedience to all others, being for my part subject to the laws and the magistracy, so far as my office allows; that is to say without prejudice to the liberty which we must have to teach according to what God commands us and to do the things which pertain to our office. And in conclusion, I promise to serve the Seignery and the people in such wise, so long as I be not at all hindered from rendering to God the service which in my vocation I owe him.¹³

The pastors took an oath of loyalty to the government under the precondition that they had expressed their loyalty to God. If a pastor committed a crime, he would be investigated by the ecclesiastical Consistory first, then report judgment to the magistrate in order that, if required, the delinquent be deposed.¹⁴

However, the Ordinances had confirmed that for those people in doctrinal error or confusion in the church or for blasphemy, the magistrate is to execute judgment:

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1066.

¹² D’aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. 7, 85-86.

¹³ Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

If there appear difference of doctrine, let the ministers come together to discuss the matter. Afterwards, if need be, let them call the elders to assist in composing the contention. Finally, if they are unable to come to friendly agreement because of the obstinacy of one of the parties, let the case be referred to the magistrate to be put in order.¹⁵

In short, the councils became indispensable in the ordination of pastors, and the civil government became an institution for the ultimate discipline of the Church. “The council did delegate certain tasks to members of the council or to the public servants, but it retained the final responsibility.”¹⁶ When the duties and powers of civil government extend to both Tables of the Law, offenses against the Church are offenses against the State, and religious persecution by the State is an inevitable consequence.¹⁷

Second, the Ordinances provided that the second order, which was Doctors who were the instruction of the faithful in true doctrine, in order that the purity of the Gospel be not corrupted either by ignorance or by evil opinions.¹⁸ The Ordinances emphasized not only the education of the Gospel but also the education of the children in language and humanities. Further, the Ordinances pointed out that the purpose of education is for the church's and civil government's future. “...it is necessary to raise offspring for time to come, in order not to leave the Church deserted to our children, a college should be instituted for instructing children to prepare them

¹⁵ Ibid, 60.

¹⁶ Herman A. Speelman, *Calvin and the Independence of the Church*, trans. Albert Gooyjes (Bristol: Vandenhoeck& Ruprecht, 2014), 107.

¹⁷ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, 463.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 62.

for the ministry as well as for civil government.”¹⁹ In other words, the school in Geneva was not only a church school but also a state school; the children were considered to belong to both the church and the state.

Thirdly, the Ordinances provided that the elders to have oversight of the life of everyone and they should be chosen from the Council.

In the present condition of the Church, it would be good to elect two of the Little Council, four of the Council of Sixty, and six of the Council of Two Hundred, men of good and honest life, without reproach and beyond suspicion, and above all fearing God and possessing spiritual prudence. These should be so elected that there be some in every quarter of the city, to keep an eye on everybody.²⁰

It means that the lay members of the church were involved in the administration and discipline of the church, which was the great reformation. In the Roman Church, the laity has no share in legislation and obeys the priesthood. Luther first effectively proclaimed the doctrine of the general priesthood of the laity. Then, however, Calvin put it into an organized form and made the laity a regular agency in the local congregation and the synods and Councils of the Church.²¹

However, in a way, these elders were not laymen. The Church did not elect them, and they were essentially magistrates, who were to be sent or deputed by the Seigneury to the Consistory, “and the very nature of their functions made them rather beings of two species,

¹⁹ Ibid, 63.

²⁰ Ibid, 63-64.

²¹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, 470-471.

belonging partly to the church and partly to the state.”²² In other words, the Ordinances provided that magistrates participated in the ministry of the Church. “It is true that this episcopate was placed in the hands of the state; but it is not certain that it was Calvin who placed it there. It was the state that assumed it.”²³ The power of civil government exercised the supervision and discipline of the Church. The elders were to meet with the ministers weekly to ensure no disorder in the Church and to discuss remedial measures. They might ask their officers to summon those they wish to admonish.²⁴ Those who rejected the doctrine and did not repent would be banned from the Lord's Supper and reported to the magistrates. “This came of the state’s having the church as its church. The court of the church was really the state’s court to attend to its church’s business.”²⁵

The Geneva consistory was composed of elders and ministers. Since these magistrate-elders, especially those from Geneva's highest council, held judicial posts, although Consistorial power was limited to admonition and temporary excommunication, many of the elders (wearing other hats) held the powers of life and death. Thus, the Consistory was not solely a parish or local body. It was a national institution.²⁶ Some people think it is

²² D’aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. 7, 88-89.

²³ *Ibid*, 95-96.

²⁴ Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 70.

²⁵ Thomas Cary Johnson, *John Calvin and The Genevan Reformation: A Sketch* (Richmond: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1900), 55.

²⁶ William G. Naphy, “Church and State in Calvin’s Geneva,” in *Calvin and the Church*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 2002), 18.

Inquisition, and that is going too far. “We cannot deny, however, that the Ordinances were severe, and that men and women were summoned before the consistory on grounds which now appear very trivial.”²⁷ What need remember is that the discipline of the 16th century cannot be seen through the eyes of the 21st century. “In that age it would everywhere meet with the principle of obedience in full force; and it was lightened for all by the knowledge that no social position was exempted from its operation.”²⁸ Furthermore, it cannot deny that the reforms in Geneva had affected the morality of society. “While Geneva, under the influence of her pastors and her elders, increased in intelligence, in morality, in prosperity, in population, in influence, and in greatness.”²⁹ The fruits of Geneva's reformation also became a pattern for other countries and regions in that time. “Calvin, however, instead of writing a “Utopia”, actually produced it in Geneva. He translated his ideas into ecclesiastical and even political institutions...Geneva itself therefore became a fact of great importance. It attracted people.”³⁰

Lastly, the Ordinances provided the fourth order of ecclesiastical government, that was, the Deacons. They were divided into procurators and hospitallers according to their duties. The former was responsible for daily alms, possessions, rents, and pensions; the latter was

²⁷ D’aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. 7, 92-93.

²⁸ Ibid, 93.

²⁹ Ibid, 89.

³⁰ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 43.

responsible for caring for the sick and administering allowances to the poor.³¹ “The election of both procurators and hospitallers is to take place like that of the elders; and in electing them the rule proposed by Paul for deacons is to be followed.”³² In other words, these deacons were also government officials. The deacons needed to focus on the needy, public hospitals, and even the charity and hospitality of people passing by. “And if the revenue assigned by their Lordships be insufficient, or should extraordinary necessity arise, the Seignery will advise about adjustment, according to the need they see.”³³ In a way, Government officials were ordained as church deacons to do state charity work according to the New Testament church. According to biblical teaching, Calvin infused government charity work with the gospel's spirit.

Summary

The Ecclesiastical Ordinances made that the ordination of pastors and the expulsion of false teachers involved civil government. The council took up the work of the Church; The teaching office of the Church was also the teaching office of the State; The elders were members of the council, bringing civil governmental power into the Church for supervision; The deacons did the charitable work of the state, according to the Bible.

In essence, it was the relationship between the state and the church that shaped these decrees. In theory, Calvin aimed at the sole rule of Christ and his Word in Church and State

³¹ Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 64.

³² *Ibid*, 64-65.

³³ *Ibid*, 64.

without mixture. Each was independent and sovereign in its own sphere.³⁴ However, in practice, the Church of Geneva depended on the civil government and the civil government interfered with the Church. The two cannot be clearly separated.

Applications

The autonomy of the Church is the key assurance that the Church's ordination, apologetics, and discipline belong to the Church itself. Self-support brings self-management. This also means that church autonomy is the path of pain and faith, because there is no financial support from the government, and there may even be persecution. "The Presbyterian Church of Scotland has labored and suffered more than any Protestant Church for the principle of the sole headship of Christ; first against popery, then against prelacy, and last against patronage."³⁵ The church will definitely pay the cost if she wants to be faithful to Christ. Today, different countries have different attitudes toward churches, but the church should have one attitude Christ alone is the head of the church. For the church persecuted by the government, she should realize that this suffering will strengthen her faith in Christ and rejoice (James 1:2); for the church with religious freedom, she should beware of lies from the government and overcome worldly temptations to demonstrate her faithfulness to Christ (James 1:12).

What Calvin faced was different from what we face. We are dealing with a secular state where pluralism and postmodernism are prevalent. It would be unwise to copy the Reformation

³⁴ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, 471-472.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 469.

of Geneva. Nor should Christians expect another theocracy or even place their hopes in some political figure who uses religion. “Our primary aim is to build up a Christian Church and to foster a Christian subculture as a whole....We must not react from Constantinian politics into pietistic withdrawal, The Church can and should influence society as a whole.”³⁶ In other words, the church is not relying on political power to influence society but relying on the power of God, which is the gospel of Christ.

³⁶ A.N.S. Lane, “The City of God: Church and State in Geneva,” in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: Calvin’s Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York & London: Garland Publishing, INC., 1992), 150.

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