

Pastoral Care in the Institutions of Geneva

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“In 1553, the Consistory confronted a drunkard who, when under the influence of strong drink, regularly cried out ‘Calvin is the god of Geneva!’”¹ Such caricatures of Geneva’s reformer did not die out in his own day, but have endured — and even flourished — in the modern age. It is not uncommon to mention Calvin’s name and hear a flurry of responses regarding a cruel, ivory-tower tyrant with an admittedly sharp mind and a sharper sword (or stake, per the case of Servetus). While one must concede that a religious leader of this sort could have been nothing less than the head of a devoted cult if he did not experience tremendous backlash, such is the response of many: Calvin must have been a sycophantic cult leader concerned only with himself and his academic publications. But by digging deeper into the wider culture of Calvin’s ministry in Geneva, from 1536-1564, it becomes clear that this image of Calvin, and even of Geneva, could be an easy caricature. Certainly he was part of a larger group of ministers who were deeply concerned with righteousness and justice, as well as right thinking; but it is neither the full, nor the fully informed, picture. By looking at the vast network of institutions in Reformed Geneva as well as their origins, it becomes clear that Geneva was deeply devoted to comprehensive pastoral care, primarily through strategic institutions. Calvin and his fellow elders did not rule as tyrants, but shepherded Geneva well through the implementation of a multi-faceted ministry concerned with whole soul-care, from which we would do well to learn.

The Origins of Pastoral Care in Geneva

John Calvin, a French expatriate who converted from Catholicism and took up ministry in Geneva, Switzerland, had a famously troubled start in the city. By invitation of Guillaume Farel, Calvin joined the burgeoning Reformed church and its ministers in 1536, all the while suggesting

¹ Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 176.

important changes in the city's religious and moral infrastructure — changes he saw as necessary to uphold the Biblical Christian life in society. Due to heavy resistance by many, especially the city's council, Calvin and Farel were dismissed from their ministerial duties in the city under intense scrutiny. Farel never returned to his post, but Calvin was recalled to Geneva in 1541, permitting him the political strength to employ his convictions.

Among the first of the documents written by Calvin upon his return was the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541, revised 1553 and 1561), a handbook of sorts regarding the overall structure of the church, beginning with the Offices of the church, ordination and installation of these Officers and their duties, the sacraments, marriage, worship, mercy ministry, and church discipline.² In doing so, Calvin identified and addressed the proper outworking of the three historic marks of the true Church — the true preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the right use of church discipline — alongside the secondary, but important duties which the church has as God's people. This can be seen summarized in the introduction of the *Ordinances*:

In the Name of Almighty God, we... having considered that it is a thing worthy of commendation above all else that the doctrine of the holy Gospel of our Lord should be carefully preserved in its purity and the Christian Church properly maintained, that the young should be faithfully instructed for the future, and the hospital well administered for the succour of the poor, which cannot be done unless there is a certain rule and method of living by which each estate attends to the duty of its office: for this reason it has seemed to us advisable that the spiritual government of the kind which our Lord demonstrated and instituted by His Word should be set out in good order so that it may be established and observed among us. And accordingly, we have made it a fixed rule to observe and maintain in our city and territory the ecclesiastical polity which follows, since we see that it is taken from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.³

² John Calvin, "Calvin's Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances, 1541," University of Oregon, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/323/texts/Calvin%20-%20Ecclesiastical%20Ordinances.htm>.

³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 35.

In addition, Calvin does not merely ensure the performance of the duties themselves, but also provides preparation for and continual concern for a high quality of the performance of these duties, always for the care of the sheep in the flock of Geneva. To serve this end, Calvin would see that a number of institutions were either devised or recruited to carry out these duties in Geneva. The primary institutions for these duties and their performances were: The Venerable Company of Pastors, The Consistory, The Ordinary Censure, The Conferences of Scripture, The Catechism and Academy, The Hospital, and The Funds (Local and French); all of which were primarily pastoral in their concern.

Pastoral Care — The Venerable Company of Pastors

The first section of the *Ordinances* addresses the “Four Orders in the Church,” or four-fold office, as Calvin understood the ordained ecclesiastical offices of Pastor, Doctor or Teacher (now widely disregarded), Elder (meaning “lay” or “ruling” elder, and distinct from the teaching elder or “pastor”), and Deacon.⁴ Calvin addresses each in turn, with primacy of place and explanation given to the office of pastor. “[The pastor’s] office is to proclaim the Word of God for the purpose of instructing, admonishing, exhorting, and reproving, both in public and in private, to administer the sacraments, and to exercise fraternal discipline together with the elders.”⁵ In what would be one of the earliest modern examples of presbyterian church government, Calvin conceived of a local institution for mutual support and edification, as well as the further propagation of Ministers of the Word: The Venerable Company of Pastors.⁶ This institution, charged with many mutual duties, notably emphasized the parity of its members and

⁴ “Ecclesiastical Ordinances.”

⁵ Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, 36.

⁶ “Ecclesiastical Ordinances.”

their role in furthering God's church. "As an institution, the Company of Pastors was built on the basic principle that all Christian ministers possessed equal authority under the Word... (and) rejected any notion of preeminence or hierarchy of authority within the pastoral company... At the same time, it was understood that the Venerable Company as a collective possessed authority over its individual members."⁷ This facet of the Company's structure is especially crucial to its effective functioning. Without equality of members, much of the work of the Company would have borne no fruit in its pastoral care, for reasons which will be explored below.

The Company was formally tasked with providing oversight for the church, both in Geneva and abroad, and thus consisted of the pastors of the three city churches and the dozen or so countryside churches, alongside various professors from the Academy. The Company met weekly to discuss matters of pastoral care (such as providing spiritual counsel to other ministers or laypeople), future planning (such as approving preaching assignments and new preaching series), theological conference (such as disputations on important theological matters), and ecclesiastical support (such as providing advice and support to struggling, sometimes underground, churches in France and Switzerland). In essence, the Company acted as a hybrid Session-Presbytery, shepherding a body of some 15-20,000 church members (the population of Geneva) in 15-20 churches, all in the geographic area of one city. For these tasks, meetings were held weekly on Fridays at noon, but these were not the only meetings in which the Company participated; rather, they were one part of a calendar of events which sought to comprehensively support the church community of Geneva, as seen in Figure 1 (bold text indicates an institution.)

⁷ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 62.

	Sunday	...	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Sunrise (6-7 AM)	Service		Service	(Service)	Service	
Morning (7-10 AM)	Service		Day of Prayer	Consistory	Congrégations	
Noontime & Onward	Catechism/ Service		Day of Prayer	Consistory	Company	Hospital/ Prison Chapel

Figure 1 — Weekly Calendar of Pastoral Events of the Venerable Company of Pastors

The modern Reformed church has a similar organization to the Company of Pastors in presbyterianism. The parity and plurality of elders required in many Reformed churches meets the standard Calvin desired in the Company of Pastors. The interconnectedness of the churches through the various courts of the church is one of the most important aspects here, as well. While churches of the same denomination are seldom as geographically close as the fifteen churches in and around Geneva, a concern for collegiality and growth in the faith would instruct many to seek out close relationships with other pastors both within and outside of their own denomination. Most congregational Evangelical churches do not have a similar structure, though some associations of non-denominational churches exist. Here, moving toward a plurality of elders and a parity of elders, coupled with a larger network of churches, even in congregational churches, would be of great benefit and keep away many of the destructive tendencies of pastoral monarchies. This would also tend towards healthy ecumenical growth and planning for the future of the church at large. Calvin and Presbyterianism would teach that these courts ought to have a binding authority over those under their care. Truly, no ecumenical advancement of the Church of God would practically advance without commitment and accountability. Numerous ecclesiastical issues, including those of preventing “bully pulpits” or gross misconduct in the church, would be prevented. If the modern Church were to grow in mutual dependence and

reliance, together with the parity and plurality of leadership, many doctrinal divisions could be worked through, the Church could move toward greater unity, and the kingdom would likely advance with greater strength under the Spirit.

While it is unlikely that independent, congregational churches would elect to group together in a form of presbyterian church government, associational evangelical churches would benefit from even moving toward collegial relationships for counsel in wisdom. This would be a step in the right direction and allow presbyterian ministers and elders to bear steady witness to the Biblical form of church government and present guidance and a path forward to those who outside of presbyterian denominations.

Pastoral Care for the Pastors's Souls — The Ordinary Censure

In the penultimate section addressing the office of Pastor, the *Ordinances* read: “For the effective maintenance of this discipline, every three months, the ministers are to give special attention to see whether there is anything open to criticism among themselves, so that, as is right, it may be remedied.”⁸ In what came to be known as the Ordinary Censure, quarterly meetings (usually ten days prior to the taking of Communion) would take place for the purpose of discerning and disciplining members of the Company of Pastors.

First, it should be noted that the ministers must be self-reflective. Here, Calvin has in mind the need for self-examination which Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 11:28, saying, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” The need to address anything open to criticism not only requires pastors to consider their own moral living, but to consider their calling to be above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2, cf. Titus 1:6-7). In this way, the

⁸ “Ecclesiastical Ordinances.”

shepherds are reminded to heed Acts 20:28: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” In this way, caring for the pastor’s own soul is a means of caring for the church of God.

Second, one must recall the overall general atmosphere of collegiality and equity which existed with few exceptions among the Company and will be explored more later in this paper. While the minister’s first point of focus ought to be himself, there is a necessary focus on the moral character and reputation of all ministers involved in the Company. As the section on “Ministerial Discipline” wisely guides:

In order to obviate all scandals of conduct it will be needful to have a form of discipline for ministers, as set out below, to which all are to submit themselves. This will help to ensure that the minister is treated with respect and the Word of God is not brought into dishonor and scorn by the evil fame of ministers. Moreover, as discipline will be imposed on him who merits it, so also there will be need to suppress slanders and false reports that may unjustly be uttered against those who are innocent.⁹

There ought to be concern for the reputation of each pastor and for the reputation of the Word of God in such inquiries. The pastoral emphasis is here placed both on the soul, reputation, and heart of the man in question *and* on the renown of the gospel. Not only does an individual minister suffer when disciplinary inquiry and action is taken upon him, but if care is not taken in the handling of such information and it becomes public, there is great scandal for that minister’s witness — whether or not the accusation is true — but the ministry of God’s Word is jeopardized in the hearts of all unbelievers who can scarce permit such “hypocritical” behavior nor suffer long to determine its veracity.

⁹ Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, 38.

Third, the pursuit of equality and collegiality extends to the minister in question, as well. In one notorious instance of disciplinary inquiry among the Company, one Jean Ferron (one of Calvin's earliest colleagues during his tenure in Geneva) was accused of having spoken lewd words and having groped one of his servant girls. He admitted to the wrongdoing, stating it was "in order to test if she was a good girl." At the following Censure, he was examined (by the traditional moderator John Calvin) and found guilty, reprimanded, and transferred to a country parish (the less favorable of pastoral posts). He responded with outrage, hurled vitriol at Calvin for his inflated ego, and left. "The ministers met in emergency session two days later to deliberate the case further, at which time Calvin requested the Company judge whether he had exceeded his authority as moderator and minister. The ministers dismissed Calvin and Ferron from the meeting and discussed the case in private before finally exonerating Calvin and upholding the charges against Ferron."¹⁰ Certainly, the facts of this case are astonishing and rightly deserving of swift and strong action, in accord with the disciplines laid out in the *Ordinances*. But almost equally astonishing is Calvin's voluntary request to be examined for his own actions as moderator and minister, willing to submit to the decision of the court of the church. In theory, Calvin was not alone in this attitude of the heart as the following tradition of the Censure would show: "As a visible sign of their unity, the ministers [regularly] concluded the Ordinary Censure by sharing a meal of soup together."¹¹

Fourth, the goal of all of the activity of the Ordinary Censure is mentioned in the final words of its instituting paragraph: "so that, as is right, it may be remedied."¹² The goal of the

¹⁰ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 63.

¹¹ Ibid, 128.

¹² "Ecclesiastical Ordinances."

Censure was never to tear down other ministers, either for their actions or their doctrine, but to remedy the situation. Elsewhere, the action of elders is described as spiritual medicine for the healing of an ailing soul. Here, pastoral care for the hearts and souls of pastors is the goal. Ministers cannot serve well and rightly without accountability to the Word and the proper execution of church discipline, which (properly understood) is a shepherd's crook to recall straying sheep, not a cruel rod wielded in wrath.

Taken together, the Ordinary Censure reveals a heart for pastors in Calvin's Geneva. While Calvin and the Company were corporately intolerant of wrong doctrine, held or applied, they were quick and gracious to seek out and remedy these concerns, especially among their pastoral colleagues; they did this for the sake of the gospel and of their brothers's eternal souls.

The idea of a modern Censure can bring unease upon first hearing. The concern here is for pastors who are morally and doctrinally sound. Certainly, pastoral examinations prior to ordination is a crucial part of this process; but is helped by closed-door sessions in which investigation into the allegations of questionable behavior or doctrine of pastors can be conducted.

In the modern age, much mud-slinging unfortunately occurs via social media, the blogosphere, or supposedly independent websites and news outlets where much harm is allowed to come to the name of Christ in the name of accountability. If the church is the first line of defense and the first line of investigation against these attacks against ministers and elders, much could be done to save the reputations of gospel ministers and bring about doctrinal or practical correction before erring ministers are allowed to do much harm themselves. In Geneva, many of these offenses were documented for the sake of transparent courts, but many laity never knew the

private matters of the courts of the church unless necessity caused them to become public knowledge. The concern ought to be for unity and collegiality, not the artificial creation of supposedly-morally-superior celebrity pastors or elders (an all-too-common occurrence today). The humility and Christ-mindedness required on such occasions would be of great advantage to the modern church, both in its pastoral corps and its reputation in the world. This begins with each individual pastor opening up and becoming accountable to others in the church, and submitting themselves to the purity of the ministry, the high calling of God upon His gospel ministers, and to the judgments of the courts of the church when they are passed.

Pastoral Care for the Laity's Souls — The Consistory

One of the most highly criticized aspects of Geneva in Calvin's day was the implementation of what is known as the Consistory. The Consistory acted as a court of the church in which various matters of sin and scandal were to be investigated and resolved. Many consider this a defining characteristic of Geneva, even leading critics to argue that "the city-state of Geneva, which became known as the Protestant Rome, was also, in effect, a police state, ruled by a Consistory of five pastors and twelve lay elders, with the bloodless figure of the dictator looming over all."¹³ If the assumptions which premise this quote are true, surely the criticism is fair. Alas, they are not.

While many moderns are uncomfortable with the thought of ecclesiastical accountability, this was not uncommon in the days of Calvin. Geneva was not alone in regards to the presence of the Consistory, it is only a preeminent example. In fact, the practice was not uncommon even in Lutheran churches of the day and was practiced in varied forms in Reformed and Protestant

¹³ William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance-Portrait of an Age* (New York, NY: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2014), 190.

churches all over Europe (including Bern, Zurich, and Strasbourg, the last of which exported its form to England).¹⁴ What was unique about Geneva's practice was the keeping of the discipline "in-house." Zwingli and Bullinger were of the opinion that passing judgment belonged to pastors and elders, while executing the discipline (including excommunication) belonged to the civil magistrate.¹⁵ The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* declare "If anyone speaks critically against the received doctrine, he shall be summoned for the purpose of reasoning with him. If he is amenable he shall be dismissed without scandal or disgrace."¹⁶ The goal in view here is not a public, tyrannical humiliation of all discordant members of the ruling class's agenda; rather, unity in mind and spirit amongst the church is at heart, as Paul says in Philippians 2:1-2: "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Unity on all matters was a defining goal of early Protestant church communities, especially in the face of religious persecution from the Roman Catholic Church.

Brief summaries of discipline often include a list such as this:

Disciplinary measures were taken for absence from sermons, criticism of the ministers, use of charms, family quarrels, cases of drunkenness, gambling, dancing, profanity, wife-beating, and adultery. Disciplinary procedure was taken for having fortunes told by gypsies, for making a noise during sermon, for saying the pope was a

¹⁴ Jordan Ballor and W. Bradford Littlejohn, "European Calvinism: Church Discipline," *Journal of European History Online*, March 25, 2013, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/religious-and-confessional-spaces/jordan-ballor-w-bradford-littlejohn-european-calvinism-church-discipline>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, 48.

good man, against a woman of seventy about to marry a youth of twenty-five, and against a barber for tonsuring a priest.¹⁷

These are pulled from the registers of the Consistory and are accounted for in many secondary documents of the day. However, it is important to note the pastoral care with which these admonitions were delivered. Calvin writes about the marriage scandal above, saying:

For although I consider that they ought to be severely reprehended, (nor can we avoid that, unless we are willing to forego our duty,) because, however, it is not free of danger, there is need of great caution being had, lest, being exasperated by us, they may overleap the fences, and burst away from each other with the same rashness by which they came together, and with greater scandal and more offensive profligacy. Therefore, unless some special occasion shall have been presented to you, I do not advise that you exchange a word with her upon the subject. But if a suitable occasion shall have presented itself, you may then shew her how greatly you were displeased that she had so little considered, in the conduct she had pursued, either her own character or the edification of the Church, and that there was not one serious or decent man who did not highly disapprove it. That you also did not entertain a doubt that this news will be both very bitter and very sad to me. At the same time, however, that she may not be utterly distracted or break out into insanity, you can soften the harshness of these expressions by kindly expressions, and exhort her to endeavour to make up for what has been so ill begun, by bringing the matter to a better ending. Lastly, you must use such discretion in the matter, that all shall be in order when I return.¹⁸

It is clear that the desire of Calvin, at least, was to order the resolution to this situation with such care that the offending parties were neither publicly disgraced nor would they make the matter worse in their response to the admonition. This is the view most commonly seen in the Consistory's process, as noted by Jeffery Watt:

When it addressed personal conflicts and sought to reconcile those in dispute, the Consistory, as noted repeatedly, resembled a counseling service. Its members were much more interested in settling differences than in assigning blame to one of the feuding parties... The testimony found in the registers provides occasional glimpses

¹⁷ W. J. Grier, "John Calvin's Geneva," Monergism.com Blog, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://www.monergism.com/john-calvins-geneva>.

¹⁸ Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin, Volume I (of 4): Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes* (Project Gutenberg, 2014), 222.

of Calvin and other pastors trying to reconcile feuding parties outside the Consistory, and summoning people before it only after their previous efforts had failed.¹⁹

And in another case, when disputes over finances were in question: “Without in any way investigating the monetary issues that were the source of this dispute, the Consistory simply pressed all four parties to reconcile, which they promised to do.”²⁰ It is clear through examples like these that the Consistory was not a tyrannical government, ordering the affairs of the people, and lashing out against anyone with the slightest difference of doctrine. The pastors and elders were concerned that “all this is to be so moderated that no severity should have the effect of overwhelming the offender, but rather that the disciplines should act as medicines to bring sinners back to our Lord.”²¹

Interestingly, it was typical that the Consistory forwarded any cases in need of civic discipline (fines, imprisonment, etc.) to the City Council, and when these punishments were assessed and carried out, the parties were transferred back to the Consistory for follow-up spiritual care.²² In one case of a marital dispute between a husband and a cheating wife, the Holy Spirit had worked upon the heart of the wife to repent of her adulterous living and return to her husband if he would accept her and the Consistory provided Biblical, legal, and practical counsel:

The opinion of the Consistory is that in view of her response her husband be asked, since she is reduced and repents, to pardon her for the honor of God, and that they be reconciled with each other and that he live with her peacefully...

¹⁹ Jeffrey R. Watt, *The Consistory and Social Discipline in Calvin's Geneva* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020), 193.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, 49.

²² Robert McCune Kingdon et al., *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 9.

Monsieur Calvin gave them beautiful admonitions from Holy Scripture, both together, and remonstrated with the wife, using firm respectable admonitions. She said that if her husband forbids some person to her she will obey him and follow his command.²³

Ultimately, this did beautifully shape the moral character of the city and reflect well on Christ. One visiting minister later remarked “All cursing and swearing, gambling, luxury, strife, hatred, fraud, etc. are forbidden, while greater sins are hardly ever heard of. What a glorious ornament of the Christian Religion is such a purity of morals!”²⁴

As regards the Consistory, the modern church has a great deal of ground to recover. I would not suggest that the same offenses be treated in the same way, but the idea that all Christians reflect Christ and are called to submit to His Word and be accountable for their actions before God and before His under-shepherds who will account for them is vitally important to the church. The modern separation of church and state makes it very difficult to directly apply the Consistory to the modern world. One may take the Zwingli-Bullinger approach of allowing the civil magistrate follow through on the execution of discipline, but that would require the church’s close association with the civil government and the government’s cooperation with and concern for God’s law. Legal action is generally not taken when members of the flock are straying, unless they have broken a civil law; and generally, the Church’s only recourse is the withholding of the sacrament and eventual revocation of church membership. To some straying sheep, this is enough; but to many who are flagrant in their sin, there are no repercussions if they separate themselves from the body of Christ. The second use of the law ought to be emphasized with the civil magistrate (a petition more easily accomplished in a covenanted nation) in an effort to guide

²³ *Registers*, 323.

²⁴ Valentin Andrae’s *Respublica Christianopolitana*, quoted in Manetsch, 182.

and direct the lives of all who claim the name of Christ. The complexities involved in employing the law toward its second use ought to be worth undertaking in order to see a nation committed to living their claim to God.

This would be a large hurdle to overcome, especially considering the necessary commitment from both the ecclesiastical authority and civil magistrate. Because of the large-scale resistance to authority and sin-grounded desire for personal freedom and gratification, steps in this direction are difficult.²⁵ Ultimately, though, one can see the obvious benefit of deeply entrenched pastoral care among the flock, concerned largely with reconciliation and resolution. If more of the laity were more quickly prompted to return to gospel living and thus concerned with living in harmony with God's Word and God's people, the church would likely look much more appealing to the watching world and behave in a manner more pleasing to our God.

Pastoral Care for the Preaching — The Conferences of Scripture

Every week, on Fridays, a conference is held in which all their ministers and many of the people participate. Here one of them reads a passage from Scripture and expounds it briefly. Another speaks on the matter what to him is according to the Spirit. A third person gives his opinion and a fourth adds some things in his capacity to weigh the issue. And not only the ministers do so, but everyone who has come to listen.²⁶

This congregant's report points to one of the least well-known aspects of the Company of Pastors: their weekly study meeting. Established “in order that all ministers may maintain purity and agreement of doctrine among themselves, it will be expedient for them to meet together on one particular day of the week for discussion of the Scriptures,”²⁷ *The Congrégations*, or

²⁵ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010), 75-100.

²⁶ Vergerio, Pier Paolo, quoted in Joseph D. Small, ““All the Ministers Shall Meet Together,”” *Theology Matters*, September 16, 2022, <https://theologymatters.com/john-calvin/2019/all-the-ministers-shall-meet-together/>.

²⁷ “Ecclesiastical Ordinances.”

Conferences of Scripture (as they were variously called) met weekly on Friday mornings to discuss Scripture and unite on doctrine.

As seen in the quote above, the typical pattern for the weekly meeting involved one of the preachers (rotating weekly so that all may have opportunity to present and to grow in their skills) taking up the pulpit, praying the Opening Prayer:

We pray to you, our good God and Father, asking that you might forgive all our faults and offenses, and illuminate us by your Holy Spirit to have the true understanding of your holy Word. Give us the grace that we need to handle it purely and faithfully to the glory of your holy name, for the edification of the Church, and for our salvation. We ask these things in the name of the only and blessed Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.²⁸

and proceeding to read the verses of the Bible which followed the previous week's passage. The moderator would then exposit the passage to the best of his ability and open the floor for comments from other pastors, elders, and even laypeople in the congregation. While the Company of Pastors never grew beyond 31 members at a given time, the Congregation frequently had an audience approximately double that.²⁹

Based on Zwingli's *Prophezei* in Zurich (begun in 1525), Calvin's Conferences were a means of sharpening the exegetical and homiletical skills of ministers, teaching lay people how to read and interpret the Bible, and sharpening and uniting the church on the interpretation of the Bible and its proceeding doctrine.³⁰ It is clear that one of the pastoral goals of the Conferences was that lay people might better understand the Scripture. As de Boer comments:

²⁸ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 135.

²⁹ Erik A. de Boer, "The Presence and Participation of Laypeople in the Congrégations of the Company of Pastors in Geneva," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 35, no. 3 (January 2004): p. 651, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20477039>, 653.

³⁰ Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2008), 232.

When the study of the last four books of Moses was organized “in the form of a harmony,” Calvin defended this method, laid down in a work plan for the colleagues: “Because the topics are so intertwined, it seemed right to our company to follow a clear order. It is not that we tried to change nothing in what Moses has said by the Holy Spirit, but it is in order that they who in the following may frequent the biblical studies may have a clear ease and learn better how they should read both the histories and the doctrine, which are so intertwined.”³¹

The laypeople present at the Conferences were being instructed in understanding the Scriptures by their mere observance of the events going on around them. The expanded presence of laypeople was a goal, even for the city council, who in 1609 convinced the Company to hold their Conference meetings earlier (replacing the Friday morning service), so that laypeople could attend without having to sit for hours on end.³² A united pastoral goal was the training of laypeople in Scriptural study.

At times, conversations became heated, such as the instance of Jerome Bolsec on October 16, 1551. Bolsec stood and challenged the doctrine of double predestination, which, he claimed, “makes God into a tyrant, indeed an idol, as the pagans have made Jupiter.”³³ After this accusation, Calvin stood and spoke in response for an hour, arguing extemporaneously both from Scripture and church history. Bolsec was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually expelled from the city based on the judgment of a plurality of elders in the city (not Calvin operating to his own ends).³⁴ Here was a man blatantly denying and defaming the doctrine of God understood by the other elders in the city and denomination and who was attempting to undermine it and call the Biblical doctrine of God a falsehood (history vindicates Calvin: Bolsec attempted to enter the

³¹ de Boer, “Presence and Participation,” 654.

³² Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 136.

³³ Ibid, 135.

³⁴ Ibid, 136.

ministry in other Reformed churches in the region and eventually returned to the Roman Catholic church). This is, admittedly, an extreme; but it is one which characterizes the heart of the Congregation: the point was not rigorous debate and argumentation for their own sake, but unity in doctrine, through struggle. As Calvin noted in a letter to a friend and colleague, “The fewer discussions of doctrine we have together, the greater the danger of pernicious opinions.”³⁵ The church as a whole, as well as each minister, was sharpened in their skills while being sharpened in their doctrine, ultimately for the edification of the church. The care for the preaching springs from a pastoral care for the hearts of the ministers and people in the church.

The Conferences of Scripture unfortunately have no real corollary in the modern church. One might suggest that any given denomination's doctrines are well set in stone, due to centuries of debate and honing, but this is not true for the minds of every individual pastor and lay person in those denominations. Gatherings like these would be an excellent way forward toward unity and maturity.

There are websites and forums in which doctrinal discussions take place, largely as a reaction to statements and essays from prominent theologians with novel propositions. Conferences like those in the Evangelical Theological Society are a means of sharpening doctrine for a wide swath of Christianity, but the outflows of the work in these societies generally go no farther than those who occupy pulpits and theological faculty positions. The average churchgoer has no awareness of these theological discussions and their repercussions, and unless one can keep track of dozens of articles from all corners of the internet and interpret them according to the confessional standards, they are likely to understand only a portion of the

³⁵ Calvin, quoted in “Even Calvin Had a Team: Lessons from His Company of Pastors,” *Desiring God* (Desiring God, June 30, 2022), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/even-calvin-had-a-team>.

debate or quickly get out of their depth. Live, public conversations with understood boundaries of orthodoxy would not only further doctrine in the Church, but also teach the laity.

Due to the ecclesiastical structure of many churches and the relative distance to the nearest sister church, this can be inhibitive in smaller denominations like the RPCNA, though there are small pockets of America which are densely populated with Reformed Presbyterian churches. The potential for local ministers to join together in preaching the same book of the Bible, study together, unite in doctrine and in preaching format, and encourage collegial relationships with one another is desirable. It would promote unity of thought and of mission, both in pastors and in the laity.

Pastoral Care for the Future Church — The Catechism

"When Calvin agreed to return to Geneva in 1541, he did so on the condition that magistrates place their full support behind catechesis and discipline."³⁶ One of the pillars of Calvin's Geneva was the emphasis not only on pastoral discipline, but on the cultivation of Biblical literacy and a cultivation of general literacy. The town of Geneva did not comprise a particularly white-collar workforce, especially once the hundreds of Catholic clergy had been ejected from the city. Calvin saw a need for the pastoral care of the mind, especially in relation to the Bible, amongst his flock.

Calvin wrote The Catechism of the Church of Geneva swiftly upon his return to the city in 1541. He saw it as fundamental to the growth of Christian people, especially young people, in his day. Catechetical services were provided on Sundays between church services, and it was expected that all youth would be in attendance to learn the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer,

³⁶ Jean Francesco A. L. Gomes, "Reforming the Church, Home, and School: The Strategic Role of Catechesis in Calvin's Geneva," *Fides Reformata* 24, no. 1 (2019): pp. 87-108, 90.

and the Catechism. These documents were set forth as a summary of doctrine with which all people in the city should be familiar. Before their first communion, children were expected to profess faith and give an answer for their faith, not by reciting all 373 answers to the Catechism, but by responding to questions whose answers would be derived from the full scope of doctrine set forth in all three documents.³⁷ This would prove crucial for the growth of the young Reformed church in Geneva, as most of the citizens were first generation Protestants. The future of the church would be secured by the instruction of the young. “The church of God will never preserve itself without a catechism, for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, causing it to multiply from age to age.”³⁸

In similar pastoral care, adults who were unfamiliar with the doctrines of the church were often assigned “homework” to attend the catechism services with the children on Sunday, that they might grow in their knowledge of God and in their faith.³⁹ This was not only for the particulars of the faith, but for any and all concerns of doctrine (including one woman who could not recall whether the Virgin was the mother or father of Jesus).⁴⁰ Manetsch notes the effectiveness of this policy:

Up until 1564, the number of people disciplined for religious “ignorance” was relatively high, accounting for more than 10 percent of all known suspensions [from the table]. In the generation after Calvin’s death, ignorance cases became far less frequent so that, between 1565 and 1609, suspensions for ignorance accounted for less than 1 percent (0.6 percent) of all known suspensions. During the final two decades included in my study [1589-1609], I identified only seventeen people

³⁷ Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, 47.

³⁸ Calvin, quoted in Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 266.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 273.

excommunicated for the fault of “ignorance” — and many of these individuals were recent immigrants to the city.⁴¹

The regimen of education was clearly effective in teaching doctrines, regardless of whether it effectively converted lost souls (though this was later a concern of the Company of Pastors). The true concern of the Pastors was the conversion of souls, no matter the instrument used.⁴²

The church today is fractured in its use of any sort of catechism. Some branches of the church are still wholeheartedly committed to employing the catechism well amongst both the young and the old. Some denominations hold it up on a shelf as a fixture of days gone by. Others still ignore catechesis as an old and irrelevant practice. As Calvin said, it is a means of preserving faith and ought still be held in high esteem, both by church officers and by the families in the church. Churches would do well to return to a regular use of the catechism (not necessarily in the church service, though that is not excluded) as a means of thoroughly educating church members on the church’s doctrine. Especially in a denomination like the RPCNA, wherein many of the theological distinctives are built on complex theological arguments built on a strong and interconnected framework of Biblical interpretation, a thorough and systematic means of congregational catechetical instruction may prevent many potential congregants from moving on before they have an understanding of the church’s doctrine that is actually adequate to decide their membership intentions. Perhaps a return to Geneva’s form of systematic instruction as a sort of extended church membership course, covering the heads of doctrine, would prevent loss of potential members and build bridges with those who do decide to place their membership elsewhere, while also encouraging a more theologically active laity.

⁴¹ Ibid. The population of Geneva averaged between 20,000 and 25,000 people in these decades, meaning the percentage of people excommunicated for “ignorance” was approximately 0.0038%.

⁴² Ibid.

Pastoral Care for the Local Church — The Hospital

Included in the *Ordinances* is the work of the deacons in regard to the care for the poor.

He describes the office of deacon serving the poor and needy as follows:

There were always two kinds of deacons in there early Church. The one kind was deputed to receive, dispense, and keep the goods for the poor, not only the daily alms, but also possessions, revenues, and pensions; the other kind to care for and remember the sick and administer the allowance for the poor, a custom which we still retain at present. And in order to avoid confusion, since we have stewards and hospitallers, one of the four stewards of the hospital shall be the receiver of all its bounty and shall be adequately paid so that he may the better fulfill his office.⁴³

This is a subject treated similarly by Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

The care of the poor was committed to deacons, of whom two classes are mentioned by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, “He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity;” “he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:8). As it is certain that he is here speaking of public offices of the Church, there must have been two distinct classes. If I mistake not, he in the former clause designates deacons, who administered alms; in the latter, those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and the sick... If we admit this (and it certainly ought to be admitted), there will be two classes of deacons, the one serving the Church by administering the affairs of the poor; the other, by taking care of the poor themselves. For although the term διακονία has a more extensive meaning, Scripture specially gives the name of deacons to those whom the Church appoints to dispense alms, and take care of the poor, constituting them as it were stewards of the public treasury of the poor.⁴⁴

Of note in the *Ordinances* is the adoption of the local resources already in place, as well as the seeming removal of ecclesiastical ties to the office of deacon in Geneva (and the requirement of election to the office). Whether this was a logistical decision on the part of the city council, an earlier position of Calvin’s which changed by the later publication of the *Institutes*, or merely a capitulation on Calvin’s part is unknown; regardless, the City of Geneva saw a unique application of the role of deacon in the Hospital of Calvin’s day.

⁴³ Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, 42.

⁴⁴ Jean Calvin and Henry Beveridge (ed.), *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 705.

The Hospital served various functions in the early days of Calvin's tenure. Geneva served largely as a city of refuge for many of the religious refugees across Europe, from Scotland to Italy to the Palatinate, and some estimates say the city's population swelled from 13,000 to 20,000 in the 1540s. The mass influx of immigrants — some temporary, some not — placed a great strain on the city, but this is further strained by Geneva's legal adoption of the Protestant religion ousted the Catholics in 1535-6, which removed much of the medical care and provision for the poor which had previously been provided by nuns and priests in the local church.⁴⁵ This may be the reason for the city's unique response: the hiring of professional stewards and hospitallers to administer the Hospital and the subsequent employment of these officeholders as officeholders in the church (deacons). The city's *Ordinances* even describe that "the hospitallers must control their own families in an honorable and godly manner, seeing that they have to govern a house dedicated to God," an obvious, but not perfect parallel to 1 Timothy 3:4-5, as the house here is merely "dedicated to God."⁴⁶ This marks a new form of diaconal servant, according to Joseph Small:

Calvin's distinctive approach to the church's ordered ministries is clearly seen in his transformation of the office of deacon. The Catholic Church's deacons were future priests, distinct from the laity. In the emerging Lutheran churches, deacons were now laity—usually civil servants—charged with care for the poor. But for Geneva's Reformed ecclesiology and practice, deacons were church members who held ecclesiastical office as an essential component of the church's ministry. Although all Christians share diaconal responsibilities, Calvin charged ordered deacons with leading the whole church in works of mercy and justice. They were no longer a subset

⁴⁵ Jeannine E. Olson, "The Care of the Poor in Calvin's Geneva," Lecture, 2009. https://kirs.kr/data/seminar/seminar/08reformation02_eng.pdf

⁴⁶ "Ecclesiastical Ordinances."

of another order of ministry, nor were they removed from the church's orders of ministry.⁴⁷

The sudden decrease in potential aid workers due to the loss of Catholic clergy necessarily focused the care for the poor and needy in a single geographic location, governed by a single body; there simply did not exist enough manpower to staff multiple locations of care, but the city downsized previous care and moved into the now-abandoned Convent of the Poor Clares, incorporating other ministries in the process:

...in 1535, even before the people of Geneva had officially voted in the Reformation, the city council organized a new social welfare system and hospital for Geneva, consolidating the seven smaller hospitals that had existed in Geneva when it had been Roman Catholic. The new social welfare system also took over the resources from other institutions, including the Box for All Souls in Purgatory, a foundation for the poor when Geneva was Roman Catholic.⁴⁸

Not only was the city concerned with caring for the poor, but it was committed doing so in a systematic way that did not allow any to fall through the cracks because of the clerical transition.

The hospital was to be “available both for the sick and for the aged who are unable to work. The same applies to widows, orphaned children, and other poor persons.”⁴⁹ Later, the *Ordinances* describe that “besides the hospice for wayfarers, which must be maintained, there should be some separate hospitality for those who are seen to be deserving of special charity. And for this purpose a room shall be set aside to receive those whom the stewards shall recommend.”⁵⁰ The hospital, then, was a one-stop shop for all sorts of mercy ministries, whether they were officially discharged by the church or state. In effect, these were all discharged by the

⁴⁷ Joseph D. Small, ““All the Ministers Shall Meet Together,”” Theology Matters, September 16, 2022, <https://theologymatters.com/john-calvin/2019/all-the-ministers-shall-meet-together/>.

⁴⁸ Olson “The Care of the Poor,” 30.

⁴⁹ “Ecclesiastical Ordinances.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

church, with a degree of funding, approval, and support by the civil magistrate, whose duty it was to cooperate with the church on matters of mutual concern. Calvin heavily relied on this duty of the church and state. In a letter to a friend and member of the city, Calvin wrote about a situation of desperate need:

Seigneur Michel,

This poor man is so very disfigured in body, that it is pitiful, and even shockingly horrible, to see. He says that it has not happened through profligacy. Seeing that it is a pitiable case, will you consider whether you can manage to help him, so that he may not putrefy in rank corruption? I recommend him all the more earnestly to you, as thinking that he must belong to the town, for had he been a stranger, I would myself have provided for him in some way, so that no occasion might be given to cry out as they do. But since he is here, I make less difficulty about it.

Your brother and good friend,
John Calvin⁵¹

Because of the size of Geneva, the demand upon this mercy infrastructure was great. Beyond this, there was a need to minister to a wide variety of people in a broad range of circumstances. There, the church and the state united to minister. Citizens were established as hospitallers (those who engaged in the care of the needy) and as stewards (those who administered the monies to the poor and the supplies to the hospitallers for the sake of the needy). Student preachers were assigned to Hospital duty for the sake of Saturday night preaching, catechizing, and prison ministry.⁵² City council elders were assigned to drive away the poor from church doors after the services and drive them toward a deacon who could assist them. Refugees and otherwise unemployable members of society were cared for and given the tools they needed to work and the necessary funding to establish their labors in Geneva, typically as a

⁵¹ Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, 449.

⁵² Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 283.

loan. (Social welfare “handouts” were not commonplace in Geneva, likely after the model of Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12: “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”)⁵³

The care for the poor and needy in Geneva was indeed a well-rounded ministry of mercy. People in all circumstances and from all walks of life were assisted according to their needs, professionally administered, and followed up with direct spiritual care. The need to feed the soul and the body together was met by the joint civic-church response of the Genevan diaconate.

It is in the area of mercy ministries like the Hospital and the Funds that the modern church could grow much. There are branches of the church that sponsor medical ministries and there are para-church organizations that seek to provide need to the homeless, the hungry, and the refugee. If the modern church took after Geneva, churches could be more proactive by assigning specific deacons to take care of specific needs and ministries (homelessness, hunger, joblessness, refugees, medical response) and by encouraging laypeople to be involved in contributing, both financially and materially, to ministries such as these. Denominational resources from various denominations could be pooled or utilized in a manner that seeks allocated state and federal funding and brings it to the church to fund diaconal work: homeless housing, food banks, job support, or counseling ministries that are carried out by the local church. In this way, the church and state could work hand in hand, each accomplishing their goals to their own ends without

⁵³ Olson “The Care of the Poor,” 41.

placing a heavy burden on individual churches or the denominational structures that are often either too large or too small to address these concerns.

Pastoral Care for the Global Church — The French Fund and International Funds

When Calvin first arrived in Geneva in 1536, the Hospital was well under way and the oncoming flood of religious refugees from other nations was beginning to trickle into the city. Geneva itself was not prepared, nor concerned, to address this problem head-on. Calvin instead insisted that the church take on the duty of providing for the poor and needy from abroad; he did so by establishing the *Bourse française* or French Fund. The French Fund was an arm of the church's mercy ministry, administered by deacons and overseen by the Venerable Company of Pastors.⁵⁴ While one of its duties was the provision for French refugees in a manner comparable to that of the Hospital, it also served to support candidates for the ministry who fled from France or were returning to France, and to continue mission work supporting the *Huguenots* in France.⁵⁵

One of the major purposes of the Bourse was to promote missionary activity within France. This was accomplished through the publishing of literature such as Bibles, Psalters, and catechisms for sale by traveling colporteurs. The Bourse also sponsored the publication of Beza's French translation of the Psalms. In addition, the fund financed special ministerial projects such as copying Calvin's sermons. In fact, the Bourse funded a full-time copyist just for that purpose.⁵⁶

The work of the French Fund served to bolster the French church in every way conceivable, caring for ministers of the church, worship in the church, worship in the home, and further

⁵⁴ Olson "The Care of the Poor," 36.

⁵⁵ Olson "The Care of the Poor," 43.

⁵⁶ Martin Klauber, "Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse Française," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (1990): pp. 385-387.

mission and outreach. In fact, between 1555 and 1562, the Fund helped send more than 100 ministers back into France.⁵⁷

While the French Fund was established specifically for the aid of the French members of society (perhaps a special place existed in Calvin's heart for his compatriots — he was a donor himself), other Funds were established in the following decades for people of other national origins, who could accordingly apply to the Italian and German Funds for similar aid in sustaining the church in other lands of the Reformation.⁵⁸

The modern church has much infrastructure dedicated to evangelism-based missions, much of which is undertaken by parachurch organizations. On top of this, many missions societies do not follow-up their support in the same way Geneva did; this, too, is another opportunity for growth. At the same time, the long-view approach that RP Global Missions takes is laudable: often going where gospel work is being done, setting up locally autonomous churches and providing accountability and resources as the local church begins to grow. If ample resources existed, this kind of work could be further supported by plenty of missionaries, translation work, and even regional training and support in various locations around the globe. By moving this “in-house,” and cooperating with parachurch organizations, instead of relying on them, all of the above ministry goals of the church (as those seen in Geneva) can be not only maintained, but spread around the world with sufficient denominational oversight and support systems.

⁵⁷ “Calvin's Company of Pastors: An Interview with Scott Manetsch,” Credo Magazine, October 23, 2018, <https://credomag.com/2013/12/calvins-company-of-pastors-an-interivew-with-scott-manetsch/?amp>.

⁵⁸ Jeannine E. Olson, *The Bourse Francaise: Deacons and Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1980), 9; Olson “The Care of the Poor,” 38-39.

A Modern Geneva

In reviewing these Genevan institutions, most of have no exact modern counterpart, it is clear that there was a beating heart at the center of the Company of Pastors — a heart which beat for care of body and soul of everyone in need. This was not concern for reputation, knowledge, or welfare alone, but all of these things in support of a person's immortal soul. No doubt, there are a great many corollaries between Geneva's small Company and the modern church, but there are also many deficiencies in the modern church which require a shepherding (pastoral) ministry that would be active in people's lives and hearts.

An added layer of difficulty in finding points of application consists in the fact that church and state, while separate, were highly symbiotic in Calvin's Geneva. The Company and Consistory were ecclesiastical bodies often used in service to the state (particularly in the later years of the Company), and the state was seen as a means of accomplishing ecclesiastical ends. While bodies like the Consistory and Hospital have lost their place in modern, post-establishmentarian society, this does not necessitate a complete dismissal of the institutions of Geneva and their potential guidance for the modern church. There is much to learn for both the broad Evangelical church and the Reformed church. Geneva pastored all of its souls in its discipline, theological discussion and propagation, theological education, mercy ministries, and missions systematically and thoroughly.

It is not the opinion of the author that the church today does *none* of these things, but that individual churches and denominations seem to specialize in a way that would have been seen as insufficient in Calvin's Geneva: the Southern Baptist Convention oversees the International Mission Board and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, but are seen by the world in a

negative light as regards pastoral and lay holiness. The Presbyterian Church in America may have great denominational structures for ministerial accountability, but may be doing so at the loss of care for the poor in the eyes of the public. Denominations like the United Methodist Church are positively viewed for their expressions of love for the poor and needy, but have much lost much ground in the realm of orthodoxy, in which interdenominational Scripture Conferences and Congregations would bear much fruit. The Genevan city operated with a full-orbed and full-hearted commitment to pastoral care of pastors and laypeople by caring for souls, discipline, preaching, education, mercy, and outreach in an unrivaled manner. May the Lord bless His church's efforts to meet physical and spiritual needs with the gospel of Christ.

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