

# Very Superstitious: Calvin, the Consistory, & Roman Catholic Superstition, 1542–1554

By Zachary Groff

## INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1964, Richard Stauffer observed with regards to biographies of French Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), “By attacking Calvin’s person, one tries to discredit his thought and that of the theologians who claim him.”<sup>1</sup> Writing more than four decades later, Denis Janz could remark, “The prevailing image of John Calvin continues to be that of the domineering tyrant, the utterly inflexible moralist, the humorless preacher, and the unrelenting dogmatist unshaken by even the slightest self-doubt.”<sup>2</sup> The same pejorative critiques have been routinely lobbed at the Genevan Consistory in Calvin’s time. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars sometimes caricatured the Consistory based on the most sensational and controversial episodes recorded in the *Registers of the Genevan Consistory*, as retrieved and published by Frédéric-Auguste Cramer (1795–1855).<sup>3</sup> Incomplete characterizations of the Consistory’s exercise of church discipline persist in popular textbooks of Reformation church history. For example, William Estep described the proceedings of the Consistory as “somewhat reminiscent of the Roman Inquisition”<sup>4</sup> as recently as 1986.

It was not until a team of researchers led by Robert Kingdon began in 1987 to retrieve “everyday cases involving plain people”<sup>5</sup> from the *Registers* that a more accurate picture of the Consistory began to emerge. From its inception under the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541, one of the principal concerns of the Consistory was to eradicate Roman Catholic religious devotion in the congregations and homes of Geneva through instruction against entrenched or otherwise lingering superstition. The *Registers* record the Consistory’s pastoral efforts to correct superstition and idolatry, to the glory of God and for the good of the people.

Especially in the opening years of Calvin’s renewed

ministry in Geneva (1542–1544), the men who made up the newly formed Consistory followed a pastoral course in addressing townspeople’s persistent religious superstition derived from traditional Roman Catholic practices. The blending together of religious superstition and cultural tradition complicated the Consistory’s work, as illustrated by a drawn-out controversy over baptismal names from 1546 to 1554. This article puts forward a narrative of the Consistory’s anti-superstition pastoral care constructed from the 1542–1544 *Registers of the Genevan Consistory*, John Calvin’s personal correspondence, and select theological treatises in the same period. Secondary sources shed light on the baptismal names controversy as a protracted complication of the Consistory’s efforts at reform. Sermonic literature lies outside the scope of this article. However, church historians have rightly noted the importance of Calvin’s sermons and commentaries in the theological and social development of the Reformation in Geneva, and scholars have effectively used such sources to present Calvin’s pastoral

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1. Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin*, trans. George Shriver (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 29.

2. Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 245.

3. Robert M. Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin, Volume 1: 1542–1544*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. xii.

4. William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 241; see also, Justo González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), pp. 83–4.

5. Kingdon et al., *Registers of the Consistory*, p. xii.

theology and ecclesiology as applied to mid-sixteenth century Geneva.<sup>6</sup>

The narrative in the following pages begins with an outline of the place and function of the Consistory within Reformation Geneva's ecclesiastical system after 1541. It then proceeds to an examination of three case studies of pastoral care between 1542 and 1544 in situations of what the Consistory regarded as persistent Roman Catholic superstition. Finally, it moves into an exploration of the theological and socio-cultural dimensions of the heated controversy over baptismal names from 1546 to 1554. The conclusion features a biblical evaluation of the pastoral practice of the Genevan Consistory in confrontation with Roman Catholic religious superstition and cultural tradition.

#### THE CONSISTORY WITHIN REFORMATION GENEVA'S ECCLESIASTICAL SYSTEM

The Genevan Consistory began its work only after the formal ratification of Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541. However, the Consistory was not without precedent in Geneva. Prior to the expulsion of the Roman Catholic bishop in 1536, church discipline and mediation over civil issues of less public significance would take place in a traditional Bishop's Court. Douglas Kelly has noted that the departure of the bishop left Geneva "with a vacuum in handling moral and minor civil cases."<sup>7</sup> Made up of both ministers and magistrates,

6. For example, see Matthew J. Tuininga, *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms*, Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 182–227; and William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 214–29.

7. Douglas F. Kelly, "Calvin and the Consistory," in *John Calvin: For a New Reformation*, eds. Derek W. H. Thomas and John W. Tweedale (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), p. 98.

8. Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 189.

9. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, ed., *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 10–13; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), pp. 55, 60–62; Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 160; Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, pp. 29–31.

10. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, pp. 183f.

11. Tuininga, *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church*, p. 214.

12. "Ecclesiastical Ordinances" in Hughes, *Register of the Company*, p. 41.

13. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, p. 192.

the Consistory adopted the caseload of what would otherwise have fallen to the Bishop's Court. Such an arrangement in and of itself was not unique to Geneva. In fact, similar courts existed in Bern, Zurich, and Strasbourg. However, the Genevan Consistory's place within the city's matrix of ecclesiastical, civil, and social order distinguished the Reformed church in Geneva from that of other cities.

The Genevan Consistory occupied a social space between three magisterial councils and Calvin's Company of Pastors, as reflected in its membership. The constitutional make-up of the Consistory under the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541 enacted Calvin's vision of the complementarity of magisterial and pastoral authority in Geneva. The Consistory included the Genevan city pastors and twelve lay elders of high moral reputation: two drawn from the Small Council, four from the Council of Sixty, and six from the Council of Two Hundred. During their weekly meetings on Thursday evenings, the lay elders and the pastors would sit on opposing benches, and a presiding civil magistrate known as the syndic would moderate the proceedings. Scott Manetsch has listed the three aims of church discipline, as pursued by the Consistory: the purity of the church, the protection of individual Christians from the bad influence of wicked people, and the encouragement of shamed sinners toward repentance and restoration to the church.<sup>8</sup> Unlike similar courts in neighboring cities, the Genevan Consistory reserved the authority—contested by the civil magistrate until 1555<sup>9</sup>—to suspend recalcitrant sinners from partaking of the Lord's Supper. As Manetsch has noted, the moral discipline which the Consistory enforced was intrusive, controversial, and pastoral as the body both enacted ecclesiastical measures of social control and leveraged its ecclesiastical authority to render social help.<sup>10</sup> The case studies and narrative examined below confirm and illustrate these twin features of the Consistory's pastoral care from 1542 to 1554.

The Consistory's mandate under the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* was not to govern the church, but rather to adjudicate cases of personal morality and piety. In Calvin's scheme, elders were responsible not for church government in general, but only for the application of church discipline in particular.<sup>11</sup> In describing the office of elder (or "commi"), the *Ordinances* read, "Their office is to watch over the life of each person, to admonish in a friendly manner those whom they see to be at fault and leading a disorderly life."<sup>12</sup> It appears that the Consistory was adept at exposing falsehood and determining guilt, as it rarely gave up a case or referred a matter within its jurisdiction to the magistracy.<sup>13</sup>

The Consistory's purpose in the prosecution of its mandate mirrored Calvin's chief end in all aspects of his pastoral ministry: the glory of God. As Ronald Wallace observed, "Calvin realized the dangers of a preoccupation with a personal holiness and salvation which was not primarily concerned with God's will and God's glory."<sup>14</sup> Calvin's concern was to encourage people to live orderly lives for God's glory, and not merely for their own benefit. Together with preaching and pastoral visitation, the discipline pursued by the Consistory was one of three means Calvin and his colleagues employed to glorify God in their capacity as officers of the church. An ultimate concern for God's glory keeps believers aligned with God's will and Word. An ultimate concern for personal salvation leads believers astray into superstition, idolatry, and autonomy in matters of faith. The Consistory's mandate to combat superstition and associated Roman Catholic religious practices was a mandate to cultivate God-honoring religious devotion among the people of Geneva.

The language used to establish the institution under the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* evidences the Consistory's goal of eradicating Roman Catholic superstition in Geneva. The text of the *Ordinances* articulates a preoccupation with addressing papistic superstition among the populace of Geneva. This preoccupation extended to the operation of the Consistory itself. For example, the practice of laying on of hands in ordination services for elders was banned due to the practice's close association at the time with Roman Catholic sacramental ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the *Ordinances* emphasized the inextricable relation between the rite of baptism, the ministry of the Word, and corporate worship, lest sacramental superstition creep into people's minds and private practices.<sup>16</sup> Concerning the Lord's Supper, the *Ordinances* state, "It was so observed in the ancient Church until the devil overturned everything, setting up the mass in its place."<sup>17</sup> To ensure orderly burial practices, the *Ordinances* declare, "We have further decided and ordered that undertakers should be under oath to the Seigneurie to prevent all superstitions contrary to the Word of God."<sup>18</sup> Such concern for combating superstition matches Calvin's writings elsewhere.

In Calvin's theological treatises dating to the same period as the enactment of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, a focus on addressing false religion and superstition is prominent. In the 1541 French edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote against the foolishness of manmade religion:

To seek God's truth, wretched people do not rise above their nature, as would be fitting, but they measure His greatness according to the weakness of their senses. They do not understand Him at all as He has given Himself to be known, but imagine Him as they have made Him by their presumption.... For they think that every feeling of religion—of whatever kind, even when it is all mixed up—is sufficient; but they do not reflect that the true religion ought to be conformed to what is pleasing to God according to His everlasting rule, and further, that God remains ever like Himself and is not an imaginary thing which changes according to the wishes of each person. Truly, one can see how many empty illusions superstition uses to make fun of God when it tries to please Him. For in doing practically only the things which He testifies He cares nothing about, superstition neglects those which He has ordained and said are pleasing to Him, or even openly rejects them.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin categorized all false religions—especially the Roman Catholicism of his day—as superstitions invented by man. Any element of religious life not mandated by God in His Word was subject to careful scrutiny, discriminating judgment, and rejection.

Calvin purposed to purge the Reformed church of all extrabiblical ceremonies characterizing superstitious Roman Catholic religion, no matter how innocuous they seemed to be in and of themselves. In his chapter "Of the Power of the Church," in the 1541 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin wrote about the extent of religious reform needed in his day:

For the present time we certainly experience that, in accordance with the occasion of the time, it is very good to get rid of some observances which in themselves are not indecent or bad. For in the past there was such blindness and ignorance, that the churches fixed on ceremonies with such a corrupt opinion and such a stubborn zeal, that one could scarcely purify them of horrible superstitions in which they were buried without taking away a great many ceremonies.<sup>20</sup>

14. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, p. 210.

15. "Ecclesiastical Ordinances" in Hughes, *Register of the Company*, page 37.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

19. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition, The First English Version*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 27f.

20. Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French Edition*, trans. McKee, p. 655.

Calvin's plan for purifying the church of superstitious practices was enacted in the work of the Genevan Consistory shortly after the 1541 edition of the *Institutes* went to press.

Several years into the Consistory's work of purifying Geneva of superstition, Calvin forcefully advanced a call for the Reformation of worship and doctrine in his 1544 treatise, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Toward the beginning of the treatise, he identified two areas in need of reform: "the mode in which God is duly worshipped" and "the source from which salvation is to be obtained."<sup>21</sup> Calvin warned against deviating from God's explicit regulation for divine worship in terms of adopting superstition in religion. "When once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions."<sup>22</sup> He wrote those words in 1544 from first-hand experience, having systematically and pastorally addressed religious superstition in the lives of newly Reformed Christians in Geneva for over two years at that point.

The endurance of the Consistory's mandate against superstition and Roman Catholic religious practices is further demonstrated on two occasions when men were brought into its service between the years 1542–1544. On Thursday, October 12, 1542, the *Registers of the Genevan Consistory* record the following exhortation to newly appointed wardens tasked with enforcing the work of the Consistory in rural districts surrounding Geneva:

Pierre Bezanson of Chouilly, Pierre Gallatin of Peney, Richard Porvieu of Satigny, Rener Bastard of Bourdigny, Ami Du Nant of Peissy. Summoned to the Consistory to establish order in the church by watching over those who live badly in their villages and to conserve the holy church, to show a good example to those others who wish to err in the church, for the sake of the Word of God, which should be well heard. And it being known that they are honest and peaceable and a good example to others, that they should admonish them with the minister about the Word of God and see that the others do their duty. And not spare anyone, neither their families, wives, children, servants or maids, at instruction

21. John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge, PHP Edition (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995 [1543]), p. 15.

22. Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 17.

23. Kingdon et al., *Registers of the Consistory*, p. 133; N.B. all subsequent parenthetical references are to this work.

24. William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 110.

after dinner. And that they should remand those in error to the Consistory and those who retain papal superstitions from the former times. And give good admonitions [to] tavern-goers, blasphemers and other evil livers, also those with anger and hatred for each other and those who rebel against the Word of God and the honor of justice, as far as they can. The Consistory advises, since they are here, that they be presented to the Council to take the oath to observe what has been said to them, or that it be put off to another time, and that they be given the admonition above.<sup>23</sup>

On Thursday, February 14, 1544, a complaint about possible superstition among the wardens came before the Consistory from Masters Jacques Bernard and Henri Mara. The latter complainant specifically requested that the Consistory admonish "those who go to the papistry, to Bonne, Cranves and other papistic places." The Consistory's immediate response was to order the "Honorable Pierre Somaretaz, castellan of Jussy, to see that both the wardens and other people follow the Reformation of the church."

The scribe recorded in greater detail the Consistory's direction to the wardens themselves, writing, "The syndic commanded them to carry out their office, to watch over the Word of God, idolatry, those who lead dishonest lives, Communion, drunkards, fornicators, beaters, blasphemers, evil livers and superstitious people. They all answered they would do their duty" (331). The Consistory's mandate to combat superstitious religious practices among the people of Geneva and the surrounding countryside is abundantly clear from the text of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, the content of Calvin's theological writings, and the record of the *Registers of the Genevan Consistory* itself. How the Consistory went about confronting superstition is detailed elsewhere in the *Registers*, with three case studies in particular being worth highlighting to illustrate the nature of the reformatory effort.

#### COMBATING SUPERSTITION: THREE CASE STUDIES OF PASTORAL CARE

William Naphy has observed that a slim majority (50.2%) of Consistory cases in 1542 dealt with "latent Catholic superstitious practices."<sup>24</sup> By 1546, the share of Consistory cases that were related to Roman Catholic superstition had dropped to roughly 14%. Whether the Consistory's work was effective in eradicating superstition or some administrative factor militated against the high rate of superstition-related cases by 1546 is

impossible to say without additional historical evidence. Regardless, in the first two years of the Consistory's operation, Roman Catholic superstition is featured prominently, and three recidivists stand out in particular: Donne Jane Pertennaz, Bartholomée d'Orsières, and Jacques Symond. The pastoral care of the Consistory (and Calvin himself) come into focus as the facts of the Consistory's dealings with these three individuals are examined. Such a project is worthwhile precisely because "Calvin's importance as a great theologian and international figure has so overshadowed his role as a minister in Geneva that this aspect of his life has been allowed to remain in obscurity illuminated only by his own interpretation of Geneva and his difficulties there."<sup>25</sup> A more complete picture regarding the Consistory's activity is necessary to appraise rightly the pastoral care of Calvin and his colleagues in Geneva.

#### *The Case of Donne Jane Pertennaz*

Donne Jane Pertennaz was not a socially obscure person in Geneva. She was the mother of a syndic, and she was widowed twice in her lifetime, both times having been married to men of some notoriety (28n106). The Consistory first interrogated her on Friday, March 31, 1542. The elders and pastors inquired about her faith, her absence from Communion, and whether or not she had attended Mass somewhere in the previous year. The record of her response is relatively lengthy and convoluted. Though equivocation muddied her testimony before the Consistory, she clearly incriminated herself as being outside of the Reformed faith. When asked "why she is not satisfied with the Communion celebrated in this city but goes elsewhere," she replied "that she goes where it seems good to her." Ultimately, the Consistory "remanded her as outside the faith and to appear day by day. And she did not want to renounce the Mass" (28). The Consistory committed to instruct her in the faith, hoping that she would reform. The next week, she appeared before the Consistory for a longer interview.

On Tuesday, April 4, 1542, after a lengthy interview in which Calvin himself "admonished her from the Word of God" (30) and she revealed her belief that "the Virgin Mary is her advocate," the Consistory suspended Pertennaz from partaking of Communion "until the Lord touches her heart." She responded by saying "that in the time when the Jews were expelled from this city [on December 23, 1490], that the time was coming when the Jews would be throughout the city" (31). These words are likely to have been an insult against the Consistory for declaring her as outside of the church. However, the Consistory's only directive to Pertennaz at this point

was that she attend to sermons each day and continue to appear before the Consistory for regular examination. Within just three months, the Consistory would again summon Pertennaz in order to address a strange development in her case.

On Thursday, July 13, 1542, "because of certain crosses and darts in her hemp-field" (92) that may have indicated some sort of attempted incantation, Pertennaz appeared before the Consistory after having been summoned twice (85, 89). Again, the Consistory's policy was to admonish her, direct her to attend daily sermons and catechism instruction, and send her before the magistrates "because of her rebelliousness" (92). Her next recorded appearance before the Consistory was on Thursday, March 20, 1543, in which she confessed that she continued sometimes to recite the rosary. She again insulted the Consistory when she "asked whether Monsieur Calvin is God" (211). Consequently, the elders suspended her from Communion, remanded her before the Council, and directed her to frequent the sermons.

In all of its dealings with Pertennaz, the Consistory demonstrated a pastoral concern for her instruction in faith, spiritual condition, and pursuit of godliness. Far from desiring to control her, the Consistory seems to have been sincere in its efforts to convert her. At the July 13, 1542 meeting, the scribe recorded the Consistory's judgment, "before she is remanded before the Council, that she be summoned once a week for remonstrances to see whether she can be converted to the Holy Gospel, and that someone be assigned to admonish her, and that she go to catechism, and that she come here Thursday" (92). Rather than casting Pertennaz out of the community, the Consistory persevered in its application of individual pastoral care, biblical admonition, and spiritual instruction.

#### *The Case of Bartholomée d'Orsières*

Like Pertennaz, Bartholomée d'Orsières was not an obscure person. She was of noble lineage, the daughter of a syndic, the wife (and widow) of another syndic, and the sister of an elder on the Consistory (Pierre d'Orsières). Nonetheless, she demonstrated eccentric behavior, such as expressing her intention to marry a 26-year-old man when she herself was 70 years old (62n262). The Consistory originally summoned her on Tuesday, May 2, 1542, and she first appeared before the elders on Thursday, May 4 "because of the sermons and the rosary, and that she always has a fever and cannot go to the sermons" (62). On Thursday, March 1, 1543, she again appeared

<sup>25</sup> Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, p. 6.

before the Consistory to answer for superstitions, rosary, and possession of images. She initially defended herself against accusations of possessing an image before she admitted that she had retrieved an image of St. John from a family chapel property. The Consistory remanded her to the Council for the possession of images, but also assigned two unspecified agents of the Consistory to visit her home to “investigate her idols” (199). Though the Council sentenced her to serve some time in prison for this offense, the Consistory proved its pastoral concern to restore her to full fellowship in the church later that same year.

On Tuesday, August 28, 1543, d’Orsières appeared before the Consistory to answer for accusations of “papist superstition.” She first denied any knowledge of why she was accused of superstition and brought before the Consistory. She subsequently demanded to know who it was that accused her. The record states, “She would like to know as much as she can about those who speak. Answers that she does not know to whom she has spoken about papistry” (265). The Consistory admonished her against superstition, and the elders directed her to reconcile with those who wished her harm. In response, she accused a goldsmith named Ypolite Revitz of robbing her, and confessed to wanting to see harm befall him. Far from dismissing her concerns or condemning her ill will, the Consistory proceeded to summon Revitz to appear before the Consistory later that week.

On Thursday, August 30, 1543, Revitz came before the Consistory and laid out the facts of the quarrel with Bartholomée d’Orsières, as he understood them. He indicated that the controversy “is at law before the lieutenant, and he asks the repair of his honor” (267). The following day, Syndic Checand and Calvin met privately with Bartholomée d’Orsières and Ypolite Revitz to mediate a process of reconciliation. The *Register* record of the reconciliation exemplifies the pastoral concern of the Consistory officers in the everyday lives of the Genevans under their oversight. The scribe recorded, “Many words having been heard, they were exhorted to pardon each other so as to receive the Holy Communion of Our Lord reverently and live in peace and charity with each other. To which both replied that they were content and they pardoned each other and shook hands in sign of peace from now on” (270). Rather than leaving reconciliation up to the quarreling parties to pursue on their own, the officers of the Consistory—represented here by Syndic Checand and Calvin—functioned pastorally to restore two adversaries to peace and concord as a condition for taking the Lord’s Supper. Throughout the Consistory’s dealings with Bartholomée d’Orsières,

the elders demonstrated a commitment to pastoral care and to d’Orsières’s communion with the saints.

#### *The Case of Jacques Symond*

The merchant Jacques Symond was a member of the Council of Sixty in 1533 and served as a city official (treasurer) in 1539–40 (67n286). He appeared before the Consistory on Thursday, May 11, 1542 to give an account of his knowledge of God’s Word and his attendance on sermons. He confessed to praying to the Virgin Mary, though he vocally agreed with the Reformed view that the Mass was “not good and abominable.” His justification for praying to Mary was, “it was proper to pray to God and the Virgin Mary, because he was in great danger from brigands when he called on Our Lord and the Virgin Mary.” The Consistory’s concern for knowing how best to admonish and instruct Symond is evidenced by the notation, “he did not understand that it was idolatry to invoke the Virgin Mary, and he was in this error a long time” (67). Subsequent meetings with members of the Symond family uncovered a lack of piety and biblical instruction in the home.

On Thursday, November 9, 1542, Symond’s wife Jana appeared before the Consistory “because of the sermons and other causes.” Her testimony indicates that sermon attendance was a low priority in the Symond household. She cited her husband’s frequent absence from the household shop on workdays as the reason for her paltry attendance of the sermons. In his absence, she had to tend to the shop. The Consistory admonished her “to frequent the sermons more often than she does” (145). The following week (Thursday, November 16, 1542), Jacques appeared before the Consistory to answer for why both his mother and his wife do not attend more frequently the preaching in their district. He answered “that his mother is ill and old and his wife goes when she can, because when he goes away on business she has to watch the house, and his mother has her heart always on God.” The Consistory issued “proper remonstrances and admonitions” (146), and it would be a year and a half before Symond would again appear before the elders, this time to address concerns of a more serious nature.

On Thursday, May 1, 1544, the Consistory summoned Jacques Symond for participating in the Mass on Easter (436). After some delay, Symond appeared before the elders on Thursday, May 27, and in a long and convoluted interrogation he betrayed his continuing attachment to Roman Catholic practices and superstitions by “his evil speech,” and specifically that he had allegedly said “that he had not done well to come to this religion (the Reformed faith), leaving the Mass, which is so good and

beautiful.” The Consistory observed that “he changes his opinion 24 times a day,” and “Monsieur Calvin says he will not give him Communion if he does not respond better about his religion.” Symond’s reproof from this confrontation was to “recognize his fault and answer, and that he be given the catechism and admonished not to be thus and asked where he received Communion at Easter and be instructed in his faith” (396).

The Consistory’s directions to Symond were common instructions to address the twin problems of religious ignorance and persistent superstition. On Thursday, May 4, 1542, the Consistory adopted as a general policy “that from now on those who are brought here because of Christianity all be made to go to catechism every day and that their names be given to the lords preachers and that they learn to pray to God and that they all be summoned for Thursday before Pentecost” (63). The constituent parts of this policy correspond to the particular Roman Catholic practices that frequently recurred in the *Registers*, such as the Pater Noster (27), Ave Maria, and praying the rosary (30–33). For Geneva’s religious leaders, the correction of such superstitions was an urgent matter for the sake of the spiritual and physical health of the townspeople as both church members and citizens.

Calvin and his colleagues related the persistence of superstition in the religious life of Genevans to the chastening hand of God. Accordingly, they addressed and combatted superstition wherever it could be found. In addition to the theological treatises cited above, Calvin’s letters from 1542 to 1544 make clear his sense of urgency for combatting superstition. In a polemical letter to Monsieur le Cure De Cernex written in 1543, Calvin identified the plague as an instrument of God’s admonition of the church, and particularly of the church’s infidelity and superstition in spiritual matters:

We likewise see that throughout the whole of Christendom there is great trouble, that there is scarce a single corner which is not in some way afflicted in that respect, from whence we must conclude that the wrath of God is greatly kindled against this poor world. And it is no wonder, for the causes are evident, and they are not far to seek, while one sees that such corruption everywhere prevails, and how vice of every kind is carried to the utmost pitch and reigns paramount. . . . There are among Christians two things which specially provoke the wrath of God; namely, that the one party of them dishonour him by their idolatry and superstitions, and instead of receiving his holy word to bring them back into the straight road, not only despise and mock and

flout, but have a hatred and horror of, and even persecute the truth. On the other hand, we who know by his Evangel how we ought to serve and honour him, do not make strict account in our discharge of duty, so that the word of life is as if it were idle and unproductive among us.<sup>26</sup>

From Calvin’s perspective articulated above, the Consistory had a duplex responsibility: to “make a strict account in our discharge of duty” and to extirpate all dishonoring of God by “idolatry and superstitions.”

Calvin specifically condemned superfluous and superstitious sacramental ceremonies; expressions of devotion, such as relying on candles, decorations, and relics; and prayers to any other person than God Himself. He testified, “Now, we have come to know, that the form of adoration which we have been in the habit of observing was false and perverted, and, moreover, that it was not in the spirit of truth, but in external ceremonies, and even in superstitious practices.”<sup>27</sup> In Calvin’s thinking, no greater insult could be made against God than to dishonor Him by idolatry and superstition. He wrote, “Seeing above all else he holds his own glory in highest commendation, he hates and chiefly holds in detestation the idolatries and superstitions by which he is dishonoured, and which more grievously offend than every other thing.”<sup>28</sup> Within the matrix of ecclesiastical government established in Calvin’s Geneva, it was the Consistory’s task to address and eradicate such superstition and idolatry.

The Consistory’s preferred method of addressing Roman Catholic superstitions was to correct them with instruction in sound biblical faith and practice. Few people who appeared before the Consistory seemed to be as attached to superstitious Roman Catholic practices as the three case studies examined above. Most of the people whom the Consistory examined seemed to be ignorant of true religion more than they were devoted to superstition. Based on the records transcribed in the *Registers*, correction in such cases was effective at curbing recidivism. However, the Consistory found the correction of superstition wrapped up in cultural traditions—such as those surrounding baptismal rites—much more difficult.

26. John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters: Letters, Part 1, 1528–1544*, ed. Jules Bonnet and Henry Beveridge, trans. David Constable, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 365.

27. Calvin, *Selected Works: Letters, Part I*, p. 368.

28. Calvin, *Selected Works: Letters, Part I*, p. 366.

CORRECTING TRADITION: THE BAPTISMAL NAMES  
CONTROVERSY

One of the most contentious issues that threatened the Reformation's progress in Geneva had to do with baptismal names. Naphy cites Genevans' widespread "resentment of the ministers' attempt to ban certain traditional given names"<sup>29</sup> as a major problem for the Consistory and more specifically, for the Company of Pastors. He goes on to summarize the problem as a persistent struggle between ministers and members of the church:

The ministers wanted to ban in Geneva certain given names which they considered to be vestiges of Catholic superstition. They hoped to eliminate names associated with the Godhead, such as Jesus, as well as names for feast-days, for example, Pentecost. They also suppressed names which they considered unbiblical such as Gaspard, Melchior and Balthazar, the names of the Wise Men. Finally, they wanted to prohibit names associated with local saints such as Claude and Martin.... The ministers hoped and demanded that only names approved by Scripture should be used. The immediate result, though, was that many Genevans faced public humiliation at the hands of their foreign ministers during baptisms. They were told, before the whole church, that their names were proscribed symbols of sinful Catholic superstitions.<sup>30</sup>

At this point, it is useful to recall Calvin's words in the 1541 French edition of the *Institutes* in which he wrote, "it is very good to get rid of some observances which in themselves are not indecent or bad. For in the past there was such blindness and ignorance, that the churches fixed on ceremonies with such a corrupt opinion and such a stubborn zeal, that one could scarcely purify them of horrible superstitions in which they were buried without taking away a great many ceremonies"<sup>31</sup> This was certainly the view of the ministers and the

Consistory regarding baptismal names. Far from viewing traditional family names as religiously neutral cultural artifacts, the ministers and lay elders judged them to be examples of Roman Catholic superstition carried over from medieval church practices.

In sixteenth century Geneva, the medieval practice of appointing godparents who would then grant children "Christian Names" at baptism had not ceased. On the contrary, it had acquired greater significance under reform. Elsie Anne McKee has helpfully described the earlier medieval practice:

Naming and presenting the baby for baptism was the prerogative of godparents. Normally parents did not participate in the baptism itself; the mother had usually not yet recovered from childbirth, and the father was occupied with the festivities of the baptismal party to which family and friends were invited.... Even if the father was present, he was not considered fit to present his baby, because it had been conceived in carnal sinfulness and the father, as a participant in that conception, was disqualified from the holy state necessary to offer the baby to God.<sup>32</sup>

McKee goes on to chart the effects of the Reformation on baptismal liturgy by 1537:

Perhaps the most important transformation in the experience of the sacrament was its location: religious and social as well as (to some extent) physical. The celebration of baptism was no longer a family affair; it belonged to the church as a whole. The participation of parents—at least the father—and the action of a minister were required.... For Reformed Christians, baptism must be celebrated in the gathered church and in Geneva it was essential that the liturgy be part of a regular preaching service, which the father and godfather must (and the whole baptismal party should) attend from beginning to end.<sup>33</sup>

During the Reformation, baptism developed from a private family affair with little connection to the preaching of the Word in the congregation of the saints to a public church occasion inextricably tied to biblical instruction. Upon his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin introduced a modified form of the baptismal rite which he developed in Strasbourg during his years of ministry there among the French Reformed refugees. This rite was published in the *French Evangelical Psalter of 1542*.<sup>34</sup> As in his pastoral ministry and in the work of the Consistory, Calvin's concern was to purge the

29. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, p. 144.

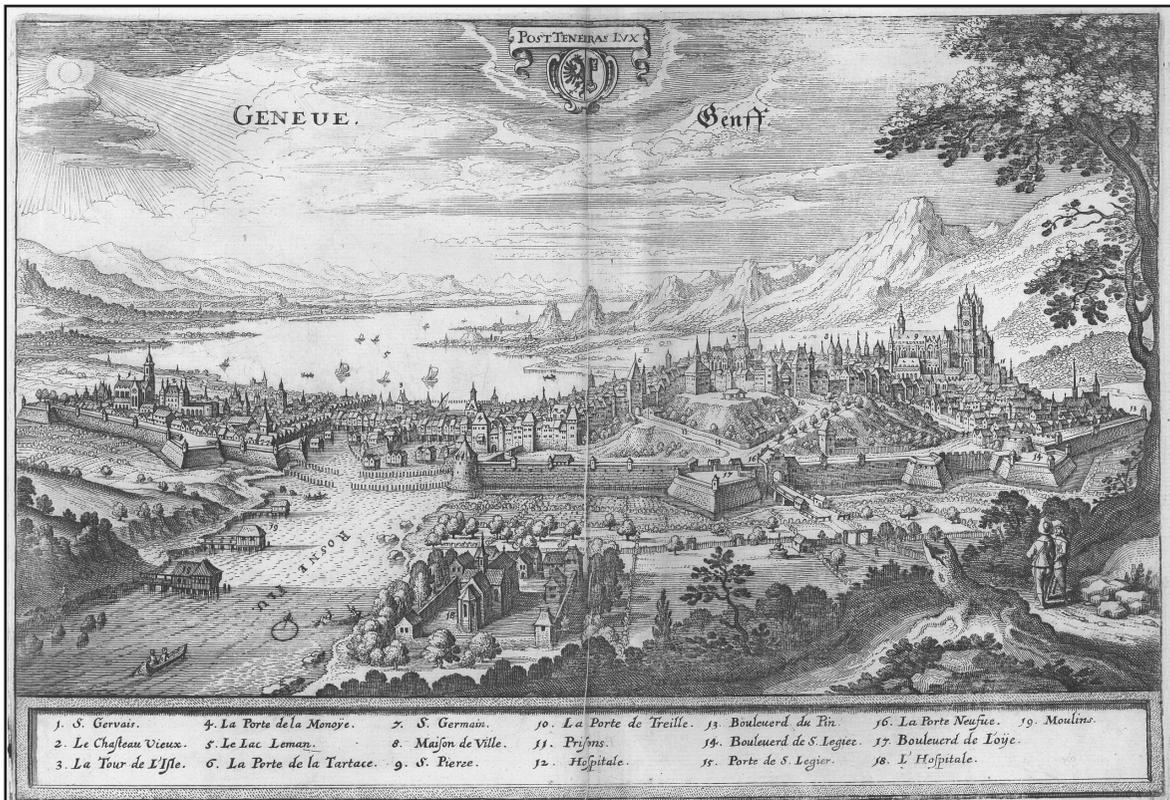
30. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, pp. 145f.

31. Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee, p. 655.

32. Elsie Anne McKee, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva* (Geneva, Switzerland: Librairie Droz, 2016), p. 392.

33. McKee, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva*, p. 422.

34. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 172.



Geneva, from *Topographia Helvetiae, Rhaetiae et Valesiae Das ist Beschreibung vnnnd eygentliche Abbildung der vornehmsten Städte und Plätze in der Hochlöblichen Eydgnosschafft, Graubündten, Wallis, vnd etlicher zugewandten Orthten* (Zum Truck verlegt von denen Merianischen Erben, 1654).

Genevans' faith and practice of all vestiges of Roman Catholic superstition. In addition to anointings, chrism, consecrations, and exorcisms,<sup>35</sup> the practice of godparents giving inappropriate baptismal names to newborns was eventually banned.

Though the controversy became a matter of public record only in 1546, the conflict is indicative of the difficulties faced by the Consistory in 1542–1544 in combating other examples of religious superstition. Naphy has recorded the public controversy concerning names as lasting from 1546 until the last outcry in 1552, and he has argued that it had largely to do with the native Genevans' resistance to their French pastors and the growing French refugee community which they in some sense represented.<sup>36</sup> Karen Spierling, however, has identified the controversy as having lasted until at least 1554, and she contends that the conflict was less an example of antagonism between French and Swiss populations than it was “a disagreement regarding the importance of tradition and the interpretation of religious ideas.”<sup>37</sup> In either case, the controversy raged at the nexus of culture and theology, which became a hotly contested battleground for the Reformation in Geneva.

Whether social dynamics or religious convictions predominated, it is evident that “when the reformers began to restrict the range of officially acceptable names, they clashed directly with a tradition that, the sources indicate, many people valued more highly than baptismal customs such as exorcisms or anointing.”<sup>38</sup> The resultant controversy spilled over into every institution of ecclesiastical discipline and civil order in Geneva for nearly a decade. The boldness—or brashness—of church leaders in directly confronting a cultural tradition that had religious significance riled up the wrath of the populace, resulting in riots, quarrels, and defamation against the ministers of the church. In response, ecclesiastical authorities suspended people from the Table and excommunicated those who

35. Old, *Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, p. 176.

36. See Chapter Five: “The pastors: ministers or masters?” in Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, pp. 144–66.

37. Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community, 1536–1564* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 144.

38. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva*, p. 141.

most violently opposed the ministers' program of religious reform.

Despite the many difficulties that attended the reform of baptismal rites and pastoral care in Reformation Geneva, Calvin and his colleagues achieved a decisive victory against superstition. Not only did the names of baptized children more frequently come from biblical sources rather than medieval saints by 1570,<sup>39</sup> but by 1555 the Consistory had won uncontested power to excommunicate those who were found to be outside of the Reformed faith.<sup>40</sup> Both developments in the consolidation of the Genevan Reformation tied directly into the Consistory's and its ministers' victory over those who opposed Calvin and his program of reform. Such antagonists used the controversy over baptismal names as an occasion to voice their opposition. By 1555, the Reformers defeated their detractors and ushered in an enduring Reformation of Genevan religion and culture.<sup>41</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In John 4, Jesus instructed the Samaritan woman, "an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers" (John 4:23).<sup>42</sup> As Calvin expressed in his treatise *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church* cited above, the first aim of the Reformation was the achievement of a form of worship that pleases God. In this desire, Calvin and his colleagues were following Christ's words to the Samaritan woman in John 4. The discipline which they exercised in and through the Genevan Consistory was for the extirpation of religious superstition in service to the reformation of worship in spirit and truth.

In His Word, God ensures that the church will always have human agents to care for the sanctity of religion and the edification of the church. God gives officers to His church for its edification and reformation after the pattern of His Word. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus that God Himself "gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some

as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:11–13). The task of pastors and elders, therefore, is to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to edify the church, and to pursue the unity of faith in the knowledge of Christ. The goal is nothing less than that "we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14). Calvin wrote in the 1541 edition of the *Institutes*, "The Lord has established in His church such a diversity of graces that there are always some people who are particularly endowed with His gifts for the edification of the church."<sup>43</sup> In the remainder of Ephesians 4, Paul linked immoral and antisocial behaviors to bad doctrine. Such behavior—even and especially culturally entrenched behavior—and doctrine together obstruct the way of the church's edification. This is as true in today's church and society as it was in sixteenth century Geneva.

The Consistory was faithful in its task to confront false doctrine as well as immorality. Understanding the importance and urgency of the Reformation's retrieval of biblical standards for faith and practice, the elders of the Consistory labored diligently to rid Geneva of superstition and idolatry. Though they encountered social and cultural obstacles, the men on the Consistory remained steadfast in opposition against religious error in faith and practice. They were committed to combating superstition and ignorance through the ordinary means of catechetical instruction, preaching, and teaching the people how to enjoy communion with God in the sacraments and prayer. The elders were not quick to remand alleged papists to the civil magistrates. Nor did they relish exercising their powers of suspension and excommunication. On the contrary, they expended every effort to reconcile offenders to the church and the Lord's Supper. Calvin's vision for church discipline as an instrument of pastoral care was realized to the extent that the Consistory was faithful in the prosecution of its task. ■

39. Naphy, *Ibid.*, p. 145.

40. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, p. 29.

41. For collections of focused treatments of Calvin's influence on Western culture, see David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett, eds., *Calvin and Culture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010) and W. Stanford Reid, ed., *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982). For academic treatments of

Calvin's influence on sixteenth-century Genevan culture, see Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*; Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*; and Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation*.

42. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the NASB95.

43. Calvin, *Institutes: 1541 French Edition*, *ibid.*, p. 639.