
Efforts To Control Hate In Calvin's Geneva

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In 1997, certain churches of the Reformation in the United States adopted a *Formula of Agreement* to permit more intercommunion among their members and more exchange of pulpits among their preachers. It was formally ratified by the governing bodies of four of these churches—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church of America, and the United Church of Christ. These four churches contain most Americans who claim descent from the two great branches of early Protestantism, the two inspired primarily by the teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

The text of this *Formula* was further explained and justified in a booklet titled *Common Calling*.¹ In general terms I approve of this agreement. I really do believe that the Reformed and the Lutherans should be nicer to each other. I hope you will forgive me, however, for observing that in the historical parts of these documents I found a significant omission. I found no mention of what I believe to be an essential difference between the Reformed and Lutherans. I found no mention anywhere of the Reformed emphasis on *discipline*.

Now why do I think *discipline* is so important? I think that because of the very definition of the church adopted by our Protestant ancestors at the time of the

¹ Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds., *A Common Calling: the witness of our Reformation churches in America today*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993.

Reformation. When it came to establishing the *notae* or marks by which the true church could be distinguished from among all the competing bodies each claiming to be the only true church, representatives of these two traditions adopted significantly different formulae. Lutherans said, most notably in article seven of the Augsburg Confession, the most fundamental summary of their belief, that there are only *two* marks of the true church: correct preaching of the Gospel and proper administration of the sacraments. In any group of any kind in which one can find these two characteristics one finds a true church. In this they were reacting against Catholic teaching that a true church must be universal, must have an uninterrupted history, must be led by an unbroken line of direct descendants of the apostles, must be the custodian of miracles, and so on and so on.

The Reformed, on the other hand, felt that the Lutherans had gone too far in basing everything on faith alone. They almost always added a *third* mark to the list of marks of the true church, the mark of *discipline*. They felt that it was not enough to accept true Christian belief. It was also essential to behave in a truly Christian way. One finds this third mark in most of the Reformed confessions. The Scotch Confession of 1560, for example, in its 18th article says that the marks by which one can distinguish a true church are, (1) "the trew preaching of the Worde of God"; (2) "the right administration of the Sacraments of Christ Jesus"; (3) "Ecclesiastical Discipline uprightlie ministred, as Goddis Worde prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and vertew nurished."² One finds this emphasis on discipline, furthermore, not only in the teaching but also in the activities of most early Reformed churches.

Yet in the *Formula of Agreement* which both Reformed and Lutheran governing bodies adopted in 1997, one finds in its preface a formulation of this key doctrine that is thoroughly Lutheran. The four churches signatory to the formula agreed, and here I quote, to "recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the word of God." And there it ends. There is no mention of discipline. This I find regrettable. While I would have hoped that this step toward union would help those of us of Reformed traditions to appreciate more fully the Lutheran emphasis on Scriptural study and theology, I would also hope that this step would help Lutherans to appreciate more fully the

² There are a number of these confessions. One convenient collection is by Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966, reprint of 1877 ed.), pp. 11-12, for the relevant clause of the Augsburg Confession, pp. 461-462 for the text in the Scotch Confession. For further discussion of the sixteenth-century definition of the true church see Robert M. Kingdon, "The Church: Ideology or Institution," *Church History*, vol. 50, pp. 81-97, esp. 84-88, and the works there cited.

Reformed emphasis on discipline. It provides a theological foundation of fundamental importance for the concern with ethics, with the ways human beings treat one another, that has been such an important part of the Reformed tradition. More and more Lutherans of my acquaintance have become more and more involved in social action and in the resolution of social problems. They bitterly regret the disasters into which neglect of this facet of Christianity led their brethren in Germany during the period of Nazi rule. Some attention to our tradition of discipline would help these Lutherans justify more fully their praiseworthy modern turn toward social action.

Now what does all this have to do with John Calvin? I would readily admit that Calvin does not give significant attention to discipline in his own theology, particularly in his *Institutes*. When he comes to describing marks of the true church there, he trots out a traditional Lutheran formula, as in IV.1.9, when he says, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." Only in some of his more obscure writings does he add a third mark of the true church.³ However when we turn from studying Calvin as a theologian to Calvin as a pastor, we find a radically different story. This is a point I would like to emphasize. Many of us who study Calvin study him only as a theologian. We should never forget that he was also a pastor, and that the record of his work as a pastor has much to teach us.

When we do examine Calvin's work as a pastor there is overwhelming evidence that he thought the establishment of Christian discipline was absolutely essential and that he was prepared to go to great lengths, deploying fully his impressive powers and energy, to see to its maintenance. The concrete evidence of that we find in his establishment and participation in a Genevan institution called the Consistory. It is upon that institution that I have concentrated my own historical research over the past ten years, along with the help of a team of graduate students and others in several different countries. I have given a number of progress reports on this research over the last several years in a variety of places. This is yet another.

The Consistory was at the very center of John Calvin's vision of what the true Church of Christ he was trying to create in Geneva should be. He insisted on its creation in the negotiations that led to his definitive appointment as leader of the

³ See the works cited and further bibliography in my preface to *Registres du Consistoire de Genève du temps de Calvin*, vol. 1 (1542-1544), published by Thomas A. Lambert and Isabella M. Watt, under the supervision of Robert M. Kingdon and with the assistance of Jeffrey R. Watt, as no. 305 in the *Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1996), p. vii and n. 1. Further citations to the registers will be to *RConsistoire* with volume and page numbers from the manuscript originals

Reformed Church in Geneva in 1541. He used his skills as a trained lawyer to draft personally the city's ecclesiastical ordinances that gave it legal shape. He participated actively in its weekly meetings. He threatened to resign and leave the city if its powers were limited. We have, furthermore, an exceptionally detailed record of the activities of the Consistory during Calvin's ministry, preserved in twenty-one volumes of manuscript registers recording the minutes of its weekly meetings, now kept in the Geneva State Archives. They have never been sufficiently used, however, because they are in such dreadful handwritings that most scholars simply cannot read them. Most scholarly work on the Consistory to date has been based on some rough sampling, most commonly from a set of samples covering about 5% of the total cases, compiled by a man named Cramer in the nineteenth century. To remedy this situation my associates and I have taught ourselves enough French paleography, the science of reading early manuscripts, to decipher these texts. And we have prepared a complete transcription into readable French of these registers, now on deposit in several libraries in several countries. We are now preparing a critical edition of these texts, with all the annotation necessary for scholars to understand them. A first volume of that edition appeared in 1996, published by the Librairie Droz of Geneva. A second volume of that edition should be ready for the press in 1999. We have raw material for eight more volumes of a similar size, compressing the content of twenty-one manuscript volumes into a total of ten printed volumes. It is my hope that we may also some day be able to translate these volumes into English.

Now what do these Registers reveal about John Calvin and the earliest Calvinists? A number of us have already used these materials in various ways. I have myself published a book titled *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Harvard University Press, 1995), to indicate, through some select examples, what the Consistory tried to do to control morals and regulate marriage. Other scholars have expanded that work. For example, John Witte, Jr., of the Emory University Law School, has used some of these materials in his chapter on "Marriage as Covenant in the Calvinist Tradition," which is a part of his very recent book, *From Sacrament to Covenant: marriage, religion, and law in the Western Tradition* (Westminster, 1997).⁴

For another study, commissioned by the Lilly Foundation as a part of an overview of formation in faith over the centuries, I have prepared an article on what

⁴ See also, for an updated and more recent version of that chapter, John Witte, Jr., "Between Sacrament and Contract: marriage as covenant in John Calvin's Geneva." *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 33 (1998), 9-75

the Consistory registers reveal about Christian education as practiced among early Calvinists. I have pointed out the importance Calvin and his associates assigned to catechesis conducted by professional ministers, as a way of teaching the basics of Christian faith to the entire population. I have pointed out that Calvinists insisted that basic religious instruction should not be left to families alone, particularly to illiterate mothers, but was a fundamental responsibility of the church and of its professional leaders. This essay is to be published in the near future in a volume edited by John Van Engen and provisionally titled *Forming People in Faith*.

From another perspective, a prize graduate student of mine, Thomas A. Lambert, lead editor of the first volume of the Consistory Registers, in 1998 completed a fascinating Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, titled "Preaching, Praying, and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva," on what the Consistory did to regulate religious behavior. He has examined the ways in which it tried to persuade the common people of Geneva to make a really radical change in their religious habits. They were expected to abandon as their most important single religious service the traditional Catholic mass, a highly ritualized dramatic celebration of the eucharist. Instead they were expected to embrace a radically new form of religious service built around a sermon. Instead of absorbing the essence of religion through sight, by watching a mass, they were expected to absorb that essence through hearing, by listening to a sermon. Lambert's work reflects a fundamental fact we often forget: Calvin and his earliest followers were not born as Presbyterians; they were born as Roman Catholics. The people of Geneva did not know what they had voted for when they voted to throw out their Catholic bishop and all his priests in 1536, and had then invited to take their place a group of immigrant French preachers led by a young lawyer named John Calvin who had not even studied theology formally. Most Genevans were quite willing to accept the changes Calvin proposed, but they did not understand them. These changes had to be patiently explained and justified to them. The Consistory played an essential role in these processes of explanation and persuasion.

Now I have started a new study using these materials. It is a product of a semester-long seminar in which I participated in 1998 at the Institute for Advanced Study of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The subject of this seminar was "the historicity of emotions," primarily in early modern Europe. It was organized by two Israeli scholars, one of whom, Michael Heyd, I have known since his days of graduate study in history at what used to be a mighty bastion of Presbyterianism, Princeton University. He wrote a superb Ph.D. dissertation on the development of religious and philosophical thought in Geneva during the Enlightenment, as Calvinism was fading.

He has since become a great authority on the religious emotion of “enthusiasm” throughout Europe,⁵ and is currently working on the emotion of guilt, again during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries throughout Europe. He and his colleagues invited me to Israel to explore and report on what the Consistory Registers on which I have been working reveal of emotions during an earlier period, the period of the Reformation. As a group we reflected on whether human emotions remain stable at all times, thus making it possible for the discipline of psychology to be a true science, or whether emotions change over time, requiring us always to set any consideration of emotions into a historical context.

The focus of my research for this seminar was on the emotion of “hate.” I think that is a particularly appropriate emotion to consider in modern Israel. One of my assistants, Wallace McDonald, combed through our Consistory transcripts in advance to record every instance in which the word “hate” appears. I explored each of these examples more closely and tried to decide what they mean. Here are some indications of the directions in which this evidence seems to point.

It seems clear that the Consistory was greatly worried about hate because it felt that hate prevented the practice of two really essential religious rituals, rituals that were required of all those who hope to be truly Christian, that were necessary to protect from divine punishment the survival of a community that regarded itself as Christian. One of these rituals was prayer. The other was communion.

Hate prevented prayer because of the very content of the most fundamental of all prayers, the Lord’s Prayer. It requires us to say, remember, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Everyone in sixteenth-century Geneva was expected to memorize this prayer in the native language, a variety of French, not in the Latin in which their ancestors had traditionally repeated it. That memorization was hammered home in the catechetical sessions to which I have already alluded and reinforced by repetition in all church services. There is strong evidence that people of sixteenth-century Geneva really did memorize this prayer and really did understand its meaning, perhaps understood it better than most modern Americans. This is particularly striking when one considers the fact that this was a population that in majority was illiterate, of people who could not read or write, but had been taught from childhood how to repeat from memory this prayer that is central to all Christian worship. Many of these people felt that they could not in good conscience repeat this

⁵ Michael Heyd, *‘Be Sober and Reasonable’: the critique of enthusiasm in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

prayer unless they really meant it. They may have feared that Almighty God would punish them if they repeated a prayer that contained words to which they could not commit themselves with real sincerity. In one striking example, a woman called before the Consistory and asked to say her prayers, began the Lord's Prayer but stopped just as she reached the phrase about debts and debtors. Instead she substituted a phrase to the effect that she hoped God could forgive her even though she could not bring herself to forgive others. She explained that she simply could not forgive the man who had been responsible for killing her brother six or seven years earlier, and apparently had not been punished in a way she thought appropriate. Therefore she could not in good conscience repeat the entire Lord's Prayer.⁶

Hate also prevented reception of communion. The people of Geneva really believed communion was designed to bring people all together, to weld them into a single community of love.⁷ And if they did not feel capable of loving their neighbors, they felt they should not receive communion. They may have even felt it would be dangerous to receive communion in these circumstances, that God might punish an unrepentant hater who dared to join in the sacrament. This is the circumstance that most commonly leads to use of the word "hate" in the Consistory registers. Shortly after each of the quarterly communion services people who had abstained from receiving the sacrament were summoned to explain why they had abstained. A common explanation was "because I have hate in my heart." The Consistory would then ask whom do you hate and why. Some refused to name the objects of their hate, insisting that this was a private matter that should not be shared with others. The Consistory did not like to receive that answer, and often pressed them for a fuller explanation. When, for example, the Captain of the Republic, Ami Perrin, in 1546 refused to identify the people he hated, he was pressed to be more forthcoming and threatened with referral to the city government if he did not name names.⁸ More often the person summoned would name someone he or she hated. Often it would be a member of his or her family: a spouse, a sibling, a child, a parent. Sometimes it would be a household servant or master. Sometimes it would be a neighbor. Sometimes it would be a business associate. Sometimes it would be a government official.

⁶ See Thomas A. Lambert, "Preaching, Praying, and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva," University of Wisconsin-Madison Ph.D. dissertation, 1997, p. 454, based on *RConsistoire*, vol. 2, fol. 72v, 5 August, 1546.

⁷ Christian Grosse of the University of Geneva is preparing a doctoral dissertation on the history of communion in Geneva. I am indebted to him for sending me a copy of a thoughtful pre-doctoral memoir on communion and its role in sixteenth century Genevan life.

⁸ *RConsistoire*, vol. 2, fol. 56v, 13 May, 1546.

Occasionally it would be a minister, a few times even Calvin himself. One particularly recalcitrant woman felt really persecuted and put upon by being summoned before the Consistory and exploded by saying that she felt Calvin had come to Geneva to provoke debate and war. She reproached him for not living the life he preached, and ended up by saying she had never sensed love him in, but always hate. That response enraged the entire Consistory, led to her instant excommunication, and provoked a referral to the city government for fuller punishment.⁹

Few cases were this extreme. In general the Consistory after receiving a report of hate would then try to reconcile the people who said they hated each other, to persuade them to abandon hate, to agree that would at least treat each other as "*hommes de bien*," people of reputation and probity. In these proceedings the Consistory would act not like the court it is commonly regarded as but as a counseling service, albeit a compulsory counseling service. Most often the reconciliation would be achieved within a Consistory session. Two parties who admitted to hating each other would be forced to appear together at a Consistory meeting, to confront each other, and to hear an "admonition" or "remonstrance," a kind of lecture on the necessity for forgiveness illustrated from appropriate Biblical texts, often administered by Calvin himself. If it was clear to the Consistory that one of the parties was primarily responsible for the mutual hate, he or she would be expected to apologize, often kneeling before the party he had offended. Thus a disobedient son had to kneel before his father, a disobedient nephew had to kneel before his uncle, a disobedient wife had to kneel before her husband. If it was clear to the Consistory that both parties were more or less equally responsible for the mutual hate, they were expected to forgive each other verbally, to promise to treat each other more humanely in the future, and to seal their promise with a gesture—shaking hands, touching each other, even embracing. This would be a semi-private ritual, since Consistory sessions were not open to the general public. It would be witnessed only by the elders and pastors who made up the Consistory and by the parties summoned.

In select cases, when the poisoned relations between two parties had become public knowledge, the parties who hated each other were required to become reconciled in more public surroundings. Instead of becoming reconciled at a Consistory session, they might be expected to announce their reconciliation in church before or after a regularly scheduled service, in front of the entire congregation of the parish in which they lived. The Consistory registers describe several ceremonies of

⁹ *RConsistoire* , vol. 4, fol. 11-11v, 22 March, 1548.

this sort. They would typically be held in a parish church only a few days after the Consistory session in which this course of action was decided upon. They would usually be scheduled shortly before the next quarterly service of communion. They would be presided over by two men: one was the syndic or magistrate who was the presiding officer of the Consistory, one of the four magistrates who held supreme power in Geneva for the current year; the other was a minister, most commonly John Calvin himself. In 1543, for example, such a ceremony was held in the parish church of the Madeleine, serving a neighborhood of merchants in downtown Geneva. It was presided over by Antoine Chicand, that year's syndic assigned to chair the Consistory, and John Calvin. A noble woman named Bartholomie Achard had had a violent quarrel with a man named Hippolite Revit who had worked as servant or agent for her former husband. Each explained his complaints to the entire congregation. Then they agreed to forgive each other, "in order to receive the holy communion of Our Lord, and to live in peace and charity with each other." Each promised not to insult the other and they touched each other as a sign of peace. Revit asked for a written copy of the agreement.¹⁰

Did this pressure toward reconciliation work? In some cases that could be doubted. On one occasion, I discover that the Consistory secretary himself noted down that he had trouble believing that two people who had just been forced to reconcile were really sincere; he clearly doubted that the agreement would stick. And we can find cases of patent failure. One occurred within John Calvin's own family. His sister-in-law, Anne le Fert, was accused of adultery by her husband Antoine Calvin, vehemently seconded by his illustrious brother John. She had been imprudent enough to let a young male admirer into her bedroom in the middle of the night, but they both insisted nothing had happened. After an extended investigation, Anne and Antoine were reconciled at a Consistory session, with Anne falling to her knees and begging her husband's forgiveness for her imprudence and her husband fully forgiving her. Several years later, however, this reconciliation ended abruptly. Anne was again accused of adultery, this time with a servant. She vehemently denied the charge but was nevertheless arrested, tortured, found guilty, and summarily banished from the city. Antoine was granted a divorce and permitted to remarry. Anne also remarried,

¹⁰ *RConsistoire*, vol. 1, fol. 129 (p. 255 in printed version), 31 August, 1543. For more on these ceremonies of reconciliation, see Robert M. Kingdon, "A New View of Calvin in the Light of the Registers of the Geneva Consistory," in Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, eds., *Calvinus Sinceriosis Religionis Vindex*, vol. 46, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, (Kirksville, MO, Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), pp. 21-33, esp. pp. 30-33.

but in another city.¹¹ This is one of the first examples in European history of a full divorce of the modern type, after which both parties remarry.

In most cases, however, it is my impression that reconciliation worked, that people really did resolve their differences and proceeded with more peaceful lives. The rate of recidivism in cases heard by the Consistory is really remarkably low. Only a few people were called back again and again to Consistory sessions. Most people either mended their ways or left the city. The services of the Consistory were thus part of a system for preserving public peace and order that worked. There were far fewer repeat offenders than one would find in almost any American city today.

If this impression of mine turns out to be true, it would mean that there is something in the history of the Consistory that modern Christians ought to consider seriously. The care and concern for the behavior of others that was its central preoccupation can improve the tone of an entire society. Nobody in sixteenth-century Geneva could ever complain of *anomie*, of the terrible isolation and loneliness that is such a central part of the experience of so many in modern society, especially in our cities. Genevans with justice might complain of nosiness, of a lack of privacy, of neighborly meddling. But they could not deny that their neighbors genuinely cared for each of them, were genuinely concerned about their behavior.

¹¹ See Robert M. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), ch. 3, pp. 71-97, for a fuller account of this case.