class, rulings, and the language of the period, tools that aid reading and research of the registers. Students and professional historians alike will benefit from this valuable primary source that offers fascinating windows into many facets of early modern Geneva.


Reviewed by: Charles J. Deur
Arlington, TX

Although John Calvin remains as enigmatic a figure today as he was in his lifetime, there seems to be no end to historians' efforts to refine and redefine his image. The public aspects of Calvin's life were already well known long before the half-millennial celebration of his birth. Modern characterizations often consider him intolerant, joyless, merciless, uncompromising, friendless, an extinguisher of happiness, and a persecutor of heretics.

Calvin had a self-image problem. The evidence for this in Calvin's writings might be written off as an overenthusiastic use of the editorial "we" or, less charitably, by an identification of his opponents as being enemies of Christ, coupled with bad press and innuendo. Understanding Calvin has either been helped or hurt by the overwhelming amount of primary source materials: fifty-nine volumes of his writings in the Calvini Opera and fifteen years of Genevan Register documentation. Many historians focus on relatively small bits of his work: Calvin as premier scholar of the Church fathers, man of durable friendships, husband (best handled in fiction), opponent of soul sleep, political operative, social humanist, promoter of participatory democracy, and prophet. In The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva, Elsie McKee repositions the puzzle pieces and defines Calvin's work in terms of what he considered his real job: being a true pastor.

In her well-constructed introduction, McKee notes the importance of the definition of "the Church" to Calvin's concept of ministry. Luther's "marks of the true church" were the faithful preaching of the Word and right administration of the sacraments. As Calvin increasingly spent more time expanding his concept of the Invisible Church and the visible church on earth, he noted the inadequacy of Luther's two marks. The visible church must reflect the Invisible Church. If the visible church influences one's understanding of God, Christians must consider how their actions affect the perception of that church by those outside that fellowship. Calvin determined the third mark as the correct application of discipline. While the marks of the Invisible Church are God ordained, the visible church remains largely a human institution. Freedom allows for interpretation and generates adiaphora that can be misinterpreted as divine requirements. The key to minimizing the damage sinful natures can produce is in those visible activities that may be carried out by the church. These include prayer and discipline, and both should be pleasing to God. Calvin believed church order must be based on the true marks and implemented by the organizational structure presented in scripture. The heart of Calvin's ministry is found in Geneva from 1541 to 1564. McKee's analysis follows Calvin's reforms in religious structure, worship, preaching, and pastoral care.

Calvin took his position very seriously. He preached two thousand sermons, often on a daily basis. He reorganized leadership (lay and clergy), wrote job descriptions, and promoted hands-on ministry (quarterly house visitations with members). He developed liturgies, penned instructional texts, corresponded with many Reformation leaders, and
organized learning experiences from elementary education through the Academy. Calvin felt music could facilitate familiarity with scripture. He encouraged Louis Bourgeois to compose the Genevan Psalter and integrated music into worship. For those not musically inclined, he promoted the poet Marot’s versification of Psalms. He translated scripture into French (Bible de Genève). He welcomed immigrants and encouraged social benevolence. From setting worship times to instructing when to sound the cathedral bells, Calvin was researching, organizing, and implementing reforms that defined protestant worship. McKee presents the “pews and pulpits” as the “nuts and bolts” of the structures Calvin designed for organizing his/God’s work. McKee is no sycophant; Calvin’s flaws are presented, including those that contributed to the end of the first Genevan ministry.

Calvin approached the pastorate with vigor. The breadth of his activities shows just how revolutionary he was as a reformer. Calvin believed the church’s mandate would only be realized by the church’s being a living, recognizable force manifested in the lives of Christians in their communities. Examples of this abound in McKee’s second and third sections: Sabbatarianism, active worship attendance (actually mandatory), participatory worship with a liturgy based upon text, that text being in the vernacular, following the lectio continua, not medieval feast days derived from the lives of bogus saints. Participation in communion required instruction, inspection, and preparation. Occasionally this could be discomfiting. For over a decade Calvin advocated celebrating the Lord’s Supper weekly, but he got quarterly. McKee summarizes the rancorous discord over Feast Days, true holy days as contrasted with a holiday with its closure of businesses. Every area of worship or service, including a nearly complete schedule of sermons, is well covered.

A provocative part of McKee’s book relates to how Calvin’s preaching promoted a habit of godliness that encouraged Christian growth. Implicit in Calvin’s definition of the marks of the true Church is preaching and sacramental practices as communal activities. Although public prayer was part of the organized activities of the church, medieval church practices had largely reassigned private prayer to the monastic orders. In the High Middle Ages this resulted in prayer becoming largely recitations and chanting, characterized as “mumblings and howling.” For Calvin, a prayerful life is divided into personal prayer, prayer services, model prayers, catechetical instruction, and memorization of texts relating to prayer. Establishing rhythm in one’s prayer life creates a sense of “melody,” which becomes a standard for personal piety. Prayer life is the constant connection of the individual’s prayers to the physical care for the sick, pastoral care for the troubled, burial practices to encourage survivors, and perpetual ministries to the suffering. Calvin considered pastoring the marriage of praying and caring. McKee notes that Calvin, in his sermons on the death of Moses, relies on the rhythms of observances to undergird all parts of pastoral care. The examples, including a touching summary of the death of Calvin’s wife Idelette, are well documented. The Genevan pastoral ministry was intentional and self-perpetuating.

This is a massive encyclopedic work that should be read carefully in its entirety. It is well written and it transitions from topic to topic in an orderly and easily comprehensible fashion. McKee’s translations often are lyrical. The indexing more easily locates nouns than concepts or key phrases. Further discussion on dissent in Calvin’s Geneva would enhance this book as the Consistory’s intrusive micromanagement and inconsistencies remain blemishes on Calvin’s reputation. This book deserves to be read by anyone interested in John Calvin’s career.