Theology and History

The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin’s Geneva
Elsie Anne McKee
Geneva: Droz, 2016 (975 pages) $150.00 hardcover

In this major new publication, Elsie Anne McKee presents the patterns of pastoral ministry and worship in Geneva between about 1536 and 1564. As the Archibald Alexander Professor of Reformation Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, McKee is already well-known for her fine work on Calvin and deacons (1984), Calvin and elders (1988), and Calvin on pastoral piety (2001), among other things. The present work was fifteen or sixteen years in the making (10); indeed, one can find it mentioned as being in preparation in footnotes of other works by McKee as far back as 2003 (e.g., Lukas Vischer, ed., Christian Worship [Eerdmans], 18n9). We have at hand, then, a tome presenting the research and conclusions of a scholar at the height of her career. All persons with an interest in the structures and patterns of the church in Geneva in Calvin’s time will find their curiosity richly rewarded. The description of the book on the publisher’s website is hard to improve on for its accuracy and succinctness:

This book examines the where, when, and what of daily, weekly, and annual corporate worship in Geneva, revealing in rich detail the liturgical rhythm shaped by Calvin’s theology. It includes sermons, sacraments, marriage, household devotions, ministry to the sick and dying. Shedding new light on Calvin’s pulpit, it uncovers when, where, what he preached, and dates sermons. It clarifies the development of Psalm singing, the Sunday afternoon liturgy; it explains how the liturgical year was transformed and the special Calvinist day of prayer and sense of providential time developed. Extensive research in baptismal and marriage records shows how practice was reshaped because (like the Lord’s Supper) these must be celebrated in a preaching service. Daily sermons in every pulpit required both educated ministers and significant planning. The program of ministerial rotation Calvin created adds dimensions to his doctrine of the church and demonstrates afresh his organizational skills.

Besides the lucid synthetic arguments presented in seven chapters and 660 pages, McKee also transmits two major appendices because of their importance to her research—registers of all the baptisms and
marriages for select years in Geneva between 1550 and 1564, a table of all of Calvin’s sermons—and a third, shorter appendix containing some prayer texts. The appendices encompass approximately 270 pages. Indices of proper names and biblical texts appear at the close.

McKee’s patience and thoroughness is evident throughout. Although I would characterize her work primarily as social history, she correctly begins with a theology of the church more broadly, particularly Calvin’s understanding of the church and the marks of the church (13–38). I found this review clear and helpful, with just two concerns. First, McKee uses the term *accommodated* a number of times without explanation—she appears to mean that the church regulates its membership not according to God’s perfect knowledge of who is elect but by our accommodated knowledge, that is, by what we observe (e.g., 27, 29, 32; cf. 179). Second, assertions about Calvin’s uniqueness are notoriously hard to defend once one takes into account the prior writings of Oecolampadius, Zwingli, Bullinger, Bucer, Farel, and Viret—not to speak of Erasmus, various other humanists, and the medieval schoolmen. Nevertheless, without reference to any of Calvin’s contemporaries, McKee states that “the doctrine of the church is arguably Calvin’s most creative contribution to historical theology” (17). In particular, she singles out Calvin’s distinction between the marks of the church and the marks of Christians as a “unique contribution” (19) and his view that church discipline should be done for the glory of God as a “distinctive contribution” (34). Certainly, Calvin’s clear and accessible teachings grapple well with these topics, and we should appreciate his singular contributions. But—to notice just one example close at hand—the latter assertion overlooks a work whose first edition is seven years prior to the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*, namely, Farel’s *Summaire*, chapter 32, wherein he speaks about excommunication being practiced for “the honour of God.” Indeed, God’s honor and glory had long been a Farellian theme before Calvin wrote anything.

After this introduction, the book divides into five parts, each part containing several chapters: first, regarding the preachers, times, and places of worship in Geneva; second, liturgies of the worship services, including the sacraments; third, the preaching in Geneva, especially Calvin’s; fourth, private worship, pastoral care; and, finally, a “month in the life of Calvin the Pastor of Geneva.”

The valuable history in part 1 begins with the changes effected when Protestants came into control of the church bells—the frequency of
ringing the bells greatly diminished, and, in fact, many were melted to make cannons (51). Here McKee’s careful interaction with several key secondary works begins, and these ought to be noted for the frequency with which they are mentioned in the notes and for McKee’s endorsement of, and sometimes nuancing of, their conclusions: Tom Lambert’s fine dissertation, “Preaching, Praying and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva” (1998, never published); Christian Grosse’s work, Les rituels de la Cène (2008); Max Engammare’s On Time, Punctuality, and Discipline in Early Modern Calvinism (2010, translated from the French of 2004); and Scott Manetsch’s recent monograph, Calvin’s Company of Pastors (2012). We learn exactly when the church buildings of St. Pierre, St. Gervais, La Madeleine, and others were in use, how many services were held in each, what times they were held, who regularly preached there, and who was expected to attend. Daily preaching was in place already in 1534 (61) and in 1541 multiple Sunday services and two on every weekday were already the norm (67). McKee clarifies the terminology in the archival records used to designate the various customary service times (73–75). Her particular contribution grows out of her painstaking study of the baptism and marriage records (see the appendices), inasmuch as these record the time or name and date of the service in which they occurred and the pastor who baptized, allowing her to reconstruct how many services were held, as well as when and where (96). The baptizing pastor was not necessarily the one who had just preached. A chart summarizing all of these findings can be found on pages 104–5. Interestingly, McKee concludes, contrary to Lambert’s earlier study, that the catechism service was absolutely required every Sunday in every parish (it occurred at noon), even if no other service was held (101). New pastors often cut their teeth on catechism preaching.

We learn other interesting things, such as that, at first, Farel, Froment, and others were viewed legally as mendicant preachers, not parish priests (110–11). Later, when the preachers held office per the Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques, they did not have parish divisions such as were in place in the late medieval era and that had led to not a few fights among clergymen. Instead they were ministers of the whole city, able to rotate from one church building to another (117). In principle, each of the three main church buildings had a pair of pastors, each of whom took the weekday services one week at a time, in rotation (140). While the city council wanted more services, the Company of Pastors wanted more pastors (129). In sum, twenty-five
sermons/services took place each week in Geneva (134). Every year Calvin preached 260 sermons and the other preachers 208 sermons each (135). One can imagine a student of theology quickly growing in biblical knowledge by attending as many sermons (in French) as possible, not to mention the weekday afternoon lectures in Latin, and the *congrégation* study group of Friday mornings.

Part 2 notices how the medieval annual rhythm of the church year morphed into a new rhythm based on the celebration of the Lord’s Supper four times per year, and the rhythm of a weekly cycle in which Sunday was central. McKee also studies the “distinctly Calvinist” weekly Wednesday Day of Prayer in some detail (but see 317–18 where she admits that the Reformed owe this creation first to Bucer, while Calvin brought it to flower). Marriages and baptisms were never performed apart from the preaching; marriages preceded the preaching service and baptisms followed it. Couples, attendants, parents, and others who came for these services were required to be present for the preaching as well. McKee reconstructs the liturgy of the various worship services convincingly and explains the early practice of “home visits” (265). In this part of the book, McKee assumes that Calvin authored the 1537 *Articles* (e.g., 192, 204, 225, 255), but Frans van Stam has demonstrated in several publications in recent years that these were principally the work of Farel. Similarly, McKee mentions that music was incorporated into the worship in 1541 (205). However, Farel’s report of the *Dispute de Rive* in 1535 mentioned teaching the children to sing so that the rest of the church could learn from them. One work that I wish McKee had brought into the discussion about Farel, Corauld, and Calvin being kicked out of Geneva in 1538 and the discussion of the relationship of the consistory to the city council more generally, is Herman Speelman’s *Calvin and the Independence of the Church* (English trans., 2014).

Part 3 became somewhat tedious for this reviewer. It is interesting, I suppose, to learn that on average Calvin treated about seven verses per sermon (482). Many readers will also appreciate McKee’s clarification that Calvin “always interrupted his lectio continua series for the Christmas-Nativity, Easter, and Pentecost Lord’s Supper services,” and often preached several “Passion week” sermons (472–76). Anyone interested in how Calvin’s sermons came to be recorded and published—in spite of his initial unwillingness—will find much interesting material in this section.
Finally, part 4 presents McKee’s research on how worship and pastoral care functioned in the daily life of the pastors and the Genevan populace. We find out how Genevan fathers were encouraged to lead their families in prayer. We stand with Calvin at the bedsides of sick and dying Genevans, in prayer and song. Her discussion about private communion, acknowledged to be heavily dependent on the scholarship of Wim Janse, concludes that in a nonpolemical context Calvin did advocate for this. Burial, as we know, was a simple and speedy affair. In some places, I wish the discussion had been set in a wider framework instead of just focusing on what Calvin advocated or practiced. Apart from such context, descriptions of his efforts run the risk of appearing to be unique or new when perhaps they are not (e.g., regarding prayer).

Busy readers might consider turning to the pages 630–50 for a wonderful recounting of a month in the life of Calvin (March 1556). This reads like a journal report and brings together most of McKee’s research. The prose throughout all of McKee’s book is enjoyable, but this section is particularly so.

This reviewer appreciates how McKee avoided (it seems she has, at least; perhaps later generations will see biases we do not) fitting her reconstruction of the social and institutional history of Geneva into a larger theoretical framework that is foreign to the material itself. By sticking to a sober account of the history—with a few added exclamation marks here and there—McKee has provided a work that no scholar of Genevan Reformation history can overlook for decades if not centuries hence. The rich archival and print resources available make this work possible. At the same time, historians do need to be careful not to study Calvin more than his contemporaries just because they like Calvin or have access to so many resources. Other early modern cities and churches also have extensive archives and deserve this kind of fine study. And if there is a weakness in the study at hand, it lies in Calvin’s isolation from prior and contemporary theological and social influences with the danger that Calvin might seem more unique than he really was. Keeping this in mind, a host of readers—whether historians, ecclesiastics, or theologians—will greatly benefit from this book, and no serious historian of anything Genevan in the sixteenth century can ignore it. McKee’s work sets a new benchmark.

—Theodore G. Van Raalte