
McKee is one of our premier Calvin scholars. She has devoted years to discovering the nature and practice of John Calvin’s work in Geneva and this is her magnum opus. This encyclopedic book is 976 pages with 660 pages of text and the remainder in appendixes and indexes. There is an unmatched thoroughness here in presenting Calvin’s pastoral ministry and the worship practices of Geneva with no detail omitted—or unknown. Archival materials are brought to light and integrated into McKee’s presentation of original sources, usually accompanied by the texts in the original language. This will be the definitive study, the source to be consulted—always.

After an introduction to Calvin’s views on the nature of the church, McKee proceeds in four parts. The first is “The Structures: Time, Space, and People,” where she considers the places and times of worship, and preachers and people in church. Here are detailed discussions of the pragmatic ways the Genevan Reformation was ordered and structured among the city’s churches, enacting the 1541 Ecclesiastical Ordinances while adjusting to emerging needs. Geneva’s preachers had to work collegially in the Company of Pastors, developing preaching schedules and rotations, as well as ways of carrying out pastoral care, utilizing flexibility as needs developed. Continuities and discontinuities with pre-Reformation practices were challenges, as Protestant emphases in worship shifted toward the centrality of preaching. Rotations of pastors among the churches insured citizens were “exposed to a wide range of voices and breadth of scripture” (168). Conflicts occurred. McKee points out that “people who had been in conflict were often told to present themselves at the end of the service for reconciliation.” This was not, she indicates, a “liturgical act, but it was associated with worship in both time and place” (170).

Part 2 considers “Worship Centered on the Lord’s Day.” This thorough examination begins with a description of Calvin’s teachings on the Sabbath, the fourth commandment. This enjoins a spiritual worship of God “by turning away from sin” and rendering obedience to God as “a daily vocation” (179). The people of God gather for corporate worship, to be ordered according to scripture. This led to the creation of worship books in Geneva, which included liturgies and also the famous Genevan Psalter where psalms were set metrically and sung in the congregations for pure worship. McKee notes that “in Geneva copies were even supplied to those living on public welfare, so that poverty would not prevent anyone having access to the prayer book of the church” (207). Catechisms and catechesis were central to teaching the faith. The Lord’s Supper, limited to four times per year by Genevan authorities despite Calvin’s desire for more frequent celebrations, was a sacramental means of sealing the faith of believers (248). McKee considers baptism and
marriage practices and practical concerns that had to be adjudged through the rhythm of Christian lives. Two appendixes provide myriad details of baptismal and marriage records.

“Preaching in Geneva and Calvin’s Sermons” comprises part 3, with McKee providing a thorough examination of Calvin’s preaching and sermons. Appendixes supplement the narrative with extensive charts and tables dating Calvin’s sermons and identifying texts on which Calvin preached and when. Most of Calvin’s many sermons were recorded by stenographers, though in 1805, some were sold by the Geneva library as old paper (501). In part 4, McKee examines “Worship and Pastoral Care in Daily Life.” At home, in daily worship, the Psalter and catechism texts played major roles. Pastoral care for those facing sickness and death was especially crucial. To see all dimensions at work, McKee provides a chapter on “A Month in the Life of Calvin the Pastor of Geneva,” clearly conveying the breadth of Calvin’s labors as a pastor, preacher, and scholar.

McKee’s monumental study shows in intimate detail what she says: “The practice of worship—what Calvin calls the official pietatis or duties of piety—must be embodied in space and time” (655). McKee notes that pastors participate in this by practicing their vocation: “to be apothecaries of the medicine of life delivering the gospel day in and day out to the whole body and to individuals” (660). They participate with the people in “life-long worship which is the calling of the whole church, the people of God living on earth.”

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