

Discipline and Ignorance in Calvin's Geneva¹

SCOTT M. MANETSCH

Abstract

Founded by John Calvin in 1542, the Genevan consistory was a disciplinary court made up of pastors and lay elders that oversaw public morality and enforced right belief in the city church. Although scholars of early modern Europe have explored in detail the various functions of this religious institution, inadequate attention has been paid to its important pedagogical role. This essay explores the various strategies that Calvin's consistory employed to correct religious ignorance and inculcate Protestant belief among the city inhabitants. Based on quantitative analysis of extant Genevan disciplinary records from 1542 to 1609, it will be argued that Calvin's consistory was largely successful in reshaping Geneva's religious culture and imparting a deeper understanding of reformed Christianity to many children and adults.

In August of 1577, a young man named Abraham de La Mare appeared before the Genevan consistory with an unusual request. De La Mare had been raised in an Anabaptist home in Flanders and now wished to receive instruction in the Reformed faith in preparation for baptism. The ministers and elders agreed to instruct and catechize the young

¹ This essay adapts and expands upon arguments made in my book *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). A shorter version of this paper was presented at a symposium entitled “Discipline and Control in Calvin's Geneva,” sponsored by the Classics Department of the University of Alabama, September 2016.

man, requiring that he also attend sermons several days each week. Four months later, the consistory assigned a city minister to meet privately with de La Mare to gauge his progress and determine whether or not he possessed the requisite knowledge of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. The interview must have gone well, for de La Mare received Christian baptism on December 22, 1577, in front of the congregation at the temple of Saint Pierre.² The account of de La Mare's instruction and baptism demonstrates the important pedagogical function of Geneva's consistory during the sixteenth century.

Scholars of early modern Europe have long recognized the prominence and historical significance of moral discipline in Reformed churches during the age of the Reformation. Beginning with Calvin's consistory in Geneva, disciplinary courts sprang up in other regions of Reformed Europe—in southern France, Scotland, Emden, the Netherlands, and the Palatinate—in an effort to supervise public behavior, battle ignorance, and enforce right belief.³ The detailed registers that survive from these Reformed tribunals continue to offer historians a fascinating glimpse into daily life, misbehavior, and misbelief in the sixteenth century. Whereas scholars once portrayed Reformed consistories as repressive institutions of social control, created to impose a Puritan-like moral austerity on a resistant laity, more recent scholarship has highlighted the ways that Calvinist discipline helped define confessional boundaries, protected the sacral unity of the Eucharistic community, provided relational support and pastoral care for troubled souls, and contributed to the process of state formation in the early modern period.⁴ In his magisterial work, *Les Rituels de la cène*, Christian Grosse has

² Registres du Consistoire, Archives d'État de Genève, vol. 31 (1577), fols. 81r–v, 130. Hereafter cited as R. Consist. For *published* volumes of the consistory, the abbreviated form will be italicized, i.e., *R. Consist.*

³ These disciplinary courts were variously called “consistories,” “kirk session,” “presbyteries,” or “Kirchenrat.”

⁴ Some important representative works include: Robert M. Kingdon, “The Control of Morals in Calvin's Geneva,” in *The Social History of the Reformation*, ed. Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan Zophy (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 3–16; Janine Estèbe and Bernard Vogler, “Le genèse d'une société protestante: Étude comparée de quelques registres consistoriaux languedociens et palatins vers 1600,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisation* 31.2 (1976): 362–88; Raymond Mentzer, “*Disciplina nervus ecclesiae*: The Calvinist Reform of Morals at Nîmes,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18.1 (1987): 89–115; Heinz Schilling, *Civic Calvinism in Northwestern Germany and the Netherlands* (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1991); Janine Garrisson, *Protestants du Midi, 1559–1598* (Toulouse: Privat, 1991); Jeffrey Watt, “Women and the Consistory in Calvin's Geneva,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24.2 (1993): 429–39; Raymond Mentzer, ed., *Sin and the Calvinists: Morals Control and the Consistory in the Reformed Tradition* (Kirkville, MO.: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1994); Robert Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995);

also highlighted the multifaceted pedagogical role that Calvin's consistory played in Reformation Geneva. As Grosse has observed, in the early years of the Reformation "the struggle against ignorance constituted the principal objective pursued by the Consistory."⁵ Taking Grosse's statement as a point of departure, I seek in this essay to shed further light on the various strategies that Calvin's consistory employed to correct religious ignorance and inculcate Protestant belief among the city's inhabitants.⁶ My quantitative analysis of Genevan disciplinary records over a sixty-eight year period, from 1542 to 1609, will also allow me to assess the overall effectiveness of the consistory in instructing Geneva's residents in the evangelical doctrine of the Reformation.

I. *Geneva's Consistory in Theory and Practice*

Of all the institutions that Calvin created in Geneva, his consistory was the most distinctive and the most controversial.⁷ The consistory had its genesis in Geneva's religious constitution, the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, drafted by a commission led by Calvin in 1541. The *Ordinances* required both the city and countryside pastors, along with twelve lay elders, to meet weekly on Thursday afternoons to supervise public morality and apply the spiritual "medicine" of church discipline as needed.⁸ Calvin and his colleagues believed that the practice of church discipline found biblical warrant throughout the New Testament, but especially in the Gospel of Matthew (16:19 and 18:19), where Jesus entrusted to his disciples the "power of the

Michael Graham, *The Uses of Reform: "Godly Discipline" and Popular Belief in Scotland and Beyond, 1560–1610* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Thomas Lambert, "Preaching, Praying and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1998); Judith Pollmann, "Off the Record: Problems in the Quantification of Calvinist Church Discipline," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 33.2 (2002): 423–38; Graeme Murdock, *Beyond Calvinism: The Intellectual, Political and Cultural World of Europe's Reformed Churches* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Christian Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène: Le culte eucharistique réformé à Genève, XVIe–XVIIe siècles* (Geneva: Droz, 2008); Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*.

⁵ Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène*, 467.

⁶ For a more general treatment of the Swiss Reformers' educational campaign against religious ignorance, see Karin Maag, "The Spectre of Ignorance: The Provision of Education in the Swiss Cities," in William Naphy and Penny Roberts, eds., *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 137–49.

⁷ For an excellent introduction to the Genevan consistory, see Robert Kingdon, "The Geneva Consistory in the Time of Calvin," in *Calvinism in Europe, 1540–1620*, ed. Andrew Pettegree, Alastair Duke, and Gillian Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21–34.

⁸ *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), in *Registres de la Compagnie des pasteurs de Genève au temps de Calvin*, ed. Robert Kingdon and J. F. Bergier, vol. 1 (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 13. Henceforth cited as RCP.

keys,” that is, the authority to proclaim God’s sentence of condemnation and forgiveness to sinners.⁹ Calvin believed that the spiritual authority to “bind and loose” was exercised in a general way when ministers preached the gospel in their sermons, announcing God’s judgment upon the wicked and the promise of salvation to those who turned to Christ in repentance and faith. The power of the keys was employed in a more targeted fashion when pastors and elders admonished sinners in private conferences, at the annual household visitation, or during the weekly meetings of the consistory. Geneva’s religious constitution made clear that the consistory exercised no civil jurisdiction and possessed no authority to impose corporal punishment on sinners. Instead, the ministers and elders were to wield the “spiritual sword of the Word of God” as they admonished, counseled, censured, and, if necessary, suspended offenders from the Lord’s Supper in hopes of affecting heart change and repentance. In the most flagrant cases, where misbehavior also constituted criminality, the consistory was expected to refer defendants to Geneva’s magistrates for fines, imprisonment, banishment, or even execution.

Calvin and his colleagues insisted that church discipline benefited not only the individual sinner but also the entire Christian community. Discipline helped maintain the purity of Christ’s church; it protected Christians from the bad example of unrepentant sinners; it shamed the wicked in hopes of securing their repentance and restoring them to the fellowship of Christian believers. The ultimate goal of church discipline was spiritual healing, not punishment or public humiliation. Calvin’s colleague Theodore Beza compared moral discipline to a form of spiritual medicine in that pastors must

not only discern the illness, but also the situation and disposition of the patient, looking for the best medicine to prescribe, preaching the Law to the hardened, and the gospel of grace to those who are despairing. In brief, let us always condemn the sin, but try to save the sinner.¹⁰

Hence, Calvin and his colleagues believed that church discipline was essential for a healthy Christian church. Church discipline was like a “father’s rod” that preserved the unity and purity of the church and guided God’s people to obedience and spiritual health. Consequently, as Calvin stated in

⁹ For Calvin’s most developed treatment of church discipline, see his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1229–40 (4.12.1–13).

¹⁰ Theodore Beza, *Sermons sur l’histoire de la resurrection de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ* (Geneva: Jean Le Preux, 1593), 129–30.

Table 1: Geneva Suspension Offenses, 1542-1609

Offense	# Male / Female	Total	% of Total
Quarrels / <i>Mauvais Ménage</i>	1,572 / 777	2,349	25.4
Fornication / Adultery	636 / 538	1,174	12.7
Scandals	447 / 233	680	7.3
Blasphemy	393 / 125	518	5.6
Lying / Slander	265 / 194	459	5.0
Catholic Behavior	298 / 152	450	4.9
Illicit Dances / Songs	171 / 274	445	4.8
Rebellion	308 / 123	431	4.7
Drunkenness	277 / 97	374	4.0
Ignorance	209 / 159	368	4.0
Confessional Infidelity	186 / 169	355	3.8
Petty Theft	159 / 161	320	3.5
Gaming / Gambling	253 / 2	255	2.8
Violation of Lord's Supper	163 / 82	245	2.6
Business Fraud / Usury	164 / 29	193	2.1
Folk Religion	63 / 99	162	1.8
Sermon Violations	108 / 34	142	1.5
Clandestine Marriage	61 / 50	111	1.2
Begging / Idleness	80 / 24	104	1.1
Endangerment	33 / 28	61	0.7
Anabaptism / Heresy	25 / 1	26	0.3
Unknown	18 / 16	34	0.4
Totals	5,889 / 3,367	9,256	100%

his *Institutes*, “all who desire to remove discipline or hinder its restoration—whether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance—are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church.”¹¹

During Calvin’s lifetime—and in the half-century following—hundreds of men and women were summoned to the consistory’s chambers each year and examined for a variety of moral infractions. The pastors and elders confronted wife beaters and Sabbath breakers, drunkards and diviners, fornicators, and petty thieves. In my study of Genevan consistorial records from 1542 to 1609, I have identified more than 9,200 cases where

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1230 (4.12.1).

defendants were temporarily suspended from the Lord's Supper.¹² The most common reasons for suspensions in Calvinist Geneva are listed in Table 1: quarrels and household disputes (25.4%), fornication and adultery (12.7%), scandals (7.3%), blasphemy (5.6%), lying and slander (5.0%), Catholic behavior (4.9%), illicit dancing and singing (4.8%), rebellion (4.7%), drunkenness (4.0%), and ignorance (4.0%). My tabulations offer several surprising results. First, the consistory censured defendants far more frequently for faulty behavior (such as quarrels, blasphemy, or drunkenness) than for wrong doctrine (such as heresy, ignorance, or Catholic belief). At least in practice, Geneva's consistory functioned more as a morals court than as a theological tribunal. Second, during the six-and-a-half decades of my study, men were nearly twice as likely to be suspended from the Lord's Supper as women (64%–36%). Third, my data indicate that roughly 26% of men and women suspended from the Lord's Supper came from Geneva's twelve countryside parishes—a percentage that is slightly disproportionate given that only one in five of Geneva's inhabitants lived in the territory outside the city walls. Finally, some offenses tended to be gender specific: women were more likely than men to be disciplined for illicit dancing and singing, petty theft, and the practice of folk religion. Men, by contrast, account for nearly all of the suspensions for gambling, business fraud, and heresy.

II. *The Problem of Ignorance*

At first blush, it would seem that the problem of ignorance does not fit the disciplinary profile of Calvin's consistory. After all, most cases of ignorance would presumably not constitute "moral failure" or "hardened unbelief" in need of repentance and restoration. Ignorance might be deplorable, but not culpable. Many defendants who appeared before the consistory for ignorance indicated that the problem was not one of inadequate desire, but of limited mental capacity. Defendants sometimes complained of having a "bad head," a "thick head," a "poor head"—or simply of being "stupid."¹³ Mamad Buctin admitted to the pastors and elders that, even though he attended sermons, "he has such a thick head that he can retain nothing of the preaching." Jacques Mossier, who had lived in Geneva for three years when he was

¹² These archival findings are discussed at length in Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 182–220. For a discussion of the difficulties of counting and categorizing disciplinary cases, see *ibid.*, 366, note 88.

¹³ See, for example, *R. Consist.* 1 (1542), 138; *ibid.* 1 (1544), 193r–v; *R. Consist.* 17 (1560), fol. 163; *ibid.* 18 (1561), fol. 32; *ibid.* 20 (1563), fol. 50v; *ibid.* 22 (1565), fol. 160.

called to consistory, insisted that he had “good will to learn but he is thick-headed.” When the ministers exhorted Aimé Navette to memorize the Ten Commandments, he replied curtly, “I knew nothing of it last year; I know nothing of it now; and as for the year to come, the Devil with it!”¹⁴

For Geneva’s ministers, ignorance warranted church discipline for reasons that lay at the heart of the city’s confessional identity.¹⁵ When Geneva officially adopted the Reformation on May 25, 1536, the citizens voted unanimously to “live henceforth according to the Law of the Gospel and the Word of God, and to abolish all Papal abuses.”¹⁶ Geneva was henceforth identified as a city where people “lived according to the true Reformation of the gospel,” a city where the evangelical faith was “purely preached and proclaimed.”¹⁷ In the years that followed, Geneva’s magistrates and ministers confirmed and consolidated this civic and religious identity by passing laws to ensure that all residents of the city and countryside understood the Reformed faith and lived according to it. All Genevan adults and children were mandated by law to attend (at a minimum) two sermons on Sunday as well as the “Day of Prayer” on Wednesday mornings. During the weekly liturgy, the congregation confessed aloud the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Moreover, fathers and mothers were obligated to instruct their households in the evangelical faith. Children were expected to go to school and attend weekly catechism classes. Beginning in 1561, the ministers were required by law to visit all the households in the city before Easter each year to make sure that family members were properly catechized and living in Christian harmony.¹⁸ Additionally, the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* required that all native Genevans and foreign visitors should be examined by the ministers and make public profession of faith before being admitted to the Lord’s Supper.¹⁹ This decision to fence off the holy sacrament from those who were ignorant of Geneva’s public faith satisfied a number of Calvin’s concerns. It addressed Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27 against people profaning the Lord’s Supper by communing in an unworthy manner. It served as an antidote to ignorance by motivating both children

¹⁴ R. Consist. 1 (1542), 104; R. Consist. 20 (1564), fol. 50v; *ibid.* 19 (1562), fol. 35v.

¹⁵ See Grosse’s detailed discussion in *Les Rituels de la cène*, 425–36.

¹⁶ Cited in E. William Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1967), 55–56.

¹⁷ Geneva was “une cité pour y vivre selon la vraye Reformation de l’Evangile, en icelle purement presché et annoncé ...” See R. Consist. 17 (1560), fol. 121. Elsewhere, the consistory minutes describe Geneva’s brand of Christianity as “the evangelical faith,” “the evangelical Reformation,” “the holy gospel,” “the teaching of the Christian religion,” “the true religion,” and “the holy Reformation of the gospel.”

¹⁸ For more on the annual visitation, see Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène*, 400–407.

¹⁹ RCP 1:8–9.

and adults to master the basics of the Protestant faith. So too, it provided a clear public reminder of Geneva's confessional boundaries and the evangelical identity that united the city's residents.

The Genevan consistory identified ignorance and determined theological illiteracy by measuring it against the general outline or summary of Calvin's *Catechism* (1542).²⁰ Defendants were expected to be able to recite in the French vernacular the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, providing a brief explanation of what they believed, how they should behave, and how they should pray. Though rote memorization was important, the pastors and elders also desired that defendants understand and personalize the basic truths of the Christian gospel. People needed to comprehend what they were praying; they needed to fear God and obey his laws; they needed to understand the substance of their salvation; they needed to have the Word of God engraved on their hearts. Thus, in 1542, after scolding François Mermiez for beating his wife, the consistory demanded that he "give an explanation of his faith in intelligible language" and show that "he knows how to pray to God."²¹ Fifteen years later, the consistory called to its chambers Pierre de La Place and his wife Guicharde who were asked "to declare what is the substance of their salvation and make a confession of faith as all good Christians should be able to do."²² Geneva's ministers and elders were especially concerned that men and women recognize that salvation is purely God's gift in Christ, apart from human works. This is illustrated in the case of Jehan Revilliod, a laborer from southern France, who was summoned to consistory in 1580 because he was "full of ignorance, without knowing how to give a reason for his faith." Not only was Revilliod unable to recite the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, or the Apostles' Creed, but he failed miserably when asked to explain the basis for his Christian hope.

Inquired if he will be saved, has responded that he hopes so, yes. And by what means, he has responded by the works that we do. In this he has responded very badly because we must have our confidence and faith of being saved by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Following this botched examination, the consistory ordered that Revilliod seek out Christian instruction before presenting himself at the Lord's Supper.²³

²⁰ For catechetical instruction in Geneva, see Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène*, 470–72, 481–92; and Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 265–74.

²¹ *R. Consist.* (1542), 36.

²² *R. Consist.* 12 (1557), fol. 16v.

²³ *R. Consist.* 32 (1580), fols. 47v–48.

III. *Kinds of Ignorance*

The Genevan consistory suspended men and women for ignorance with some frequency during the first generations of the Reformation. In my study of the consistory registers from 1542 to 1609, I have identified 368 cases of ignorance that resulted in suspension, or 4% of total suspensions during the period. Of this number, 57% of the defendants were men, 43% were women. Surprisingly, ignorance cases were far more prevalent among city dwellers than country folk: 88% of defendants suspended for religious ignorance came from within the city walls—a figure that may indicate more intense supervision, or perhaps, higher expectations placed upon city dwellers.²⁴

Consistory records indicate that there were various kinds or degrees of ignorance cases, which we will classify into three categories: extreme ignorance, confessional ignorance, and hostile ignorance. A number of men and women were suspended from the Lord's Supper for religious ignorance so extreme that even the jaded ministers and elders were taken aback. When a butcher named Pierre Durand was asked to repeat the Lord's Prayer, he could barely recite two words of it. A sailor named Guillaume Genod did even worse, failing to remember a single word of the Creed. So poorly instructed in the Christian faith was Jehan Cuys that the consistory likened him to a "lost sheep."²⁵ Defendants before consistory sometimes found the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith to be elusive, if not altogether incomprehensible. When asked about the doctrine of the Trinity, a wagon driver named Mermet Foudral announced that there were three gods in heaven who were all one, that the divine Father named "Pilate" had died for sinners, and that he did not think God would damn anyone. The wife of Pierre Armand did only slightly better, stating that the father of believers was Jesus Christ, and that the son of Jesus Christ was God. As for the identity of Jesus Christ, Isabela Delafie opined that he was "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit ... he is the Father if you please." Other Genevans who appeared before the consistory displayed extreme ignorance regarding the Ten Commandments and the sacraments. Marguerite Danelle, the wife of a pin maker, believed that there were three commandments, the Lord's Supper, Baptism ... and she couldn't remember the third. When asked about the holy sacraments, a servant named Gaspard Musner stated that "it was the grace of God and that the bread was one sacrament

²⁴ In addition, one wonders if ministers who served rural parishes sometimes informally censured ignorant country folk and withheld the Lord's Supper from them without sending them to the city for formal suspension.

²⁵ *R. Consist.* 1 (1542), 119; *ibid.* 2 (1546), 103; *ibid.* 8 (1553), 121–22.

and the wine the other.” Perhaps the most spectacular case of ignorance belongs to a widow named Guillermette Tissot, whom the consistory examined in 1561. She was judged to be “very stupid and ignorant of the way of her salvation” for declaring that the Virgin Mary was the *father* of Jesus Christ. Further questioning revealed that she was not altogether clear as to whether the Virgin was a man or a woman. Guillermette was ordered to meet with her minister every Sunday after catechism class to become better instructed.²⁶

Confessional ignorance was a second and more common kind of religious ignorance found in Geneva’s consistory records. The term “confessional ignorance” has been chosen to identify Genevan residents who presumably embraced the city’s Protestant faith, but remained habituated to a variety of Catholic teachings or ceremonies.²⁷ Clearly, many men and women raised in the Catholic religion and nurtured on the Latin Mass found it difficult to adjust to Geneva’s new confessional requirements. In the early years of Geneva’s Reformation, the consistory encountered a sizeable number of elderly citizens who continued to say the Ave Maria, continued to pray to the saints, continued to believe in purgatory—and found it next to impossible to learn the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments in the French vernacular. When Françoise Loup was called before the consistory for ignorance in 1542, she complained that “she has a poor head” and “does not know how to pray to God except in the manner that her father and mother taught her ... and she says she is a good Christian and that it is too late to teach her the Our Father.” Sermé Bylo, the elderly wife of a string maker, had a similar problem fourteen years later: she did not know the Apostles’ Creed and still prayed in the “old fashion,” that is, in Latin. Geneva’s ministers and elders were especially on the lookout for defendants who were unable to articulate “the reason for their faith” or express confidence in the evangelical message of grace. In 1572, for example, the consistory’s interview of a foreign visitor named Antoine Buffet took place as follows: Asked if he was confident that he would be saved, Antoine initially said no, but when confronted with the possibility of despairing in hell, changed his answer to yes. Antoine was asked by what means he would be saved. “By works,” he replied. The consistory next inquired whether he prayed to the Virgin Mary. Antoine assured them that he did, and proceeded to recite the

²⁶ R. Consist. 30 (1576), fol. 102v; *ibid.* 18 (1561), fol. 40; *ibid.* 22 (1565), n.p.; *ibid.* 17 (1561), fol. 217v; *ibid.* 19 (1562), fol. 78; *ibid.*, 18 (1561), fol. 32.

²⁷ Of course, there were also native Genevans or foreign visitors who remained secretly committed to the Catholic religion and hostile to Geneva’s Reformed faith. In my tabulation of suspensions, I have listed these individuals under the category of “Catholic practice.”

Ave Maria. As a result of this hearing, Antoine and his wife were ordered to attend sermons and present themselves to their minister for instruction and repentance before the next Lord's Supper.²⁸

A third type of religious ignorance might be described as hostile ignorance, where religious confusion was accompanied by resistance toward Geneva's religious authorities or even toward classical creedal Christianity. When the hostess of the tavern named The Three Sheep was questioned by the consistory in 1548, she averred that no one is damned, not even the devil or Judas Iscariot, and that Catholicism was as good as the gospel. Alarmed by her "poverty of soul," the consistory commanded her to attend catechism services and sent her to the parish minister for instruction in the Christian faith. Two decades later, a widow named Catherine Leguaine—who had already been suspended once from the Lord's Table—was summoned before consistory for refusing to give a reason for her faith. Her curt response was that if she wasn't wise enough to take the Lord's Supper, then neither was she wise enough to give a reason for her faith—and, she would henceforth partake of the sacrament elsewhere. Accusing her of rebellion, pertinacity, and foolishness, the ministers and elders suspended her from the Lord's Supper (a second time) and sent her to the magistrates for further punishment. Thyven Bastard of Bourdigny was equally hostile to consistorial correction. When Bastard appeared before the consistory in May 1561, he was unable to answer the question "Who suffered and died for us?" He was given two months to improve his knowledge of the Christian faith by attending sermons and seeking out his minister for weekly instruction. A month later, Bastard was called back to the consistory for infelicitous comments made to his minister Jean Trembley. At their recent meeting, Trembley had confronted Bastard with the fact that Bastard's wife was well instructed and would go to paradise. When asked if *he* too hoped for paradise, Bastard replied: "If I knew that [my wife] was in paradise and I wasn't, I would go there and make a great spectacle by beating her." Given this outrageous statement, the consistory suspended Bastard for his "ignorance and stupidity, as well as his mockery."²⁹

IV. *The Battle Against Ignorance*

Calvin's consistory employed a variety of strategies to assure that Geneva's residents in the city and countryside understood the basics of the Protestant

²⁸ *R. Consist.* 1 (1542), 138; *R. Consist.* 11 (1556), fol. 14; *ibid.* 28 (1572), fol. 193.

²⁹ *R. Consist.* 4 (1548), 6–7, 9; *R. Consist.* 25 (1568), fol. 68v–69; *ibid.* 18 (1561), fols. 52, 68v.

faith. As we have already seen, the consistory regularly summoned, examined, and sometimes suspended from the sacrament men and women suspected of ignorance. The decision to impose church discipline on the ignorant was almost always accompanied by specific advice or requirements intended to foster theological literacy and hasten restoration to the Christian community. The most common strategy was to command defendants to obey city statutes that required regular attendance at sermons and weekly catechism classes. The Sunday catechism was not only for children, but also for adults in need of remedial Christian instruction. Hence, when Claude Pascard in 1560 betrayed utter confusion about the Christian faith (he stated that theft and adultery do not violate the Ten Commandments), the consistory suspended him from the Lord's Supper and ordered him to attend catechism classes every week for a year, sitting with the children so as to be better instructed, and to report his progress to his minister on a regular basis. Though many men and women refused to attend the catechism out of the perception that "the catechism hour is for children," the ministers never backed down from their expectation that the catechism sermon should serve both children and ignorant adults.³⁰

The consistory possessed still other "weapons" in its arsenal as it battled ignorance. The ministers and elders sometimes directed a defendant to purchase and read the Bible, or to hire a private tutor for personalized Christian instruction. The consistory also held parents responsible for the religious education of their children and household servants. Thus, in 1542, the consistory ordered a merchant named Jaques Carre to "learn the Lord's Prayer and his faith and creed so he can teach his children." The following year, the ministers commanded the apothecary Pierre Pauloz Du Pain, whose mother remained an ardent Catholic, to

instruct his wife and his mother, that he admonish and give a good example to his household ... and remove the books from his house so that his mother will not read them. ... and to teach his mother to pray to God and learn her creed, and all those of his house.³¹

Finally, Geneva's consistory frequently played a more direct, personal role in helping ignorant men and women grow in Christian understanding. During the annual household visitation, held shortly before Easter each year, the ministers examined the religious knowledge of individual family members and attempted to help them understand the central tenets of the

³⁰ R. Consist. 17 (1560), fol. 163; *ibid.*, 12 (1557), fol. 81.

³¹ R. Consist. 1 (1542), 44; *ibid.* (1543), 218.

Table 2: Geneva Consistory Suspensions for “Ignorance” by Decade

Decade	# Suspensions for Ignorance	Total Suspensions	% of Total
1540s	26	112	23.2
1550s	127	1,407	9
1560s	195	3,987	4.9
1570s	9	1,989	0.5
1580s	5	558	0.9
1590s	4	640	0.6
1600s	2	563	0.4
Totals	368	9,256	4%

Christian faith.³² In addition, defendants who appeared before consistory were regularly advised to consult their parish ministers for personal tutoring and assistance. Thus, for example, the consistory commanded Jean de La Pallud of the parish of Saint Gervais to seek out his minister Raymond Chauvet for instruction twice per week and then report back on his progress in three weeks. Similarly, the pastor Jean Pinault was commissioned “to meet daily” with a citizen named Pierre Genod “until he should be properly instructed.”³³ In all these ways then—through sermons and catechism, through household visitations, and through personal coaching and formal discipline—Geneva’s consistory endeavored to assure that all Genevans understood the Christian gospel and were committed to it.

Conclusion

The question that remains is how effective the consistory’s battle against ignorance in early modern Geneva was. Grosse and other scholars have recently argued that Calvin’s extensive program of religious instruction and moral supervision succeeded within several decades of imparting to most Genevan adults and children a basic understanding of Protestant faith and

³² The central pedagogical purpose of the annual visitation is stated in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1576): “We have decreed that each household should be visited yearly, to examine each person very simply on their faith, so that at least no one will come to communion without knowing the grounds of their salvation.” In Henri Heyer, *L’Église de Genève: Esquisse historique de son organisation, 1535–1909* (repr., Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1974), 289. On this, see Maag, “The Spectre of Ignorance,” 145.

³³ R. Consist. 15 (1559), fol. 78; *ibid.* 32 (1580), fol. 139v.

practice.³⁴ My empirical study of Genevan suspensions between 1542 and 1609 lends support to this conclusion. During Calvin's lifetime, from 1542 to 1564, extant consistorial records indicate that 308 people were suspended for ignorance, or 11% of all total suspensions. After Calvin's lifetime, from 1565 to 1609, extant consistorial records indicate that around 60 people were suspended for ignorance, or less than 1% of all total suspensions. This sharp decline in the relative number of ignorance suspensions is seen even more clearly when they are broken down by decade (see Table 2). During the decade of the 1540s, 25% of all consistory suspensions were for ignorance; during the decades of the 1550s and 1560s, that number declined to 9% and 5% respectively. During the last three decades of the sixteenth century, suspension rates for ignorance never exceeded 1% of all consistorial suspensions—and most of those cases involved foreign visitors to Geneva rather than Genevan natives.

Despite this indication of success, however, Geneva's ministers recognized the challenges and limitations of their educational enterprise. Memorizing a brief summary of Calvin's *Catechism* or reciting the Creed and the Lord's Prayer in French did not guarantee that a person had extensive knowledge of Reformed doctrine. The city's ministers admitted this fact in 1576, when they expressed alarm that many people whom they examined were not well instructed and that "our catechisms ... do not seem to be accomplishing what they should."³⁵ But if Calvin's pedagogical program produced mixed results, the fact remains that it significantly reshaped Geneva's religious culture and imparted to a large number of adults and children a deeper understanding of Protestant Christianity, which many of them welcomed with gratitude. Such was the case with Master Thomas Sylvester, a physician from the royal court of Hungary, who arrived in Geneva in July of 1559 desiring "to hear the preaching of the gospel" and "become instructed and live according to the true reformation of the gospel." An initial interview before the consistory determined that Sylvester was "very ignorant and did not know the principles of Christianity"; consequently, the ministers charged Sylvester to study the catechism in Latin and Italian and to report back in six weeks for a fuller examination of his Christian faith. When Sylvester returned to consistory at the end of August without having mastered the catechism, the ministers gave him another three months to be instructed and urged him to consult the city ministers

³⁴ See Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène*, 498–501. Similarly, Lambert concludes that most Genevans had learned to pray in the Reformed fashion by the 1570s. See his "Preaching, Praying and Policing the Reform," 417–19.

³⁵ RCP 4:47.

to “discuss with them matters of doctrine.” Finally, after five months of formal and informal catechetical instruction, Master Thomas Sylvester successfully declared “the reason for his faith and the manner of his salvation” before the consistory and was welcomed to the Lord’s Supper before the Genevan congregation in December 1559.³⁶ By all appearances, the consistory’s pedagogical program had succeeded.

³⁶ R. Consist. 15 (1559), fols. 124r–v, 167v, 244.