

Calvin's first stay and the expulsion (1536–1538)

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

It was in this context that an event occurred which would change the history of the city. John Calvin, a young French humanist converted to the Reformation and the author of a work published in Basel that same year, the *Institution de la religion chrétienne* (Institutes of the Christian Religion), passed through Geneva in the summer of 1536. Guillaume Farel, who grasped the scale of the task required to organise the city's Church, persuaded him to stay.¹ The account Calvin would later give of this encounter, in which Farel is said to have threatened him with divine malediction should he refuse, has become famous.²

Calvin began by teaching Scripture before taking up a pastoral ministry. Together with Farel, he proposed to the Council a programme for organising the Church. In 1537, the reformers presented articles on the organisation of the Church, a confession of faith and a catechism.³ They asked that all inhabitants swear to the confession of faith, and that the Church have the right to exclude from the Lord's Supper those whose conduct was judged scandalous.

These demands met with resistance. Some of the citizens refused to take the oath. The Council, jealous of its prerogatives, had no intention of surrendering the power of excommunication to the pastors. Relations with Bern complicated the situation further, since the Bernese wished Geneva to adopt their liturgical usages, whereas Calvin and Farel defended the autonomy of their Church. The conflict came to a head at the beginning of 1538, when the reformers refused to celebrate the Lord's Supper under the conditions imposed by the Council.⁴ Calvin and Farel were expelled from the city.⁵

The expulsion of 1538 revealed a tension that would run through Calvin's entire Genevan career, namely the relationship between the Church and the civil authority. The magistrates accepted the Reformation, but they intended to keep control of discipline and morals. The pastors held that the

Church must have its own means of carrying out its mission. This tension would never be completely resolved. It would find a compromise in the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, which the next chapter analyses.

1 Notes

1. Article “John Calvin”, Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026), which summarises the commonly accepted biography: publication of the Institutes in Basel in 1536 and recruitment by Farel the same year. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Calvin, Jean”: “In July 1536, passing through a Geneva recently won over to the Reformation, he was retained by Guillaume Farel”; Wikipedia (en), art. “John Calvin”: account of the conversion in the preface to the Commentary on the Psalms (1557), “God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame”. ↩
3. Archives d’État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “1536, arrivée de Jean Calvin”: articles on the administration of the Church proposed by Farel in November 1536 and approved on 16 January 1537; Wikipedia (en), “John Calvin”: presentation of the Articles to the Council on 16 January 1537. ↩
4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Calvin, Jean”: “At Easter 1538, after conflicts with the city Council over the administration of the Lord’s Supper, Farel and C. were banished from Geneva”; Archives d’État de Genève (archives-etat-ge.ch), “1536, arrivée de Jean Calvin”: banishment in April 1538 for refusing to administer the Lord’s Supper according to the Bernese liturgy; Wikipedia (en), “John Calvin”: expulsion on 23 April 1538. ↩
5. Article “John Calvin”, Wikipedia (en), cited above; article “Calvin’s Geneva”, Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: [helveticaregister.com/geneva-calvins-first-stay-and-the-expulsion-15361538](https://www.helveticaregister.com/geneva-calvins-first-stay-and-the-expulsion-15361538)