

The Consistory at work

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Established by the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, the Consistory brought together the pastors and the elders and met regularly to examine conduct judged contrary to Christian morality.¹ Its registers, preserved in the Archives d'État de Genève and published over several decades, make it possible to follow its activity closely.²

The matters dealt with there covered a very wide field: family and marital quarrels, violence, blasphemy, the persistence of Catholic practices, dancing, gambling, drunkenness, fraud, debts and usury. Those summoned were questioned, admonished and exhorted to mend their ways. In serious cases, the Consistory could exclude them from the Lord's Supper and refer the matter to the Council, which alone had the power to impose civil penalties.³

The Consistory aimed first of all at reconciliation. Many cases ended in mutual forgiveness, an undertaking to make good a wrong or a promise of better conduct. This dimension of mediation deserves emphasis: in a city where disputes between neighbours, relatives or business partners could escalate, the Consistory offered a forum for swift and inexpensive settlement. It thereby contributed to social peace and to the stability of economic relations.

For business life, the work of the Consistory had several effects. It strengthened the value of a person's word, since lying and deceit exposed one to a summons. It discouraged practices that ruined families, such as gambling and drunkenness. It kept watch over credit, in particular loans judged excessive. And it created a collective memory of conduct, which shaped each person's reputation. In a small city, that reputation determined access to credit, to advantageous marriages and to public office.

This supervision had its downside. It severely restricted private life, it could be used to serve personal rivalries and it provoked resistance,

particularly among the old Geneva families, who saw in it the hold of the pastors and the refugees. The history of the Consistory is also a history of conflict between ecclesiastical discipline and the liberties of the citizens.

Caution. The Consistory did not impose civil penalties and sought first of all correction and reconciliation. Its social control was no less intense for that, and it left a lasting mark on the Geneva culture of discretion and restraint.

1 Notes

1. Article “Calvin’s Geneva”, Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026), which links the Consistory to the Ordinances of 1541. ↩
2. *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin*, vol. I (1542–1544), published by Thomas A. Lambert and Isabella M. Watt under the direction of Robert M. Kingdon, Geneva, Droz (“Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance”, CCCV), 1996, followed by volumes covering in particular 1548 (vol. IV), 1551–1552 (vol. VI) and 1555–1556 (vol. X). ↩
3. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Consistoire de Genève”: the Consistory judges “in particular matrimonial cases, but also matters concerning the morality or conduct of the Genevans”; it may impose “only ecclesiastical penalties such as excommunication” and may “refer the guilty to the secular justice of the Petit Conseil, which then imposes corporal penalties that are sometimes severe (flogging, banishment)”; Archives d’État de Genève, “Première période (1517-1555)” (disciplinary authority over faith and morals). ↩

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