

The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541

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

On his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin presented the Council with a draft set of ordinances intended to organise the Church. After discussion and amendment by the councils, the Ordonnances ecclésiastiques (Ecclesiastical Ordinances) were adopted in the same year.¹ They are a law of the Republic, adopted by the civil authorities. This point is fundamental: the organisation of the Genevan Church rests on a legislative act, and the ecclesiastical institutions derive their authority from the law as much as from doctrine.

The Ordinances distinguish four ministries.² The pastors proclaim the Word, administer the sacraments and, together with the elders, exercise fraternal correction. The doctors teach doctrine and train future ministers; their ministry would reach its full development with the foundation of the Collège and the Academy in 1559.³ The elders, chosen from among the members of the councils, watch over the conduct of the faithful. The deacons, finally, administer the property of the poor and care for the sick.

Ministry	Function	Institutional extension
Pastors	preaching, sacraments, fraternal correction	Compagnie des pasteurs (Company of Pastors)
Doctors	teaching of doctrine, training of ministers	Collège and Academy (1559)
Elders	supervision of the conduct of the faithful	Consistory
Deacons	administration of the property of the poor, care of the sick	Hôpital général, assistance funds

The Consistory is the most original institution created by the Ordinances. It brings together the pastors and the elders, who are appointed from among the members of the city councils, and it meets regularly to examine

cases of conduct deemed contrary to Christian morality.⁴ It may admonish, exhort and, in serious cases, exclude from the Lord's Supper. Civil sanctions, by contrast, fall to the Council, to which the Consistory may refer matters. The registers of the Consistory, now published, are an exceptional source for the social history of Geneva; among other things, they contain cases of usury, gambling, fraud and commercial disputes.⁵

The Consistory embodies the Calvinist moral economy. It supervises behaviour in every area of life, including economic life. A merchant who deceives his customers, a lender who exploits his debtors or a gambler who ruins his family may be summoned and admonished. This supervision also aims at reconciliation, at reparation and at a return to conduct that meets the community's expectations. It likewise creates a form of social control that strengthens confidence in commercial dealings: in a city where fraud exposes one to a summons before the Consistory, a person's given word takes on a particular value.

The Ordinances also organise the Compagnie des pasteurs, which brings together the ministers of the city and the countryside, examines candidates for the ministry and watches over the unity of doctrine. The Company became an influential body, which maintained a correspondence with the Reformed Churches of all Europe and contributed to Geneva's international influence.⁶

1 Notes

1. Article "Calvin's Geneva", Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026), which dates the Ordinances to 1541 and links the Consistory to that text. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": Ecclesiastical Ordinances adopted by the Council on 20 November 1541, "establishing four ministerial offices"; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Calvin, Jean" (three fundamental documents drafted in 1541–1542). ↩
3. Article "Calvin's Geneva", Wikipedia (en), cited above, for the foundation of the Academy in 1559. ↩
4. Wikipédia (fr), art. "Consistoire de Genève": instituted by the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, composed of the pastors "and of twelve lay Elders appointed by the Seigneurie", namely "2 members of the Petit Conseil [...] four from the Conseil des Soixante, six from the Conseil des Deux-Cents"; "meets every week"; Archives d'État de Genève, "Première période (1517-1555)": Consistory composed of the

pastors and twelve elders representing the quarters, sitting every Thursday. ↩

5. 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, with the assistance of Jeffrey R. Watt, Geneva, Droz, series “Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance” no. CCCV, 1996 (reviewed in the Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses, 77/3, 1997); English translation Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin, vol. I, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000; later volumes published by Droz (vol. IV, 1548; vol. VI, 1551–1552; vol. X, 1555–1556). ↩
6. Robert M. Kingdon, Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555–1563, Geneva, Droz, series “Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance” XXII, 1956, ix-163 pp. (reviewed in The Journal of Ecclesiastical History); Robert M. Kingdon, Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564–1571, Geneva, Droz, 1967; Wikipedia (en), art. “Robert M. Kingdon” (29 December 1927–3 December 2010). ↩

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