

The recall of 1541: a contract between a reformer and a city

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During Calvin's absence, Geneva went through a period of instability. Factions confronted one another. Relations with Bern grew tense over the interpretation of the treaties and over Bernese rights in certain territories.¹ The organisation of the Church remained unfinished, and discipline left much to be desired in the eyes of the supporters of the Reformation. Around the turn of 1540, the faction favourable to Calvin gained the upper hand in the Council, and the city decided to recall the reformer.

Calvin hesitated. He feared a return to the conflicts he had known. He eventually agreed, setting his conditions, and came back to Geneva in 1541.² His return took place in early autumn.³ He immediately presented the Council with a draft of ordinances intended to organise the Church. After discussion and amendment, the Ecclesiastical Ordinances were adopted the same year.⁴

The recall of 1541 can be read as a contract between a reformer and a city. The city gained an organiser capable of structuring its Church, giving it international legitimacy and stabilising a social order shaken by two decades of conflict. Calvin gained institutions that allowed him to carry out his mission, in particular the Consistory, which was responsible for discipline. Each party retained its prerogatives: the Council remained sovereign, and the Ordinances were a law of the Republic; the Church had an organisation of its own, but one subject to the framework laid down by the magistrates.

This compromise did not eliminate the tensions. For the fourteen years that followed, Calvin faced a powerful opposition made up of old Genevan families who looked unfavourably on the growing influence of the pastors and the refugees. Only in 1555, after the defeat of this opposition, did Calvin's position become secure.⁵ The chronology matters for economic history, since it was precisely from 1555 onwards, according to the 2025

study already cited, that a more rigorous control of usurious lending began, at the very moment when a great wave of immigration was getting under way.⁶

Key point. Calvin's recall in 1541 rested on a compromise: the Republic retained its legislative sovereignty, and the Church received an organisation of its own, laid down by a civil law, the Ecclesiastical Ordinances. This compromise structured the relations between public authority and the city's moral institutions for centuries, and it underpinned the regulation of economic practices that the following chapters describe.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, "Première période (1517-1555)": in January 1537, Calvin and Farel submitted "Articles" on the organisation of the Church and asked for an oath from the citizens, "This first attempt nevertheless failed in the face of opposition from some of the citizens"; expulsion of the two reformers in April 1538; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Calvin, Jean": "At Easter 1538, after conflicts over the administration of the Lord's Supper [...] Farel and C. were banished from Geneva"; Wikipedia (en), art. "John Calvin": conflict over liturgical alignment with Bern (unleavened bread), refusal to celebrate the Lord's Supper, riot, order of the Council to leave the city. ↩
2. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above. ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": return to Geneva on 13 September 1541 with an official escort; Ecclesiastical Ordinances adopted by the Council on 20 November 1541; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Calvin, Jean": recall decided in 1540, drafting in 1541–1542 of three fundamental documents. ↩
4. Article "Calvin's Geneva", Wikipedia (en), cited above, which dates the Ecclesiastical Ordinances to 1541. ↩
5. Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": "1555: Opposition faction (Perrinists) defeated; Calvin's authority secured"; William G. Naphy, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation, Manchester University Press, 1994 (reissued Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, ISBN 978-0-664-22662-6). ↩

6. Revue européenne des sciences sociales, 2025/1, p. 155 et seq., abstract cited above. ↩

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