
The introduction is well written and clearly lays out the historiographical issues and problems of French Protestantism. It also makes a persuasive case for the importance of institutional history. Finally, it asserts that the ecclesiastical model developed in France was of greater importance in the shaping of a
Calvinist church polity than was the Genevan model. The first chapter considers not only the development of French Protestantism before the 1550s but also the importance of the illegal and covert nature of the nascent movement in the kingdom. Sunshine makes the interesting observation—which surely must have an impact on the entire discussion of institutional development—that nearly half of French Protestant churches were noble house churches. These played no part in the “drive for greater organizational unity” (23) and “were never integrated into the institutional structures of the French Reformed Church” (30). Indeed, a question logically arises: Can one speak of a French Reformed Church if half of the Reformed churches in France were not part of its structure? Moreover, as Sunshine notes (again, p. 30), the Huguenots were led by the nobles who attended and maintained churches that were not under the control of the confession or church to which they (nominally) adhered. Truly, the French Protestant church looks decidedly non-Calvinist and non-Reformed—and rather undisciplined—in this light. The third chapter turns to examine the national and provincial synods after the first Paris synod (1559) with which chapter 2 closes. In particular, this chapter emphasises the place of “equality” (among ministers and churches) in France as opposed to more hierarchical models adopted (e.g., Berne and Hungary) or advocated (e.g., Calvin) elsewhere, rejecting both bishops (or superintendents) as well as “mother churches.” This third chapter also has a useful, concise overview of the structural development of the synodical structure (47-57). The fourth chapter focuses on the adoption of the Confession and Discipline across French Protestantism. In effect, preexisting (again, nonnoble) churches were asked to join a provincial and national structure. This had implications for the personnel, polity, and beliefs of these local (largely urban) churches. Here, we see a full treatment of the Morély controversy that pitted a “disciplining congregational” structure against emerging “Presbyterian” institutions. While Morély’s congregational vision lost, the chapter also makes clear that Viret’s classe system (based on his experiences in the Bernese-dominated Pay de Vaud) was also a failure. The fifth chapter focuses on the development of the diaconate and, in particular, the stress laid on the social-welfare work of deacons as opposed to any idea that the diaconate was a ministerial “training post.” However, Sunshine stresses that deacons (perhaps because of the lack of sufficient ministerial personnel) were often given liturgical roles in the church. The sixth chapter looks at that “most Reformed” of institutions—the consistory. In particular, it considers the absorption of the diaconate into the eldership (the effectual merging of the offices). Chapter 7 looks beyond the institutional church to consider the important question of “noble churches,” the magistracy (largely and theoretically Catholic), the royal court, and international relations. The eighth chapter provides a succinct conclusion to the volume. As a whole, the book is fascinating and meticulous. The quantity of detail is excellent. Sunshine effectively shows the extent to which the French church was as much Gallican as Reformed and, in fact, the trend-setter elsewhere (as opposed to the Genevan model) for large Reformed polities. One issue that is treated in detail but left
largely unresolved is the extent to which one can discuss French Protestantism as a national institution—or single structure—when so many of its churches were not under the effective control of the official structure (synods) of the church. The question of noble churches and their place remains a significant problem in any discussion of the French Reformed Church (as opposed to French Reformed churches). Sunshine is correct to remind the reader consistently that the official designation was Reformed churches—the emphasis on the plural of equal and cooperating congregations rather than a denomination. The use of contractions (e.g., ‘hadn’t’, p. 16) is peculiar and, one hopes, a typographical oversight. The volume makes a useful contribution to the scholarly understanding of French Protestantism by highlighting its diverse and unique institutional nature, structure, and development.

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