
The third volume of the registers of the Genevan Consistory, published in a highly-detailed and annotated French edition, covers the years 1547 to 1548, six to seven years after the creation of the Consistory following John Calvin’s return from exile in 1541. The records of the Consistory meetings contained in this volume provide significant insights into the main issues facing the Genevan church toward the end of the 1540s. The introduction highlights many of the key themes and topics that the Consistory tackled during this period. As was the case in the previous volumes, the abbreviated and laconic style of the Consistory secretary’s minutes, combined with sixteenth-century French spelling and vocabulary, can make interpretation and analysis of this primary source a problem. Yet, readers’ perseverance is amply rewarded by the understanding they gain of the workings of the Genevan church and of social relations in early modern Geneva.
The consistory’s concerns can be divided into several categories, including marital and family relations, neighbor and community relations, and religious and worship-related issues. In terms of the first two categories, the Consistory’s main aim was consistent: They wished to restore harmonious relations that had broken down due to quarrels, physical violence, illicit activity, or disputes of various kinds. In most instances, the Consistory did not simply accept the accounts of those directly involved in the case. Instead, they called witnesses to testify to what they had seen or heard, and then attempted to get culprits to admit to what had happened on the basis of witness statements.

Those whom the Consistory judged to be at fault had to listen to a remonstrance, or verbal reprimand, by one of the pastors in attendance and had to reconcile with the others involved in the dispute. In more serious cases, those responsible could be barred temporarily from the Lord’s Supper and/or be referred to the city government for further investigation and punishment. Those appearing before the Consistory included men and women who had made promises to marry but then changed their minds, men who beat their wives or who were suspected of having made their maidservants pregnant, parents and grown children who were enmeshed in protracted family disputes, or neighbors who insulted one another. One growing problem recorded in this volume can be considered as a subset of neighbor disputes, namely friction between native Genevans and French refugees, who had fled their homeland because of persecution from French Catholic authorities. For instance, in February 1548, a Genevan man was called before the Consistory for having said publicly that all French refugees should be packed into a boat and sent down the Rhone river, i.e., back to Catholic France. The Consistory intervened quickly and decisively in these and other cases, to prevent the tensions from getting worse, but the number of cases suggests that the problem was in fact growing throughout the period.

Some of these disputes also tied in with religious issues. In particular, conflicts in the city were exacerbated when Genevans refused to recognize the authority of the Consistory, and specifically of its French-born pastors, to oversee and correct Genevans’ behavior. In several cases in 1547 and 1548, appearances before the Consistory only worsened relations, as offenders not only were reluctant to admit to any wrongdoing but, in fact, also turned the tables on the pastors by accusing them of unwarranted interference in people’s affairs. Other religious issues dealt with by the Consistory had to do with church attendance and remnants of Catholic practices, though the proportion of these cases compared to the total is much lower in this volume than in the preceding ones. Finally, a subset of cases reveals lay interest in theology: In 1547, there were at least three cases of men brought before the Consistory for having carried out their own exegesis of sermons preached in church and having discussed their interpretation with others. In the Consistory’s eyes, this practice was to be repressed because the men were thought to interpret the sermons incorrectly and set a bad example. These accounts provide evidence of the
growing institutional character of the church and its pastors as the sole legitimate interpreters of Scripture for the laity.

Overall, this volume, together with the first two, offers a rich resource for research on a wide range of aspects of Genevan social history. The editors and project team members are to be highly commended for continuing to publish these valuable records. So far, only the first volume is available in English. It is to be hoped that subsequent volumes will also be published in English so this important source can be used by even more scholars of Reformation history and theology.

—Karin Maag