
It is an occasional classroom trick of history professors to ask a student to recount her or his day in front of the class. Invariably, the student leaves a tremendous amount of material out—daily meals are mundane, getting dressed can be assumed because of presently being dressed, being on time (in an American culture) is a function of the ubiquity of timekeeping devices on every cell phone, every computer, and every classroom’s clock. It is easy to point out to the students that much of what the historian needs to know in order to grasp the world of another era lies so far beneath notice that it escapes being catalogued, counted, or chronicled. So, frequently the task of the historian is to get behind the shields that humans construct by lifting up what seems important, and obscuring what appears commonplace. Often, this requires sifting through evidence that was meant for one purpose, in order to glean other insights because of the facts or impressions that are available there.

In the study of early modern Geneva, the textbook case for this has been the recent development of research into the Consistory records. While the Consistory itself sought to have its records to help in its own work of seeking to better the moral climate of Geneva, a much later generation of historians have found these to be a treasure trove of fragments of information about how Genevans thought about marriage and sexuality, about taking care of their children’s futures, and about crime and punishment. With the publication of Wilhelmus Moehn’s new volume of Calvin’s sermons, another set of texts becomes available for scholars to comb through, both to consider their original purpose, and the wider ideal of reconstructing life in early modern Geneva. For make no mistake, sermons accompanied the lives of every Genevan—whether they liked it or not. The Wednesday and Sunday morning sermons that Genevans attended so regularly were a basic feature of their lives, and one that their government enforced upon them. There were sermons every day in Geneva, but some were compulsory. Significant insights into early modern Genevan life can be taken from these.

Significant studies can use the sermons as either corroborating evidence, or starting places to get into the everyday reality of the town during Calvin’s ministry. In one of Calvin’s sermons, the Reformer noted that the “... church bell tolls to call us together at a regular hour” (p. xv). Other scholars have examined this and noted the late arrival of clocks in the town (Engammare, 2009). Likewise, in a sermon that Moehn dates to 29 May 1558, Calvin speaks to the Genevans of the ways that believers in France are being persecuted, and gives an account of the viciousness of that persecution. Calvin uses that torment of the Parisian
believers to point out how easy it is in Geneva to confess the true gospel, and to remind his congregation that this is a gift from God, that others suffer grievously in the hope of such a privilege.

Another important usage of the sermons has come from comparative studies of the homiletical material that has survived. Calvin’s sermons have been compared to those of other Reformers and of the Catholics of his day to attempt to get behind the doctrine to ascertain the affect that the various preachers sought (Karant-Nunn, 2010). Other analysts have sought to compare Calvin’s theology that is presented in his treatises and the *Institutes* to that doctrine he presented to his congregation in a worship setting to see how they compared. The presentation of further sermons that have been meticulously edited is a great boon to Calvin studies in particular, and early modern studies in general.

However, if one sees the value of this edition wholly in the ways it allows the modern scholar to get “behind” the text to know more about Calvin’s Geneva, or about the emotions that Calvin meant to evoke, or how we can learn about early modern life in its political, familial, legal, and communal dimensions from these sermons, then that choice is to concentrate the modern gaze on the periphery. The most significant reason to delve into these sermons is for the window into Calvin’s thought, and by extension, the religious thought that was promulgated to the Genevans in the middle of the sixteenth century. For that, these are a marvelous source.

We have more of Calvin’s sermons than almost any other pre-modern preacher. This is true for many reasons. The first is that Calvin preached frequently. This was not extraordinary for the time, but did provide the necessary condition for the second reason—a great number of his sermons were transcribed as he preached them. That was a necessity—Calvin apparently delivered his sermons extemporaneously, having prepared no manuscript. Denis Raguenier, a trained stenographer, was hired in 1549 to take down Calvin’s sermons as he gave them in an early form of shorthand, which Raguenier would later transcribe into longhand. These collections became the basis of most of the printed collections of Calvin’s sermons, and explain the great number of Calvin’s sermons that have survived.

A few examples from this collection demonstrate both Calvin’s thought and his homiletical practice. Preaching on Christmas day in 1552, Calvin was expounding on Luke 2,1–14. While that is a perfectly natural text for the day, Calvin’s method of expounding the text exposes his own thought, and method of approaching the nativity event. Instead of beginning with some detail of the narrative, or the emotional draw to a newborn, Calvin began with his congregation, and the Christian reason for the approach to Bethlehem. “We know that all of our good, our joy and rest is wholly attached to the Son of God. As he is our head, we are his body, and it is from him that we hold our life and salvation and