
In the mid-1960s, two young American scholars, E. William Monter and Robert M. Kingdon, began to delve into the sixteenth-century registers of the Genevan consistory to an unprecedented degree, setting off a new wave of investigations into the implementation of Reformed discipline that continues into the present. Many of these studies have been undertaken by Kingdon’s own Ph.D. students (including me), and the topics of investigation have ranged widely. To date, however, no single book has provided a broad overview of the workings of the Genevan consistory and its embodiment of the Reformed ideals of Christian discipline as articulated by John Calvin and his Genevan colleagues. Robert Kingdon’s parting contribution to Reformation scholarship, completed with the assistance of Thomas Lambert and published after Kingdon’s death in December 2010, was to provide such an overview founded in his extensive knowledge of the consistory records, accrued over nearly five decades.

This volume, based on Kingdon’s 1999 Levi Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, reflects his career-long concern to produce work on Calvin and the Genevan Reformation that was free of both historical and current-day denominational agendas and biases. As Lambert explains in his brief preface, before suffering a brain hemorrhage in 2008, Kingdon had decided to revise his original 1999 lectures in order to incorporate subsequent scholarly findings. With Lambert’s assistance, Kingdon was able to complete the revised manuscript with updated references to recent scholarship and a conclusion reflecting his thoughts regarding the role of the consistory in the Genevan Reformation as they had developed a decade after the original lectures. The result is a concise discussion written in the conversational style of the original lectures and supported throughout with detailed references to evidence from the consistory registers.

The book is divided into six brief chapters and a conclusion, which, as a whole, illustrate the richness of the consistory registers as a source on many aspects of religion and society in early modern Geneva. The first chapter introduces the project to publish the registers of the Genevan consistory, which Kingdon and his team began in earnest in 1987. The five subsequent chapters are based directly on the Stone Lectures: The Importance of Order and Discipline to Calvinists; Reforming Public Worship; Reforming Religious Education; Reforming Marriage, Family and Sex; and Reforming Anger: Pacification and Control. An outstanding strength of these chapters is the seemingly casual imparting of Kingdon’s deep knowledge of sixteenth-century Genevan records and society. Throughout the text, he provides clear, well-focused explanations of the goals.
and practices of the consistory as well as examples of the challenges of using the consistory records. The footnotes, which are useful but not exhaustive, direct the reader to recent scholarship that shaped Kingdon’s final thoughts on this topic. Similarly, while the bibliography provides the names of many of the scholars who specialize in the Genevan Reformation, it should not be taken as a full reflection of the depth or breadth of current scholarship on Geneva or on early modern Reformed communities.

The chapters on discipline, worship, education, and marriage, taken altogether, allow the reader to identify the connections and themes that emerge from the registers in terms of the consistory’s overall goals and efforts in Geneva. While Kingdon provides many specific examples and anecdotes from the consistory records, in these chapters he is primarily reflecting on the significance of findings produced by scholars (including him) who have investigated these topics in great detail. In contrast, the final chapter on anger resulted from a project on “the emotion of hate in sixteenth-century Geneva and France” (p. xii) that Kingdon began during a semester-long seminar on the historicity of emotions at Hebrew University in 1998. This material, not published in any other venue, is the most suggestive chapter in the volume and, as Lambert notes, is characteristic of Kingdon’s ongoing curiosity and openness to new ideas and topics even later in his career, including, for example, investigations into reconciliation by younger scholars such as Christian Grosse.

One particular advantage of a book written at the end of a career is that it can allow the author a degree of informality and candor that may be part of his or her lecture style but is sometimes less apparent in published work. In this case, readers may especially appreciate instances of Kingdon’s unexpected, wry humor, as well as the fact that he allowed himself, especially in his conclusion, to articulate the connections that he drew between his historical research and global issues of the 21st century, as when he concludes: “In short, there is much in the attempts of Calvin and his earliest associates to create a model Christian community in Geneva that deserves the respect and emulation of his spiritual descendants in the world today and that might deepen significantly their attempts to lead a truly Christian life. But there is also much that needs to be avoided, that risks leading us back to tensions and hatreds that have plagued the international community of Christianity for too much of its history, from which we must escape” (p. 158).

Of course, one cannot help but regret that Professor Kingdon did not have the chance to work through this final project in good health and to develop his discussion in greater detail. Nevertheless, his final book provides an excellent introduction and overview, in the clear teaching style of his lectures, to those unfamiliar with the nuances of the Genevan Reformation. At the same time, the book will be valued by Reformation scholars because it provides the final perspective of a well-established expert on what we now know and what we