Elsie Anne McKee


Although there has been something of a renaissance of interest in Calvin’s sermons during the twentieth century, in the 21st century scholars sometimes still have to consult the manuscripts because of the absence of a critical (or even a printed!) edition. Elsie Anne McKee, Archibald Alexander Professor of Reformation Studies and the History of Worship at Princeton Theological Seminary, has done this job over the course of many years. Her latest study on pastoral ministry and worship in Calvin’s Geneva is the completion of a triptych which started in 1984 with a study on the diaconate and liturgical almsgiving, followed by a book on the elders and plural ministry. For her research on the diaconate she intensively used the manuscript of Calvin’s sermons on the Acts of the Apostles (since 1994 available in a critical edition in the series *Supplementa Calvariniana*). The present book is loaded with many quotations from Calvin’s *lectio continua* on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. McKee is responsible for the edition of these sermons and with the well-chosen selection of quotations she has already given a good insight into this rich source.

The project began with the preparation of *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (2001). The author combines her study of Calvin’s theology with an in-depth research of the data in the many archives of Geneva. After the deacons and elders the focus is now on the ministers and especially their task to preach the divine Word from the pulpit. It is the strength of McKee’s research method that at the same time the people in the pew never disappear from sight. This aspect makes this book not only interesting and valuable for theologians, but also for social historians.

The study is divided into four parts, starting with an analysis of the places and times of worship. Because almost exclusively sermons of Calvin are recorded, the impression could arise that John Calvin was the only one who preached to the Genevans. The opposite is true: from the very beginning of the Reformation in Geneva a team of ministers was active and they had their own system of ministerial rotation among the Genevan parish churches. This system was unique compared to the organization of worship in late medieval Geneva. “God had yoked the ministers together with a sacred tie to serve His glory and advance the Kingdom of His Son,” Calvin declared in sermon 18 on 1 Corinthians. A variety of preachers on the pulpit could prevent a personality cult. It is McKee’s merit to map this system in a profound way by using and combining the data of the baptismal registers with the entries of the marriage
registers. The huge amount of data is documented in the appendices and provided with comments (ca. 300 pages!).

The second part is devoted to the worship on the Lord’s Day, weekday worship, and especially to the day of prayer and the public rhythms of personal religious life—baptism and marriage. McKee is specifically interested in singing in corporate worship and the extent of active participation by the people in the pew. Building on the results of Pidoux and other researchers, she analyzes in a fresh way the tables for finding the Psalms in the consecutive editions of the Genevan Psalter.

Another aspect McKee discusses is the relation between the rhythm of weekly worship and the traditional liturgical calendar with its four feasts: Christmas, Circumcision, Annunciation and Ascension. Over the course of the years 1541–1550 the weekday calendar of special services was revised in several ways till the official abolition of the feast days as holy days in 1550. With regard to the Ascension McKee concludes: “Before the changes in 1550 there was probably an interruption in the lectio continua on the traditional day of Ascension, but there is no concrete evidence either for or against, and no sermons identified as given on that occasion have been preserved” (p. 298). The editors of the Supplementa Calviniana indeed could not identify any sermon for Ascension, but nevertheless some more evidence could be found in the Registers of the Consistory of Geneva. On Thursday May 11, 1542 the Consistory decided to remove the meeting of next week’s Thursday to Wednesday “a cause de la solemnité de l’Ascension” (Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin, vol. 1, p. 60). At least we find here some evidence that the preacher could have devoted a part of his sermon on that Thursday to the content of the Ascension. From the years 1546 and 1547 we know that there were the regular meetings of the Consistory on Thursdays—the day of Ascension.

The third part of the book is devoted to the preaching activity of the ministers in Geneva with—naturally—a concentration on Calvin’s preaching. Against the background of the late medieval preaching practice, the author underscores the profound innovations of Reformation preaching: the people in the pew and the minister on the pulpit see each other face to face and the preacher speaks their mother tongue. Like their colleagues in other Swiss towns, the Genevan ministers started to preach on complete books of the Bible in the form of a lectio continua instead of the prescribed lectionary of the Catholic Church. In a comprehensive attempt McKee tries to map Calvin’s sermons during his entire career as preacher in Geneva. She is very careful in presenting the results of her research, because it is a highly hypothetical reconstruction of what Calvin’s preaching before 1549 might have been. An intermediate header like “Guesswork, or what else is missing?” says enough.