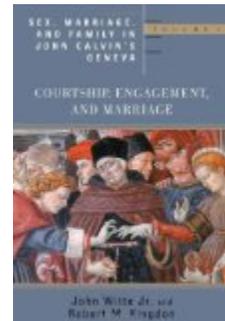


John Jr., Witte, Robert M. Kingdon. *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva, Vol. 1: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005. xxxii + 512 pp. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4803-1.

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Love in the Time of Calvin

In 1541 John Calvin returned to Geneva, after a three-year exile, to begin the reformation of that city in earnest. While Geneva had been officially Protestant for nearly a decade, church and city leaders were still struggling in their efforts to fully implement the reform. A key condition of Calvin's return was that he be given the authority to draw up a set of "ecclesiastical ordinances" to guide the process of reform. In order to enforce those ordinances, the city agreed to allow Calvin to establish a consistory, or morals court, made up of the city's pastors and twelve elders—laymen selected from the city's various governing councils.

With the support (generally) of the Consistory, Calvin continued to set guidelines and draw up ordinances regarding the behavior of reformed Genevans for the next two decades, until his death in 1564. One of his many influential set of rules was the Marriage Ordinances of 1546; while these recommended statutes did not become official law until 1561, they guided the decisions of both church and city leaders from the time of their writing. Taken together, Calvin's Marriage Ordinances and the extensive records of the Consistory provide a wealth of information regarding the implementation of Protestant ideas about marriage and the family in sixteenth-century Geneva. This is important not only for providing a useful example of these processes in early modern Europe; it also furthers our understanding of the far-reaching influence of Calvin's writings and the reputation Geneva gained in the mid-sixteenth century for being a thoroughly and strictly reformed city.

In this volume, John Witte and Robert Kingdon bring together Calvin's Marriage Ordinances and relevant cases from the Consistory records in order to examine the interplay between Calvin's thinking and the Consistory's decisions regarding courtship, engagement, and the ceremony of marriage. Their analysis is further enriched by excerpts from Calvin's theological writings, sermons, biblical commentaries, personal letters, polemical treatises, and catechetical texts. As both the leader of the Genevan church and one of the best-trained lawyers in the city, Calvin had great influence on religious and secular policies regarding the making and breaking of marriage contracts. At the same time, as Witte and Kingdon seek to show, Calvin's experiences as a pastor and Consistory member in Geneva helped to shape his thinking on these topics over time. In examining these connections between theology and practice, the authors are making significant contributions to two important discussions in early modern European, and especially Reformation, history: first, the advantages and challenges of using consistorial records to reveal important aspects of early modern society; and second, the need for historians and theologians to work together more effectively in understanding Reformation developments.

The success of this project is the combined result of the authors' individual expertise and interests. John Witte, Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University, has written extensively on Protestantism and the law, and increasingly on issues of marriage and family within that broader topic.

Robert Kingdon, Professor Emeritus of the Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, remains the leading expert on the work of the Genevan Consistory during Calvin's lifetime; he currently heads the project to edit and publish the Consistory records of 1542-1564. The primary sources included in this volume, many of which are not available elsewhere in English or even in published form in French, have been provided by the team of scholars working on the Consistory project.

The book is broken into fourteen chapters, organized around the key topics in the 1546 Ordinances relating to courtship, engagement, and the ceremony of marriage. Each chapter is split more or less evenly between the authors' discussion of the main subject and translations of the specific primary sources mentioned in the commentary. The clear and effective introduction lays out the organization of the book, the types of primary sources examined, and the key figures involved in teaching and implementing Calvin's ideas: Guillaume Farel, Pierre Viret, Theodore Beza, Germaine Colladon, and Francois Hotman. Here the authors also convincingly defend their selection of three sample years of Consistory records—1546, 1552, and 1557—as “watershed years in the evolution of the Genevan Reformation” (p. 22). Chapter one compares Calvin's Marriage Ordinances to traditional canon law, setting out both the similarities and the most important differences between them. The second chapter is a concise overview of the structure of the Genevan government, the workings of the Consistory, and the relationship between church and state in mid-sixteenth-century Geneva. In itself, this chapter is an invaluable tool for teachers trying to explain the political context of the Reformation and for scholars considering the Genevan Reformation for the first time.

The following chapters move through the process of courtship and engagement to the wedding itself. Topics addressed include the ideal qualities of a spouse (as vaguely defined by Calvin), the importance of individual consent to betrothal, parental consent, impediments to marriage (covered in several chapters), inter-religious marriage, property issues, the engagement period and its dangers of premarital sex and desertion, and the process of getting married (banns and the wedding). Among other things, these chapters demonstrate that both Calvin and the Consistory upheld certain ideas from canon law, including the importance of mutual consent to an engagement and the validity of some traditional Catholic impediments to marriage. At the same time, the Genevan reformers strengthened the emphasis on parental consent, rejected religious differences as a strict

impediment or reason to dissolve a marriage, and refused to acknowledge disputes over property (e.g., failure to produce a complete dowry as promised) as an acceptable reason to break an engagement. In many ways, including his emphasis on individual consent, parental consent, and insistence on the binding nature of engagement contracts, Calvin's thinking was in line with that of other reformers of the period. While Witte and Kingdon acknowledge this point, they could emphasize it more strongly in order to tie Calvin firmly to the broader context of the Reformation.[1] The most suggestive part of this project comes in the final chapter, which provides a brief discussion of the development of Calvin's covenantal theology. Here the authors state that “Calvin's covenantal understanding of marriage mediated both the sacramental and the contractual models of marriage that pressed for recognition in his day” (p. 488). This assertion suggests the profound impact of his Genevan experience on Calvin's covenantal principles, now seen as one of the defining aspects of Calvinist theology. This is a significant and enticing connection between history and theology which the authors intend to elucidate further in the subsequent volumes of this project (p. 3).

The primary goal of this project, as articulated by the authors, is “to show the extraordinary interdependence of these theological and legal resources [of the Calvinist reformation] and to demonstrate how they concretely informed the daily lives of Genevan citizens and institutions” (p.2). While the book focuses narrowly on Geneva and the Calvinist reformation, it is an important contribution to more general discussions on marriage and the family in early modern Europe. The authors make clear from the start that they will provide only selective references to secondary sources because their “principal preoccupation in this volume and its sequels is with the primary sources that tell the story of the reformation of sex, marriage, and family life in John Calvin's Geneva” (p. 26). Nevertheless, potential comparisons with other regions and other reformers abound. Readers may find themselves wishing for the inclusion of a complete bibliography, rather than only selective footnotes, to acknowledge those connections and provide some guidance in pursuing them.

Many of the specific issues addressed in this first volume demonstrate both the value and the difficulty of using Consistory records and tying those records to other types of sources. One particularly striking example is the discussion of Calvin's argument that in the case of the rape of a single woman, the rapist should be com-

pelled to marry his victim—particularly if the woman was a minor and her father consented (p. 121). While Calvin was following Mosaic law closely here, the authors acknowledge that it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain his stance in view of other teachings in which he more clearly prioritizes the welfare of women and the need for their consent to marriage. In this case, rather than clarifying our understanding of Calvin’s thinking, the Consistory records only muddy the waters further. The authors present three Consistory cases dealing with rape and attempted rape; in none of these cases was the victim forced to marry her accused rapist. While the examples shed considerable light on the flexible workings of the Consistory, they do not give particular insight into Calvin’s thinking. They do, however, provide a vital check on any consideration of Calvin’s stance on this issue, demonstrating clearly that his written arguments did not always translate directly into consistorial actions.

As mentioned above, Witte and Kingdon’s book is also an important contribution to the discussion about cooperation between historians and theologians; it demonstrates both the difficulties and the potential advantages of building a closer working relationship between these two disciplines. Eerdmans’ Religion, Marriage, and Family Series, of which this book is a part, is the second major publication project of the now defunct Religion, Culture, and Family Project, directed by Don Browning at The Divinity School of The University of Chicago and funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. That project ended in 2003, and the Eerdmans’ series, edited by Don Browning and John Witte, is now connected to the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at the School of Law of Emory University. Early modern social historians may be disconcerted by the book’s foreword, which sets out a clear and strong current agenda: using Calvin as a model and resource for current theological and religious questions regarding marriage and the family. This agenda fits the concerns of both the RMF Series and the

original RCF Project, which sought “to address the contemporary situation of American families from a range of theological, historical, legal, biblical, and cultural perspectives.”[2] In terms of historical work, however, such an agenda can risk coloring the selection and reading of sources with the authors’ and editors’ concern about current issues.

Fortunately, from the historian’s point of view, the contemporary agenda of the series in no way dominates the text itself. The authors’ choice to refer to sixteenth-century Geneva as “modern day” does implicitly emphasize commonalities between the sixteenth century and today, an admittedly debatable approach. But while the book provides plentiful material for discussions focused on current issues, the descriptions and commentary provided in the text focus unquestionably on Calvin and Geneva in the sixteenth century. As a result, this unique collaboration between Witte and Kingdon provides an effective model for the ongoing effort to connect ideas and practices in early modern Europe. The product of their efforts is an invaluable research and teaching tool that will be welcomed by early modern historians, historical theologians, and contemporary theologians alike.

Notes

[1]. For example, two key works that provide important comparisons but are not mentioned in the brief notes of this volume are: Joel F. Harrington, *Reordering Marriage and Society in Reformation Germany* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Jeffery R. Watt, *The Making of Modern Marriage: Matrimonial Control and the Rise of Sentiment in Neuchatel, 1550-1800* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[2]. The Religion, Culture, and Family Project, The University of Chicago Divinity School, <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/research/rcfp/>.

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