Sin and the Calvinists
Habent sua fata libelli
Sin and the Calvinists
Morals Control and the Consistory in Reformed Tradition

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Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Even in Paradise*, ca. 1510
Introduction

Raymond A. Mentzer

The disciplinary dynamics within the Reformed churches of preindustrial Europe have been the focus of considerable recent scholarship. Historians recognize that the Reformation was far more than the transformation of theological tenets or the introduction of new modes of prayer and liturgical practice. It also involved a careful reordering, delimitation, and supervision of the community. Toward this end, Calvinists everywhere set extremely high standards of comportment, which they then compelled through a kind of disciplinary tribunal known variously as the consistory, kirk-session, or presbytery. The pastors and lay persons serving as elders and deacons met weekly to supervise the religious life of the community. They had primary responsibility for ecclesiastical administration, social welfare, and above all, morals control. The elementary role of the consistory, kirk-session, or presbytery has made it the object of intense interest as much for what its workings reveal about Protestant culture as for what it can tell us about early modern society in general. Yet the nature, scope, and effect of the endeavor have not been established in any adequate or precise fashion.

The Calvinist definition and subsequent enforcement of good behavior are clearly areas where comparative analysis seems appropriate and helpful. How do the offenders who appeared before the Genevan consistory compare, for instance, with their fellow delinquents in the German Rhineland, the Netherlands, the French provinces, or Scotland? In what ways does the hierarchy of misdeeds vary from one part of Europe to another? How did the pastors and elders go about punishing offenders and inculcating a sense of moral responsibility? Where did they tend to concentrate their effort? What was the relationship of this undertaking to the interests and authority of the state?

The six essays presented in this collection introduce the rich possibilities for historical research. Their geographic scope generally corresponds to the spread of Calvinism in western Europe, extending from
Geneva to Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Scotland. They examine a variety of subjects and suggest a number of methodological approaches, while maintaining a focus on the Reformed consistory. Several contributions explore the many complex issues surrounding marriage and family life. Robert Kingdon discusses the first Calvinist divorce action, which occurred at Geneva in the mid-1540s. This sensational case suggests the initial framework by which adultery, and later desertion, became grounds for dissolution of the marriage bond with right of remarriage in Calvin's Geneva. Heinz Schilling broadens the discussion of these issues in a sweeping examination of Reformed control over marriage and family life in the neighboring communities of Emden and Groningen from the mid-sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Both German and Dutch Calvinists developed “modern” standards for marriage. Schilling’s extensive quantitative analysis, supplemented with narrative materials, makes plain the topography of the presbytery’s supervisory endeavor to avert marital strife, discourage separation or divorce, root out concubinage, foster harmonious households, prevent child neglect, and regulate sexuality. Finally, all these actions took place within the context of long-term cultural change.

Philippe Chareyre furnishes a broad portrait of consistorial activity at the southern French town of Nîmes. He focuses on the consistory’s efforts to strengthen family cohesiveness, pacify the congregation, and bring an end to profane distractions. The results were mixed, particularly when the pastors and elders challenged popular traditions and time-honored social exchanges. The use of excommunication by the consistories at Nîmes and nine other French towns and villages is the subject of my own contribution. It discusses the reasons behind exclusion from Communion, the rituals for reintegration, and the ways in which people accepted and internalized the structure of discipline.

Drawing on a rich database of nearly forty-six hundred cases from rural as well as urban kirk-sessions, Michael Graham surveys the disciplinary offensive during the first half-century of the Reformation in Scotland. The findings, above all the preponderance of sexual misdeeds, are surprising when set alongside the data from Germany, the Netherlands, and France. Graham views this apparent preoccupation with sex as a sign of the Kirk’s early weakness. Only later, when the ministers and elders enjoyed a stronger position, did they gradually turn to the chastisement of Sabbath breach, “superstitious” religious practices, neighborly disputes, and the like.
The concluding essay by Geoffrey Parker is a case study of the kirk session at St. Andrews. He stresses the deliberate yet firm acceptance of church discipline, and the growth of a close beneficial relationship between ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Again, the incidence of sexual wrongdoing dominates the overall pattern. And in what was surely a unique Scottish touch, the ministers and elders sentenced the worst miscreants to the precarious “stool of repentance.”

It must also be said that national differences and regional variations, despite their importance, should not obscure the striking commonalities in the Calvinist attempt to discipline the community. The convergencies and affinities affirm the fact that, amid diverse localized circumstances, the Calvinist tradition displayed a remarkable unity of purpose and procedure. The development underscores the strongly international character of Calvinism and the adaptability of its polity and institutions.

Finally, I would like to thank a number of people for their assistance in the planning and preparation of this volume. Geoffrey Parker first suggested the collection, and provided encouragement throughout. Stephen Burnett prepared a fine translation of Heinz Schilling’s article. Miral Gamradt and Richard Wojtowicz helped to design and produce the more intricate of the many tables and graphs. Mary Bolhuis clarified many details regarding Reformed belief and practice. The individual contributors, however, deserve the most credit, for in the end this project is theirs.
Albrecht Dürer, *Husband Trampling His Cheeky Wife*
About the Contributors

**Philippe Chareyre** is maître de conférence at the University of Pau.

**Michael Graham** is Professor of History at the University of Akron.

**Robert M. Kingdon** is Hilldale Professor emeritus of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison

**Raymond A. Mentzer** is the Daniel J. Krumm Family Professor in Reformation Studies at the School of Religion, University of Iowa.

**Geoffrey Parker** is Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History, Yale University.

**Heinz Schilling** is Professor of History at the Humboldt University, Berlin.
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