One of the central impediments to the ecumenical movement is the dispute concerning the proper form of church government. Presently, there are three major forms of church government within the Christian religion, namely episcopal, presbyterian and congregational. Proponents of each of these forms of church government appeal to Scripture and church tradition for the alleged superiority of their position. Yet, even a cursory examination of the development of each of these governments would seem to indicate that they are also consistent with the political theory of the age in which they arose. To what extent then are forms of church government a reflection of political theories rather than Scriptural principles? In this present study, I will examine the structure of the civil government of Geneva and how this structure is reflected in the form of government of Calvin's church in that city.

The Structure of Genevan Government

The government of Geneva in the time of Calvin consisted of three councils: the Small Council, the Council of Sixty and the Council of Two Hundred. The Small Council was the highest governing body, consisting of twenty-five members. These twenty-five members included four syndics (or chiefs of state), two secretaries and a treasurer. The Small Council maintained ultimate jurisdiction in all affairs of state. It supervised the conduct of all public officials. It also acted as the final appellate court in any disputes. Beneath the Small Council was the relatively obscure Council of Sixty. The primary responsibility of the Council of Sixty appears to have been to consider issues of an exceptional nature, particularly in the area of foreign affairs (Kingdon 1984:60). The largest official estate of Geneva was the Council of Two Hundred. This Council functioned primarily as an intermediary between the General Assembly, a commune of all eligible voters in Geneva, and the Small Council. Its primary role was to vote on legislation presented by the Small Council and each February, to elect members to that Council. They could also grant pardons to convicted criminals (Monter 1967:145).

The inhabitants of Geneva in the time of Calvin were divided into three categories: citizens, bourgeois and habitants. In order to be considered a citizen, a person must have been born within city limits to parents of that status. Citizens were given the highest privilege as well

as the highest responsibility in the city-state. Male citizens were obliged to participate in the government of the city. They voted as members of the General Assembly and could be elected to any of the three councils. Inhabitants of the city of Geneva that did not qualify as citizens could possess the privileged position of bourgeois. This position could be conferred upon individuals by the Small Council or purchased at a significant sum. The bourgeois were entitled to participate in the electoral process as members of the General Assembly and could assume positions in the Councils of Sixty and Two Hundred. Beneath the bourgeois were disenfranchised habitants. People in this category could not hold public office, except as a pastor or lecturer. They could be easily dismissed from their positions and expelled from the city by the Small Council.

All members of the Genevan councils were elected. The electoral process underwent some changes throughout the years of Genevan independence so not every election was alike.[1] Nevertheless, the elections did follow a relatively standardized, time-honoured practice. The elections were held every year in February. The General Assembly would be convoked and would have the responsibility of electing the four syndics that would preside over the Small Council in the coming year. Every three years, the General Assembly would also elect a Treasurer. The four syndics were elected from a list of eight candidates, which was submitted by the Small Council. The newly elected syndics would then convoke the Council of Two Hundred, who would elect the remaining people that would comprise the Small Council. In most cases, the Council of Two Hundred would simply reaffirm the incumbent. If a position was contested, there were at most two candidates. Once the election of the syndics and the Small Council was complete, the Small Council would meet to elect the members of the Council of Two Hundred and the Council of Sixty. After the conciliar elections, the newly elected Small Council and the Council of Two Hundred would participate in a special meeting known as the *conseil des offices* in order to elect persons to the administrative positions of Geneva. The Genevan elections involved both the work of the councils as well as general suffrage.

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[1] See Monter 1964:88-89. My subsequent description of Genevan elections draws primarily on Monter 1964:85-89.

The Structure of Calvin's Church

The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541 established the structure of Calvin's church in Geneva. The ordinances, written by John Calvin and enacted by the Small Council and the Council of Two Hundred, recognized four orders for the government of the church: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. In some respects, the organization of the four orders and the institutions in which they functioned resembled or even adopted structures of the Genevan government.

Of the four orders, the pastors were invested with the greatest responsibility. The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* assigns them several crucial tasks:

> . . . their office is to proclaim the Word of God for the purpose of instructing, admonishing, exhorting, and reproving, both in public and in private, to administer the sacraments, and to exercise fraternal discipline together with the elders or delegates (36).

In addition to these duties, pastors also "had to acquire and display considerable rhetorical skills" (Kingdon 1984:61). For unlike their Catholic counterparts, Protestant pastors generally did not possess civil power. Yet, the pastors of Calvin's church were important spokesmen of the church to Genevan governing councils. In order to work in partnership on these important responsibilities, the pastors formed the Venerable Company of Pastors. The Company maintained discipline among the pastors, oversaw the election of pastors and discussed all the affairs of the church. They possessed a comparable authority in their power over the church as that exerted by the Small Council in civil matters.

The election of pastors followed a format very similar to the election of syndics. Before being considered for the position of pastor, candidates underwent a rigorous examination by the Company. Once the candidate had satisfied the Company, the candidate's position among the pastors would be subject to votes by the Small Council and the people of Geneva (or, at least, his local congregation). Once elected, the pastor then assumed authority over his local congregation

and became a member of the Company. Thus candidates were elected in a process that involved both the work of councils as well as general suffrage just as in the case of the syndics.

The second order of Calvin's church, teachers, did not have a substantial role in the early years of Calvin's ministry. Teachers were responsible for the instruction of sound and right doctrine. As this responsibility also fell upon the pastors, the teachers, as a separate and distinct order of the church, do not seem to have appeared until the Genevan Academy opened in 1559. From that point forward, the teachers assumed the responsibility of educating children, "preparing them both for the ministry and for the civil government" (*Ordinances* 41). Teachers, therefore, taught not only doctrine and theology but also the broader disciplines of language and the humanities.

The Elders of Calvin's church were lay people invested with authority in ecclesiastical discipline. The Elders were elected in the *conseil des offices*, the joint meeting of the Small Council and the Council of Two Hundred, which took place after the annual Genevan elections. Candidates for the elections were selected by consultation between the Company and the Small Council. Twelve Elders were chosen, two from the Small Council, four from the Council of Sixty, and six from the Council of Two Hundred (*Ordinances* 41). These Elders served together with the pastors on Geneva's court of ecclesiastical discipline, the Consistory.

Though quite distinct from its predecessors, the Consistory developed out of the existing matrimonial courts that had been established in Geneva during Calvin's exile from the city between 1538-41 (McGrath 1990:112). The purpose of the Consistory was to admonish members of the community who were leading disorderly lives (*Ordinances* 41). The Consistory, therefore, dealt with matters such as marital infidelity, fornication, failure to attend church, relapses into the Catholic faith, drunkenness, and other such vices. The Consistory was not intended to wield authority in civil matters and therefore, Calvin emphasized that the primary role of the institution was to admonish, not punish, offenders (Monter 1967:137); the Consistory would "wield only the spiritual sword of the Word of God" (*Ordinances* 49). The primary weapon of the Consistory was excommunication. Securing the right to wield this weapon, however, involved a lengthy dispute

with the Small Council. The battle for control of this prerogative lasted nearly 14 years, from 1541 to 1555. It was a significant victory for Calvin, for nowhere else in Protestant Europe did the church retain this right (Monter 1967:138).

The development of the fourth order, the deaconate, clearly reveals the influence that Geneva had upon the organization and structure of Calvin's church. Calvin divided deacons into two classes: those "who administered alms" and those who "devoted themselves to the care of the poor and the sick" (*Institutes* iv.323). In his commentary on 1 Timothy, Calvin employed the language of existing institutions in Geneva when he named these deacons as *procureurs* and *hospitalliers* respectively (Kingdon 1971:60). The *procureurs* were essentially rectors in charge of Geneva's *Hôpital-Général*, an institution created in 1535 (before Calvin's arrival in the city) to laicise and consolidate the many social welfare programs that had existed under Catholicism. The *procureurs* managed the finances and properties within Geneva that provided poor relief. They were elected to their offices in the annual *conseil des offices* and formed their own council in order to coordinate their responsibilities. The *hospitalliers* were directly responsible to this council of *procureurs* and assumed the responsibility of actually caring for the poor. In the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, Calvin invested *procureurs* and *hospitalliers* as the deacons of the church (42-43). As Kingdon notes, Calvin "did not in any sense create or direct this institution [but] he did consecrate it" (1971:61). It is, therefore, a clear example of the influence that Geneva had upon Calvin's church.

The structure of Calvin's church then bears a noticeable stamp of Genevan government and administration. Just as in Genevan government, authority was exercised through a series of governing councils, namely the Company, the Consistory and the council of *procureurs*. In the same manner as their civil counterparts, the officials on these councils were selected by a combination of conciliar appointments and general suffrage, creating a system of representative government. Moreover, the Consistory and the *Hôpital-Général* were pre-Calvin institutions assumed into Calvin's ecclesiastical structure. These points demonstrate that Genevan government, institutions and ideas influenced the structure of Calvin's church. It also

demonstrates that Calvin did not enforce a foreign and radical agenda upon the inhabitants of Geneva. In fact, it may be that Geneva shaped Calvin as much as Calvin shaped Geneva.

Conclusion

In Calvin's treatise on civil government, he discusses the three forms of government that existed in his day, namely monarchial, aristocratic and democratic (*Institutes* iv.656-657). It seems, and as this present study supports, that these forms of government correspond to the forms of government in the church; the monarchial with the episcopal, the aristocratic with the presbyterian and the democratic with the congregational. If such is this case, then it is appropriate that in our interactions as Christians, particularly in the ecumenical movement, that we should consider Calvin's comments on the forms of government:

> And certainly it were a very idle occupation for private men to discuss what would be the best form of polity in the place where they live, seeing these deliberations cannot have any influence in determining any public matter. Then the thing itself could not be defined absolutely without rashness, since the nature of the discussion depends on circumstances. And if you compare the different states with each other, without regard to circumstances, it is not easy to determine which of these has the advantage in point of utility, so equal are the terms on which they meet . . . If you fix your eyes not on one state merely, but look around the world, or at least direct your view to regions widely separated from each other, you will perceive that Divine Providence has not, without good cause, arranged that different countries should be governed by different forms of polity . . . For if it has pleased him to appoint kings over kingdoms, and senates or burgomasters over free states, whatever be the form which he has appointed in the places in which we live, our duty is to obey and submit (*Institutes* iv.656-657).

In my opinion, these words should be the starting point for the ecumenical movement and inter-Christian dialogue on the role of church government in our Faith.

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