

# CALVIN AND BASEL: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OECOLAMPADIUS AND THE BASEL DISCIPLINE ORDINANCE FOR THE INSTITUTION OF ECCLESIASTICAL DISCIPLINE IN GENEVA

OLAF KUHR, JOSHUA BAPTIST CHURCH, HANOVER-  
LANGENHAGEN, GERMANY

'It seems to me, that we shall not have a lasting church unless the old, that is apostolic, church discipline is in its totality reinstated – which is needed in many respects among us.' So John Calvin wrote to Zurich's Bullinger in 1538.<sup>1</sup> Calvin's verdict seems to echo the words which the Basel Reformer John Oecolampadius had written some thirteen years before. 'As far as I can see', he had confessed in his defence against Jaques Masson, 'it shall never be well with us unless excommunication is maintained according to the apostolic and evangelical rule in the churches.'<sup>2</sup> For both Reformers, the issue of church discipline was of fundamental importance for the reformation of the church. But while his early and untimely death in 1531, only two and a half years after the city of Basel had officially embraced Protestantism, prevented Oecolampadius from completing his reform work in this respect, Calvin was the one to succeed and establish what the former had in mind. It is well known that, concerning church discipline, the Reformers of Basel and Geneva basically thought along

---

<sup>1</sup> Calvin to Bullinger, February 21, 1538 (*Ioannis Calvini Opera*, vol. 10/2, Nr. 93, p. 154).

<sup>2</sup> See Jaques Masson and John Oecolampadius, *Iacobi Latomi theologiae professoris de confessione secreta. Ioannis Oecolampadii Elleboron, pro eodem Iacobo Latomo* (Basel, 1525), fol. H3<sup>v</sup>. For the life and thought of John Oecolampadius see my forthcoming study, Olaf Kuhr, 'Die Macht des Bannes und der Busse': *Kirchenzucht und Erneuerung der Kirche bei Johannes Oekolampad (1482-1531)*, Basler und Berner Studien zur Historischen und Systematischen Theologie (Berne: Peter Lang, 1998); also Ulrich Gäbler, 'Oekolampad', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 25 (Berlin, New York, 1995), pp. 29-36 (literature!); Hans Rudolf Guggisberg, 'Johannes Oekolampad', *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 5: *Die Reformationszeit I*, ed. Martin Greschat (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 117-28; less valuable but still the only essay of some length in English that is easily accessible, Gordon Rupp, 'Johannes Oecolampadius: The Reformer as Scholar', *Patterns of Reformation* (London, 1969), pp. 3-46.

the same lines.<sup>3</sup> For both, the power to excommunicate rests with the church and should be exercised independently of the secular authorities.<sup>4</sup>

However, in spite of the ecclesiological similarities between the two Reformers, modern research has only occasionally touched upon the issue of a possible influence of Oecolampadius on Calvin. While

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Paul Wernle, *Calvin und Basel bis zum Tode des Myconius, 1535-1552* (Basel, 1909), pp. 3-11; Walther Köhler, *Zürcher Ehegericht und Genfer Konsistorium*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1942), pp. 505-19, 555-61, 673; Akira Demura, 'Church Discipline According to Johannes Oekolampad in the Setting of his Life and Thought' (unpublished PhD Diss.; Princeton, 1964), pp. 161-80; Uwe Plath, *Calvin und Basel in den Jahren 1552-1556* (Zürich, 1974), pp. 17-22; J. Wayne Baker, 'Christian Discipline and the Early Reformed Tradition: Bullinger and Calvin', in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker (Kirksville, 1988), pp. 107-19.

<sup>4</sup> For Calvin's concept of ecclesiastical discipline see R. N. Caswell, 'Calvin's View of Ecclesiastical Discipline', in *John Calvin*, ed. Gervase E. Duffield (Appleford, 1966), pp. 210-26; Wilhem H. Neuser, 'Dogma und Bekenntnis in der Reformation: Von Zwingli und Calvin bis zur Synode von Westminster', *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 2: *Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Konfessionalität*, ed. Carl Andresen (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 165-352, at 265-8 (lit.); Robert White, 'Oil and Vinegar: Calvin on Church Discipline', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985), pp. 25-40; Richard R. De Ridder, 'John Calvin's Views on Discipline: A Comparison of the Institution of 1536 and the Institutes of 1559', *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986), pp. 223-30. For the institution of the Consistory and the practice of discipline in Calvin's Geneva, see Robert M. Kingdon, 'Calvin and the Establishment of Consistory Discipline in Geneva: The Institution and the Men who Directed it', *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 70 (1990), pp. 158-72; *id.*, 'Social Control and Political Control in Calvin's Geneva', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, Sonderband: Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa: Interpretationen und Debatten*, ed. Hans R. Guggisberg and Gottfried G. Krodel (Gütersloh, 1993), pp. 521-32; *id.*, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); E. William Monter, 'The Consistory of Geneva, 1559-1569', Monter, *Enforcing Morality in Europe* (London, 1987), pp. II 467-II 484; still valuable is Köhler, *Ehegericht*, vol. 2, pp. 504-652.

scholars generally agree that the Basel Reformer and the disciplinary system he helped to institute in his city should be seen as a potential if not probable source for Calvin's thought in this matter,<sup>5</sup> a detailed study comparing the two Reformers and their respective systems of discipline is still lacking. This paper will investigate the relation of the Geneva model to its Basel predecessor and re-examine the question how far an influence of Oecolampadius and his ideals on Calvin's concept of church discipline is discernible. To this end we shall, in addition to looking at Calvin's first systematic statements concerning discipline, examine in particular the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* which were drawn up by Calvin in 1541 and revised several times down to 1561.

### The First Edition of the *Institutes*

Already in the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) Calvin emphasized the benefits as well as the necessity of church discipline: 'It is all to the good that excommunications have been instituted by which all those should be expelled and banished from the fellowship of believers who...are nothing but a scandal for the church and therefore unworthy to pride themselves on the name of Christ.' For Calvin, the benefits are threefold. First of all, excommunication prevents the name of God from being insulted and his holy church from being brought into disrepute. Secondly, the ban averts the danger that through bad example other Christians might be corrupted. Finally, it is designed to bring shame on the culprits and thus lead them to repentance.<sup>6</sup> Calvin was convinced that, as in all human societies, so in the church, too, there was a need for an order which, under the preservation of the law, would ensure the peace and unity of the community. Such laws he

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul Wernle (*op. cit.*, pp. 3-11) was the first to point out that concerning ecclesiastical discipline the Reformer of Geneva might have received some fundamental insights during his first stay in Basel (see also Plath, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-22). Without convincingly substantiating his thesis, Akira Demura (*op. cit.*, pp. 161-80) claimed a direct influence of Oecolampadianism on Calvin (see also Demura, 'Calvin's and Oecolampadius' Concept of Church Discipline', *Calvinus ecclesiae Genevensis custos*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser [Frankfurt a.M., 1984], pp. 187-9). More recently J. Wayne Baker, 'Christian Discipline and the Early Reformed Tradition: Bullinger and Calvin', pp. 110f., argued that an influence of Oecolampadius on the Reformer of Geneva had to be seen as a real possibility.

<sup>6</sup> *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta* [= OS], 5 vols., ed. Peter Barth *et al.* (Munich, 1926-52), vol. 1, pp. 89f.

compared with the sinews by which the body is held together. Without them the church is bound to lose its structure and disintegrate.<sup>7</sup> Although, in his first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin did not explicitly use this metaphor with regard to ecclesiastical discipline, he nevertheless spoke out the fundamental conviction which henceforth would lie at the heart of his understanding of discipline.<sup>8</sup>

It might not be a coincidence that Calvin's first systematic comments concerning church discipline date back to the days when, as a refugee, he had sought a safe haven in the city of Basel. Presumably in January 1535 he had come there to live the quiet life of a scholar under the pseudonym of 'Martianus Lucianus'. Calvin stayed for about a year in Basel.<sup>9</sup> The preface of the *Institutes*, in which he dedicates his work to Francis I of France, dates from August 23, 1535. When the book appeared in spring of the following year, Calvin had already left the city. The further circumstances of the drafting of the first edition remain in the dark and it is not known which parts were written in Basel. Therefore, we have to leave open to what extent his remarks about church discipline were influenced by what he might have observed and learned concerning the ban there. Only very little is known about Calvin's first sojourn in Basel. It seems that his social intercourse was largely restricted to the scholarly world. He was in contact with Simon Grynaeus and Sebastian Münster, who were professors of Greek and Hebrew at the university, as well as with the well-known humanist and professor of law, Boniface Amerbach. At the same time, he apparently remained a stranger to the leading men of the Basel church. When the first edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1536, Markus Bertschi, at that time parish minister of St. Leonhard, called Calvin only 'a certain Frenchman'.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église et du culte of 1537***

However, we have reason to assume that Calvin watched the ecclesiastical situation in Basel very closely. A first indication that the model of the Basel church possibly had some influence on the Reformer of Geneva is found in the *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église et du culte* which, in the name of the Genevan ministers,

---

<sup>7</sup> OS 1, pp. 255f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. OS 1, p. 479 (*Ad Sadoleti epistolam*, 1539); OS 5, p. 212 / *Inst.* 4:12:1 (1559).

<sup>9</sup> For Calvin's first visit to Basel, see Wernle, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-8; Plath, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-22.

<sup>10</sup> Wernle, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Farel and Calvin submitted to the city Council in January 1537.<sup>11</sup> The *Articles* are, to a large extent, the work of John Calvin who, when passing through Geneva in the summer of 1536, was urged by Farel to stay and to help carry through the reformation of the Genevan church. They were not written as a draft church ordinance but rather as a theological opinion in which the Genevan ministers submitted various recommendations concerning the reorganization of the church to the city Council. In the *Articles*, the Reformers called for a more frequent celebration of communion, the exercise of excommunication, the introduction of congregational psalmody, compulsory catechetical instruction for the young, and the creation of a secular matrimonial court. Furthermore, all residents of Geneva were to sign a common declaration of faith.

When, shortly before, the city had associated itself with the Reformation, Geneva had also accepted the Bernese communion ordinance which prescribed that the Eucharist should be celebrated only four times a year. Although the Genevan ministers judged weekly communion to be desirable, they were prepared to make concessions because of the 'great weakness of the people'. Therefore they suggested a monthly communion service which should alternate between the three main parish churches of the city. It is possible that this proposal was inspired by Basel's eucharistic ordinance. The *Reformation Ordinance* of 1529 laid down that the Lord's Supper had to be celebrated in Basel each Sunday, alternating between the four city parishes.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, concerning the call for a mandatory common profession of faith, the introduction of psalmody and the religious instruction of children, one can also point to the model of the Basel church. In 1534, the city Council and all guilds had to sign the Basel Confession, which had been drawn up by Oecolampadius' successor, Oswald Myconius. Following the example of the Strasbourg church, psalm singing had been common in Basel since 1526, and the *Reformation Ordinance* made it a duty of all parish ministers to instruct the young in the Christian religion.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> OS 1, pp. 369-77; Eberhard Busch *et al.* (eds), *Calvin Studienausgabe*, Band I/1 (Neukirchen, 1994), pp. 114-29 (for the question of authorship see Peter Opitz, *ibid.*, pp. 109f.).

<sup>12</sup> OS 1, pp. 370f.; cf. *Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Basler Reformation in den Jahren 1519 bis Anfang 1534 [=AGBR]*, 6 vols., ed. Emil Dürr and Paul Roth (Basel, 1921-50), vol. 3, Nr. 473, p. 395.

<sup>13</sup> See Karl Rudolf Hagenbach, *Johann Oekolampad und Oswald Myconius, die Reformatoren Basels: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften* (Elberfeld, 1859), p. 353; Ernst Staehelin, *Das*

The most striking parallels between the Genevan *Articles* and the Basel church, however, are to be found in the area of church discipline. The issue of excommunication receives the most detailed attention in the theological opinion of the Genevan ministers. According to the *Articles*, Christ instituted the measure of the ban with the intention that 'the holy eucharist should not be soiled and tainted', and to this end one had to pay attention with the greatest of care. If one were really to fear God, then one had to heed the instructions of the Bible also in Geneva.<sup>14</sup> Following, partly verbatim, the respective paragraphs in Calvin's *Institutes*, the necessity of excommunication is seen to be threefold: it prevents the name of Christ from being insulted, leads the culprit to repentance, and ensures that other Christians are not being corrupted by bad example.<sup>15</sup> The reason for the misuse of the ban by the medieval church is seen in the fact that the bishops usurped the power to excommunicate which rightly belongs to the whole fellowship of believers. Since the ban is of a fundamental importance for the church, which 'cannot be in a right order without taking seriously the instructions of the Lord', the *Articles* demand that some men of moral integrity should be appointed from the congregation to be in charge of disciplinary measures together with the ministers. Each one of these 'commissioners' (*deputez*) will be assigned to a particular quarter of the city where it will be their responsibility to keep watch over the moral life of the people and report misdeeds to the ministers. The *Articles* leave open the question who is to reprimand the delinquent in private or how often this might take place. However, for the Genevan theologians church discipline concerns not only ministers and 'commissioners' but also parents and neighbours, whose duty it is likewise to reproach evildoers privately before reporting them to the ecclesiastical authorities. Should the warning of the offender be without any success, the minister has to make his or her name known to the congregation. Only after this measure has also proved to be ineffective should the delinquent be excluded from communion. The *Articles* state explicitly that 'beyond this reprimand' the church has no further authority. The magistrates, however, should consider whether excommunicates may go unpunished for their 'contempt of God and his gospel'.<sup>16</sup>

---

*theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads* (Leipzig, 1939), pp. 443-6; *AGBR* 3, Nr. 473, pp. 389f. For a comparison of Geneva and Basel see also Wernle, *op. cit.*, pp. 10f.

<sup>14</sup> *OS* 1, p. 371.

<sup>15</sup> *OS* 1, p. 372; *cf.* *OS* 1, pp. 89f.

<sup>16</sup> *OS* 1, pp. 373f.

The disciplinary system which the *Articles* propose shows some remarkable parallels to the Basel Discipline Ordinance and to Oecolampadian ideals. First of all, it must be stressed that a direct involvement of ordinary lay persons as well as the creation of a mixed ecclesiastical court for the exercise of church discipline, a court which would comprise representatives from both congregation and ministry, was a characteristic feature in Oecolampadius' plan for the introduction of church discipline.<sup>17</sup> In his programmatic speech *Oratio de reducenda excommunicatione* before the Basel magistrates in May 1530, he had already proposed in some detail a disciplinary system similar to the *Articles*. According to Oecolampadius, the power to excommunicate rests with the church as a whole. Ecclesiastical discipline, therefore, should not be the sole responsibility of the ministers but also involve members of the laity so that both could act for and on behalf of the whole church. For this reason, the Basel Reformer had proposed the creation of the new ecclesiastical office of the 'censor' who would be in charge of discipline together with the minister. Like the 'commissioners' of the *Articles*, Oecolampadius' *censores* were representatives of the congregation. Both the Basel Reformer and the *Articles* also introduce their call for a more active participation of lay persons by pointing out that the misuse of the ban was largely due to the unlawful usurpation of the disciplinary powers by the bishops. Another parallel between the *Articles* and Oecolampadius is that the latter, too, had proposed that a delinquent should first be privately admonished by individual members of the congregation before taking the matter to the 'censors'. And, finally, the plan to assign each 'commissioner' to a particular district of Geneva was already practised in Basel, where the four city parishes each had their own disciplinary court.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The *Articles* of the Genevan ministers implicitly called for the creation of a new ecclesiastical court similar to the model which had already been established in Basel. The *desputez* clearly parallel Oecolampadius' *censores*, as we shall see. Thus, Alister McGrath is slightly mistaken when, by pointing to the absence of the *seniores* from the 1537 *Articles*, he says: 'The articles for the organization of the church at Geneva...anticipate virtually every aspect of the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* of 1541 – with the notable exception of the Consistory' (Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 113; see also *ibid.*, p. 295, n. 25).

<sup>18</sup> For a comparison with Basel see: *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads [= BrA]*, ed. Ernst Staehelin, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1927-34), vol. 2, Nr. 750, pp. 452-7; *AGBR* 5, Nr. 76, pp. 60-62.

It should be said, however, that concerning the suggested discipline ordinance, the Genevan *Articles* of 1537 remain, on the whole, rather general and avoid going into much detail. Therefore, in spite of the parallels that have been noted, we cannot unequivocally answer the question whether and to what extent Oecolampadian ideals and, in particular, the Basel Discipline Ordinance had an effect on the theological opinion of the Genevan ministers. Taking into account that parallels to Basel are also found in the other sections of the *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église et du culte*, as we have seen, it nevertheless seems to be very probable that Calvin received some fundamental impulses from his first visit to Basel which he soon and independently developed further.<sup>19</sup>

### Calvin's Eucharistic Liturgy

In contrast to the 1537 *Articles*, we are able to identify in Calvin's eucharistic liturgy of 1542 a distinct influence from Basel at one characteristic point: the solemn excommunication by which the 'unworthy' were declared to be banned from the communion table without being named. Although the Genevan ordinance does not give a verbatim translation of the respective section in the Basel liturgy and also places the excommunication at a later point in the order of service, it is evident that the latter has been a source for Calvin's communion ordinance. This can be seen not only from the formal pronouncement of the ban, which had been a special characteristic of the reformed Basel liturgy since 1526, but also from a list that follows and which specifies the various groups of persons who are considered to be excommunicated. The list reveals exactly the same structure as we find in the Basel communion ordinance. Also in its contents, there are several parallels.<sup>20</sup>

### The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541

While in 1537 Calvin did not succeed in his attempt to introduce reforms in Geneva according to the *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église et du culte* and had to leave the city in 1538, the situation had changed when he returned to Geneva in September 1541.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wernle, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. OS 2, pp. 46-7 with: (a) *Form und gestalt wie der kinder tauff, Des herren Nachtmahl, und der Krancken heym süchung, jetz zü Basel von etlichen Predicanten gehalten werden* (Basel, 1526), fol. B1<sup>v</sup>-B2<sup>r</sup>; (b) *AGBR* 3, Nr. 473, p. 394. For the origin and the sources of Calvin's Geneva liturgy see Markus Jenny, *Die Einheit des Abendmahlsgottesdienst bei den elsässischen und schweizerischen Reformatoren* (Zürich, 1968), pp. 125-30.



Immediately after his arrival he began to draft a new church ordinance. After the *Petit Conseil* as well as the Council of Two Hundred had demanded several changes, the revised *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* were finally adopted by the *Conseil Général* on November 20, 1541. With this church ordinance Calvin not only established the four ministries within the church – *pasteurs, docteurs, anciens* und *diacres* – which became a characteristic of his ecclesiology, but also created the *Consistoire*, a new ecclesiastical court for the enforcement of ecclesiastical discipline, comprising both ministers and lay persons. We shall now turn to these *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* and investigate the relationship between Calvin and the Genevan disciplinary system on the one hand and Oecolampadius and the Basel Discipline Ordinance on the other.<sup>21</sup>

While the *Articles* of 1537 had been a mere theological opinion containing a series of proposals for a fundamental reform of the Genevan church, Calvin presented, with the *Ordonnances*, a comprehensive church ordinance in which nearly all recommendations of the *Articles* were embodied. However, the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* are more than just a realization of the reform principles laid down in 1537. At the same time they betray a further development in Calvin's thought and reveal how his ecclesiological concepts have become more specific. This applies in particular to the issue of church discipline. For the *Articles*, the 'Commissioners' had just been representatives of the congregation carrying out a specific duty. In the *Ordonnances*, however, they become bearers of one of the four offices in the church which Christ has instituted. As elders, it is their responsibility to watch over the moral life of the parishioners and 'to admonish amicably those whom they see to be erring or to be living a disordered life'. In such a case the matter has to be referred to the Consistory in which it is collectively decided if and what further steps should be taken. The number of the elders is limited to twelve of whom two are to be elected from the *Petit Conseil*, four from the Council of Sixty, and six from the Council of Two Hundred. The candidates are suggested by the *Petit Conseil* who, however, first have to consult the ministers. The election of the elders needs to be

---

<sup>21</sup> For the text of the Ordinances see *OS* 2, pp. 325-89; see also François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (London, 1965), pp. 69-81; McGrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-14. The most thorough analysis of the Ordinances and in particular its excommunication ordinance is given by Köhler, *Ehegericht*, vol. 2, pp. 555-68. The following discussion of the Ordinances is based exclusively on the revised version which was adopted by the *Conseil Général* in November 1541.

approved by the Council of Two Hundred. The Council has to decide annually whether an elder should remain in office for another year or someone else is to be elected in his place.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the election of the elders by the secular authorities, the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* unambiguously characterize their office as being merely ecclesiastical. Even more so, it is a ministry instituted by Christ. It is this theological argument which is new here and in which Calvin clearly goes beyond Oecolampadius. For the latter, the idea of representation was central: the 'censor' was a representative of the congregation and, together with the minister, of the whole church. For Calvin, he was not just an ecclesiastical office-bearer in charge of disciplinary matters but the *presbyter* of the New Testament. The concept of representation is here, in contrast to Oecolampadius, only subordinate.<sup>23</sup>

The *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* do not only contain regulations concerning the four ministries of the church but also include a detailed excommunication ordinance. Its instructions oblige the elders to convene each week in order to discuss disciplinary matters together with the ministers. To the sessions of this disciplinary court the Consistory may summon all persons they wish to reprimand. Since they do not possess any coercive power to enforce a summons, council servants have to cite the incriminated persons to appear before the Consistory.<sup>24</sup> The excommunication ordinance distinguishes two categories of offences, each of which requires a slightly different

---

<sup>22</sup> OS 2, pp. 339-40.

<sup>23</sup> For a comparison with Oecolampadius' programmatic speech *Oratio de reducenda excommunicatione* see BrA 2, Nr. 750, pp. 454-7. By this speech and the subsequent Basel Discipline Ordinance of December 1530 the Basel Reformer created the new office of the church elder who, as a lay person, was in charge of church discipline (see also Staehelin, *Lebenswerk*, pp. 511f.). For Oecolampadius, however, the New Testament served only as a model for the new office of the *censores*. Calvin, by contrast, identified the *anciens* with the Bible's *presbyteroi*. While the Reformer of Geneva had not been the first to introduce the office of church elder, he was the first to connect it directly to a New Testament office. Although for Calvin the idea of the divine institution is clearly central, it cannot be said that the concept of representation is completely absent. This can be seen in particular from the selection mode for the *anciens* which requires the elders to be chosen from all three Councils.

<sup>24</sup> OS 2, p. 358. As in Basel, the weekly sessions of the Consistory were to take place on a Thursday.

procedure. The first category comprises public teaching against the received religion (*dogmatise contre la doctrine receue*) as well as negligence in regular church attendance due to open disregard of the church ordinances. Persons guilty of these offences should be excluded from taking communion, after being repeatedly admonished or instructed without success and, furthermore, be reported to the magistrates.<sup>25</sup> The second category covers all moral offences. In contrast to Basel, it is explicitly mentioned that even hidden or secret sins are subject to ecclesiastical discipline. However, they should not be reported to the Consistory unless the delinquent had been repeatedly admonished in private and had proved to be 'recalcitrant'. Offences that are publicly known are further classified as trespasses, which the church must reproach, or as criminal acts, which need to be punished by the magistrates in addition. In the first case the delinquents are to be cited before the Consistory and reprimanded. Should a culprit not reform his or her life, this procedure is to be repeated as often as it is judged necessary. Only after the failure of these disciplinary actions has become evident, is it to be announced to the delinquent – not, as in Basel, to the public – that as a 'despiser of God' he must abstain from communion until he has reformed his life. In the case of a criminal offence, however, the delinquent has to be banned immediately. According to the gravity of the crime, a fixed time has to be determined in which the culprit is barred from the sacrament. The ministers are explicitly given the right to reject all who in defiance of an excommunication sentence seek to receive communion.<sup>26</sup>

A comparison with the Basel Discipline Ordinance reveals that the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* establish a new disciplinary system that is largely independent of its Basel predecessor. A marked difference is the 'casuistic' structure of the Genevan discipline ordinance. According to the nature and the seriousness of the offence different disciplinary procedures are given. Also, the admonition by the elders always has to take place before the whole Consistory and can be repeated at will, a feature which is reminiscent of Martin Bucer and

---

<sup>25</sup> OS 2, p. 358. Neuser (*op. cit.*, p. 266) leaves one with the incorrect impression that Calvin, in contrast to Oecolampadius, included the supervision of doctrinal matters in the discipline ordinance. However, also in Basel offences of a distinct religious character like 'blasphemy', 'contempt of the sacraments' or failing to attend church on a Sunday had to be punished by the *censores* just like moral offences (see e.g. AGR 5, Nr. 76, pp. 60-62 = BrA 2, Nr. 809, pp. 536-8).

<sup>26</sup> OS 2, pp. 358-9, 360.

his Ulm Church Ordinance of 1531.<sup>27</sup> A catalogue of offences, in which particular sins are listed according to the Ten Commandments, as found in the Basel Discipline Ordinance and other southern German church ordinances, is missing. In Geneva all trespasses are in principle subject to ecclesiastical discipline so that even secret lapses could be publicly disciplined provided a culprit was judged 'recalcitrant'. Criminal acts cause immediate excommunication without prior admonition. Another difference is that in Geneva the ban is announced only to the delinquent, while in Basel it was also heralded from the pulpit.<sup>28</sup> Although the Genevan discipline ordinance is anxious to point out that everything should be carried out in moderation so that no one should be burdened with unnecessary hardship,<sup>29</sup> it has to be said that, on the whole, the *Ordonnances* present a stiffer disciplinary system than the one which had been instituted in Basel. The Genevan discipline ordinance can be seen as the visible expression of Calvin's understanding of ecclesiastical discipline according to which all aspects of private and public life need to be subject to Christ's government in and through his church.

Notwithstanding the differences between Geneva and Basel, the fundamental ideals of Oecolampadius concerning ecclesiastical discipline had been realized by the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques*. Here one only has to point to the institution of the Consistory. While for political reasons Oecolampadius was unable to establish a central disciplinary court for the whole church (instead, each city parish had its own), Calvin did succeed. As in Basel, it was a mixed ecclesiastical body comprising both ministers and lay members. In spite of the fact that in both cities the Council was in a position to exercise political control over it, the disciplinary courts of Basel as well as the Genevan Consistory were, in principle, simply ecclesiastical institutions. Beyond the formal admonition of a delinquent and the pronouncement of excommunication they had no further powers. Neither for Oecolampadius nor for Calvin did the ban itself have any immediate legal effects outside the church.

### The Struggle to Introduce Ecclesiastical Discipline

The disciplinary system instituted by the *Ordonnances*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Robert Stupperich *et al.* (eds.), *Martini Bucerii Opera Omnia*, Series I: *Deutsche Schriften* (Gütersloh/Paris, 1960- ), vol. 4, pp. 394-5.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Basler Chroniken*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Burckhardt (Basel, 1945), pp. 144f. (= *BrA* 2, Nr. 854, p. 596); see also *AGBR* 5, Nr. 80, pp. 67f. (= *BrA* 2, Nr. 852, pp. 593f.).

<sup>29</sup> *Os* 2, pp. 360-61.

*Ecclésiastiques*, however, was not as unambiguous as it might appear at first sight. Since the Council had insisted on several changes, it was also a document of compromise containing the seed of further conflict. It was certainly not an insignificant alteration of Calvin's draft ordinance when the Council added to the designation of the office of the Elders the phrase that the *anciens* were also 'commissioners of the Council' (*comys ou deputes par la seigneurie*). Strikingly, *anciens* in the draft discipline ordinance was replaced by *comys* in the approved text. The amendment of the draft shows that the Council was determined to define Calvin's Elders, against the Reformer's theological intention, primarily as representatives and agents of the magistrates. Another detail that would allow conflicting interpretations of the discipline ordinance was the fact that the Consistory is nowhere given the *explicit* right to pronounce a ban. The word *excommunication* is conspicuously absent from the text. Instead, the text states only generally and without further explication that a particular person should be informed that he or she was to abstain from communion.

That the Council was not yet prepared to concede any legal powers, ecclesiastical or secular, to the Consistory or to the ministry, can be seen from a paragraph that was appended to Calvin's draft ordinance. It was declared there that the clergy should not possess any *jurisdiction civile* but have only the spiritual sword of the divine Word. The authority and jurisdiction of the Council was not to be impaired by the Consistory in any way.<sup>30</sup>

As far as church discipline was concerned, the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* were by no means unambiguous, nor did they settle the issue of who would be in control of the power of excommunication. The opposing interpretations to which the Ordinances gave rise soon led to further conflict.<sup>31</sup> It was not until fourteen years later that the battle was finally decided. When the opponents of Calvin, led by Ami Perrin, obtained political control of the Council in the annual elections of February 1553, the smouldering conflict re-erupted with full force. In a dramatic move against Calvin, and as a direct challenge to his ecclesiastical authority, the Council openly denied the Consistory the right to excommunicate. However, the embittered battle that ensued led eventually to the complete political victory of Calvin and his followers in 1555. Perrin and his party had to leave Geneva.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> OS 2, p. 361.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Wendel, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-4. The ambiguity of the *Ordonnances* in this respect was overlooked by McGrath (*op. cit.*, p. 110).

<sup>32</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, pp. 93, 98-101; McGrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 121-3; see also Baker, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-19; J. W. Baker, 'Christian

Five years later, on February 9, 1560, the Council of Two Hundred passed a resolution that marked the end of the long struggle over the nature of the Consistory. It was made unmistakably clear that it belonged to the church and not to the state. Any mayor of the city, it was decreed, who at the same time was also a member of the Consistory, had to leave his staff of office at the doorstep whenever he would lead the church together with the other elders and the ministers.<sup>33</sup> By this instruction it was spelt out unambiguously that, although secular and ecclesiastical government might be interwoven as far as individuals were concerned, church discipline was not subject to the magistrates. It had to be exercised independently. Church and state were two separate entities. Calvin had finally secured what Oecolampadius had always envisaged but could not realize.

### Conclusion

This essay has drawn attention to the several parallels and similarities which can be observed to exist between Calvin and the Genevan order of ecclesiastical discipline on the one side and the Basel Discipline Ordinance and its intellectual father, John Oecolampadius, on the other. The nature as well as the limitation of the available source material, however, does not allow a definite verdict whether the ideas and concepts of the Basel Reformer exercised a direct influence on Calvin. The outright dependence of the latter on the former cannot be established beyond doubt. Nevertheless, the overall evidence of the consulted sources points clearly to a distinct influence. The similarities and parallels we have noticed make it highly probable that Oecolampadian ideals and, in particular, the order of ecclesiastical discipline, which Calvin came to know during his stay in the city of Basel, made a lasting impact on the Frenchman. While the precise extent of this impact cannot be ascertained, its factuality should not be doubted.

Oecolampadius was certainly not the only Reformer of the first generation to influence the development of Calvin's ecclesiological thought. In this respect, the role of the Strasbourg Reformer, Martin Bucer, has already been brought to our attention.<sup>34</sup> From 1538 to

---

Discipline, Church and State, and Toleration: Bullinger, Calvin, and Basel 1530-1555', in *Reformiertes Erbe: Festschrift für Gottfried W. Locher zu seinem 80. Geburtstag*, vol. 1 (= *Zwingliana* 19/1), ed. Heiko A. Oberman *et al.* (Zürich, 1992), pp. 35-48.

<sup>33</sup> OS 2, p. 362.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Courvoisier, 'Bucer et Calvin', in *Calvin à Strasbourg 1538-1541: Quatre Etudes* (Strasbourg, 1938), pp. 37-66; Wendel,

1541, much longer than in Basel, Calvin stayed in Strasbourg where he ministered a congregation of protestant refugees from France. Although the influence Bucer had on Calvin should not be overestimated, it is clear that the Strasbourg experience, and Bucer in particular, served as a source for his ecclesiology.

While Calvin never met Oecolampadius, he had worked alongside Bucer for three years. However, the shadow of Oecolampadius reached far beyond the city of Basel in which the Frenchman had sojourned only a short while. During the summer months of 1531 the Basel Reformer, together with his colleague, Martin Bucer, helped to introduce the Reformation in the southern German imperial cities of Ulm, Memmingen, and Biberach. Initially, Bucer had been highly critical of Oecolampadius' plans to institute autonomous ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>35</sup> It therefore proved to be a significant success for the spread of Oecolampadian ideals that, while working on the Reformation of the church in Ulm, the Strasbourg Reformer was won over by his colleague from Basel. The Ulm Church Ordinance, drafted largely by Bucer alone, shows just how much he had learned from Oecolampadius. If thus one is to estimate and compare the significance of both Reformers for the development of Calvin's ecclesiological thought and, in particular, for the institution of discipline in Geneva, we have to take into account that not just Calvin but Bucer, too, were among those who learned from the Basel Reformer.

---

*op. cit.*, pp. 137-44; on Bucer and Calvin see also: Gottfried Hammann, *Entre la sect et la cité: le Projet d'Église du Réformateur Martin Bucer* (Geneva, 1984), *passim*; Martin Greschat, *Martin Bucer: Ein Reformator und seine Zeit* (Munich, 1990), pp. 157f.; Amy Nelson Burnett, *The Yoke of Christ: Martin Bucer and Church Discipline* (Kirksville, 1994), pp. 206f.

<sup>35</sup> On this and the following, see Kuhr, *op.cit.*, chapter IV. 3. b.