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Children of the People of God : Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva

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In August 1551, the Genevan Consistory found itself confronted with a situation involving an illegitimate, abandoned and apparently unbaptized child.¹ At the end of July, Pierre de la Mar, a member of a prominent Genevan family, had summoned Martin de Loerne to his home. When he arrived, de Loerne, the lieutenant of the local *châtellain*, found an infant who had been left on de la Mar's doorstep. As de Loerne began to inspect the child, he discovered a note, which Pierre grabbed from him and tried to hide. When pressed by de Loerne, de la Mar finally admitted that the message said that the baby belonged to his brother, Philibert. De la Mar then asked de Loerne to find a nurse to care for the child, since his brother was not present and Pierre did not consider the child to be his own responsibility. Although de Loerne tried to fulfill this request, he was unable to find care for the child, so he returned to de la Mar's house and told Pierre that he would have to find a way to care for her in his own home until his brother returned. Ultimately, Pierre convinced Martin to take the child to *his* home, promising to pay for a nurse to care for the baby there.²

While the most immediate problem of caring for the child was solved by imposing on relatives and neighbors, rather than on the *Hôpital General*, a scandal quickly developed regarding the un-

¹ All primary sources for this article are housed in the Archives d'État de Genève. I will use the following abbreviations in the citations : R. Consist. : *Registres du Consistoire* – RC : *Registres du Conseil* – RC Part. : *Registres du Conseil pour les affaires particulières* – PC : *Procès Criminel*, 1e série – PC2 : *Procès Criminels*, 2e série – EC : État Civil – *Institutes* : John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols (Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 1960). All excerpts from the *Institutes* are taken from Battles's translation.

² R. Consist. 6, f. 49v, 6 August 1551; f. 52, 13 August 1551. PC2 959, 14 – 18 August 1551; PC2 963, 17 September 1551.

baptized state of the infant. During the subsequent weeks, Philibert de la Mar refused to appear before the Consistory to recognize the child as his own. The Genevan ministers, in turn, refused to baptize the baby without knowing the name of her father. A week after de Loerne first appeared before the Consistory to report the situation, the City Council learned of the situation and ordered that the child should be baptized. Following this decision, Martin de Loerne brought the child to a church in Foncenez and showed the minister the magistrates' order, requesting that he baptize the girl. Still, the pastor refused to baptize the infant without knowing the name of her father.³ Several days later, the Council addressed the situation once again, in conjunction with a second, similar case in Jussy also involving an abandoned child of undetermined baptismal status. The Council ordered that both infants should be baptized "*in order to avoid scandal*." They also ruled that Philibert de la Mar should publicly acknowledge his daughter and take responsibility for her.⁴ This time, apparently, de la Mar's child was baptized. Almost two months later, however, he was still denying that the baby was his.⁵

This case is an excellent example of some of the many concerns and competing interests connected to the practice of infant baptism in sixteenth-century Geneva. Here we have a father, Philibert de la Mar, more interested in protecting his family honor (and perhaps his finances) than in taking responsibility for a child born out of wedlock. His efforts to protect himself collided with the priorities of both the city and church officials of Geneva. In the case of an illegitimate child, both city and church were intent on discovering the name of the child's parents in order to establish and enforce responsibility for that child, as well as to subject the parents in question to the discipline of the Reformed church. In a situation like this one, where the baptismal status of the child was unknown, the pastors were further concerned about the possibility of rebaptism. Jean Calvin and his colleagues were anxious not to baptize a child a second time, convinced that such an action would offend God by belittling the significance of the child's first, and only necessary, baptism. The city magistrates, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of easing the shared anxieties of the Genevan community

³ PC2 959, 14 – 18 August 1551.

⁴ RC 46, f. 40v, 18 August 1551.

⁵ R. Consist. 6, f. 62v, 1 October 1551.

by going ahead with a baptism in order to assure people that the church and city authorities were not so callous as to simply leave a baby unbaptized indefinitely.

This incident raises a number of issues that were both important and contested in sixteenth-century Genevan society, including the significance of infant baptism as a sacrament; the role of the baptismal ceremony as an entrance into the overlapping communities of church, city and social networks; and the importance of the ceremony in publicly establishing parental responsibility for the baptized child. To date, the practice of infant baptism and these related issues have received little attention from scholars of the history of Geneva or of the Reformation.⁶ They are, however, vital to a thorough understanding of the context and impact of both religious and political controversies in Reformation Geneva. Decisions and discussions regarding infant baptism were closely tied to competing views of the place of children in Genevan society, the responsibilities of parents and the authority of both church and city in overseeing the lives of Genevan families. As envisioned by the reformers, baptism was a sign of God's inscrutable grace, a visible reminder of God's covenant with the community of faithful Christians and the introduction of a newborn child into that community. For the city magistrates, baptism may have been all this, but it was equally important because the baptismal registry provided a written record of newborn Genevans and their parents — an important instrument for enforcing parental responsibility, both spiritual and financial. For many parents, the ceremony of baptism provided reassurance

⁶ William Naphy addresses archival cases concerning baptism in Geneva in his examination of the naming controversy of the late 1540s and 1550s: William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 144–53. Two recent works that focus on baptismal practices in places *other* than Geneva are: Will Coster, *Baptism and Spiritual Kinship in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) and Michael James Halvorson, "Theology, Ritual and Confessionalization: The Making and Meaning of Lutheran Baptism in Reformation Germany, 1520–1618" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2001). The following works give limited attention to infant baptism as part of studies on ritual or families in the Reformation: David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 97–194; Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An interpretation of early modern Germany* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 84–126; Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 164–6.

regarding the fate of a child's soul, and it also presented the opportunity to extend and reinforce social networks through the selection of godparents.

In order to illustrate some of the ways in which these interpretations of infant baptism challenged and shaped one another, this article will focus on three main topics : emergency baptism, the selection of "inappropriate" godparents and, as in the de la Mar case, the baptism of illegitimate children. All three of these issues involved changes in traditional practice, and all three provoked, in various ways, disagreements about the theological significance of baptism, the importance of social connections and reputations, and the spiritual and material care of children. Examining these particular issues reveals both debate and negotiation among the church pastors, city officials and Genevan inhabitants and provides a clear sense of the significant role that infant baptism and the practices associated with it played in shaping the Reformed Genevan community.⁷

The Argument

At the center of incidents like the one involving the de la Mar family lay the sacrament of infant baptism — one of only two sacraments maintained by Jean Calvin and his Reformed followers. Sometimes referred to by modern scholars as the "other" sacrament, infant baptism has been largely overlooked by historians and historical theologians in favor of communion.⁸ And yet, baptism is fundamental not only to understanding Calvin's vision for the church, but to fully comprehending the priorities of Genevan inhabitants and the dynamics involved in establishing the Reformation in Geneva. Analyzing the baptismal liturgy itself is only one part of this endeavor. It is equally important to examine the arguments

⁷ The following discussion is largely based on the research and findings of my recently published book : Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva : The Shaping of a Community, 1536 – 1564* (Aldershot : Ashgate, 2005).

⁸ Most recently, Christian Grosse has produced an excellent dissertation on the topic of communion in Geneva : Grosse, "Les rituels de la cène : une anthropologie historique du culte eucharistique réformé à Genève (XVI^e – XVII^e siècles)" (PhD dissertation, Université de Genève, 2001). Examples of references to baptism as the "other" sacrament include : Mark Tranvik, "The Other Sacrament : The doctrine of baptism in the late Lutheran reformation" (ThD dissertation, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1992) and Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2002), p. 119.

and confrontations among church leaders, city officials and Genevan inhabitants regarding baptismal practices in order to shed light on the processes of negotiation involved in the Genevan Reformation.

Analysis of these conflicts and debates demonstrates clearly that the establishment of the Reformation was not a simple process of imposition by church and city authorities and reaction by Genevan inhabitants. Rather, the confrontations and discussions concerning infant baptism were part of a wider process of negotiation regarding the care and place of children in Genevan society. The outcome of such struggles affected the future of church, city and individual families. As the following discussion will show, the conflicts and negotiations regarding infant baptism and its related practices grew out of three main types of concerns : theological questions about the purpose and efficacy of infant baptism ; social concerns involving family honor, prestige and the importance of kinship networks ; and issues of authority, in particular matters involving responsibility for the religious and financial care of children.

It is not, of course, possible to separate these concerns entirely from one another. Rather, we must recognize the connections among them. Both the separate priorities of city, church and parents and the overlapping interests among those groups helped to define the shape and direction of the Genevan reformation and the place of children with that Reformed society. As a result, infant baptism provides a useful lens through which to examine the relationship between the Reformation as it was envisioned by church and city leaders and as it was realized in the actual, less-than-ideal community of sixteenth-century Geneva.

Emergency Baptisms

The prohibition of emergency baptisms was one of the most obvious changes that Calvin and his colleagues made to Genevan baptismal practices.⁹ As a result of developments in medieval baptismal theology, emergency baptisms had become common practice across Europe. In a situation where a newborn infant was sickly and

⁹ For an earlier version of this discussion, see : Karen E. Spierling, "Daring Insolence toward God? The Perpetuation of Catholic Baptismal Traditions in Sixteenth-Century Geneva," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 92 (2002), pp. 104 – 12.

death appeared to be imminent, the midwife (or in some cases any baptized adult present) would baptize the child. The purpose of an emergency baptism was to ensure that the child's soul would not end up in limbo, the resting place of unbaptized infants.¹⁰ As this concept of infant limbo became accepted, the Roman Catholic church faced a potential dilemma : If they insisted that only priests could perform baptisms, church authorities risked condemning sickly newborns to limbo. One alternative would have been to teach that infants who died without baptism would still be accepted into heaven, but this would have thrown the very meaning of baptism into question. Instead, the church officially recognized the practice of emergency baptisms performed by midwives in people's homes.¹¹

In a direct challenge to this traditional practice, the Reformed church insisted that infant baptism was valid only when performed in a church, by a minister, after a sermon, in front of a congregation.¹² For Calvin, one of the most vital aspects of the sacraments was their public nature : both baptism and communion were intended to be public signs of God's covenant with faithful Christians and to affirm the church community. The significance of baptism lay not simply in the formula spoken and the water placed on the infant's head. The full effect of the sacrament was realized only when a congregation was present to witness the ceremony, to welcome the child into the church community (thereby committing to the spiritual care of the child as he or she grew up) and to hear the sermon which, ideally, would remind them of the significance of their own baptisms and of

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas addressed the idea of infant limbo in the thirteenth century. A.R. Colón and P.A. Colón, *A History of Children : A Socio-Cultural Survey Across Millennia* (Westport, CT : Greenwood Press, 2001), pp. 205 – 6.

¹¹ Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound : Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 172; Merry Wiesner, "Early Modern Midwifery : A Case Study," in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 106 – 7; Linda Pollock, "Childbearing and female bonding in early modern England" *Social History* 22 : 3 (October 1997), pp. 295 – 301. On medieval Catholic concerns about emergency baptism, see Kathryn Ann Taglia, "The Cultural Construction of Childhood : Baptism, Communion and Confirmation," in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom : Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan, C.S.B.*, ed. Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal (Kalamazoo, MI : Western Michigan University, 1998), pp. 260 – 64.

¹² *Les Sources du Droit du Canton de Genève*, ed. Émile Rivoire and Victor van Berchem (Aarau : H.R. Sauerländer & Cie, 1927 – 30), vol. 2, p. 385.

their responsibilities as faithful Christians.¹³ An emergency baptism performed privately, by a midwife, in the presence of desperate parents, did not satisfy any of these requirements.

Furthermore, from Calvin's point of view, the reasoning behind emergency baptism placed limitations on God, an idea that Calvin always found unacceptable. Calvin and the Reformed pastors rejected entirely the concept of limbo, arguing instead that if a child was unfortunate enough to die without baptism, it was still within God's power to accept that child into heaven. A human action could not, according to Calvin, determine the actions of God. Even to suggest the possibility was to insult God :

God declares that he adopts our babies as his own before they are born, when he promises that he will be our God and the God of our descendants after us [Gen. 17 : 7].

*Their salvation is embraced in this word. No one will dare to be so insolent toward God as to deny that his promise of itself suffices for its effect.*¹⁴

One might argue that, carried to its logical conclusion, this argument suggests that baptism as a sacrament was irrelevant, at least in terms of an individual's relationship with God. But despite his rejection of emergency baptism, Calvin maintained that baptism was vital as a sign of God's grace and covenant with humanity, an act of comfort for parents and an event marking the entrance of the child into the church community.

¹³ On the design of Calvin's baptismal liturgy, see Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, pp. 55 – 60. On Calvin's baptismal theology, see also : John Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition : An Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) ; Egil Grislis, "Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism," *Church History* 31 (March 1962), pp. 46 – 65 ; Jill Raitt, "Three Inter-related Principles in Calvin's Unique Doctrine of Infant Baptism," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 : 1 (1980), pp. 51 – 61 ; Bryan D. Spinks, "Calvin's Baptismal Theology and the Making of the Strasbourg and Genevan Baptismal Liturgies 1540 and 1542," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48 : 1 (1995), pp. 55 – 78 ; T.F. Torrance, "L'Enseignement baptistal de Calvin," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 9 (1959), pp. 141 – 52 ; Jules Martin, *Notion du Baptême dans Calvin* (Montauban : Imprimerie Administrative et Commerciale J. Granié, 1894).

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 4.15.20.

This simultaneous insistence on the importance of infant baptism and rejection of emergency baptism set the stage for disagreements and conflicts between the Consistory and some Genevan church members. Debate regarding infant baptism revolved around a variety of issues, including the authority of the Reformed church, the authority of midwives, the salvific effect of infant baptism, parental authority and parental responsibility for children's souls. Calvin and his colleagues faced the challenge of trying to impose an immediate change in practice while working more slowly to teach people about the reasons for that change. During the course of their efforts, they confronted parents (and midwives) who considered themselves to be faithful Christians and church members, but who sought more reassurance about the fate of their children's souls than Reformed teachings offered.

For their part, the Genevan church and city authorities viewed emergency baptism as a Catholic practice and interrogated women accused of participating in such baptisms to determine whether they were still "*papists*." For example, in March 1544, the Consistory questioned Ayma Baux regarding an emergency baptism that had taken place at her home. Baux's brother-in-law had impregnated one of Baux's servants, who subsequently gave birth to a boy in Baux's house. When questioned, Baux testified that the newborn was sickly, so they got some water, and the midwife baptized the child "*in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*." Having heard her testimony, the Consistory then examined Baux regarding her Christian faith and standing as a church member. She responded that she was not always able to attend sermon because she had "*so much business*" but that she did not pray to the Virgin Mary (a sure sign of Catholicism) and that she always entrusted herself to God. Furthermore, she asserted, she no longer followed Catholic fasting practices.¹⁵ Apparently the Consistory accepted Baux's assertions; the record makes no mention of remonstrance or any other punishment. Still, the presence of this case in the Consistory records and the wording of Baux's testimony make it clear that Genevans were familiar with the practice of infant baptism and that the purpose of such a baptism was specifically to care for an infant facing the possibility of imminent death.

¹⁵ R. Consist. 1, f. 172v, 3 March 1544. On the association between emergency baptism and Catholic belief, see also : R. Consist. 5, f. 80v, 20 November 1550.

The Consistory addressed this concern more pointedly several years later, in May 1548. At a meeting on 3 May, they questioned Claude, the wife of Nycollas Mestral, and the midwife who had baptized her child. In this case, the Consistory admonished the two women for the “*great infidelity of thinking that if the children of the faithful do not have an external sign, they perish.*” The lesson continued : “*The children of the faithful are saved, even as the faithful are certain that God is their God and the God of their children.*” *The court then sent the women away “with admonitions to mend their ways.”*¹⁶ While Calvin himself intended this point of theology to provide comfort to parents, he continued to keep infant baptism as a sacrament, affirming the importance of the ritual. He also asserted in the *Institutes* that while truly faithful Christians could be confident of their own salvation, presuming to be certain about the election of another person would be to place yet another limitation on God.¹⁷ Perhaps partly as a result of the complicated nature of this theological argument, a number of Genevans continued to take greater — or at least additional — comfort in the more concrete traditional practice of emergency baptism. This apparently was a matter both of uncertainty about Reformed teachings on the efficacy of baptism and of disagreement regarding the “*proper*” role and authority of midwives. For example, in March 1550, Jehan Geno’s wife, Loyse, found herself accused of wanting to baptize infants “*fully*” — with water — when death seemed imminent. Loyse asserted to the Consistory that she had never baptized a child, although she admitted having cut open the abdomen of a dead woman in order to save the life of the baby inside. The case concludes : “*She denies ever having baptized. Remonstrances have been made to her.*”¹⁸

¹⁶ R. Consist. 4, f. 25, 3 May 1548.

¹⁷ *Institutes*, 4.1.3.

¹⁸ R. Consist. 5, f. 12v, 20 March 1550. Across western Europe, early modern midwives faced increasing challenges not only to their authority to baptize infants, but to their medical practices, as well. See : Jacques Gélis, *La sage-femme ou le médecin : une nouvelle conception de la vie* (Paris : Fayard, 1988); Myriam Greilsammer, “The midwife, the priest, and the physician : the subjugation of midwives in the Low Countries at the end of the Middle Ages,” *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 : 2 (1991), pp. 285 – 329; Alison Klairmont Lingo, “Empirics and Charlatans in Early Modern France : The Genesis of the Classification of the “Other” in Medical Practice,” *The Journal of Social History* 19 : 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 583 – 603; Wiesner, “Early Modern Midwifery”; Hilary Marland, ed., *The Art of Midwifery : Early Modern Midwives in Europe* (London : Routledge, 1993).

While the individuals accused of performing emergency baptisms were almost always women, the members of the Consistory did not articulate their objections specifically in terms of *women* performing baptisms. The emphasis was always on the problem of a *lay* baptism that had happened outside of a church and without a minister of congregation. At the same time, it is important to note that, in his *Institutes*, Calvin himself placed special emphasis on the problem of women baptizing. He did not, however, address this issue specifically until the 1559 edition of his the *Institutes*. The section criticizing the practice of emergency baptism first appeared in the 1543, but it was not until 1559 that Calvin added the final paragraph of that section, attacking the “*dogma that baptism is necessary for salvation*.”¹⁹ This edition also included two new sections in which Calvin discussed the topic of *women* baptizing babies, dismissing the possibility as unscriptural.²⁰

This late addition of a discussion about women performing baptisms indicates that, whatever the primary objection of the pastors to emergency baptisms, midwives did continue to baptize infants in Reformation Geneva. For the parents and midwives involved, emergency baptisms apparently provided some solace in an anxious situation. In most cases, little could be done to save the life of a dying newborn; the familiar words and actions of the baptismal ritual must have provided some comfort to people feeling otherwise helpless. But from the reformers’ perspective, this practice stripped baptism of its importance as a ritual of introduction into the Reformed community. Furthermore, it increased the possibility that a newborn child would be exposed to practices the reformers considered “*superstitious*,” such as praying to saints for assistance. In 1552, for example, a midwife called La Taborine appeared before the Consistory to respond to accusations that she regularly invoked the name of St. Barbe during childbirth and then baptized the children that she delivered. As had Loyse Geno, La Taborine denied baptizing infants, although she admitted that she had called out to St. Barbe at the most recent birth.²¹ Her response suggests that call-

¹⁹ *Institutes*, 4.15.20.

²⁰ *Institutes*, 4.15.21 – 2.

²¹ R. Consist. 7, f. 107, 8 December 1552. See also the case of Andrye Nevet, a midwife accused of making the sign of the cross over each child she delivered. R. Consist. 2, f. 40, 11 March 1546.

ing upon St. Barbe was an instinctive reaction; traditionally, saints offered comfort in difficult situations. For the reformers however, this behavior challenged Reformed theology, which asserted that one needed recourse only to God.

While Calvin and his colleagues had very clear ideas about their opposition to emergency baptism, cases such as these demonstrate that some Genevan church members continued to value the practice. The reformers faced a particular challenge in their attempts to do away with this practice because it was intimately tied to parents' concerns about the fate of their newborn children and their own parental responsibilities to those children. Despite — or perhaps because of — this resistance, Jean Calvin and his pastoral colleagues showed no significant flexibility regarding emergency baptisms. Church and city authorities sometimes made exceptions to allow church members to adapt to other Reformed practices — proceeding with baptisms in the absence of fathers, for example. The practice of emergency baptism, however, troubled these officials for several reasons: It directly challenged the authority of the ministers by taking the sacrament out of their hands; it threw into question the fundamental principles of Calvin's theology by suggesting that salvation might hinge on one particular human act; and it left open the possibility that the private emergency baptism might in fact have been a Catholic baptism, provoking the concerns of both church and city leaders about protecting Reformed Geneva from Catholic influence.

“Inappropriate” godparents

One baptismal practice on which Calvin and the pastors did appear to compromise was the participation of godparents. Calvin did not give godparents an explicit role in his baptismal liturgy, but neither did he specifically exclude them from the baptismal ceremony. And yet, there was no clear theological reason for continuing the practice of godparents, rather than parents, presenting infants to be baptized. Whenever possible, the ministers and Consistory insisted that at least fathers should be present at the baptisms of their own children — mothers were excused if they were still recovering from labor. While the participation of fathers in baptismal ceremonies did increase during the Reformation, there was no corresponding decline in the presence of godparents — at least not of godfathers.

Calvin himself served as godfather to at least forty-seven children over the course of thirteen years (1550 – 63).²²

But if the reformers were willing to compromise on the existence and participation of godparents, they were more insistent on screening those individuals to ensure that they were faithful members of the Reformed church who would be able to serve as good models of piety and as religious instructors should the parents not be able to fulfill those roles. And here, in their efforts to control the selection of godparents, Calvin and his colleagues presented an obstacle to the plans of some Genevan parents. Without a clear biblical or theological justification for the participation of godparents in baptism, the best explanation for the ministers' accession on this issue is that they recognized the social importance of the role and the connection that it established, not only between the baptized infant and his or her godparent, but also between the godparent and the child's family. In perhaps the most famous case involving a debate over the role of godparents, in 1555, Calvin himself acknowledged the importance of affection and social ties in establishing this bond.²³ And yet, despite this apparent acknowledgement of the importance of this tradition, the reformers insisted that some Genevans break social customs and obligations by rejecting as potential godparents not only Catholic friends and relatives from outside the city, but also Genevan residents who had been excommunicated from the Reformed church. This demand was justified by the Reformed understanding of church membership and the community of the faithful, but it threatened long-standing social traditions in Geneva.

As with the issue of emergency baptism, the debates and confrontations regarding non-Reformed godparents involved a variety of concerns for all of the participants. For parents, a baptism was both a religious and a social obligation and opportunity. If baptism

²² EC St-Pierre, B.M. 1; EC Micr. St-Pierre, B.M. 2. *Godmothers*, however, are largely absent from the baptismal registries of the Genevan churches for the period under study. On godmothers in Reformed Genevan practice, see Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 112 – 15.

²³ RC 51, f. 192, 22 June 1556. Calvin was serving as godfather to John, son of William and Dorothy Stafford, wealthy English refugees and immigrants to Geneva. The case was brought before the Council when the widowed Dorothy announced her intentions to leave Geneva with her children. For more on this controversy, see also: RC 51, f. 196, 25 June 1556. Charles Martin, "La Famille Stafford à Genève : Son Conflit avec Calvin," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Genève* 4 (1914 – 23), pp. 201 – 16.

traditionally ensured that a child's soul would not get trapped in limbo, it also provided the more temporal benefit of social networking. In some cases, the selection of a godparent seems to have been arranged long in advance, allowing the godparent in question to anticipate the honor of presenting a child for public baptism and, in many cases, naming the child after himself (or herself).²⁴ In all of the cases arising in the Consistory and Council, the parents' priorities in selecting godparents most often placed social obligations above religious qualifications. The ministers, on the other hand, generally emphasized the fact that godparents were likely to be participating in the baptism on behalf of the child's father and mother and, thus, making promises about the upbringing of that child in place of his or her parents. While the father and mother would ultimately be the ones held responsible for the child's upbringing, religious and otherwise, both church and city officials considered the godparents to be an important resource in the *absence* of parents. Should the parents, especially the father, die or be unable to fulfill their obligations for any other reason, church and city occasionally looked to the godfather to provide support for a child.²⁵ For the pastors, if the traditional role of godparent was to have any real significance in the Reformed church, it was vital that each godparent be a proven, faithful church member who would not lead his or her godchild astray with incorrect or "*papist*" religious teachings. Again, from their point of view, selecting an appropriate godparent was as much a parental responsibility as ensuring that one's child received a Reformed baptism.

²⁴ There is a rich and growing literature on godparents and spiritual kinship in medieval and early modern Europe. See, for example: Joseph H. Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); John Bossy, "Blood and baptism: kinship, community and Christianity in western Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries," in *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), pp. 129–43; *idem*, "Godparenthood: the fortunes and history of a social institution in early modern Christianity," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500–1800*, ed. K. von Greyerz (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 194–201; Coster, *Baptism and Spiritual Kinship*; Agnès Fine, *Parrains, Maraines: La parenté spirituelle en Europe* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *La maison et le nom: Stratégies et rituels dans l'Italie de la Renaissance* (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1990).

²⁵ Relatives, especially grandparents, often took responsibility for fatherless or parentless children. Cf. Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, pp. 152–4.

In cases involving the qualifications of godparents, the magistrates consistently supported the ministers and Consistory in their efforts at regulation. This was not simply a matter of one authority reinforcing another. The city had a vested interest in controlling what type of people would serve as godparents to Genevan children. First, as noted above, godparents provided one possible resource for children in need of financial and religious support and oversight. The baptismal registries kept by the Genevan churches recorded the names of father, mother and godparents (most often only godfathers). These registries provided a written record that the city could use to identify those people responsible for a particular child — and they would be most useful if all of the adults involved were Genevan residents. The magistrates also took an interest in the qualifications of godparents because, from the city's point of view, a non-Genevan godparent, or in some cases even a Genevan inhabitant who was excommunicated, increased the possibility that a baptized child might one day be lured away from his or her commitments and loyalty to Geneva. While the ministers insisted that godparents be faithful Reformed church members for reasons of sacramental integrity and religious instruction, to the city magistrates these same qualifications indicated a loyal inhabitant of Geneva who would help to raise his or her godchild to be the same.

From the start of its operation in Geneva, the Consistory attempted to enforce its own control over the selection of godparents for Genevan children. When, in March 1543, Jehan Bennard chose a Catholic friend from La Roche to be the godfather of his child, he found himself called before the Consistory to explain his choice. Bennard first asserted that the godfather in question was a good man and that he did indeed want this man as his *compère*. He further defended his choice, saying that he had been away when the new rules about godparents were publicized; if he had erred, he said, it was a result of ignorance only. Despite this argument, the Consistory concluded that Bennard should be admonished and sent on to the Council for further remonstrances.²⁶

Nearly a decade later, in 1551, the Consistory questioned Vincent Retier about whether his brother, who lived in a Catholic place, had recently presented Retier's child for baptism. In this case,

²⁶ R. Consist. 1, f. 103v, 29 March 1543.

instead of claiming ignorance about the church's rules, Retier tried to reassure the court by explaining that his brother intended to move to Geneva and that he himself had not meant to disobey the regulations about godparents. Although Retier's argument demonstrated a more fully developed understanding of Reformed concerns, still the Consistory sent him on to the Council to receive remonstrances, as they had done with Bennard.²⁷ In both of these cases, the godfather was Catholic *and* from outside of Geneva. Together, these two characteristics posed a serious challenge to Genevan officials' efforts to establish and preserve a stable community. For church and city authorities, the protection of the community they envisioned required cutting all ties with Catholic friends and relatives and nurturing social connections within the city — and possibly within the Reformed community more broadly. For some Genevans, in contrast, social ties remained equally as important as the purity of their religious faith. We can see this in the fact that neither Bennard nor Retier appeared to be seeking a confrontation with the Genevan authorities; as with other Genevans in similar situations, neither man appears to have seen any contradiction in his choice of godfather. Both explained or apologized for their selection only because the Consistory pressed them. Cases such as these are important reminders of the varying views of religious reform within the city of Geneva. While church officials, usually supported by city magistrates, saw the need for as complete a break as possible with the Catholic past, some Genevans found no contradiction in adapting to the practices of a new church while still maintaining traditions and relationships from the old.

Despite their efforts to separate and shelter the city's population from Catholic influences, the Genevan authorities did sometimes exercise flexibility or leniency in their dealings with non-Reformed godparents. For example, when Jehan Vulliermoz selected a Catholic to be the godfather of his child, the minister performing the baptism rejected the godfather. The record suggests, however, that if the godfather had been willing to renounce the mass publicly and reject his Catholic beliefs, the minister would have accepted him as a participant in the baptism, despite his ignorance of the Reformed faith. When the Consistory sent Vulliermoz to the Council, the court chastised him but then told him simply to "*go in peace and not to*

²⁷ R. Consist. 6, f. 29, 30 April 1551. See also PC2 942, 30 April 1551.

do this anymore."²⁸ This case suggests that Catholic candidates for godparent did not need to be rejected out of hand; if they were open to conversion to the Reformed faith, they might still be accepted as a participant in the baptismal ceremony.

The Consistory demonstrated the greatest flexibility in cases involving godparents who did live in Geneva but had not yet learned the basic Reformed teachings. For example, when Jehan Coysot served as godfather for the child of Jaques Colloub, despite the fact that he was ignorant about the lessons of the Reformed catechism, the Consistory merely demanded the Coysot be educated, presumably so that he could fulfill his responsibilities as godfather.²⁹ Similarly, in 1556, Domenne Favre, an immigrant to Geneva, served as a godfather despite the fact that he was "*not yet instructed in the religion*" and that he had been a practicing Catholic when he lived in Troyes. The Consistory did send the father in question, Pierre Echernier, on to the Council for remonstrances, but they did not reject Favre entirely. Rather, they excluded him from communion (and, thus, from any additional baptisms) until he was "*better instructed*" in Reformed teachings.³⁰ In cases such as this, which involved Genevan residents, there was little threat that a child would be removed from the city — one of the main concerns of both church and city officials. As a result, the Consistory was willing to allow time for the godparents in question to learn Reformed teachings. In such cases, the church and city authorities appear to have believed that it was possible, with the proper education, that these inappropriate choices might still turn out to be pious godparents.

As mentioned above, cases involving godparents presented a challenge to the reformers' emphasis on scriptural precedent in the Reformed church. The participation of godparents in the baptismal ceremony was not a practice recorded in the Bible, and yet it had developed into a very important social tradition. The examples given here demonstrate the Consistory's efforts, with some assistance from the Council, to bring that practice into line with Reformed teachings. But it is also important to realize that, despite all of these various dealings with unqualified godfathers and the fathers who had se-

²⁸ RC 43, f. 261v, 10 December 1548.

²⁹ R. Consist. 2, f. 10v, 12 November 1545.

³⁰ R. Consist. 11, f. 61, 24 September 1556.

lected them, in none of these situations did the Consistory insist on terminating the godparent-godchild relationship once it had been established by a baptismal ceremony. This was consistent with other Reformed teachings regarding baptism. Once the sacrament had been performed — even if had been performed by a Catholic priest — it could not be altered, undone or performed again. Perhaps it was this understanding of baptism as a unique and irreversible event that led the Genevan pastors and the Consistory both to screen candidates carefully and, when that failed, to deal flexibly with “*inappropriate*” godparents.

Baptizing Illegitimate Children

As demonstrated by the de la Mar case that opened this discussion, another contentious issue that appears in the pages of the Consistory and Council registers is the baptism of illegitimate children. Calvin’s defense of infant baptism was predicated on the requirement that the parents of the child be faithful Christians; even one faithful parent sufficed, but there had to be one.³¹ Particularly in view of this assertion, it at first seems startling that the Reformed church baptized illegitimate children at all. There was no question that the parents of an illegitimate child were not in good standing in the eyes of the church, since they had had sexual relations outside of marriage. Certainly such parents were not welcome to present their own child for baptism, unless they had already admitted their sin to the Consistory, accepted their punishment and been reconciled to God and the church community. But in most cases, rather than waiting for this to happen, the pastors expected someone else — a godparent in good standing in the church — to present an illegitimate child for baptism.³²

The situation was greatly complicated, however, when a father such as Philibert de la Mar refused to acknowledge his child altogether. The Genevan pastors may have been willing to accept

³¹ *Institutes* 4.16.9 and 4.16.6.

³² In contrast, the Reformed church in Scotland followed a stricter policy of withholding baptism from an illegitimate child until the parents had repented. Cf. Geoffrey Parker, “The ‘Kirk By Law Established’ and the Origins of ‘The Taming of Scotland’: Saint Andrews, 1559 – 1600,” in *Sin and the Calvinists: Morals Control and the Consistory in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Raymond Mentzer (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), p. 181; Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*, p. 121.

an illegitimate child for baptism when they knew the identity of the parents, but a child of unnamed parents was a different matter. As we saw at the beginning of this article, Calvin and his colleagues refused to baptize de la Mar's daughter as long as she remained officially fatherless. Ultimately, in that case, the City Council's concerns about maintaining a stable community and easing anxieties about unbaptized children took precedence over the theological objections of the pastors. The de la Mar incident is an excellent illustration of the competing interests of church, city and parents in cases involving illegitimate children; it is unusual, however, in both the church's and the city's failure to force the father to acknowledge his child, allowing the officiating minister to enter the father's name in the baptismal registry.

Far more common were cases in which parents privately acknowledged but actively attempted to conceal the birth of their children born out of wedlock. In such cases, the baptism of illegitimate children raised some of the same concerns for church and cities authorities that emergency baptisms did. And such baptisms were motivated, in part, by some of the same intentions on the part of the parents. Illegitimate children were likely to receive private baptisms — often in homes outside of Geneva, which also meant they would be Catholic rituals. While the baptism of an illegitimate child demonstrated the parents' concern for the child's soul, as did emergency baptism, it also was often an attempt by the parents to avoid having their sin of fornication announced in public. The best way to conceal an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and birth was to have the child baptized privately — in a neighboring Catholic town, often at the home of relatives. Frequently this arrangement was convenient because the mother in question had already left Geneva for the end of her pregnancy and the birth of her child, whether to protect the reputation of the child's father or to protect her own as well.

This was the case when, in 1546, the Consistory questioned Jehan François Ramel regarding his relationship with a servant named Claude. Ramel confessed that he had had sex with the woman and impregnated her, but he assured the court that he had made arrangements with the woman's family to care for her. He said, further, that he understood that the baby had died and that, as far as he knew, the child had not been baptized. Although an emergency baptism would have violated Reformed teachings, the Consistory

viewed the failure to have one's child baptized at all as a dereliction of parental — especially paternal — obligations. Suspicious about the situation, the court pressed Ramel further, asking if he had agreed to not having his own child baptized in order "*to hide the paillardise.*" When Ramel refused to admit to this, the Consistory sent him on to the Council so that the magistrates could investigate his role in the situation.³³ Without any further records on this case, one could conclude that Ramel did not in fact know about anything that had happened once the pregnant servant was settled in with her family and that the Consistory was looking for a conspiracy where there was none. What this record tells us for certain is that Ramel did attempt to conceal the birth of his illegitimate child by sending the pregnant mother away, and that he made at least some effort to take financial responsibility for that child — a particular concern of the Genevan city authorities.³⁴ It is equally certain from this case that the Consistory viewed the baptism of illegitimate children outside of Geneva, or the lack of any baptism, as an intentional act to conceal the sin of extramarital sex. Other cases, however, indicate that this was not simply a matter of pastoral paranoia but that, rather, not baptizing an illegitimate child, or giving such a child a Catholic baptism, were strategies that Genevans used to try to hide their behavior and their offspring from both city and church authorities.

For example, while Ramel acknowledged his illegitimate child but denied intentionally leaving the child unbaptized, in a later case, Mermet Foudrat first refused to admit that he even had an illegitimate child. In 1554, Foudrat, a cartwright, was accused by the Consistory of having "*had the company*" of one of his servants — Pernon, daughter of Jehan de True. When asked whether his child by Pernon had died unbaptized, Foudrat denied the existence of the infant. The Consistory then reminded him that there had been two children, one of whom survived and was baptized in La Roche, but Foudrat maintained his innocence. Consequently, the Consistory called other witnesses to provide more information.³⁵ Several days later, Foudrat's wife testified to the court that she had heard that her

³³ R. Consist. 2, f. 92v, 28 November 1546.

³⁴ On the city's efforts to enforce fathers' financial responsibilities to their illegitimate children, even before the Reformation, see : Henri Nacé, *Les Origines de la Réforme à Genève* (Geneva : Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Genève, 1936), pp. 231 – 3.

³⁵ R. Consist. 9, f. 113, 23 August 1554.

husband had had two children by Pernon.³⁶ A few weeks afterwards, the Consistory questioned Foudrat again. This time, responding to the question of whether he had two bastard children, he said, “No, but rather only one that had lived.” He continued, admitting that the living child had been presented for baptism by “*the brother of Sieur Dearcha*.”³⁷ Unfortunately, the Consistory registers contain no resolution of this case. The last relevant entry ends with an order for the godfather to appear before the court, but there is no record of that meeting. Nevertheless, this case tells us a number of things about the baptism of illegitimate children. In this instance, the father did want to conceal his paternity, even to the point of denying the existence of a child despite evidence of that child’s Catholic baptism. This case also suggests the complicated nature of the interests of both church and city. For both financial and religious reasons, these authorities were intent on enforcing paternal responsibility to both legitimate and illegitimate children. Foudrat violated every expectation of both church and city by ensuring that his children would be born outside of Geneva, allowing one child to die unbaptized, permitting the second to receive a Catholic baptism, and then denying the existence of the children altogether. Cases such as this reinforce the sense that the decisions of both church and city were complicated and not always predictable. While emergency baptism was unacceptable, it was equally objectionable to let a child die unbaptized if the intent was to conceal the child’s existence. In a situation like this, where there was clear evidence to force a father to recognize his child, both the pastors and the city magistrates were more concerned with enforcing the responsibilities of a faithful Christian father and responsible Genevan inhabitant than they were with a theological analysis of the sacrament of baptism.

Based on the discussion in the previous sections, it is clear why both of these situations would have offended both the church pastors and city officials. Not only had the parents committed a sin to begin with, but they had then tried to hide their illicit behavior; in doing so, they put their own offspring at risk by removing the children to Catholic places and, then, either denying them the sacrament of baptism or subjecting them to a “*papist*” rite — at the same time depriving the city of a potentially loyal inhabitant.

³⁶ R. Consist. 9, f. 116, 28 August 1554.

³⁷ R. Consist. 9, f. 134v, 20 September 1554.

It seems equally clear why parents who found themselves in this situation would have chosen birth and baptism outside of Geneva as their course of action. Again, we see these different sets of people making different judgments based on their own priorities. Parents — in most cases especially the fathers, who were frequently well-established Genevan citizens who had impregnated their servants — were anxious to protect their reputations. In the cases involving baptism, they also generally were concerned to do what they could to ensure their children's salvation and, often, to provide at least some material care for them. Philibert de la Mar proved to be a clear exception to this; he was certainly interested in protecting his family name, but he showed no inclination to provide in any way for his illegitimate daughter. But even in cases where fathers such as Ramel did attempt to make provisions for their offspring outside of Geneva, church and city officials viewed such measures as a disregard for the well-being of the child as well as disrespect for the pastors and members of the Reformed community.³⁸

Perhaps the most interesting cases involving the baptism of illegitimate children are those in which the child was *not* removed from Geneva but was, rather, baptized in the Reformed church, within the city, but without public recognition of the child's birth status. These cases outraged church and city officials just as much as those involving baptisms beyond the city limits, but they are additionally complex in terms of the parents' motives and their attempts to both live within and manipulate the Reformed system. The case of Denis Potier provides an excellent, well-documented example of such a situation: On Sunday, 6 October 1555, Potier presented his step-grandson, Benjamin, to be baptized at St-Pierre. When the pastor, Michel Cop, asked Potier for the name of the boy's father, Potier gave the name of André Dymonnet, the husband of Benjamin's mother, Marthe Pignier. The names of André and Marthe were duly recorded in the baptismal registry, the child was baptized with the public witness of the congregation, and the church and city gained, apparently, an official record of a family formed within legitimate

³⁸ Other relevant examples include: R. Consist. 1, f. 43, 13 July 1542; RC 36, f. 68v, 13 July 1542 (Jana Grenier and Jehan Benez). R. Consist. 5, f. 80v, 20 November 1555 (Pernette Chappon and Jacques Vyollat). R. Consist. 8, f. 33v, 22 June 1553; f. 35v, 29 June 1553. RC Part. 7, f. 96v, 3 July 1553 (Ayma Bosonaz and Colin Mermetta).

legal and religious bonds.³⁹ But later that month, the Consistory and City Council discovered that André Dymonnet was not Benjamin's father. Rather, his father was Amyed Varoud, a previous lover of Marthe who had refused to marry her. Recording a meeting in late October, the Council secretary noted that Potier had told the minister that his godchild was "*the son of André Dymonnet, current husband of the aforesaid Marthe, who had said that he would not accept the child as his own.*"⁴⁰ Dymonnet himself, upset at his discovery of Marthe's earlier liaison and unwilling to take responsibility for her child, had revealed the situation to the city authorities.⁴¹

In addition to investigating the affair between Marthe and Amyed Varoud, the Council and Consistory accused Potier of misusing his role as godfather intentionally to mislead the authorities and conceal his godson's illegitimate status. Faced with these accusations from the Council, Potier admitted that he was in the wrong, but he also insisted that Dymonnet had never told him *not* to announce that the child was his. He begged the Council to consider the fact that his intention had been to "*conceal the dishonor of his daughter.*" He stated, finally, that he could neither "*declare nor say that the infant belonged to Amyed Varoud in the presence of so many people.*"⁴² Despite Potier's plea that the Council "*have pity on him and treat him with humanity,*" the Council members declared that "*seeing that the error is great, the aforementioned Potier should here kneel and cry mercy to God and to Messieurs.*" They also remanded him to the Consistory to "*repent and correct the baptismal registry.*"⁴³ Potier's case provides an excellent, well-documented example of parents and godparents taking a ritual intended by the pastors to emphasize the nature of the church as a faithful community and using that ceremony, instead, to conceal an impious act that challenged the rules and expectations of that community. In Potier's case,

³⁹ RC 50, f. 10, 15 October 1555; f. 17, 22 October 1555; f. 20v, 28 October 1555; f. 21, 28 October 1555. R. Consiste 10, f. 59v, 17 October 1555, f. 61, 24 October 1555; f. 63v, 31 October 1555. EC St-Pierre, B.M. 1, 6 Octber 1555.

⁴⁰ RC 50, f. 20v, 20 October 1555. See also R. Consist. 10, f. 59v, 17 October 1555.

⁴¹ RC 50, f. 10, 15 October 1555.

⁴² RC 50, f. 20v, 28 October 1555.

⁴³ Ibid. For other cases involving false entries in the baptismal registry, see : R. Consist. 8, f. 90, 1 February 1554; R. Consist. 9, f. 3, 15 February 1554. PC 498, 19 – 20 February 1554 (Emard Bertet). PC2 1219, 1 – 6 January 1561 (Barbe Cersia and Robert Mora).

church discipline demanded that he reveal his family's dishonor publicly, before the congregation of St-Pierre — but in practice, the baptismal registry provided a possible means to protect that honor, instead. Had Dymonnet consented to raise Benjamin as his own child, it is likely that the boy's illegitimate status would not have been revealed publicly, and the registry itself would have served as proof that André, Marthe and Benjamin were a legitimate family.

This conflict between Potier on one hand, and the Council and Consistory on the other, resulted from different definitions of community and different concepts of a peaceful and stable society. The city magistrates considered responsible fathers who provided for their children financially and did not leave families dependent on city resources to be a vital component of a stable community. For the pastors and Consistory, the community could be truly peaceful and stable only if all of its members acknowledged their own sinful behavior and reconciled themselves to both God and the church community. For individuals such as Denis Potier, however, peace and stability meant the protection of family honor and the quiet incorporation of a child into the family, without public scandal.

As church and city officials saw it, parents such as Jehan Ramel and Mermet Foudrat who had their illegitimate children baptized outside of Geneva were compounding their initial sin by removing their children from the city and subjecting them to a "*superstitious*" and "*papist*" rite. But the parents, grandparents and godparents involved in baptizing illegitimate children in Genevan churches without admitting to their illegitimacy were not only trying to conceal their transgressions (or those of their relatives or friends) ; they were also lying outright to their fellow church members and church pastors, in the presence of God. In some ways this was worse, in the reformers' eyes, because the individual in question was publicly proclaiming himself or herself to be a faithful church member, knowing full well that he or she was deceiving the Reformed community. The lengths to which such people went, however, also demonstrated their desire to remain within that community and to maintain the respect and social connections they had already established there.

Conclusion

This research reveals the significance of infant baptism in Reformation Geneva, not only as a sacrament but also as an instrument for shaping — and negotiating the shape of — the Reformed community. These disagreements and confrontations regarding emergency baptism, the selection of godparents and the baptism of illegitimate children illustrate the complexity and variety of the concerns and interests that were intertwined with the Reformed practice of infant baptism. The examples presented here also suggest the spectrum of solutions presented to resolve these conflicts. Generally speaking, Calvin and the pastors prioritized theological concerns, parents emphasized social tradition and financial necessity, and the city magistrates focused on financial concerns and matters of civic stability. But these were not absolute divisions or certain predictors of the behavior of any of these three groups of people. In some cases, Calvin and the pastors acknowledged the importance of traditional practices, such as the participation of godparents in the baptismal ritual. City officials, while frequently supportive of the Reformed ministers, sometimes upheld traditional religious beliefs more directly, as when they ordered the immediate baptism of two apparently unbaptized children. And in addition to worrying about family honor and social connections, parents often acted on religious concerns, particularly regarding the salvation of their children's souls. Ultimately, in their efforts to address their own priorities and to negotiate with one another, all three of these groups of people influenced the shaping of the Reformed community in Geneva and the incorporation of children into that community.