It is important that we have a basic understanding of the political structures in place in Geneva during Calvin’s tenure there if we want to properly grasp the dynamics at play in Calvin’s various political and intellectual struggles, as well as his institution-building. For instance, the structures of church discipline in Geneva (the “Consistory”) relied heavily upon the city’s conciliar structures to populate its membership, and the progress in Calvin’s reforms depended in no small part on the composition of the various councils in any given year. As André Bieler puts it: “Calvin was to struggle for some years to establish an appropriate balance between the political authority and church government.”

Briefly put, there were four conciliar levels in Geneva during Calvin’s time.

The Small Council—Here we have the smallest and most powerful of the councils. It “made the most important decisions for the city, and after the Reformation controlled the church, hiring and firing ministers, and working with the Consistory.” Twenty-five members sat on this council, including the four syndics who exercised the city’s executive functions. Judicial authority was also primarily located in this council. These syndics were elected from the Small Council each year and were ranked in order of “their seniority in city service.” Bernard Cottret provides helpful insight into this council’s function: “It met in the City Hall and played an executive role, also assuming part of the legislative power. The Council generally sat three times

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1 André Bieler, Calvin’s Economic and Social Thought, Edward Dommen, ed., James Greig, trans. (Geneva; World Alliance of Reformed Churches and World Council of Churches, 2005), 43.
2 Bruce Gordon, Calvin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 69.
a week, on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. The first syndic presided. . . . This council
predominated because of its oligarchical tone and its stability; fourteen of its members sat
without interruption from 1541 to 1555.”

**The Council of Sixty**—This council’s primary task was to provide a resource on which
the Small Council could draw for personnel and experience when dealing with matters of foreign
policy. In other words, if you needed ambassadors or emissaries to conduct business with
foreign powers, members of this council could bear that burden (perhaps under the leadership of
one of the syndics) without taking the members of the Small Council out of Geneva and away
from their executive tasks. However, this council waned in importance as the Council of Two-
Hundred slowly assumed these responsibilities.

**The Council of Two-Hundred**—Here we have the primary legislative body in the
Genevan system. The Small Council proposed needed legislation, and it was the Council of Two-
Hundred which approved (or not) that legislation. It also worked in support of the Small Council
by its members sitting on committees, etc.

**The General Assembly**—This council represents the level of general suffrage. The
Assembly was comprised of “all heads of households”—provided they held sufficient property
or were of a suitable profession, i.e., citizens (native-born; only citizens were eligible to hold
office) and bourgeois (immigrants who purchased permanent resident status, which included the
right to vote)—“and met four times a year. Its role was to approve or reject legislation from the
Two Hundred.” It was the task of the Assembly to populate the councils and committees, and in

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5 See Kingdon, 13.
6 Bieler, 43.
7 Gordon, 69.
8 Gordon, 69.
some cases to approve certain kinds of the legislation that came out of the Council of Two-Hundred. It is worth noting here that the election of council members was conducted each year in February, and these appointments were for a duration of one year. As far as I have discovered, the only political appointment in Geneva for a term greater than one year was the treasurer, who was appointed to terms of three years.\(^9\)

Geneva’s conciliar structure was not unusual in its time, although it necessarily included some particular idiosyncrasies. I will conclude with Bruce Gordon’s reflections on the whole of Geneva’s municipal institutions and preoccupations: “All in all, the political structures of Geneva mirrored those of most middling European cities of the sixteenth century. In most respects there was nothing remarkable about the city: its life revolved around trade; it had to worry about its larger neighbours; and the magistrates struggled to maintain social order by limiting drinking and violence, controlling prostitution and dealing with the poor and destitute.”\(^10\)

\(^9\) Bieler, 42.
\(^10\) Gordon, 69.