

CHURCH HISTORY III

WEEK 2: ZWINGLI, CALVIN & REFORMED CHURCHES¹

INTRODUCTION

- Luther lived from 1483 – 1546
 - German Reformation Oct. 31st, 1517.
- Now we are going to see the spread of the Reformation throughout Europe.

THE REFORMATION IN ZURICH: ULRICH ZWINGLI (1484-1531)

- Born in 1484 in Switzerland, Zwingli was a contemporary of Luther.
 - He became ordained to the priesthood in 1506, and soon, through study of Scripture concluded the Church was deeply corrupt and their doctrine was incorrect in many areas.
 - **Zwingli felt strongly the influence of John Wycliffe (1320 – 1384), Jon Huss (1369 – 1415), as well as Erasmus (1466 – 1536).**
- Having realized that the Bible was the supreme authority, Zwingli appropriately enough sought to apply this to his life, and the life of the church.
 - He thought that true reformation springs not from one man's opinions, but from the Word of God.
 - We can date the beginnings of the Reformation in Zurich to New Year's Day, 1519, when Zwingli – already a very popular preacher among the people – commenced a series of expositional sermons beginning in the first chapter of Matthew.
 - He even preached through the genealogies as he began to work through the New Testament, chapter by chapter.
- ***This new focus on the Bible and biblical doctrines soon brought tensions to a crisis, as Zwingli realized he could no longer stay in communion with the Roman Catholic church.***
 - The next year he renounced his salary from Rome and in 1522 he resigned his office as priest.
 - The Zurich City Council immediately hired him to be the city's official preacher.
 - Zwingli himself acknowledged his support from the people, observing that *"the common man adheres to the gospel although his superiors want nothing of it."*
- Zwingli's – and Zurich's – final break with Rome came early 1523, when Zwingli sought to defend himself against the criticisms of the Catholic hierarchy by calling a special town council meeting.

¹ <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/church-history/>

- His 67 Articles, theological points, he composed to summarize his differences with Rome.
- Zwingli declared those 600 Christians gathered to be a legitimate church council, and challenged the small delegation led representing the local Catholic bishop to refute any of his points.
 - The people of Zurich, who by now had been sitting under biblical preaching for four years, issued a decisive verdict in Zwingli's favor.
 - This became known as the First Zurich Disputation and marked a key moment in the Reformation. It vindicated Zwingli against the charge of heresy and produced the first Reformed confession of faith.

Zwingli's Doctrine

- Zwingli affirmed the core doctrines of the Reformation – salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, based on Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone.
- He focused in particular on the fundamental distinction separating the Creator from His creation, separating God from man.
- It followed that Zwingli thought idolatry to be the most fundamental and most heinous sin committed by humanity, he thought *“for what is idolatry, but ascribing to creatures that which is due the Creator?”*
- At the core of Rome's errors, corruptions, and excesses was idolatry.
 - Appalled at the rampant superstition of his day, Zwingli sought to expunge all relics, icons, and other manner of idols from his churches and the lives of his people, and turn their worship to God in heaven alone.
 - In the words of one scholar, *“Thoughtless prayers, prescribed fasts, the bleached cowls and carefully shaved heads of the monks, holy days, incense, the burning of candles, the sprinkling of holy water, nun's prayers, priest's chatter, vigils, masses, and matins – this “whole rubbish heap of ceremonies” amounted to nothing but “tomfoolery.” To depend upon them at all for salvation was like “placing iceblocks upon iceblocks.”*
- Zwingli did more than preach against these rituals and objects – he purged them.
 - One distraught Catholic wrote to the Emperor in 1530 describing Zwingli's churches: *“The altars are destroyed and overthrown, the images of the saints and the paintings are burned or broken up and defaced...They no longer have churches but rather stables.”*
 - Zwingli wanted Christian worship to focus on the transcendent, living God in heaven – not on human creations or pale images.

Differing With Luther

- Perhaps most eminent was their dispute over the nature of the Lord's supper.
 - Luther had opposed the Catholic mass because he saw it as a work – as something we are required to do in order to gain favor with God. Thus Luther still affirmed Christ's physical presence in the Lord's supper.
 - Zwingli opposed the Catholic mass because he saw it as idolatrous – as a superstitious reverence for something in the place of Christ.
 - Thus Zwingli differed with Luther and saw the Lord's supper as only a symbol or memorial to Christ. This disagreement provoked a bitter dispute between the two, with Zwingli wishing Luther would keep quiet so “*we should not have been forced to swallow your loathsome stuff,*” and Luther denouncing Zwingli as “*seven times more dangerous than when he was a papist.*”
 - They met in 1529 for a famous debate that failed to resolve their differences, and parted in an unfortunate enmity that remained to their deaths.
- Zwingli also differed with Luther over what could take place in Christian worship gatherings.
 - Luther allowed what the Bible did not prohibit, Zwingli rejected what the Bible did not prescribe.
 - The “**Regulative Principle**,” as it came to be known, holds that church gatherings should only include those practices mandated by Scripture: prayer, Scripture readings, confessions of faith, singing of hymns and songs, the preaching of the word, baptism, and the Lord's supper.
 - One practical illustration of this difference came over organs – Luther loved them and found them a powerful addition to church music, whereas Zwingli, though an accomplished musician, removed the organ from his church.
- Luther and Zwingli held different positions on the nature of the two kingdoms, of man and of God.
 - **This arose again from their different fundamental concerns.**
 - As one scholar puts it, “*Luther's Reformation was born out of his tortuous quest...to answer the question: How can I be saved? ...Zwingli was more concerned with the social and political implications of reform. Zwingli's central question was: How can my people be saved?*”
 - As such, Zwingli believed in a much closer relationship between church and state, where both church and the civic community were almost united as one body and the kingdom of God brought nearer to earth. In his words, “*the Christian man is nothing else but a faithful and good citizen and the Christian city nothing other than the Christian church.*”
 - Luther thought only the magistrates could wield the sword, and that to keep the peace but not to defend the faith, Zwingli had no such hesitations.

- He was a passionate Swiss nationalist, so much so that as chaplain of the Zurich army, he took up armor and the sword in a war against the Catholic forces.
- On October 11, 1531, Zwingli suffered mortal wounds on the battlefield, and uttered his last words: *“You may kill the body, but you cannot kill the soul.”*
- While Zwingli and Luther, disagreed on some finer point of theology, they were both clear on the Gospel and the belief that in the power of God’s Word to bring about reformation in hearts of people.
- The “second” generation of reformers continued on, but the reforms began to take a different emphasis.
- Zwingli’s followers in Zurich carried on his legacy, particularly the great theologian Heinrich Bullinger, whose writings would have great influence on English Protestants who had fled to the Continent to escape the Catholic Queen Mary in their own land.
 - These were the ancestors of the Puritans. Zwingli’s teachings also came to influence a young Frenchman beginning to have his own qualms about the Roman Catholic Church – John Calvin.

JOHN CALVIN (1509 – 1564)

- Born in Noyon, France, in 1509, Calvin as a youth was deeply religious, serious and moral.
- His father had originally intended that he study theology, but then after having a falling out with the local Bishop, changed his mind and sent young Calvin to law school.
- Besides his legal studies, Calvin also steeped himself in classic works of philosophy and literature.
- Calvin came under the influence of humanism, with its emphasis on clear thinking, rigorous logic, and especially the original text sources.
 - With this background, it naturally followed that Calvin, like his predecessors Luther and Zwingli, would be drawn to the Bible.
- Some point later while reading the Bible, Calvin experienced a rather sudden conversion in which *“God subdued my heart to teachableness.”*
- He came under close scrutiny for his Protestant sympathies, and King Francis I order his arrest for heresy.
- To escape imprisonment, in 1535 he fled to Basel, Switzerland.
 - Basel was a haven for refugees at this time. It was there, at age 26, that Calvin published his first draft of the Institutes of the Christian Religion, which was written as a defense to the man who had ordered his arrest, the King of France.
 - The full title Calvin chose for this first edition of his classic work tells much of his heart: *The Institute of the Christian Religion, Containing almost the Whole Sum of Piety and Whatever It is Necessary to Know in the Doctrine of Salvation. A Work Very Well Worth Reading by All Persons*

Zealous for Piety, and Lately Published. A Preface to the Most Christian King of France, in Which this Book is Presented to Him as a Confession of Faith.

- The “Institutes” became a bestseller as soon as it was released, and Calvin was to revise, expand, and republish the Institutes several times throughout his life, bringing it to its completed form in 1559.

To Geneva

- Basel was German speaking, so the young Frenchmen eventually decided to go to Strasburg, France.
- To evade arrest, Calvin chose a circuitous route that took him to Geneva for one night.
 - Another Protestant preacher, William Farel, had already planted himself in Geneva and begun to agitate against Rome and for reform.
 - In one scholar’s vivid description, Farel arrived as “*a refugee from France, a fiery red-bearded Elijah bellowing at the priests of Baal.*”²
 - Just as Elijah had Elisha for a comrade and successor, Farel also realized his need of assistance, and he implored the visiting Calvin to stay and help reform Geneva’s religious life.
 - Convinced that his gifts and calling were more suited to a solitary life of quiet study and contemplation, Calvin resisted.
 - Farel then threatened Calvin, “*May God condemn your repose, and the calm you seek for study, if before such a great need you withdraw, and refuse your succor[aid] and help.*” Calvin later confessed that “*these words shocked and broke me, and I desisted from the journey I had begun.*”³
 - The young Frenchman stayed, and Geneva – and the church worldwide – would never be the same.
- Staying in Geneva meant diving into theological strife. He and Farel fought with the city government over whether the church was allowed to excommunicate unrepentant sinners.
- The city magistrates, unsympathetic with Calvin’s desire for a pure church membership, found such church discipline too rigorous, and so they expelled Calvin in 1538.
- Calvin and his faithful friend Farel then left for Strasburg. Calvin spent 3 very happy, productive years there, during which he married a widow and became father to her two children.
- In 1541, the Geneva authorities realized their mistake and invited Calvin back to Geneva.
 - Initially reluctant to give up his idyllic life in Strasburg, a sense of duty and mission eventually compelled his return to Geneva, where he would stay for the rest of his life.
- His first Sunday back in Geneva, *after a three-year exile*, Calvin ascended the pulpit at his old church. His listeners, fully expecting to hear a vindictive or self-righteous sermon gloating about his return, were

² Roland Herbert Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, Enl. ed (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 118.

³ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 64–65.

surprised to hear Calvin instead open the Bible and simply resume expository preaching through the very text at which he had left off three years earlier.

- Calvin bore powerful witness to his own submission to the Word of God, resisting the temptation to distort it for his own petty purposes.
- He maintained a rigorous preaching schedule during his next 23 years in Geneva, preaching two sermons from the New Testament every Sunday, and one sermon from the Old Testament every day during the week, on alternate weeks.
- When not preaching or studying, Calvin kept a dizzying pace of pastoring, counseling, teaching, and corresponding with thousands of people ranging from kings and emperors to poor, imprisoned Protestants.
- He did all of this in the midst of acute physical suffering.
 - Always of a frail constitution, towards the end of his life Calvin detailed a catalogue of his various ailments: arthritis, kidney stones, hemorrhoids, fever, nephritis, severe indigestion (“*whatever nourishment I take sticks like paste to my stomach*”), cholic, and ulcers.
 - **He rarely let these afflictions inhibit his ministry, even preaching his last sermon by being carried into the pulpit on his bed.**
- Under Calvin's pastorate in Geneva, every citizen was supposed to be under the moral discipline of the church. While Calvin only held the office of minister and sought to preserve both the independence and the supremacy of the church, Church and State worked closely together to create a "Christian" city.
- Calvin became Geneva's dominant figure, influencing even education and commerce policies.
- Though Calvin and his fellow church leaders found themselves frequently at odds with the city council, he succeeded in part in forging a unified Christian community whose members were in good standing with both church and civil authorities.
- Meanwhile, Geneva became a haven for oppressed Protestants, and a training ground and center for the Reformation in Europe.
 - Calvin did not confine his vision to Geneva. He sent out missionaries to spread the Gospel not only throughout Europe, but as far away as Brazil.

Calvin's “Unpardonable” Sin

- The Spanish physician and theological mischief-maker Michael Servetus, who had been stirring indignation throughout all of Europe for his denial of the Trinity, was arrested upon his arrival in Geneva, tried, convicted, and burned at the stake.
- While today we rightly understand religious liberty and freedom of conscience to permit citizens to hold heretical beliefs, in the 16th century such notions were profoundly threatening to civil order.

- After all, how could one be a good citizen while denying God’s truth? While it was the city council and not Calvin who ordered Servetus’ execution, and while Calvin argued for the less painful death by beheading, Calvin did agree to the execution, just as all the other Protestants did.
- As one scholar reminds us, “*these heresies Servetus would have atoned at the stake in Catholic France had he not escaped and paid the same penalty in Protestant Geneva.*”
- So while we should not defend Calvin in this regard, neither should we judge him by a historical standard not his own.

Calvin’s Writings

- To put him in context, Calvin should be appreciated as a second-generation reformer, after the first generation led by Luther and Zwingli.
- It was they who had recovered the Gospel and fought the battles and broken decisively with Rome, laying the foundation for successors such as Calvin to refine, systematize, and further implement the reforms into a positive vision of the church and the Christian life.
- *Calvin’s Institutes* is widely recognized as the single most influential book of the Protestant Reformation, and one of the greatest theological works of all time. What he wrote of in the *Institutes*, he tried to live out in Geneva.
- Calvin also wrote renowned Commentaries on almost every book of the Bible, commentaries that are still both in print and in use by many scholars and pastors today. Again, Calvin paid more than just lip service to the Bible, but rather devoted himself to Scripture as God’s revealed Word.
- Though *Calvinism* is often caricatured as focusing only on human sin and God’s sovereignty in salvation, any fair reading of Calvin’s original work will reveal a Christian profoundly concerned with declaring the whole counsel of God for the entire Christian life.
- The *Institutes* begin with the question of the *knowledge of God* and the *knowledge of ourselves*, and how the two are connected, even inseparable.
 - Calvin observes, on the one hand “*no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God,*” and on the other hand “*it is clear that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinize himself.*”
 - Notice Calvin’s paramount concern here – it is not abstract theorizing about an impersonal deity, but rather it is earnest grappling with the relationship between God and man.
 - So if Luther’s foundational question was “*what must I do to be saved?*”, Calvin’s basic questions were two, and even more foundational: “*Who am I? And who is God?*”
 - Here, Calvin showed an acute perception of human nature.

- He believed that all human beings had in them a “seed of religion,” a need to worship something or someone. This leads either to *idolatry* and love and worship of the self, or else to *piety* and love and worship of God.
- Calvin’s answer to this second question about the nature of God is often misunderstood. Though Calvin is widely and rightly known for his emphasis on the sovereignty of God, this does not give the full picture.
 - For Calvin, God’s sovereignty points to God’s *majesty* and *glory*.
 - In Calvin’s words, “*Although God lacks nothing, still the principal aim He had in creating men was that His name might be glorified in them...And were this not so, what would become of the many evidences of Scripture which tell us that the sovereign aim of our salvation is the glory of God?*”
- Calvin saw God’s glory manifest most vividly in Christ’s work in securing our salvation. As our substitute who suffered the penalty of death that we deserved for our own sins, Christ served as the only sufficient Mediator between a holy God and sinful man.
 - Those who by faith trusted in Christ for their salvation could be sure that God would hold them secure. This is why Calvin came to focus on God’s election in salvation – not as a smug, self-satisfaction for arrogant or complacent Christians, but rather out of a pastoral concern, to assure anxious Christians God’s absolute reliability in saving them.
 - How do we know who the elect are? Calvin states this cannot be known with certainty here, but believed that three measures provided helpful guidance for discerning who is likely saved: **1)** participation in the sacraments **2)** an upright moral life **3)** a public profession of faith.
- Calvin’s emphasis on God’s glory and sovereignty in salvation led naturally to a great love for the church as Christ’s body here on earth.
- Going beyond Luther’s preoccupation with justification, Calvin also focused on sanctification, or the believer’s responsibility out of gratitude for God’s grace to then live a new and holy life.
 - Here the church for Calvin was key, both as a help in sanctification and as a display to the world of God’s glory in making a holy people.
 - He distinguished between the invisible church, which included all people for all time who had been saved by Christ, and the visible church, which was the particular local manifestation of Christ’s body.
 - There was and would always be a tension between the invisible church, which consisted of all the elect and could only be known by God, and the visible church, those local congregations whose members usually included both believers and unbelievers.

- Calvin hoped for the visible church to mirror the invisible church as closely as possible, and he identified two distinguishing marks of a true visible church: **1)** the right preaching of the Word and **2)** the right administration of the Sacraments.

CONCLUSION

- By the time of Calvin's death in 1564, it had become clear that the Reformation was no mere passing fancy or local disturbance; nor was it confined to Luther's Wittenberg, Zwingli's Zurich, or Calvin's Geneva.
- The ideals and doctrines of the Reformation spread rapidly throughout Europe, sometimes taking root in fertile and welcoming fields, other times encountering severe resistance and violent persecution.
- Within decades, Reformed or Lutheran churches came to be in the majority in Switzerland, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, parts of France, and England and Scotland.
- The Reformation also unleashed movements beyond its control and beyond the imaging of the original Reformers, as groups like the Anabaptists took certain Reformation insights even further and often to excess, separating from society and often from each other.