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## Church History

**Core Seminar**

## Zwingli, Calvin, and the Reformed Churches, 1500-1564

*“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

*You shall have no other gods before me.”  Exodus 20:2-3*

One man does not a revolution make, or even a reformation.  If the Protestant Reformation had been the product only of Luther’s brilliance and stubbornness, it would have been nothing more than a standoff between a pugnacious monk and a corrupt pope, only remembered as a curious footnote to history.  Yet the Reformation was much more – a clear movement of the hand of God in history, bringing different Christian leaders in different regions almost simultaneously to similar conclusions.  Among them: God is sovereign in history and in salvation.  Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and not as a result of good works or superstitious ritual.  The Bible is the supreme and final authority in matters of faith and life.

Luther’s insights were either shared or followed by many others across Europe.  In different localities, however, the Reformation took on some different emphases.  Church leaders grappled with the full implications of the recovered Gospel.  What did this mean for the practice of Christian worship?  For the relationship between the church and the world?  Or, for that matter, the relationship between different churches?

Meanwhile, while this class will focus on two particularly significant leaders of the Reformation, we should not forget that the Reformation was most significant as a movement in the hearts and minds of countless people across Europe.  In this, it was inseparable from – indeed, was inspired by and guided by – the Bible.  And not just the Bible, but the Bible in the people’s own languages, spread rapidly by copies pouring off the recently invented printed presses.  Between 1520 and 1530, the Bible was translated into German, French, and English, and given into the hands of eager people desperate to learn the will of God through the Word of God.

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

At the same time that Luther was locking horns with the Roman Catholic church, a similar struggle was ongoing in a small, newly constituted country halfway between Wittenburg and Rome, in Zurich.  When we think of Switzerland today, we think of fine watches, tasty chocolates, and political neutrality.  Switzerland’s national roots, however, deeply intertwine with the roots of the Reformation, for the new nation’s relative political autonomy also created a fertile environment for religious reform.  If we take Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin to be the three leading Reformers, it is both remarkable and not coincidental that the latter two conducted their reforms in Switzerland.

[Background on Switzerland: All of the theological and moral problems with the church were just as rampant in Switzerland as they were when we looked at them in Germany last week, so we won't delve again into the problems being faced.

There was, however, one major difference. In addition to the theological and moral difficulties faced by Christians at the time, the Swiss were also having political and military trouble. If you don't know much about Swiss politics, that's okay, there's no particular reason you should. The nation of Switzerland is divided into Cantons, these are similar to our states here, except much more independent and powerful on their own. They work together and form the Swiss Confederation. You'll see why that matters in just a second.

At the end of the 1200s and beginning of the 1300s, the Swiss had developed a new form of warfare using pikes and halberds that was essentially unbeatable until gunpowder comes into use. (We won't go into why that is, but if you want to know more there's a great little book called *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* that you can pick up.) This means that everyone wants the Swiss on their side in a war, but that no one can conquer the Swiss and force them to fight on their side. So, what the King of France and the Holy Roman Emperor and various other leaders around Europe do is pay the Swiss money to fight for them. The Swiss people become mercenaries.

There are a number of problems that grow as a direct result of this practice. The first of course is a whole new set of moral problems that arise from living in a mercenary culture. If you live in a nation of people who kill for money, the moral bar is going to be pretty low.

In addition to that, remember the Swiss cantons are largely independent. Which means that each canton gets to decide who it's going to hire out to. Which means that if the King of France hires mercenaries from one Canton, the Holy Roman Emperor could hire mercenaries from another. Which means that in most of the wars in the 1300 and 1400s, whichever nations happened to be at war, it was still likely Swiss fighting against Swiss on the actual battlefield.

The Swiss were not terribly pleased with this situation, though they were pleased with the pay and with their own military prowess. The question becomes "how do we escape this self-made trap we're in?" Enter Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Reformation. Now before we jump into Zwingli's life, I hope you've noticed the point of this little bit of background—in the Swiss Reformation, corporate concerns, the concerns of the body of people, are there from the very beginning. Luther reforms as an individual, "here **I** stand," and only later goes back and develops a civil and ecclesiastical theology. Zwingli and the Swiss reformers begin with "**we** believe." Now, this is not a difference of doctrine, it is a difference of emphasis, as we'll see in a few minutes.”]

Born in 1484, Zwingli was a contemporary of Luther's generation.  He became ordained to the priesthood in 1506, and soon thereafter through study of Scripture, independently concluded that the Church was deeply corrupt and that Church doctrine was incorrect in many areas.  Zwingli felt strongly the influence of Wycliffe and Huss, as well as Erasmus, all of whom we looked at last week.

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.  True reformation, after all, springs not from one man’s opinions, or even one social group’s frustrations, but from the Word of God.  And so 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 October, 1522 he resigned his office as priest.  The Zurich City Council immediately hired him to be the city’s official preacher, reflecting Zwingli’s widespread popularity and support.  Here again we see the vitality of congregationalism; Zwingli himself acknowledged his support from the people, observing that “the common man adheres to the gospel although his superiors want nothing of it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Zwingli’s – and Zurich’s – final break with Rome came a few months later in early 1523, when Zwingli sought to defend himself against the criticisms of the Catholic hierarchy by calling a special town council meeting.  Here he presented his 67 Articles, theological points he had 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.  Again, here is a potent illustration of congregationalism: the Catholic authorities were aghast that Zwingli would believe this gathering of ordinary Christians, under the authority of the Bible alone, could be equal to an official church council led by the Pope, Cardinals, and Bishops.  But Zwingli and the people of Zurich, who by now had been sitting under biblical preaching for four years, believed it was, and the council issued a decisive verdict in Zwingli’s favor. This became known as the *First Zurich Disputation*, and marked a key moment in the Reformation, as 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, and to the glory of God alone….From here, Zwingli focused in particular on the fundamental distinction, even the great divide, 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 – for what is idolatry, but ascribing to creatures that which is due the Creator?  At the core of Rome’s errors, corruptions, and excesses, Zwingli sniffed the stench of 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 ceremonials” amounted to nothing but “tomfoolery.”  To depend upon them at all for salvation was like “placing iceblocks upon iceblocks**.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

 Zwingli did more than preach against these rituals and objects – he purged them.  One distraught Catholic wrote to the Emperor in 1530 and described the condition of Zurich’s churches after Zwingli’s reforms: *“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**.*”[[3]](#footnote-3) Zwingli wanted Christian worship to focus on the transcendent, living God in heaven – not on human creations or pale images.

Much as Luther and Zwingli agreed on the essentials of the Gospel and on the need to reform the church, they had some important differences.  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 [though Luther did part ways with Rome in some important ways on communion, as we saw last week].  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.**”[[4]](#footnote-4)*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.  While 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.

Finally, Luther and Zwingli held somewhat 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?**”[[5]](#footnote-5)* 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.”[[6]](#footnote-6) And whereas 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 compunctions.  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 in their stead, but the reforms began to take a different emphasis. Zwingli’s followers in Zurich carried on his legacy, particularly the great theologian Heinrich Bollinger, 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, and of them we will consider more next week.  Meanwhile, 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.  Again, we see here 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.

At some point later in his studies, Calvin experienced a rather sudden conversion in which “God *subdued my heart to teachableness.*”[[7]](#footnote-7) Soon thereafter, 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 (Erasmus). 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 – and the version we read today – 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-beared Elijah bellowing at the priests of Baal*.”[[8]](#footnote-8) 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.*”[[9]](#footnote-9) The young Frenchman stayed, and Geneva – and the church worldwide – would never be the same.

Staying in Geneva meant diving into theological strife, and during Calvin’s first two years, 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, the cathedral of Saint Pierre.  His listeners, fully expecting to hear a vindictive or self-righteous sermon gloating about his return, were 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.  In this way, 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.

Critics are often quick to disparage Calvin for an unfortunate episode that took place during his tenure in Geneva.  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 almost every other Catholic and Protestant in Europe did.  As one scholar reminds us, “*these heresies Servetus would have expiated 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. 

**Writings: Institutes of the Christian Religion and commentaries on Scripture**

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.

Calvin divided the *Institutes* into four parts or books, meant to follow the outline of the Apostles creed: *I. The Knowledge of God the Creator; II. The Knowledge of God the Redeemer; III. The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ, Its Benefits and Effects; and IV. The External Means by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ.*

Though Calvinism is often caricatured as focusing only on human sin and God’s sovereignty in salvation, any fair reading of Calvin’s seminal work will reveal a Christian profoundly concerned with declaring the whole counsel of God for the entire Christian life.  Indeed, the *Institutes* begins with the question of the *knowledge of God* and the *knowledge of ourselves*, and how the two are connected, even inseparable.  After all, observes Calvin, 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.

Again, 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.  And 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.  And just who are the “elect”?  Though this can not be known with certainty or finality by mere humans here on earth, Calvin believed that three measures provided helpful guidance for discerning who is likely saved: participation in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, an upright moral life, and 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: the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments.  Were these followed faithfully, the Gospel would flourish.

**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.  It was a monumental era on several fronts, as a social upheaval, a political revolution, a scholarly renaissance, and most of all, a recovery of the Gospel.  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 predominate in Switzerland, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, parts of France, and England and Scotland, on which we will focus next week.  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.  Though these divisions and errors served as reminders of the persistence of sin, Christians then and now can join in rejoicing that God stayed faithful to His promises, proclaimed His Gospel, and preserved His people.

1. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1988), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, v. 20-21 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), ii. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Roland Herbert Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, Enl. ed (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 64–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)