

Reformation Church History

Session 5—The Reformed Branches of Protestantism

[The two main branches of Protestantism are the Lutheran and the Reformed. They had much in common: a high view of Scripture and its authority over against the RC view of Scripture plus tradition; belief in a radical fall and the resultant depravity of man; the need for salvation by grace apart from works; the centrality of Christ and his cross work. But there were also significant differences: Lutheranism retained more of the liturgical vestiges of Rome; had a stronger sacramental emphasis; followed a trajectory that would be later termed Arminian soteriology.]

Reformed Branch in the early 16th Century

1. The German Swiss, with the main center in Zurich. Chief figure was Ulrich Zwingli, succeeded by Heinrich Bullinger.
2. The French Swiss, with the main center in Geneva. Chief figure was Jean Calvin succeeded by Theodore Beza.

I. Swiss Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

- A. Contemporary with Luther; educated at Basel, Bern and Vienna.
- B. Initially a humanist similar to Erasmus. A student of the Greek NT. Developed a conviction about the authority of Scripture. Became a parish priest in the small town of Glarus (1506-1516); read Augustine.
- C. It is unclear how much he was influenced by Luther's doctrine. Certainly he became aware of the German reformation movement. Zwingli adopted an expository approach to preaching, which was novel and effective.
- D. After a brief stint as minister in Einsiedeln, came to Zurich (1519). The church and town council were closely aligned; spiritual reforms were initiated in collaboration with the magistrates.

- E. The *Great Sausage Incident*—February, 1522. Eating meat was not allowed during Lent. Since he saw no prohibition in Scripture Zwingli encouraged some friends to eat meat and test this prohibition. They were imprisoned, but Zwingli was able to convince the council from Scripture and won their release.
- F. Through debates held in the next years, Zwingli pressed for reform in the areas of clerical celibacy, authority of Scripture over tradition, salvation by grace alone. Also, rejection of the mass, intercession of saints, purgatory and penance. His overriding principle was the primacy and authority of Scripture.
- G. Zwingli died in 1531 at the 2nd Battle of Capel. Of the 13 different Cantons in Switzerland at that time, half were Catholic and the other half Protestant which led to armed conflict. Bullinger, who succeeded him, was responsible for *the Second Helvetic Confession* (1561) which found wide acceptance beyond the Swiss. After Westminster and Heidelberg, it was the most generally recognized Reformed confession.

II. The Anabaptists

- A. Contended for believers' baptism, a gathered (voluntary) church, radical separation of church and state and stricter church discipline.
- B. Conrad Grebel (1498-1526) in Zurich represented a growing desire to extend reform to the areas mentioned above. At first, it seemed that Zwingli was supportive, but in the end he sided with the town magistrates. [read excerpt]
- C. Infant baptism was not only viewed as a religious rite, but as an entry point into the body politic. In this period of church-state union the attempt to re-baptize was considered seditious.
- D. On January 17, 1525 Grebel and Zwingli debated the issue of infant baptism before the Zurich city council. Zwingli was officially declared the winner. On January 21, Grebel baptized George Blaurock at the home of

Felix Manz. Blaurock then proceeded to baptize the others present.¹
With this act Anabaptism was born.

- E. The Anabaptists were severely persecuted by both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Over the next hundred years, as many as five thousand Anabaptists were executed, often by drowning.
- F. When speaking of the “Radical Reformation” a distinction must be made between:
 - 1. The *Anabaptists* proper, whose primary authority was Scripture.
 - 2. The *Spiritualists* or *Inspirationists* who set the immediate illumination of the Spirit over Scripture.
 - 3. The *Rationalists* who put the emphasis on human reason.²
- G. *The Schleitheim Confession* (1527). This document’s seven articles were mainly concerned with practical questions of Christian living: rejection of infant baptism; the desire to establish a pure church composed only of the regenerate; the Lord’s Supper as memorial; separation of Christians from all wickedness and affairs of the state; pastors must be men of good reputation; no bearing of arms; no taking of oaths (allegiance to anyone or anything apart from Christ).³

III. Jean Calvin (1509-1564)

- A. Unlike Luther, Calvin spoke little of himself. He represents the second generation of Protestants, coming on the scene in the 1530s. Calvin was a great admirer of Luther, saying he owed a great debt to him. “The gospel restored in our time.”
- B. His mother died when he was young. His father, Girard, was a legal official in the court of the bishop of Noyon. Through connections with the De Montmors, a noble family, Calvin was able to receive an excellent education. He began studies at the University of Paris but had to withdraw.

¹ William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975, p. 11.

² Ibid, p. 15.

³ Cf. Estep, pages 40-47; Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, B&H Academic, Nashville, 2009, p. 88.

His father fell out of favor with the bishop and was excommunicated. Jean received a law degree in 1532, having studied at Bourges and Orleans. At this point Calvin was a French humanist in the literary sense and there was no indication that he even leaned toward Protestantism.

- C. Questions about the time of his conversion. Possibly as early as 1528 and perhaps as late as 1534. One brief biographical note in the 1557 preface to his commentary on the Psalms, “I was obstinately addicted to ... the papacy.” Probably he was converted around 1532-33 because of two events. In 1532 he was awarded two scholarships (sources of income) but in 1533 he gave them up and returned to Noyon. In October 1533 he shows up in Paris with Nicholas Cop who had been elected rector of the University of Paris. At the end of Cop’s inaugural address, he spoke of salvation by grace, dangerous to speak of in Paris at that time. The radical speech required Cop to flee. When rumor spread that Calvin had written the speech, he too was forced to take flight.

- D. While on the run, he began to write the *Institutes*. In 1535 he was living in a safe house for Protestants where there was a excellent theological library. The 1st edition (1536) of the *Institutes* consisted of six short chapters. By the time of Calvin’s last revision it had ground to 80 chapters. The idea of this work was to provide a theological basis for understanding his commentaries. Calvin’s separation of theological reflection (*Institutes*) from commentary was a break with tradition.

- E. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*—four major books:
 - 1. Book I—Doctrine of God Father
 - 2. Book II—Redemption and Christ Son
 - 3. Book III—Application of Redemption Holy Spirit
 - 4. Book IV—Church Church

- F. The fall has affected our minds—we no longer use them aright. The fall has affected our wills—we no longer obey God. In Book III there is an extraordinary emphasis on the Holy Spirit. B.B. Warfield called Calvin the theologian of the Holy Spirit.

- G. The doctrine of predestination is something usually associated with Calvin. A pastoral tone governs his approach to this doctrine. He asks, "Why is it that a pastor finds that some respond and some do not?" The answer is the doctrine of predestination. God, in love, chooses some unworthy sinners to be his children. Others, he passes over. This discussion does not occur in the abstract. The doctrine was previously located under the Doctrine of God (decrees; providence) in the 1st edition. But in 1559 he moved it to Book III, under the Doctrine of Redemption, linking it with Christology. It is "in Christ" that we have been chosen. Calvin continued to read his Bible and saw that predestination is "in Christ."
- H. This shows how his theology developed. There is nothing of predestination in the earliest edition. Beginning his career as a humanist, he would not have been fond of this doctrine. When he wrote his commentary on Romans, his thinking apparently developed. But predestination is not Calvin's most important doctrine, God's sovereignty is.
- I. Calvin in Geneva. He wanted a quiet life in the study so he could write books. He wanted to live in Strasbourg, a free city where he could live the life of a scholar. But while on his way there, a battle (part of the Hapsburg-Valois War) forced him to turn aside into Geneva. His call to the ministry occurred in a Genevan inn, August 1536. God confronted him.
- J. Guillaume (William) Farel was instrumental in getting the city council to declare for the Reformation a few months earlier. But Farel soon felt the task more than he could handle. When he heard that Calvin, the author, was staying at a local inn, he implored him to stay in Geneva and help him. "Wherever I went, I resolved to keep private that I was the author of the *Institutes*, ... Farel burned with an extraordinary zeal." Calvin said he was not interested, but reluctantly agreed to stay because Farel convinced him that God would oppose his retirement. But his time in Geneva was unsuccessful.
- K. The council said Geneva was a Protestant city, but most of the populace was Roman Catholic and therefore hostile. In addition, Geneva was embroiled in political intrigue. There were two major political factions, one pro-French, the other pro-Bern (a powerful canton). Eventually, in March

1538, the political situation deteriorated even further and Calvin and Farel were banished. Calvin went to Martin Bucer (a father figure for Calvin) in Strasbourg (his original destination). Bucer wanted Calvin to be pastor of the French-speaking people in Strasbourg. He was there from 1538-1541.

- L. In 1541, he received a letter from the Genevan city council asking him to return. A new council had been elected which was Protestant. He reluctantly returned but required a freer hand in church matters, so that pastors would be better able to preach, encourage and admonish.
- M. Calvin is often misrepresented as the dictator of Geneva who tried to establish a theocracy. But he never held a position in the city government and wasn't even granted citizenship until late in his life. The authority he did have derived from his pastoral influence, his preaching and his unparalleled work ethic. That his life and work are still influential today is a testimony to his greatness.
- N. Michael Servetus—a brilliant but erratic heretic who wrote works on the circulatory system, mathematics, astronomy and unfortunately, works denying the Trinity. Calvin is usually portrayed as responsible for his death. But this is not a fair nor complete picture. “The trial, condemnation and execution ... of Servetus were entirely the work of the city council.”⁴ Calvin even visited him repeatedly in prison to help him. He appealed for mercy for Servetus. “The sixteenth century knew little, if anything, of the modern distaste for capital punishment, and regarded it as a legitimate and expedient method of eliminating undesirables and discouraging their imitation.”⁵ If anything, Calvin was merely a child of his age.
- O. Calvin, the pastor. From his many letters, a picture emerges of a compassionate and diligent pastor who, in addition to preaching and teaching, is often at the bedside of the dying. His preaching was both eloquent and passionate. He preached three times on Sunday, also on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays—for twenty years! In addition there were theological lectures, presiding over pastors meetings and other events, including weddings, funerals and baptisms. Add in pastoral

⁴ Alister McGrath, *A Life of Jean Calvin*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1990. p. 116.

⁵ Ibid, p. 115.

counseling, and commentaries written on almost every book of the Bible. Numerous treatises, revisions of the *Institutes*, not to mention vast numbers of letters to individuals. An unbelievable work ethic.

- P. A sickly person. Like Luther, Calvin had many and varied maladies and he didn't hesitate to write about them in his letters. Thankfully, unlike Luther, he spared his readers descriptions of the details of his constipation and diarrhea.⁶ Gout and kidney stones were chief among his complaints. But a host of digestive and respiratory problems plagued him, as well. It's amazing that he lived as long as he did.

- Q. Calvin and Missions. Many think Calvinism undermines missions, but not so. The city of Geneva was a refugee center with many fleeing persecution. Most of the refugees were French, whom Calvin trained, supported and often sent back to plant churches. He set up training structures to equip men in biblical and theological studies; preaching; character training. By 1562 more than 2000 churches had been planted out from Geneva.⁷ Calvin believed we ought to engage in missions for the glory of God, out of compassion for the lost and as a matter of duty.

- R. "True Christianity is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affections of the heart." *Institutes Book III: 6:4*

- S. Calvin and Luther would say, "We are not innovators, nor revolutionaries. We are reformers seeking to return to the way it was."⁸

The Reformed branch of Protestantism in Switzerland would significantly influence Scottish Presbyterianism, the French Huguenots, the English Puritans, the early Congregationalists, the Dutch Reformed and many other streams of the Christian faith.

⁶ Herman Selderhuis, *John Calvin, A Pilgrim's Life*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2009, p.199.

⁷ From class notes, Frank James, RTS, April 3, 1998.

⁸ Ibid.