

## KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (12)

### The Reformation Church (1517-1648) – From Calvin to Calvinism

#### A. Introduction

1. As the Word of God was unleashed, a true church faithful to the Gospel emerged out of the Medieval Church, and a new period of church history began.

The Reformation Church was the period of the church history between the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, sparked by the nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, and its end with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

2. Two of the influential leaders that God raised up to unleash His Word were Martin Luther in Germany and Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland.

Both these men were thoroughly convinced about the power of God's Word to bring about in the church the much-needed change.

Luther: *"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word... And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it. I did nothing, the Word did everything."*

Zwingli: *"For God's sake, do not put yourself at odds with the Word of God. For truly it will persist as surely as the Rhine follows its course. One can perhaps dam it up for awhile, but it is impossible to stop it."*

Luther and Zwingli were men who were committed to the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

There was something else that these two men believed, which is that, *"salvation is a gift of God's grace alone (Sola Gratia), found, not in any pope or Mass, but in Christ alone (Solus Christus), and received by simple faith alone (Sola Fide). And we can know this for certain only through Scripture (Sola Scriptura). Only if all these things are true, the sinner contributing nothing to his own salvation, can all the glory go to God (Soli Deo Gloria)."*<sup>1</sup>

3. Yet neither of these two men were responsible for the lasting impact, the event that began 500 years ago, has had on the church and continues to have on the church today.

No other Reformer has had a greater effect than John Calvin.

The influence of Calvin's teaching can be seen in the French Huguenot Church, the Scottish Presbyterian Church, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the English Puritans.

Today it's not just Presbyterians who hold to Calvin's theology, there are many Protestant evangelicals – Independents, Baptists, Anglicans, Charismatics – who follow in his footsteps too.

*"Left to itself, Lutheranism might well have foundered: it required Calvinism to keep the Reformed ship afloat. And in the world as a whole we may also remember Calvin as the greatest religious force in modern times."* (William Stevenson)

4. John Calvin was born in northern France in 1509, and was converted out of Roman Catholicism during his time at university where he was studying law, sometime between 1530 and 1533.

No doubt his discovery of the gospel was helped by the writings of Luther, which had spread to the universities in France and Switzerland.

Although he never met Luther, Calvin called him his *"most respected father"*.

Calvin remarkably says almost nothing about the circumstances of his conversion.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*

There is just one little passage in his Latin commentary on the Psalms where he simply tells us, "*God subdued my heart to docility.*"

Like Luther and Zwingli, Calvin would unleash God's Word by being committed to preaching and teaching it.

But how was it that Calvin would have such an influence in a way that Luther and Zwingli did not?

## **B. He wrote a book**

1. A few years after his conversion, John Calvin wrote the first edition of a book that would be his life's work.

A theological masterpiece called 'The Institutes of the Christian Religion'.

It wasn't his intention then to write a systematic summary of the Christian faith. His original purpose for the Institutes was to bring an end to the persecution of Protestants in France.

He hoped that by providing a simple introduction to the Protestant faith for King Francis I, he would persuade him that those who held to the teaching of Luther were not heretics but were holding to the true Christian faith the king had sworn to uphold.

This explains why the Institutes begins with a lengthy letter to King Francis.

2. The persecution of Protestants was sparked by the placement of placards denouncing the Mass in prominent locations throughout France in 1534.

One of this placards somehow was able to placed outside of King Francis' bedchamber.

He wasn't too impressed.

Hundreds of Protestants were imprisoned and a number were burned at the stake, including some of Calvin's close friends.

Calvin had escaped to Basel, which was where he wrote the first version of the Institutes in 1536.

3. Later that year, Calvin made plans to join Martin Bucer who was leading the Reformation in Strasbourg.

His journey to Strasbourg took him through Geneva where he planned on staying one night.

Guillaume (William) Farel had come to Geneva a few years earlier to strengthen the reformation of the church that had already begun, but now he was too old to give the leadership needed.

Farel was aware of the Institutes that Calvin had written (they had made him a household name) and when he heard that the author was in town, he sought to persuade Calvin to take over from him.

Calvin was reluctant, giving numerous reasons why he shouldn't remain in Geneva.

*"May God curse your studies if now in her time of need you refuse to lend your aid to His church!"* was Farel's response.

Calvin stayed in Geneva and sought to continue the reformation of the church by preaching the Word of God.

However, the city council did not want to reform as much as Calvin sought to bring it about, and less than two years after arriving, Calvin was forced to leave and finally got to Strasbourg.

Arriving in Strasbourg, Calvin felt like he had failed as a reformer and was concerned that the church might return to Rome. At the same time he was glad to finally get the chance to study.

Martin Bucer however had other ideas for him, asking him to pastor a congregation of French refugees, which for three happy years he did, learning what a reformation church could look like.

He also found time to study, revising and expanding his Institutes and writing his first commentary on Romans.

Although over the course of his life, Calvin would write commentaries to help preachers on every New Testament book except Revelation, and the Old Testament books of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, part of Ezekiel, and the Minor prophets, his magnum opus remained the Institutes.

#### 4. The Institutes of the Christian Religion was the most concise expression of his views about what the Bible taught.

The first edition which appeared in 1536 had only six chapters. The final edition in 1559 would consist of four books of eighty chapters, following the flow of the Apostles' Creed.

Book 1: The Knowledge of God the Creator.

Book 2: The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, first disclosed to the fathers under the law, and then to us in the gospel.

Book 3: The way in which we receive the grace of Christ: what benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow.

Book 4: The external means or aids by which God invites us into the Society of Christ and holds us therein.

The reason why this book was so influential was because not only was it a systematic and succinct (!) summary of what the Bible taught, he also made doctrine easier to understand.

Calvin himself saw the Institutes as being important for filling in what he left out in his commentaries.

*"In my commentaries... there will be no need for me to argue at length about the subjects raised, since the present book [the Institutes] provides overall direction for those who wish to be helped."*

*"The Institutes are thus a companion piece to Calvin's entire work of biblical exposition and vice versa." (Robert White)*

### C. He started a school

#### 1. Three years after Calvin left, Geneva decided that it was ready for reform, having rejected a plea from a Cardinal to come back to Rome.

They invited Calvin back, who although he said he would prefer 'a hundred deaths to this cross', was eventually persuaded to return.

On the day of his return, he submitted to the city council a list of proposals for the comprehensive reformation of the church, of which most were accepted.

Reforms included that every household should receive a pastoral visit every year, everyone should learn a catechism explaining the faith, only those who did should be allowed to participate at the Lord's table, and church attendance was made mandatory.

Calvin wanted to create a godly city filled with Christian citizens living out their Christian faith by obeying the Word of God.

He devoted most of his time to preaching and teaching, preaching twice each Sunday and on alternative weeks, every weekday as well.

#### 2. The reformation that took place in Geneva literally turned the church and the city into a school.

John Knox who spent two years in Geneva, called it, "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles."

When persecution brought many Christian refugees to Geneva from other countries, they returned to their homelands, taking with them the teaching and model of church and community life they had experienced there.

3. This wasn't the only school that was started in Geneva.

In 1559, Calvin started an Academy to train ministers.

Hundreds of students were trained to preach, taught theology and had their moral character assessed to make sure they were qualified to be ministers of the gospel.

Once equipped they were then dispatched to places like France, Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Poland.

*"Calvin's Geneva was something very much more than a haven and a school. It was not a theological ivory tower that lived to itself and for itself, oblivious to its responsibility in the gospel to the needs of others. Human vessels were equipped and refitted in this haven... that they might launch out into the surrounding ocean of the world's need, bravely facing every storm and peril that awaited them, in order to bring the light of Christ's gospel to those who were in the ignorance and darkness from which they themselves had originally come. They were taught in this school in order that they in turn might teach others the truth that had set them free." (Philip Hughes)*

By 1562 some 2,150 congregations had been planted in France with around 3 million members, many of them converted through the witness of men trained in Geneva.

4. 15 years after Calvin's death, a Dutch student by the name of Jacobus Arminius came to Geneva to study at the Academy under Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza.

When he had finished his training, he returned to Amsterdam to serve as pastor and then professor, and over time his teaching began to differ from what Calvin and Beza after him had taught, especially in regards to the sovereignty of God in salvation (a key theme of Calvin's teaching).

He came to believe that God predestines people for salvation on the basis of His foreknowledge of their faith.

After Arminius' died, a disagreement in the Dutch Reformed Church would ensue between those who held to the teaching of Calvin (Calvinists) and those who held to the teaching of Arminius' (Arminians) regarding God's sovereignty in salvation.

The matter would be settled, for the Dutch Reformed Church anyway, when a synod of theologians met in Dort in 1618.

Five articles were agreed, known as the Canons of Dort, and later put into the appropriately Dutch acronym TULIP.

- T – Total Depravity (or grace that reaches)
- U – Unconditional Election (or grace that chooses)
- L – Limited Atonement (or grace that saves)
- I – Irresistible Grace (or grace that overcomes)
- P – Perseverance of the Saints (or grace that keeps)

These along with the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Confession would become the confessional standards not only for Dutch Reformed Church but many reformed churches around the world today.

5. Calvin wasn't perfect – like Luther and Zwingli he had his flaws.

But we should be grateful for the way God used this Reformer through the book he wrote, and the school he started.

#### **D. What lessons can we learn for today?**

1. The way we've structured our church services reflect the relationship between Calvin's Commentaries and His Institutes.

Our morning service is where, like Calvin's Commentaries, we go verse by verse through books of Bibles in the sermons that are preached.

Our evening service is where, like Calvin's Institutes, we have doctrinal series to teach what the whole Bible teaches on a subject.

2. Training is Mission.

Our training programme aims to train our trainees to preach and be pastors and model to them what a healthy church life looks like.

But we equip them in order to send them out to bless other churches and other communities.