

# **THE STORY OF the Swiss Reformation**

## **ULRICH ZWINGLI AND JOHN CALVIN**

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Switzerland may be small in land mass, but God chose this small land to produce what we know to be the Reformed faith. As Germany gave birth to the Reformation, so Switzerland became the place where Reformation theology was developed and spread abroad. The Christian influence began in Switzerland under Roman rule as early as the third century spreading from France and Italy. During the Medieval period, Switzerland was under the authority and rule of the Roman see, and no other religion was tolerated but Roman Catholicism. As the Church had been terribly corrupted in Germany and was in dire need of reformation, so the Church in Switzerland under the unbiblical teachings of Roman Catholicism and the teachings of mere men, had become corrupted in doctrine and life and was in dire need of a reformation. For instance, during this time the convents were in state of moral decay where guilty priests were absolved of children being born to them from concubines by a mere payment of a fine. Openly before the laypeople, the priests kept concubines and immoral women in their homes (cf. Proverbs 5-7). At the University of Basle, a great center of learning and intellectual influence, there were those who had been calling for a reformation of the church. Between the years of 1505 and 1508, a man named Thomas Wyttenbach of Biel who taught theology at the university attacked the selling of indulgences, the superstitious practice of the Roman Catholic mass, and the celibacy of the priesthood particularly because it led to so much gross immorality. As the German Reformation reached and influenced Switzerland through the work of Luther and Melancthon, Wyttenbach and other priests married in

1524; he and the seven other priests were deposed and excommunicated from the church. By God's grace and because of his providence, many of Luther's writings were published in Switzerland and were received and read by the clergy and educated laypeople during this time.

It would not be the city of Basle where God would begin the Swiss Reformation however. It was to be the capital city of Zurich, through an able humanistic scholar named Ulrich Zwingli. Like Luther, he was well educated, and an able preacher and popular teacher and was used by God to make the doctrines of grace and the theology of the reformation known to the people. We can follow the spread of the reformation in Switzerland through three important time periods: (1) The Period of Zwingli (ca. 1516-1531); (2) The Period of Calvin (ca. 1531-1564); and (3) The Period of Bullinger and Beza (ca. 1564-1605). While both Zwingli in Switzerland and Luther in Germany were mighty reformers who could make the doctrines of the Reformation known popularly to the people, it would be Calvin primarily who would be the architect of Reformation Theology, and these biblical doctrines would be consolidated in the churches during the time of Bullinger and Beza. The Lutheran and Reformed Churches are the two original branches of what we call Evangelical Christianity; all of those who claim that the Bible is inspired and the sole rule for faith in life and believe that Jesus is the only Mediator between God and man, and believe the basic tenants of the Reformation find their heritage in the German and Swiss Reformation whether they understand or acknowledge it or not. In the beginning of the organization of the Reformation in 1529, the only doctrinal difference between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches was the understanding

of the Lord's Supper and the presence of Christ in it (Colloquy of Marburg, 1529; 14 out of 15 doctrines were agreed upon and so there was confessional unity in the beginning, although through the last few hundred years the doctrinal differences have widened with regard to church government, worship, discipline, etc.). As historian Philip Schaff wrote: "The Swiss and the German Reformers agreed in opposition to Romanism, but the Swiss departed further from it."

### **Ulrich Zwingli**

Huldreich or Ulrich Zwingli was born on January 1, 1484 in Wildhaus, in Northeastern Switzerland (and was notably born seven weeks after Martin Luther in God's providence). The principal industry was shepherding in Wildhaus and so Zwingli was raised by God-fearing parents who tended flocks, his father was also a chief magistrate of the village. Zwingli was taught the Roman Catholic faith by his parents and educated in the classics of humanism by his uncle. As he grew up, he became a great humanist scholar with an outstanding knowledge of classical learning. In 1502, Zwingli taught Latin for a season, and then took the Master of Arts in 1506. In God's providence Zwingli and a friend named Leo Judah attended lectures by Thomas Wyttenbach who was professor of theology and this warm and knowledgeable professor opened the eyes of both the students to the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and planted the seeds of the biblical teachings of the reformation. It was this professor Wyttenbach who memorably taught Zwingli a truth that he never forgot; he said to him: "Do not rely on the keys of the Church [in speaking of indulgences that are purchased for the forgiveness of sins], but to seek the remission of sins alone in the death of Christ, and to open access

to it by the key of faith” (As Staupitz was a spiritual father to Luther early in his career, so Wyttenbach was a spiritual father to Zwingli).

Zwingli was ordained to the priesthood and appointed the pastor of Glarus; he ministered in Glarus from 1506-1516. For these ten years, Zwingli fulfilled his duties as pastor, teacher, minister and student. During this time, he taught himself to read the Greek New Testament so that he could read the Bible in the original languages. As he continued his study in the classics, he observed that these writings had a great deal of understanding of God’s revelation that had been revealed to them through nature and because they were made in God’s image. Zwingli was fascinated with the Greek poets and philosophers in what they understood about the world and how it coincided with biblical truth. It was during his time at Glarus that Zwingli began to understand the truth of biblical Christianity, and the truths that he would soon preach as a pastor-theologian of the reformation. Through his reading of the Bible, and correspondence with Erasmus of Rotterdam, Zwingli was led by the Spirit to begin to understand the truth of God found in the Scriptures. He would begin his activity as reformer not in Glarus, but in Zurich, the place that God had appointed for the Swiss Reformation to take hold and spread west to Europe with the fires of evangelical Christianity.

Before Zwingli would go to Zurich, he was a pastor-preacher for a short season in Einsidlen. As he studied the Greek Testament, he wrote on the Apostle’s Paul’s epistles and openly preached against indulgences and other abuses of Romanism as early as 1516. Some historians say that this is evidence that the Swiss Reformation began actually

earlier than Luther's Reformation in Germany on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517. The truth is that although Zwingli did indeed preach against abuses in as early as 1516, so did Martin Luther, and the preaching at this point did not have the immediate consequences like Luther's posting of his Ninety-Five Theses. Zwingli was more like Philip Melancthon than Luther in his education; Zwingli was an example of a man with great Humanistic and Renaissance learning coupled with a warm and biblical Reformation Christianity. Historian Dr. Schaff wrote: "Zwingli was trained in the school of Erasmus, and passed from the heathen classics directly to the New Testament. He represents more than any other Reformer, except Melancthon, the spirit of the Renaissance in harmony with the Reformation."

The Reformation in Switzerland formally begins when Zwingli is called to the position of chief pastor in Zurich in December 1518. Because of the influence he had already had from the Greek New Testament and the little progress he had experienced in biblical Christianity in his career, Zwingli began his time as pastor preaching through and expositing the Book of the Gospel of Matthew. For Zwingli, the Word of God was the final rule for faith and life; the Word of God was to be understood and given primacy over the Church Fathers and any tradition. Zwingli was probably familiar with the style of expository preaching through books from the Church Fathers' example, particularly his reading and knowledge of Chrysostom and Augustine, and within four years he had preached through all of the books of the New Testament except the Apocalypse of St. John (aka *The Book of Revelation*). Zurich was an important and influentially cosmopolitan city in Switzerland full of wealth, luxury, and many politicians drunk with

power. The city has been compared to the city of Corinth where Paul and Silas visited and made the gospel known. Zwingli preached the pure gospel of Christ and sought to preach only what the Bible taught and this had a profound influence on the people of Zurich. When the people of Zurich first heard his expository and practical sermons they were astounded and amazed at the truth revealed. They said: “Such preaching was never heard before” and “This is a genuine preacher of the truth, a Moses who will deliver the people from bondage.”

Zwingli’s life as faithful preacher and pastor was not without problems and persecutions as he had to stand in August 1518 against Bernhardin Samson, hawker of indulgences, the Swiss Johan Tetzel; also he suffered with the Plague as it swept through Zurich in 1519, and escaped death by God’s graciousness to him (Approximately 1 out of every 4 persons died, and many left the city to flee the plague, but Zwingli stayed to continue the work of the Gospel and he was sick unto death and his recovery was rough as he had been very sick). During his sickness, Zwingli wrote this poem:

*Thy purpose fulfil:  
nothing can be too severe for me.  
I am thy vessel,  
for you to make whole or break to pieces.  
Since, if you take hence  
my spirit from this earth,  
you do it so that it will not grow evil,  
and will not mar  
the pious lives of others.*

It was in 1522 that Zwingli as pastor took his stand ultimately against Roman Catholicism and realized that as pastor he must stand with Luther and the Reformation. It was during the period of Lent in 1522 when Roman Catholics were not to eat meat that Zwingli preached that eating meat was not sinful and that this command of Rome bound

men's consciences as a teaching that was unbiblical. Both the Church and the magistrate of Zurich threatened Zwingli and those who obeyed his preaching with punishment if they failed to observe the customary fasts of the Church of Rome. Zwingli explained that he was teaching what the Apostle Paul had taught in Romans 14 and his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8 and 10 that the eating of meats was an example of things indifferent and that Christians have liberty to use or to abstain. Zwingli was now in trouble with the government and the Church, and he was threatened with assassination for his views. Later in 1522, Zwingli sends a petition to the bishop to permit the free preaching of the gospel and marriage of the clergy; his petition was not granted. Regardless, Zwingli understood that his conscience should only be bound by God's Word, and the Bible did not teach clerical celibacy as did Rome, so Zwingli married a widow named Anna Reinhart in 1522 along with other priests who had become Reformed in doctrine and life.

Because of the great commotion that was stirred up by Zwingli's stand for Biblical Christianity, the Council of Two Hundred, the main ruling government in Zurich at this time, called for a disputation that would settle the teaching of Scripture. In preparation for this disputation, Zwingli penned the first summary or conclusions of the Reformed faith; there were Sixty-seven articles. Article 2 stated: "The sum of the gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, has made known to us the will of the heavenly Father, and redeemed us by his innocence from eternal death, and reconciled us to God." Article 18 stated: "Christ, who offered himself once on the cross, is the sufficient and perpetual sacrifice for the sins of all believers. Therefore the mass is no sacrifice, but a

commemoration of the one sacrifice of the cross, and a seal of the redemption through Christ.” Article 22 stated: “Christ is our righteousness. From this it follows that our works are good so far as they are Christ’s, but not good so far as they are our own.” Article 34 stated: “The spiritual [hierarchical] power, so called, has no foundation in the Holy Scriptures and the teaching of Christ.” Article 50 stated: “God alone forgives sins, through Jesus Christ our Lord alone.” The first of the disputations were held in January 1523 and there were about 600 persons present, including clergy and members of the government of Zurich. Throughout January of 1523 the disputations continued and it was decided that according to Scripture, Zwingli was correct in his teaching, and the City of Zurich became formally committed to the Reformation through the will of the council who represented the people. The Reformation continued in Zurich through the cooperation of preachers, the civil magistrates and the people, and by June 1524 worship was reformed in that all practices of idolatry was destroyed or removed from the worship service: the Mass was abolished, pictures of saints were broken and burnt, the bones of the saints were buried, the organs and the choir was removed to make room for congregational hymn singing, and the preaching of the Word of God became the centerpiece of the churches. Martin Luther’s New Testament that he had completed in 1522 was reprinted at Basel with a glossary and in Zurich Luther’s New Testament translation was revised and improved for the people to read and study for themselves. According to Church Historian Philip Schaff, the Reformation of Zurich was substantially completed in 1525 and was accomplished by the secular and spiritual powers that God had appointed in Switzerland at that time and this radically caused the

Roman Catholic powers that were still present in Zurich to submit to the civil Swiss government because the law protected the Reformation there.

As in Germany, there was also a schismatic, separatistic, and radical spirit that threatened the influence of the Reformation in Zurich. The Anabaptists as they have been called (because they believed in the rebaptism of those who had been baptized as infants in the Church) desired impatiently to clean up and reform the Church so that the visible Church was made up only of believers. The Anabaptist goal was to so reform the church in an ultra-Protestant way that there would be a pristine Church if the Church was only made up of those who were believers and so were baptized; they desired to go back to the purity of the New Testament Church in their thinking, separating from the historic visible Church that was made up of both believers and unbelievers. Because of their goal of purifying the Church so that there would only be believers, they forbid infant baptism, and confessed only what they called "Believers' Baptism". Only those who professed Christ could be in the visible Church, and only those baptized as adults, opposing anyone who taught infant baptism as the historic Christian Church had taught, and requiring those who confess to be rebaptized if they wanted to join. They were a great threat to Zwingli and the Reformation and many with the help of the government, some were put to death for their crimes against the State laws and the Church. In fact, six executions took place in Zurich between 1527 and 1532 because of their threat to the laws of Zurich, and their ongoing persistence in splitting from the historic Christian Church. In 1529, the Diet of Speier joined the Swiss in silencing these radical schismatics by decreeing:

“Every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex will be put to death by sword, or fire, or otherwise.”

As we turn to John Calvin who will become the architect theologically of the Swiss Reformation and the Reformed Churches everywhere through his influence, we should note a few important theological emphases that Zwingli had as an important theological forerunner of Calvin. Zwingli theologically emphasized the Word of God as the only rule of faith and practice for the Christian life; Christ is the only and sufficient source of saving truth and saving grace, against the traditions of men and works of men. Zwingli emphasized the doctrines of eternal election and providence. He expounds and articulates the biblical teaching that the primary source of salvation is God’s sovereign election of his people in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3-14). With Luther and later with Calvin, Zwingli was a strong Augustinian predestinarian who affirmed that the human will had been affect by sin and so was unable to choose God without an initiative work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration (cf. Eph. 2:1-10). Zwingli’s unique teaching on the Lord’s Supper as a mere memorial or commemoration was where he taught differently from both Luther and Calvin. On one extreme of the issues was Luther and on the other was Zwingli, with John Calvin’s teaching being between these two differences as we will concern ourselves with later in this study.

Because of the work of God’s Spirit in the heart and the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli, the Reformation spread throughout Switzerland to the cities of Basel, Glarus, to the northeastern parts in St. Gall, Toggenburg, Schaffhausen, Appenzell, Thurgau, and

Aargau, even extending so far as the Italian valleys under the teaching of Petrus Paulus Vergerius (1498-1565) who was very close to John Calvin in much of this theological teachings, particularly his articulation of the Bible's teaching on the Lord's Supper. Although the Reformation continued to spread, it was not without the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church. The truth is that in 1528, Zwingli was officially excommunicated from the Church of Rome but never came close to the persecution that Luther did during his Reformation due to the civil magistrates in Zurich. By 1530 the Zwinglian Reformation was firmly established in the leading Swiss cities of Zurich, Bern, and Basel and war broke out in 1529 between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic armies and would continue until 1531. Zwingli in his Reformation believed that the reformed biblical principles extended to all aspects of life, and therefore he was not only a powerful preacher-pastor in his day, but also an influential statesman and patriot. Zwingli believed that in order to preserve the peace of the church during this time of Reformation, men must take up arms in order to fight against the bondage threatened by the Roman Catholic Church and her armies. Zurich declared war in June 1529 and four thousand soldiers were sent to Cappel a territory in Zurich. Zwingli believed in this war for freedom and scriptural principles, and he bravely and nobly went to the front to fight with the armed men. There were peace treaties between the Swiss and the Roman Catholic Church during this time, but they were did not end the warfare and settle the important issues of the day. It is true that during this time of peace, Zwingli was dissatisfied with the peace that had been made when there was no actual peace between the Reformation and Rome, and unfortunately he crossed spiritual and civil boundaries that was unwise for a pastor-preacher by trying to win alliances from France and Venice

as well as politically from Philip of Hesse through private correspondence. Zwingli wrote a Confession of the Reformed Faith to King Francis I of France which was his last work, but his Confession was not heeded and he did not gain the aid of King Francis (any more than Calvin did later when he dedicated his *Institutes* to the king). At the Second War of Cappel in 1531, Zwingli died in battle at the age of forty-seven years along with his brother-in-law, his step-son, his son-in-law, and some of his closest friends. He died of a head injury after a stone was hurled at him as he was giving relief to a dying soldier. His last words were: "They may kill my body, but they cannot kill the soul." The Roman Catholics ordered that Zwingli's body be quartered for treason, burnt for heresy, and his ashes be mingled with the ashes of swine and scattered to the four winds of heaven.

Many Roman Catholics of the time as well as some historians opposed to the Reformation think that Zwingli's death was an obvious indication that the Reformation was not the work of God, because God showed his judgment against Zwingli in the Battle of Cappel, but as historian Philip Schaff wrote: "Such an uncharitable interpretation of Providence is condemned by the example of Job, the fate of the prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and the express rebuke of the disciples by our Savior in the case of the man born blind (John 9:31)."

## **John Calvin and His Work**

In Geneva, William (Guillaume) Farel (1489-1565) could not have done the work of Calvin. Farel was an important Reformer in Geneva, as well as a popular preacher as Luther and Zwingli, but Calvin became the theological architect of the Swiss Reformation that would influence church in Europe and America. John Calvin was twenty-five years younger than Luther and Zwingli and was able to build upon the Reformation work that they had started. It is important to think of Calvin as more of a thinker and organizer than a man of action who could have started the Reformation with the kind of zeal and popularity of the people that Luther and Zwingli were able to accomplish by God's grace. At the time that Calvin desired to retire as an active teacher-scholar and repose to his study to write full time, God called him to be a great preacher-pastor, organizer of the Reformation and builder and influencer of the Reformed Churches. As a Reformed Pastor-Theologian, Calvin stands with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in his influence and able theological mind. His theology reveals a thorough and in depth knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and an ability to clearly make the truth of Scripture known. Calvin's theology and commentaries on the Bible reveal a heart that is stirred by the love and grace of God and a dedication to making these scriptures known to the people systematically so that they can confess the truth faith of our fathers. As a Churchman, Calvin's goal was to organize churches and the worship of the congregation from Scriptural teaching alone. Calvin believed in the supremacy of Christ the King and His teaching over both Church and State, and so he believed the Bible's teaching extended to both the Church as well as the magistrate and that all of life should be

Reformed according to Scripture. John Calvin's influence was tremendous and he was in many ways like none who had preceded him as a theologian and churchman; no man has been more loved as well as hated perhaps in the history of Christianity. Especially influential were his literary labors that historian Schaff described in this way: "The literary activity of Calvin, whether we look at the number or at the importance of works, is not surpassed by any ecclesiastical writer, ancient or modern, and excites double astonishment when we take into consideration the shortness of his life, the frailty of his health, and the multiplicity of his other labors as a teacher, preacher, church ruler, and correspondent." It is also important to ironically quote James (Jacob) Arminius on Calvin's able ability as exegete and theologian; Arminius wrote of Calvin:

"Next to the study of the Scriptures which I earnestly inculcate, I exhort my pupils to peruse Calvin's *Commentaries* which I extol in loftier terms than Helmich himself [a Dutch divine, d. 1608]; for I affirm that Calvin excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture and that his commentaries ought to be more highly valued than all that is handed down to us by the library of the fathers; so that I acknowledge him to have possessed above most others, or rather above all other men, what may be called an eminent spirit of prophecy. **His *Institutes* ought to be studied after the Heidelberg Catechism [the most important biblical confession of his time], as containing a fuller explanation, but with discrimination, like the writings of all men.**"

### **Calvin's Birth and Education**

John Calvin (or Jean Cauvin) was born on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1509, twenty-five years after Luther and Zwingli in Noyon, France, an old cathedral city in the northern province of Picardy. Calvin's father was Gerard Cauvin and his vocation was in the prominent position as apostolic secretary to the Bishop of Noyon. From Calvin's youth, his father desired for him to enter the clerical profession and he was educated with the children of nobility and made great strides in his learning as well as his manners and refinement as a gentleman scholar of the time. At fourteen years of age, Calvin entered into his studies in

Paris at the College de la March in August 1523. He studied grammar and rhetoric with the notable scholar Marthurin Cordier (or Cordatus) and from him gained a fine understanding of Latin in his thinking and writing. From the College de la Marche Calvin then entered the College de Montague and studied philosophy and theology (studying ironically at the same time and under the same teacher as Ignatius Loyola who would later found the Jesuit Order of the Roman Catholic Church). Calvin was extremely studious, quiet and calm in temperament, with a great zeal to accomplish works of religion (and was considered by some to be overly studious as well as overly religious for a boy of his age). Throughout his life, Calvin received the best education that one could receive in France at this time. He studied the humanities, law, philosophy and theology, and was knowledgeable and able in all of these subjects. He studied at the most prestigious universities in France: Orleans, Bourges, and Paris from 1528 to 1533; he studied first for the priesthood, then under the influence of his father, studied law for a time. Calvin had the opportunity to study under some of the most notable professors in France and Europe at that time, and was often called upon to supply the place of his professors in their absence. Calvin had an astounding ability to comprehend his subjects easily and with his wonderful mind also had an incredible memory. While God had gifted Calvin as a thinker and student who was soon to become one of the greatest theologian-teachers of all time, he also suffered greatly in his body for most of his life; his ailments including constant headaches, dyspepsia, and insomnia. Although he acquired the degree of Licentiate or Bachelor of Laws at Orleans in February 1531 (some historians say 1532), he was later offered the degree of Doctor of Laws based on the unanimous consent of his professors.

In April 1532, Calvin was twenty-three years old, and as an able scholar given the opportunity to publish his first work which was a commentary on the Stoic Philosopher Seneca's *On Mercy*. Erasmus of Rotterdam had published works by Seneca in 1515 and 1529, and commented upon reading Calvin's commentary that Calvin was "the honor and delight of the world of letters." Calvin once wrote concerning quoting pagan philosophers and scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Polybius, Cicero, et al "that those who are superstitious who never venture to quote anything from profane authors do not recognize that all truth is God's truth. Since all truth is from God, if anything has been said aptly and truly even by impious men, it ought not to be rejected, because it proceeded from God." Calvin truly was a humanistic scholar at this early age, and his knowledge and erudition with Latin works such as Seneca shows how widely read he was as he also had studied law and theology as well. Calvin's knowledge could have opened for him many vocational doors to law, or to philosophy, or to the church as a theologian; God would intervene through the reformation of France as well as Calvin's heart to direct his paths according His sovereign will.

The influence of the Reformation from Switzerland and Germany were taking hold in places in France and the ideas of the reformation were being discussed at the universities he had attended. In 1532, the Reformation changed Calvin's life forever, as he describes that "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame." Calvin said later in his life that his conversion from Roman Catholicism to the gospel of the Reformation was because "God himself produced the change." As Calvin understood

the gospel of grace in Christ for the first time in his life, he was driven to a deeper sense of his sin and the mercies of God found in Jesus Christ. He said: “Only one haven of salvation is left open for our souls, and that is the mercy of God in Christ. We are saved by grace- -not by our merits, not by our works.” Calvin was a quiet person who did not leave behind much about himself and God’s work in him. Nevertheless, from letters and correspondence of the time, it seems that Calvin’s conversion happened while he studied at Orleans or Paris in 1532 (most historians are sure of this date); he wrote in his

*Commentary on the Psalms* (1557) concerning his conversion:

“And at first, while I remained thus so obstinately addicted to the superstitions of the Papacy that it would have been hard indeed to have pulled me out of so deep a quagmire by sudden conversion, [God] subdued and made me teachable a heart which, for my age, was far too hardened in such matters. Having thus received some foretaste and knowledge of true piety, I was straitway inflamed with such great desire to profit by it, that although I did not attempt to give up other studies I worked only slackly at them. And I was wonderstruck when, before the year was out, all those who had some desire for the true doctrine ranged themselves around me to learn, although I was hardly more than a beginner myself.”

Within a year after Calvin’s conversion, through the sovereign will of God, Calvin became the leading and most influential Reformer in France. At this time, Calvin was still a faithful and devout Roman Catholic, but things had changed forever for him.

It is important to note that all of the Reformers were ordained priests within the Roman Catholic Church except for Melanchthon and Calvin. Calvin, although he was one of the greatest recognized theologians of the Roman fold, had been trained for the priesthood, had preached in various places, and served in the Church since he was eighteen years old through the influence of his father, he had not been ordained at this point in his life. A significant event happened for Calvin that is similar to Luther’s nailing of his Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenberg. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1533, a friend of Calvin’s, a man named Nicolas Cop was elected rector of the University of Paris. As

usual, he was called to delivery the inauguration sermon on All Saints Day, November 1<sup>st</sup>. The sermon was from the Gospel of Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and this was written by Calvin, and the sermon aimed at the abuses of Roman Catholicism and the unbiblical doctrines taught by the Romish Scholastic Theologians who taught at the university. In the sermon, Calvin had written and Cop read: “They [the Scholastic teachers] teach nothing of faith, nothing of the love of God, nothing of the remission of sins, nothing of grace, nothing of justification; or if they do so, they pervert and undermine it all by their laws and sophistries. I beg you, who are present, not to tolerate nay longer these heresies and abuses”- -and the war upon Roman Catholicism was declared. This caused persecution for the reformers in Paris and John Calvin began writing his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to explain why the Reformers were the true Apostolic Catholic Church, not sectarians, and obeying the fifth commandment, Calvin addressed King Francis I (1494-1547) in an appeal for his support and protection against bloody persecution and opposition (Francis was at the time a cruel persecutor of Protestants as a Roman Catholic King). After he became a Reformer, Calvin wandered as an evangelist of the biblical gospel of Christ from the years 1533-1536, and officially renounced his devotedness to the Roman Church. Calvin was an evangelist-preacher in Southern France, Switzerland and Italy, but because of Calvin’s stand for biblical truth, no one in the Roman Catholic Church would ordain him to the ministry now. In spite of these setbacks and difficulties that Calvin experienced, he aided Olivetan in the revision and completion of the French translation of the Bible that appeared in Neuchatel in June 1535. Later in 1536, John Calvin was elected pastor and

teacher of theology at Geneva by the elders and the council and with the consent of the whole people.

### **Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion***

It cannot be underestimated how much Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* has influenced the Reformed Churches as well as the world in biblical teaching. Before Calvin wrote published his first edition of the *Institutes* he had written another dogmatic treatise entitled *Psychopannychia, or Sleep of the Soul* using Biblical exegesis and argumentation to deny this doctrine of the Anabaptists. At the young age of twenty-six, Calvin published the *Institutes* and historian Philip Schaff said of it: "This book is the masterpiece of a precocious genius of commanding intellectual and spiritual depth and power. It is one of the few truly classical productions in the history of theology, and has given its author the double title of the Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas of the Reformed Church." Upon publication, the Roman Catholics immediately were threatened by its doctrinal and biblical substance and called it the Koran and Talmud of heresy. The Reformers received the *Institutes* as the clearest, most biblical exposition and defense of the Christian faith since the time of the apostles. After its publication, Martin Bucer wrote Calvin and said: "It is evident that the Lord has elected you as his organ for the bestowment of the richest fullness of blessing to his Church." Many editions followed of this important theological work and it was translated into many languages causing by God's grace Reformation to occur wherever it was read. The primary reason for Calvin's writing the *Institutes* was twofold: (1) To instruct in the biblical doctrines of the faith and defend the faith that has been once and for all handed down to us from the apostles (Jude

3); (2) To defend the Reformers and the Reformation in general from false accusations of Roman Catholics and protect them from persecution by aiding princes and the nobility to recognize that the Evangelical Reformers stand for the Biblical truth and they are the true Church that should be protected with the power and help of the state. As Luther before him, Calvin revealed himself to be a true Apostolic Catholic in his writing of the *Institutes*. In his book, Calvin's system of doctrine not only is supported ingeniously by Scripture, but his doctrine agrees with the ecumenical creeds and councils of the Church, affirming the truth that was articulated in theology and Christology at Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon, as well as agreeing with Augustinianism in anthropology and soteriology, and showing a brilliant distinction from the Medieval Church's wrong teaching on ecclesiology and sacramentology.

The first edition of the *Institutes* was a brief manual that contained six parts: (1) Exposition of the Decalogue; (2) Exposition of the Apostle's Creed; (3) Exposition of the Lord's Prayer; (4) Exposition of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; (5) Polemics against the seven Roman Catholic Sacraments; and (6) Exposition on Christian liberty, Church government and discipline. The last edition was published in 1559 and was divided into four books and had grown about five times from its original size. The last edition is Trinitarian in form and outline; the first book is theology proper, or the knowledge of God the Creator; the second book is the knowledge of God the Redeemer which is known as Christology; the third book is the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit and the application of His saving work; the fourth book concerns the Means of Grace and the doctrine of the Church.

Calvin arrived in the City of Geneva in July 1536 after the Reformation had taken hold in this fair city and this would be where his efforts as churchman and pastor would be most clearly observed and his service would remain influential for the world. When he arrived, Calvin had planned to retire to his studies and be a full-time scholar, but God in his providence would intervene. Earlier in his life, William Farel (Guillaume Farel, 1489-1565), had encouraged him to be a pastor-preacher and to make the gospel known; Calvin had objected to this because of his shyness, natural timidity and what he perceived to be his inability with influence in public. This time Farel threatened Calvin literally with the judgment of God if he did not recognize God's gifts and calling and to answer the call of God to be pastor and teacher in Geneva. Farel's boldness as a respected evangelist and man of God caused Calvin to reconsider his objections, answer the call of God that was upon his life, and Calvin says that through Farel God had stretched out his hand. Geneva was located on the borders of both France and Switzerland and was self-governed as a republic of twelve thousand inhabitants in 1536. Calvin began ministering in Geneva by giving expository lectures on the Epistles of Paul and books of the New Testament; his official title was "Reader in Holy Scripture to the Church in Geneva". Pastor Farel was twenty years older than Calvin and had worked in Geneva to establish the doctrines of the Reformation before he arrived, but the Church and city were still in great need of moral reform according to the Bible. In order to achieve order and godly discipline that would be reflective of God's glory, Farel as senior pastor and Calvin prepared a popular catechism for the people to read, study and memorize in November 1536. The catechism consists of twenty-one articles beginning with the Reformed

doctrine of the Word of God as the sole rule for faith and life and ending with the Christian's duty to the civil magistrate. In this confession, the doctrines of grace are articulated biblically as well as the necessity of godly discipline in the Church through admonition and excommunication. The catechism was published and distributed to the Church in April 1537 and it was read together as a congregation during worship every Sunday in order that it might be adopted by the citizens of Geneva. On July 29, 1537, the Council of Two Hundred ordered all of the citizens of Geneva to assent to the Confession of Faith in the Church of St. Peter, thus the Confession was made the law of both the Church and the State. This was the state of Geneva at the time of Calvin, and Calvin clearly saw the impossibility of all men being held accountable by law to a Confession that they might not believe. Calvin saw that the Council's act was binding the consciences of the people of Geneva just as much as Rome had done, and realized that Reformation only comes as God changes the heart, and one desire to submit to the Confession that reveals Biblical truth. Later, Calvin would freely articulate that it should be the elders of the Church who enforce discipline, not the civile magistrate, but this was the time in which he lived, and God intervened in this situation to establish a strong and influential Reformed Church in Geneva. Both Farel and Calvin as pastors and churchmen had disagreements over this issue of binding men's consciences and other doctrinal issues with the Council of the Two Hundred, but this was the ruling government of the city. In their opposition to the Council, they particularly appealed to the Council concerning a friend who the Council said could no longer preach; their stand against the Council caused them to ask Calvin to leave Geneva in August 1537.

Discouraged, Calvin traveled to Strassburg, Germany where the reformer Martin Bucer was doing his work in the city. Calvin taught theology while he was there and worked with the other reformers Bucer, Capito, and Hedio. In Strassburg, Calvin's pastoral gifts were honed and sharpened and he learned a lot from the Lutheran Church and her leaders. Many French Reformed refugees had come to Strassburg and Calvin pastored this congregation of about 400 during the time of his sojourn there. Because he did not struggle with the civil magistrate's interference like he had experienced in Geneva, he was able to establish and enforce biblical discipline because he believed it was the best safeguard of sound doctrine and Christian life. Calvin said: "No house, no society, can exist without order and discipline, much less the Church." Some objected to Calvin's discipline in the Church because they had been abused by the tyranny of the papacy and feared that this would occur again in time, but Calvin pastorally sought to patiently teach the difference between biblical discipline and tyrannizing people without love. The important distinction that many would have to learn was the difference between the yoke of Jesus Christ and the yoke of papal tyranny.

In addition to insisting on biblical discipline as a reformer, Calvin also began to reform the liturgy in worship at Strassburg that he would also use later in Geneva. In response to Roman Catholicism, Calvin rejected the Mass, all of the sacraments of Rome, except baptism and the Lord's Supper, the saint's days, all of the church festivals, except Sunday or the Lord's Day, images, relics, and processions of pomp in worship that focused on man rather than God. In the place of this ceremonialism, the sermon and Word of God as the central part of worship, and now the pulpit rather than the altar was

the place of focus during worship. Calvin introduced pastoral prayers in the worship as well as congregational singing as Luther had done. The service of worship began with an invocation, a confession of sin and a brief absolution. Then there was the reading of Scriptures, singing, and a pastoral prayer. Then the sermon was preached by the ordained man of God, then the Lord's Prayer was prayed by the entire congregation and the service closed with singing and a benediction. The Lord's Supper was celebrated once a month and unworthy, unrepentant applicants were excluded, but those communicants who gave previous notice could receive instruction, warning, and comfort from Calvin and the elders according to their needs.

### **Calvin's Reply to Sadoleto**

Calvin like the other Reformers faced much opposition from Rome. In 1539, Jacob Sadoleto (d. 1547), the Bishop of Carpentras who had been appointed a cardinal of the Church (and also served as one of the secretaries of Pope Leo X, and Clement VII), sought the Council of Geneva to resist the Reformation and come back into the fold of the Roman Church. Sadoleto was acting as a mediator between Rome and Protestantism because of his great piety, learning, ability to negotiate, and because he was held in respect by both sides. He wrote in his letter craftily: "Whether it be more expedient for their [the Genevans] salvation to believe and follow what the Catholic Church has approved with general consent for more than fifteen hundred years, or innovations introduced within these twenty-five years by crafty men." Sadoleto criticized the sects and disagreements of the reformers and their doctrine. No one in Geneva was gifted to answer his letter, but when Calvin received the letter while in Strassburg, he accepted the

opportunity to respond to Sadoleto. With great respect and theological ability, Calvin answered Sadoleto point by point. In response to Sadoleto's argument that the Roman Catholic Church is unified and the only true church, Calvin paints for him a true portrait of the abuses and moral degeneration in the Church and particularly in the leadership of the day. Calvin gets to the main point in his literary debate by declaring to Sadoleto that the Reformed Churches are based on the Word of God as their sole and final authority for faith and life while the Roman Catholic Church while speaking highly of the Word of God actually undermines it with unbiblical traditions and commandments of men. The importance of this debate is in Calvin's argumentation based solely on God's Word, and the defense Calvin ably makes that the Reformed Church is the true Church because of her commitment to God's Word; a true Church is known by three marks: (1) Right preaching of the Word of God; (2) Proper administration of the Sacraments; and (3) Godly biblical discipline to uphold order and God's Word. Calvin concluded his reply to Sadoleto with:

"May the Lord grant, Sadoleto, that you and all your party may at length perceive that the only true bond of Church unity is Christ the Lord, who has reconciled us to God the Father, and will gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of His body, that so, through his one Word and Spirit, we may grow together into one heart and one soul."

Luther was ecstatic about Calvin's reply to Sadoleto and responded after reading it: "This answer [of Calvin's] has hand and foot, and I rejoice that God raises up men who will give the last blow to popery, and finish the war against Antichrist which I began."

Calvin's reply was published in Latin and French at the expense of the city of Geneva in 1540.

In August 1540, Calvin married Idelette de Bure, the widow of a man named Jean Stordeur (or Storder). Calvin was not anxious to get married but did see the advantages of having a well-ordered home as he described it. He had written to Bucer in a letter that if he ever considered marriage it would be to a woman who was chaste, obliging, patient, and helpful to him with his ailments and poor health. Idelette Calviin was devoted to the education of her children and to taking care of John Calvin so that he could focus on his ministry of the Word of God to the people. Idelette and Calvin were happily married for only nine years because she would die of a long illness in April 1549. The only son born to Calvin and Ideletta died in infancy in 1542. He wrote of his wife later “My wife, a woman of rare qualities, died a year and a half ago, and I have now willingly chosen to lead a solitary life.”

During Calvin’s time of exile in Strassburg, God gave him great success in his ministerial labors; his sermons were well received, the worship services were growing in numbers, and the Reformation was continuing to spread. Calvin himself was enjoying his teaching, his marital status with Ideletta, and the call God had placed upon him in Strassburg; and the government of Strassburg and his colleagues appreciated his being there as a pastor-theologian. But the City of Geneva needed him and the Council of Two Hundred had realized during Calvin and Farel’s absence, that he was the only man that was truly able to bring the full reform needed to the Church and State in Geneva and to save the city from anarchy. The Council wrote to Calvin: “On behalf of our Little, Great, and General Councils (all of which have strongly urged us to take this step), we pray you very affectionately that you will be pleased to come over to us, and to return to your post

and ministry; and we hope that by God's help this course will be a great advantage for the furtherance of the holy gospel, seeing that our people very much desire you, and we will so deal with you that you shall have reason to be satisfied"; the letter bore the seal *Post tenebras spero lucem* (which is translated "After darkness, I hope for light"). Calvin initially did not want to go because of his new life in Strassburg, but he obediently followed the Lord, and said to Farel, realizing God's sovereignty and purposes for his life: "When I remember that in this matter I am not my own master, I present my heart as a sacrifice and offer it up to the Lord." When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 his many friends, fellow reformers, and even the government of Strassburg was disappointed about losing him as a pastor to the French refugees in Germany. Once he returned to Geneva, he found a nice manse for his family at St. Peter's Church, along with a garden to keep and a sufficient salary that would provide for his needs. John Calvin faithfully fulfilled his ministry by God's grace and stayed at his reformation post in Geneva for the remainder of his life as pastor-preacher-theologian, twenty-three years until his death on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1564.

Calvin knew there was much work to be done by God's grace to reform, shape and build the Church in Geneva and his work began with organizing an ecclesiastical order to guide the church (this was like a modern book of church order that sets out in an orderly fashion when the Lord's Supper shall be observed, how to rightly administer biblical discipline, etc), as well as setting aside a special day of prayer and fasting for all to seek God's blessing on the reformation of the church there. In one of Calvin's letters, he wrote of the state of the Church of Geneva upon his return: "The present state of affairs I

can give you in a few words. For they first month after resuming the ministry, I had so much to attend to, and so many annoyances, that I was almost worn out; such a work of labor and difficulty has it been to build up a once more fallen edifice.” Calvin’s task at reformer was to fulfill many offices and duties as God had eminently gifted him and called him to the task. Historian Philip Schaff wrote: “Calvin combined the offices of theological professor, preacher, pastor, church-ruler, superintendent of schools, with the extra labors of equal, yea, greater importance, as author correspondent, and leader of the expanding movement of the Reformation in Western Europe.

### **Calvin’s Doctrine of the Holy Catholic Church**

John Calvin’s doctrine of the Church is found in his fourth book of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin was a true Apostolic Catholic as was Martin Luther; Calvin, revealing a consistent understanding of what the Apostle’s Creed, along with the Church Fathers Cyprian and Augustine, wrote in his *Institutes* chapter I, section iv: “As our present design is to treat of the visible Church, we may learn even from the title of *mother*, how useful and even necessary it is for us to know here; since there is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her, nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government...” Calvin articulated a balanced view of the Church of Jesus Christ against both Rome and the Anabaptists. Against Rome, Calvin made a proper biblical distinction between the visible Church made up of both sinners and saints, and the invisible Church which is made up of the true elect from all ages. Against the Anabaptists, Calvin placed great emphasis on the Church being “one” and therefore was intolerant toward the divisive individualism and

sectarianism of the Anabaptists who lived as if the gates of hell had prevailed against the true Church of God and that they must go back to the beginning and start over; the Anabaptists did not make a proper distinction between the visible and invisible Church in a way similar yet different from Rome. Rome placed the emphasis of unity on the Church in mere visibility, and the Anabaptists taught likewise that the only true visible Church are believers who have made a confession of faith and have been baptized. Calvin wrote particularly against the Anabaptist notion of a “pure New Testament Church” that would be attained by breaking wholly with Churches that displayed any sin whatsoever in the communion: “If the holy Prophets [of Israel] were restrained by a sense of duty from forsaking the Church on account of the numerous and enormous crimes which were practiced [in Israel] ... it is extreme arrogance in us, if we presume immediately to withdraw from the communion of a Church, where the conduct of all the members is not compatible either with the judgment or even with the Christian profession.” Calvin quoted Cyprian when he had said earlier in church history against sectarian schismatics: “Although tares, or impure vessels, are found in the Church, yet this is not a reason why we should withdraw from it. It only behooves us to labor that we may be the wheat, and to use our utmost endeavors and exertions that we may be vessels of gold or of silver... Let no one arrogate to himself what is the exclusive province of the Son of God, by pretending to fan the floor, clear away the chaff, and separate all the tares by the judgment of man. This is proud obstinacy, and sacrilegious presumption, originating in corrupt frenzy.” Calvin concluded with these sober words: “Let he who voluntarily deserts the external communion of the Church where the Word of God is preached, and the sacraments are administered, know that he is without excuse before

God.” Calvin himself realized that the Roman Catholic Church characterized the Reformers and when he wrote to Sadoletto, he emphasized that he was not a sectarian or schismatic:

“[Sadoletto] You either labor under a delusion as to the term Church, or, at least, knowingly and willingly give it a gloss.... When you describe it as that which in all parts, as well as at the present time, in every region of the earth, being united and consenting in Christ, has been always and everywhere directed by the one Spirit of Christ, what comes of the Word of the Lord, that clearest of all marks, and which the Lord himself, in pointing out the Church, so often recommends to us? For seeing how dangerous it would be to boast of the Spirit without the Word, he declared that the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit, but in order that that government might not be vague and unstable, he annexed it to the Word.”

Calvin disputed with Sadoletto because although he claimed the Reformers had left the Church, Calvin replied that the Church and the working of the Holy Spirit were annexed to the Word of God. When the Word of God is undermined and perverted, no longer teaching the will of Christ to his bride, then that outward manifestation in this world that once was a Church ceases to be one. Rome had denied the true gospel of the Word of Jesus Christ and it was not Calvin and the Reformers who had abandoned Christ, it was Rome.

The way a person is saved is an essential of the Christian faith and Rome formally denied the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone. What God does in the Person and Work of Christ to save an individual was perverted by Rome, and therefore the Roman Church ceased to be a faithful representation of the visible Church of Christ. Calvin said bluntly to Sadoletto, “Now, if you can bear to receive a truer definition of the Church than your own, say, in future, that it is the society of all the saints, a society which, spread over the whole world, and existing in all ages, yet bound together by the one doctrine, and the one Spirit of Christ, cultivates and observes unity and brotherly accord. With this

Church we deny that we have any disagreement. Nay, rather, as we revere her as our mother, so we desire to remain in her bosom.”

### **Calvin's Church Polity**

John Calvin placed an emphasis not only on the soul of the Church in her teaching and sacraments, but was careful to reform the body, or external part of the Church as well through proper and biblical organization. Calvin's Church polity is based on the following principles: (1) ***Christ is the King or Head of the Church***: Christ is the head of the Church and should be self-governed by elders under Christ and the congregation, not in a hierarchical sense like in the Church of Rome. Calvin wrote: “Christ alone ought to rule and reign in the Church, and to have all preeminence in it, and this government ought to be exercised and administered solely by his word; yet as he dwells not among us by a visible presence, so as to make an audible declaration of his will to us, he uses for this purpose the ministry of men whom he employs as his delegates, not to transfer his right and honor to them, but only that he may himself do his work by their lips...” (2)

***Presbyterian Government/Rule by Elders***: Calvin maintained with Jerome, the biblical teaching of bishops (overseers) and presbyters (elders) as those who shepherd and rule over Christ's Church under His rule. Although Calvin does not oppose episcopacy in certain circumstances and particularly in large countries like Poland or England, nevertheless he taught that Presbyterianism seemed to be closer to the biblical revelation and model. (3) ***Participation of the Congregation in Church Government***: The congregation in the Roman Church are wholly passive and have no say in matters of church government and business; they are to obey the priesthood. Although Luther

taught first the priesthood of all believers, Calvin applied this biblical teaching to his Church government in Geneva. The laity were to participate in the synods and councils of the Church; they were to have a voice although they were not to rule as the elders. (4)

***Strict Discipline:*** Discipline must be enforced by the elders to uphold peace and purity, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. (5) ***Church and State:*** Union of Church and State on a theocratic basis if possible, or separation if necessary to secure the purity and self-government of the Church. Although Calvin's Geneva has been considered by historians to be theocracy, it is important to make a few points to clarify. Calvin taught that Christ ruled over the Church and the State, and that both spheres belonged to the sovereign rule of God. However, Calvin made distinctions between the roles or vocations of those who serve as ministers in the Church and those who serve as ministers in the State. In Calvin's Geneva, the Church and State powers were almost equally balanced. In an age when the spiritual and secular spheres had been severely confused as with the Roman Catholic Church and her relationship to the State, Calvin made a proper biblical distinction between the Church and the State, and between the spheres of the spiritual and secular: the Church's main business was the eternal soul and welfare of man, but the State's main business was with the present welfare of the body as a temporal benefit of God to guard against evil and to protect a man's life. Because Calvin rightly made this distinction, he believed that the State was called by God to protect the rights and the lives of the members of the Church, but the State was not to interfere into the spiritual matters of the Church such as the preaching of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, and certainly not in the Church's exercise of discipline. Contrary to popular opinion, Calvin had only spiritual power in Geneva in his advice,

wisdom, or preaching that was gained by the governors in the way they ruled Geneva; Calvin never was a political head of Geneva, never held a public office in the government, and did not even become a citizen of Geneva until 1559. Historian Philip Schaff summarizes Calvin's essential view of the relationship between Church and State: "[Calvin's] fundamental idea was, that God alone is Lord on earth as well as in heaven, and should rule supreme in Church and State. In this sense he was theocratic or christocratic. God uses Church and State as two distinct but cooperative arms for the building up of Christ's Kingdom. The law for both is the revealed will of God in the Holy Scriptures. The Church gives moral support to the State, while the State gives temporal support to the Church." Unfortunately, Calvin's arguments are taken wholly from the Old Testament, and it is important to note that the Apostolic Church was part of a new phase of redemptive-history where Christ called the disciples to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give unto God the things that are God's (Matt. 22:21). The Church in Geneva was a State Church and even though this may not be the ideal, and this New Testament may argue against this reality, nevertheless, God in his grace used this State Church to bring glory to himself and to extend the Reformation onward to the West. In Calvin's theory, he gave to us important biblical principles of the relationship between Church and State, but the outworking of this theory in Geneva, as well as elsewhere does not always get properly executed and realized as the Church would hope. This humbles us, and reminds us that we live in a temporal world full of sin and misery, and we await a true rule of Christ in the restoration of all things in the New Creation when Christ shall indeed sit upon His throne visibly and rule over his Church; this is the hope of the Christian.

## Calvin's Teaching on Offices in Christ's Church

Calvin distinguishes between three *extraordinary offices* and four *ordinary* offices within Christ's Church. The extraordinary offices are the Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists (Eph. 4:11ff) that God used at particular times in redemptive-history to shape, mold and found his church. He considers evangelists to be those God raised up throughout church history after the time of the Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament who would bring the Church reformation and God would raise them up "by the necessity of the times"; he included himself and Martin Luther as examples of evangelists. The four ordinary offices were Pastors (Bishops), Teachers, Ancients (Lay-Elders), and Deacons. **Pastors:** These are ministers of the Holy Gospel and Calvin taught that their calling was "to preach the Word of God, to instruct, to admonish, to exhort and reprove in public and private, to administer the sacraments, and jointly with the elders, to exercise discipline." No one could be a pastor who was not called, examined, ordained and installed. A pastor should be examined and show a proficient knowledge of the Scriptures, the ability to teach them clearly and to defend the truth from them. Discipline is to be strictly exercised over the ministers of the Word by other ministers. **Teachers:** The office of Teacher is to instruct believers in sound doctrine in order that the purity of the gospel be not corrupted by ignorance or false opinion. These are those we might call the seminary professor today. Calvin made the distinction between pastors and teachers in that teachers did not administer the sacraments or discipline but sought to fulfill their call through the interpretation of the Scripture (whereas the pastoral office did all of these tasks after being taught by the Teacher). Theological professors occupy the highest rank

among Teachers according to Calvin. *The Ancients/Lay-Elders*: These are called to watch over the conduct of the people and would be what we call ruling elders today.

*Deacons*: Those called to this office care for the weak, the poor, visitation of the sick and hospitals and administer alms to those who are in need.

### **Calvin's Theory of Discipline**

Calvin suffered greatly for his stand for biblical Church discipline. His teaching on discipline was one of the reasons for his first expulsion from Geneva, but was also a foundational teaching for the success of the reformation in Geneva in both the hearts and the minds of the people. Calvin taught that discipline was necessary in order to continue the preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments, to uphold the peace and the purity of the Church. The aim of Calvin in discipline was to realize the purity and holiness of the Church as far as human weakness will permit as historian Philip Schaff wrote. Discipline was necessary in assisting God's children with consequences to live consistently with their confession in a world of sin and misery. Calvin wrote: "As far as we are concerned, we must strive to correct vices and to purge the Church of impurity, although she will not be free from all stain and blemish until Christ shall separate the goats from the sheep." According to Matthew 18:15-17, Calvin taught that the discipline of members of the church had three degrees: (1) Private admonition; (2) Admonition in the presence of witnesses or before the Church; and (3) In the case of persistent disobedience, exclusion from the Lord's Table. The object of discipline was threefold: (1) To protect the body against contamination and profanation; (2) To guard the individual members against the corrupting influence of constant

association with the wicked; and (3) To bring the offender to repentance that he may be saved and restored to the fellowship of the faithful. Excommunication should only be exercised against flagrant and sinful crimes that disgrace the Church and the Christian profession such as adultery, fornication, theft, robbery, sedition, perjury, and contempt of God and his authority. Excommunication cannot be carried out by a pastor, or any one elder, but must be decided carefully and soberly by a body of elders. When a sinner gives reasonable evidence of repentance in his doctrine and life, they shall be restored to the Church. Calvin wrote: "Such as are expelled from the Church, it is not for us to expunge from the number of the elect, or to despair of them already lost. It is proper to consider them as strangers to the Church, and consequently to Christ, but this only as long as they remain in a state of exclusion. And even then let us hope better things of them for the future, and not cease to pray to God on their behalf. Let us not condemn to eternal death the offender, nor prescribe laws to the mercy of God who can change the worst of men into the best." Calvin pastorally reminded all Christians in his teaching that if we do not use grace and tenderness in our exercise of discipline then it will degenerate (speedily!) into cruelty. Calvin struggled for ten years with members of the State government or Council to fully carry out with their support his system of discipline. Schaff noted that by 1555 "the authorities of the State [in Geneva] were as zealous for the honor of the Church and for the glory of Christ as the ministers of the gospel. The churches were well filled; the Word of God was preached daily; family worship was the rule; prayer and singing of Psalms never ceased; the whole city seemed to present the aspect of a community of sincere, earnest Christians who practiced what they believed." William Farel said of the city after Calvin's reformation of doctrine and discipline were

consistently carried out in Geneva: “I would rather be the last in Geneva than the first anywhere else.” John Knox, Reformer of Scotland famously said: “In my heart I could have wished, yea, I cannot cease to wish, that it might please God to guide and conduct yourself to this place where, I neither fear nor am ashamed to say, is the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so seriously reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place besides.”

### **Calvin's Theology**

#### **The Doctrine and Interpretation of Holy Scripture**

As Luther has been remembered for his great contribution to the Church with his translation of the Bible into German, so Calvin is remembered for his exegetical and expositional contribution through his commentaries. John Calvin is still considered today to be the chief exegete of the Reformation and the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He had a deep understanding of the Scriptures and was an architect of biblical theology like few before him. Calvin says that the chief virtues of the interpreter of Scripture should be comprehensive brevity, transparent clarity, and strict adherence to the Holy Spirit speaking through the human author. *Calvin's Commentaries* include most of the books of the Old Testament and all of the books of the New Testament except the *Apocalypse of John, or the Book of Revelation* which Calvin did not fully know how to interpret and humbly did not want to contribute confusion to the Church. Calvin's comments on Scripture freshly breathed of biblical truth- -the very wind of the Holy Spirit in contrast to the stale opinions of men that was found in the Schoolmen or their Scholastic Method

of interpreting. Calvin studied with the Church Fathers as he interpreted the Scriptures realizing he was part of a great heritage in the Church. Calvin prayed that the Holy Spirit would speak through the Scriptures and relied upon Him to guide in interpretation, but also remembered that the Resurrected-Ascended Christ had given pastor-interpreters to the Church as gifts as Ephesians 4:11 taught and that we are to learn of Christ “together with all the saints” (Eph. 3:18). He wrote a word of caution however in interpreting Scripture with the Church; the Church Fathers were to be read comparing their teaching with Scripture, but no one should read them slavishly as if they possessed some natural infallibility in their interpretation as men: “Another calumny is their [Church of Rome] charging us [the Reformers] with opposition to the fathers; I mean the writers of the earlier and purer ages, as if those writers were abettors of their impiety...But though the writings of those fathers contain many wise and excellent things, yet, in some respects, they have suffered the common fate of mankind; these very dutiful children reverence only their errors and mistakes, but their excellencies they either overlook, or conceal, or corrupt; so that it may be truly said to be their only study to collect dross from the midst of gold...While we make use of their writings, we always remember that ‘All things are ours’ to serve us, not to have dominion over us, and that ‘we are Christ’s alone’ and owe him universal obedience. He who neglects this distinction will have nothing decided in religion, since those holy men were ignorant of many things, frequently at variance with each other and sometimes inconsistent with themselves.” For Calvin, the Holy Spirit spoke through Scripture and Scripture could be understood. He believed that we should use the resources and learning of men who came before us in our interpretation, but to do so with caution, ultimately depending on the Work and Ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin has rightly been called the Father of modern grammatico-historical method of interpreting Scripture. This method he devised seeks to understand the meaning of Scripture and thus hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, but understanding the biblical Hebrew and Greek languages in the context in which they were written, and to know and understand the historical milieu in which they wrote. For Calvin, to know what God said was by finding out what the person God inspired wrote and said. In the first commentary that Calvin wrote on *Paul's Epistle to the Romans* he wrote:

John Calvin wrote concerning the importance of the human author: "Since it is almost the interpreter's only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound [exegete and exposit], he misses the mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his students away from the meaning of the author [in the Bible]...It is presumptuous and almost blasphemous to turn the meaning of Scripture around without due care, as though it were some game that we were playing" [*Calvin's Commentaries: Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 1.4].

Calvin's method of Grammatico-Historical interpretation or exegesis of the Bible revealed the errors of both allegorical and dogmatic interpretation. Allegorical interpretation was very popular during the Medieval Period and Calvin described it as interpreting the Scriptures to be twisted any way one would like similar to a wax nose. Dogmatic interpretation was an interpretation where the interpreter only found in the Scriptures what he already believed and confessed. Calvin's method allowed for one meaning to be found in Scripture (contra allegorical method) and allowed for present theological dogmatic convictions might be supported by the Bible's teaching, or they must be changed.

For Calvin, Holy Scripture was the only infallible rule for faith and life and so it possessed the authority of God. This authority of God was not because the Church gave

the Bible authority (contra Church of Rome) but because it possessed authority internally, as a self-attesting, self-authenticating special revelation of God's truth. Men come to understand that the Scriptures are authoritative not through the mere teaching and conviction of men, not primarily through trying to reasonably explain why the Scriptures are inspired, but through the illumination and power of the Holy Spirit working within men's hearts and minds in order that they might recognize the authority of God found in the Word of God. Calvin wrote: "As God alone is a sufficient witness of Himself in His own Word, so also the Word will never gain credit in the hearts of men until it be confirmed by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is necessary, therefore, that the same Spirit, who spoke by the mouths of the prophets, should penetrate into our hearts, to convince us that they faithfully delivered the oracles which were divinely entrusted to them...*Let it be considered, then, as an undeniable truth, that they who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstrations and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Holy Spirit*" (my emphasis). This in no way denies the importance of the witness of the Church of Jesus to the Scriptures because this is of great value to Calvin. It places the primary testimony upon the Holy Spirit with the Church acknowledging, recognizing, and witnessing to the truth of the divine authority of Scriptures. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, the Church witnesses to the self-authenticating revelation of God's Word, but does not establish or give authority to it.

### **Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination**

John Calvin was devoted to the belief that scripture alone was the sole infallible rule that God had given his Church for what to believe and how to live. Calvin's systematic expression of his theology is deeply Augustinian in contrast to the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian errors of church history. Calvin's theology is rooted in God and his glory. For Calvin, all theology is about glorifying God and revealing God; theology is not a play-time for intellectual geniuses to show off their ingenious skills in pointing to their own wise interpretations and opinions, but a devotion to God by the heart to glory God and to reveal the glory of God to man through the Word of God. Although Calvin was Augustinian in his theology, historian Philip Schaff helpfully offers an important distinction between the two: "Augustine says: 'I would not believe the gospel if it were not for the Church.' Calvin says: 'I would not believe the Church if it were not for the gospel.' The reconciliation must be found in the higher principle: I believe in Christ, and therefore I believe in the gospel and the Church, which jointly bear witness of him. Calvin's theology of God and his Sovereignty in salvation and election was taught primarily from Paul's Epistles to the Romans and the Ephesians. Calvin taught with/from the Apostle Paul that God sovereignly ruled over all creation. Man was born depraved because of Adam's sin and could not do or will anything good-Godward. In order for man to exercise faith in Christ and believe, like Lazarus, he must be raised from the dead. Man was by nature a child of wrath like all mankind, and all deserved God's just wrath and punishment for their sins, but God who is rich in mercy chose some out of this great sinful mass to glorify and serve him as children of the Living God; not because of anything man had done to deserve it, but because of God's mercy (Romans 9). As God says clearly in the Bible: "I will have mercy upon who I have mercy." If man is truly

dead in trespasses and sins following the course of the prince of the power of air as Ephesians 2, then his will is in bondage to sin; he does whatever he desires to do, which is sin against God. A sinner cannot do good, that is Godward-good as Romans 3:9ff teaches. If no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws them (John 6:44), then sinful man must rely upon God's initiating grace and mercy in salvation. If God chooses sovereignly to act upon man by His Holy Spirit, then that person will respond with faith in Christ. Calvin taught with both Paul and Augustine that God sent his Son to die for those sinners whom he foreknew and had sovereignly predestinated because of glory and mercy before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3-14; Romans 8:29ff). Calvin defined predestination this way: "Predestination we call the eternal decree of God, by which he has determined in himself the destiny of every man. For they are not all created in the same condition, but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestinated either to life or to death." Compared to Martin Luther who agreed with Augustine and Calvin on man's sinful condition and man's bondage of the will, Calvin's biblical focus was distinct from him and therefore both ultimately drew different theological conclusions. Calvin's primary focus was on the eternal election of God in predestination whereas Luther's primary focus was on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Both agreed that God was sovereign and man was in a hopeless sinful predicament without God's mercy. Luther however, focused on justification by faith alone in the order of salvation, while Calvin rooted his theology in the electing purposes of God in the order of salvation. Because Calvin found the beginning of his theology in God's electing purposes, he articulated clearly that before the foundation of the world,

God had chosen, or foreordained those who would in real time and space be justified by faith alone. This theological reasoning led to Calvin's realizing that if God foreordained those who would be justified in Christ, then God therefore had foreordained those who would be damned and condemned by the Judgment of God. For Calvin, the biblical doctrine of predestination was the hope for man to be assured before God and was practically an extremely comforting doctrine (especially in light of the Roman Catholic Church's denying men of any real assurance of salvation before God). Predestination practically made men humble, not proud because they were the elect; predestination must exalt God and his sovereign grace for his own glory. Calvin did understand that sinful man hates this biblical doctrine when he wrote: "Many consider nothing more unreasonable than that some of the common mass of mankind should be foreordained to salvation, and others to destruction... When the human mind hears these things, its petulance breaks all restraint, and it discovers a serious and violent agitation as if alarmed by the sound of a martial trumpet." Calvin's focus was the unchangeable decree of God, while Luther focused on the salvation that is revealed to a person in Christ through the preaching of Law and Gospel. The Reformed Church in the centuries since have adopted rightly and biblically a more Christ-centered understanding of both Luther and Calvin's position as it has articulated: In Christ Jesus, men are justified by faith alone, and in Christ Jesus God has predestined men to be adopted as sons (see Ephesians 1:3-6). The focus theologically should always be on Christ and his Person and Work; it is in Christ we find the realization of God's eternal decree of election and our justification by faith alone. In Calvin's *Institutes* it is interesting to note that Calvin's explanation of the doctrine of election or predestination is found after the section on union with Christ. It

seems that this should instruct us that Calvin understood that the priority must be upon union with Christ, and so he placed the explanation of predestination after the order of salvation that is found in our union with Jesus Christ. In Calvin's *Institutes* he biblically ends his discussion on predestination with Paul's words to the Church at Rome. Calvin says that no matter how offensive this doctrine may seem to sinful man, no matter how difficult and unreasonable it may seem to sinful man, we must uphold Scriptural teaching and say: "Who are you O man to reply against God?" We must realize the sovereignty of God and his glory as the clay understands itself in the potter's hand.

### **Calvin's Doctrine of the Sacraments**

Next in importance to Calvin's biblical exposition of the doctrine of predestination is Calvin's contribution to the Church's understanding of the Sacraments. The Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 will always serve as a reminder to the Church how humbly we must strive to understand the whole revelation of Scripture concerning the Sacraments of the Church. Learning from Augustine, Calvin calls the sacraments a mystery and explains that they are "a visible sign of an invisible grace." Calvin goes further than Augustine in that he also adds from his interpretation of Romans 4:11 that the sacraments are also seals. Calvin wrote: "It is an outward sign by which the Lord seals in our consciences the promises of his good-will toward us, to support the weakness of our faith, or a testimony of his grace towards us, with a reciprocal attestation of our piety towards him." The Holy Spirit makes the sacraments efficacious. The Sacraments are visible pictures of God's redemption; they are the means of grace similar to the Word of God. The sacraments offer the same grace that the Word of God does but in a different manner. Both Word

and Sacraments offer Christ and his heavenly grace to us, but they confer no benefit without them being received by faith alone. Calvin denied the seven supposed sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church and taught that Christ had only given us two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

### **Baptism**

Baptism for Calvin is a sign and seal of our initiation into Christ's Church; it is a sign of the washing of Christ's blood and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can work in a sinner's heart, making effectual what is signified in baptism, before, during, or after as He sovereignly pleases (cf. John 3:7ff). Baptism received and understood by faith for adults teaches that they have been truly regenerated by the Holy Spirit and that their sins have been washed away making them pure in the sight of God. Baptism shows forth our death with Christ and our new life by the Spirit as we have been united to Him by faith. Baptism symbolizes that we are partakers of all the benefits of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension *for us*. For infants, Calvin articulated the biblical doctrine of paedobaptism. Calvin taught that circumcision was a type of baptism for the Old Covenant saints and in the New Testament the promises of God were extended to the children of believing parents and therefore their children ought to be baptized. Calvin taught that infant baptism or paedobaptism signifies and seals the promises of God to covenant parents, initiates the children into the visible Church, and encourages the children (through the nurture and admonition of parents and the teaching of the Church) to be true to their baptism throughout their lives by living by faith in Christ.

### **Lord's Supper: *Spiritual-Real Presence of Christ***

As we have learned from the Colloquy of Marburg (1529), the Lord's Supper was the chief contention and theological subject that prevented unity between the Lutherans and the Reformed Churches. In Calvin's work, he sought to maintain a biblical *via media* or mediating position between the teaching of Luther and Zwingli on the Lord's Supper. Calvin taught that Luther had gone further than the biblical data in his theology, and denied Luther's teaching that Christ was corporeally present in the Supper; Calvin taught that Zwingli had not gone far enough in understanding the biblical data in his theology, and so he taught incorrectly that Christ was wholly absent in the Supper. It is important to note that Luther never rejected Calvin's teaching on the Supper, and later in his life (right before his death in 1545) it has been said that he had made the comment that if Calvin had been present at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 (although Calvin would not be converted for three more years), then they could have possibly reached a consensus. For Zwingli, Christ was not present in the Lord's Supper because the supper was a mere memorial; for Luther, who taught that the glorified-ascended Christ possessed omniscience, Christ was corporeally present in the Lord's Supper "in, with, and under" the elements. Calvin denied that the Lord's Supper was a mere memorial, and that Christ in his humanity could be omnipresent. Calvin responded to Luther's notions of Christ's omnipresence by reminding him that Christ as Mediator is the God-Man and he sits at God's right hand, and therefore our doctrines should not deify his humanity, nor bring Christ down from heaven. Rather, Christ lifted his people up by His Spirit by virtue of their being unified with Jesus Christ, the God-man. Calvin realized that in placing the

focus theologically on our union with Christ, we must admit of the great mystery of fully comprehending and understanding the Lord's Supper: "I exhort my readers to rise much higher than I am able to conduct them; for as to myself, whenever I handle this subject, after having endeavored to say everything, I am conscious of having said by very little in comparison with its excellence. And though the conceptions of the mind can far exceed the expressions of the tongue; yet, with the magnitude of the subject, the mind itself is oppressed and overwhelmed. Nothing remains for me, therefore, but to break forth in admiration of that mystery [of our union with Jesus Christ], which the mind is unable clearly to understand, or the tongue to express." Calvin appreciated the fact that the Lord's Supper as Zwingli had taught was a memorial, but it was not merely a memorial; Christ was indeed really and truly, yet spiritually present. Against Luther, Calvin's emphasis on Christ's spiritual, yet real and true presence denied that he was corporeally present because Christ is present for us as Mediator in heaven. In 1559, Calvin closed his last edition of the *Institutes* with these important words concerning the Sacraments of the Church: "After receiving us into his family by baptism, God undertakes to sustain and to nourish us as long as we live, and gives us a pledge of his gracious intention in the sacrament of the Holy Communion. This is a spiritual banquet, in which Christ testifies himself to be the Bread of Life, to feed our souls for a true and blessed immortality. The signs of bread and wine represent to us the invisible nourishment which we receive from the body and blood of Christ. They are exhibited in figure and image, adapted to our feeble capacity, and rendered certain by visible tokens and pledges, which the dullest minds can understand." Calvin has been called the "Theologian of the Holy Spirit" and that is nowhere more evident than in his doctrine of the Sacraments. Calvin emphasizes

how the Holy Spirit is presently active as we receive the elements in the Lord's Supper. He spoke of the truth that the Holy Spirit raises our hearts from the earth to heaven and brings down life-giving power from the Resurrected-Ascended Christ in heaven.

Calvin's position on the Lord's Supper has been rightly called the Doctrine of the *Spiritual-Real Presence*. The Calvinistic teaching on the Sacraments were received into all the Reformed Confessions, particularly the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563 and the Westminster Confession and Catechism of 1643-47. Unfortunately, many who call themselves "Evangelical" in today's modern Church would hold to a more Zwinglian view and should reconsider Calvin's balanced and Christ and Spirit-centric view of the Spiritual-Real Presence of Christ.

### **Calvin's Polemical Writings**

Calvin was a prolific writer as a Reformer. He wrote against the doctrinal errors and heresies of his day. Calvin polemically wrote in 1543 a tract against a man from Holland by the name of Albert Pighius who like Erasmus of Rotterdam denied that man's will was enslaved or in bondage to sin. Pighius like many modern day evangelicals argued that God had given every man free will to choose or deny the Lord Jesus Christ. Pighius was essentially a Semi-Pelagian in his theological views much like his contemporary Erasmus and many other Roman Catholic theologians of the day, but like many Semi-Pelagians, there lurks in his writings some Pelagian thought as well. Pighius wrote: "Our works are meritorious before God." Calvin biblically supported his position and denied that man without the initiating work and assistance of the Holy Spirit does not have the power to choose what is spiritually good and supports his argument from Romans 6:17; 7:14, 23.

Calvin wrote: “Man has a spontaneous (self-directed) will, so that he willingly and by choice does evil, without compulsion from without, and, therefore, he incurs guilt. But, owing to native depravity, his will is so given to sin that it always chooses evil. Hence spontaneity and enslavement may exist together. The *voluntas* is *spontanea*, but not *libera*; it is not *coacta*, yet *serva* (Translated: The will is self-directed (*spontanea*) but not free (*libera*) to do whatever it pleases, this is because it is enslaved (*serva*) to the necessity of its own nature, but it is not coerced or compelled (*coacta*).” Calvin dedicated his tract to Philip Melanchthon as a friend who had encouraged him to write against Pighius, but ironically, Melanchthon although believed Luther and Calvin’s view for most of his career, would eventually deny it and become a Semi-Pelagian.

The Roman Catholic Church met in Council at Trent from 1545 to 1563 to decide doctrinally they would confess against the doctrine of the Reformers; this is often referred to as the “Counter-Reformation”. In 1547, Calvin criticized the Council of Trent for its doctrinal errors. In 1546, the Council had declared an anathema against anyone who would teach the doctrine of justification by faith alone as the Reformers were doing and arguing that it was the heart of the gospel. In this year alone, Rome condemned the doctrine of the Scripture alone, the slavery of the human will, and justification by faith alone; it was clear that the Church of Rome had doctrinally fallen and confessed publicly that it was formally no longer a faithful Christian Church. Calvin began his writing against Trent by pointing out that this was not an ecumenical council such as Nicea, Constantinople or Chalcedon because it only included the Roman Church and did not invite or recognize other members of the universal-catholic church from the East or from

among the evangelical Reformers. If Rome had wanted a true ecumenical council they would have given a chance to hear clearly the teaching of the Reformers, as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church. Calvin wrote: “The proclamation of the Council is entitled to no more weight than the cry of an auctioneer.”

Another group Calvin opposed were known as the “Nicodemites” after Nicodemus in the New Testament. These “Nicodemites” as they were called by Calvin were French people who had come to believe in their conscience that the teachings of the Reformation were true, but because they were threatened by persecution from Rome who was deeply rooted in France, they only confessed and professed their Reformed convictions privately. They wrote to Calvin that they were like Nicodemus who went to Jesus at night (see John 3). Calvin responded to them by reminding them of the importance of publicly confessing their faith and standing for the truth of Scripture; he wrote to them that to follow Jesus is to expect persecution and even be willing to die for the truth of the gospel. Calvin used a quotation from Elijah when he said: “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; if Baal, then follow him” (from 1 Kings 18:21). For Calvin, the truth of the Gospel and the glory of God should be more dear to the Christian than his very own life. Calvin openly rebuked many of the “Nicodemites” for their worldly, mere nominal Christianity but never disowned them as true brethren because of their weakness.

Another person that Calvin polemically confronted in his day in order to establish the truth of Scripture was a Carmelite monk named Hieronymus Hermes Bolsec from Paris

who had left the Roman Catholic Church and settled in Geneva. Bolsec unwisely tried to write and teach against Calvin's biblical presentation of predestination while in Geneva. Bolsec taught that all men have the same opportunity to believe in Christ and have the ability universally to do so; the reason some are saved and some are not is not because of God's electing purposes but because of the person's free will. One afternoon as a preacher in Geneva was exegeting the text of John 8:47 which teaches predestination, Bolsec rudely stood and interrupted the worship service saying that men are not saved because they are elected, but men are elected because they have faith. Bolsec's teaching was very similar to modern evangelical teaching in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in America and England. Bolsec's errors included the following five points: (1) That faith depends not on election, but election on faith; (2) That it is an insult to God to say that he abandons some to blindness, because it is his pleasure to do so; (3) That God leads to himself all rational creatures, and abandons only those who have often resisted him; (4) that God's grace is universal, and some are not more predestinated to salvation than others; and (5) That when St. Paul says (Eph. 1:5) that God has elected us through Christ, he does not mean election to salvation, but election to discipleship and apostleship. In December 1551, because Bolsec not only disagreed with clear scriptural teaching, but because at the time in Geneva it was against the law to teach unbiblical ideas and especially to preach and propagate them, Bolsec was exiled from Geneva for life for exciting sedition and for teaching Pelagianism. In response to Bolsec's false teaching Calvin wrote *On the Eternal Predestination of God* to teach correctly and exegetically the doctrine of Holy Scripture. After Calvin's death Bolsec desired revenge upon Calvin and wrote an abominable book entitled 'The Life of Calvin' which contained many

inaccuracies and lies which the substance of informs the opinions of many opponents of Calvin and the biblical doctrine of predestination today. Historian Philip Schaff wrote:

“This book would long since have been forgotten, had not partisan zeal kept it alive.”

Although Bolsec was exiled from Geneva, forms of Pelagianism continued to threaten the Swiss Reformation. Universalism (or Socinianism) also threatened the Swiss

Reformation being entirely Pelagian in its doctrine, it was because of John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger’s influence that it was banished from Switzerland. Calvin had many opponents in his time, but perhaps the one we remember most is Michael Servetus.

### **Michael Servetus and Religious Intolerance**

The trial and execution of Michael Servetus is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the working out of Calvin’s theology and discipline in his time in the City of Geneva. Historian Philip Schaff described this event as a dark chapter in the history of Calvin which has cast a gloom over his fair name, and exposed him, not unjustly, to the charge of intolerance and persecution which he shares with the whole age.” We must study this “dark chapter” by understanding the relationship between the Church and the State in Calvin’s Geneva. Both Calvin and Servetus wanted a change in the theology of the Church, but they differed on the essentials of what defines Christianity, particularly the doctrine of the Trinity. Servetus was a scholar from Spain who never joined the German or Swiss Reformers, and lived his intellectual life arguing vehemently against the Church Fathers, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reformers. He was an individualistic and proud person who thought he was wiser and smarter than all the other Christians before him. From very early in Calvin’s career Servetus challenged Calvin’s orthodox and

biblical writings on the Trinity and desired to engage him in debate. Servetus' book against the biblical doctrine of the Trinity was called by other reformers "an awfully bad book" (Luther), "a most pestilential book" (Martin Bucer); Servetus' reputation among the other German and Swiss Reformers was that "he deserved to be disemboweled and torn to pieces" (Martin Bucer); he was characterized as "a monstrous compound of mere impiety and horrid blasphemy (Beza); and he was called "a genuine son of the devil whose pestiferous and detestable doctrines and intolerable blasphemies justified death" (Peter Martyr). Even though Servetus was an unorthodox, anti-Trinitarian heretic, it was not right for him to be burned, and this was an inconsistent action based on Protestant principles of liberty, and a misinterpretation of Mosaic legislation for the modern Church. In the age in which Calvin lived, the laws of the land upheld the doctrines of the Church and it was not only an offense to the Church but a crime to confess something foreign to the confession of a particular city or state. The spirit of Protestantism is that one must do what one's conscience dictates before God, and let man be a liar, and therefore the actions of men persecuting and killing other men for disbelief was wrong. If we consider Calvin in the context of history in Geneva, then we must understand that Calvin acted as all men during an age of intolerance in religion. As historian Philip Schaff correctly points out even Michael Servetus admitted the principle under which he suffered for trying to persuade Genevan Christians to deny the Trinity; Servetus said that incorrigible obstinacy and malice deserved death before God and men. Calvin always thought that he had done what was best for the Church; at the end of his life he wrote: "Servetus suffered the penalty due to his heresies, but was it my will [that put him to death]? Certainly his arrogance destroyed him not less than his impiety. And what crime was it of mine if our

Council, at my exhortation, indeed, but in conformity with the opinion of several Churches, took vengeance on his execrable blasphemies? Let Baudouin (Francois Baudouin, 1520-73; a French opponent of Calvin ca. 1561) abuse me as long as he will, provided that, by the judgment of Melanchthon, posterity owes me a debt of gratitude for having purged the Church of so pernicious a monster.” Calvin pleaded mercy for Servetus to the Council by requesting that if he is to be executed for breaking the law, then to consider doing it by the sword rather than the stake (which made Calvin ahead of his times in some ways). Servetus was ultimately charged and executed according to Mosaic Law for blasphemy against God (Leviticus 24:16). The Council listed the specific crimes of Servetus as called the Holy Trinity a monster with three heads in his writings, blaspheming the Son of God in his articulation of his Christology, denying infant-baptism as an invention of the devil and of witchcraft, assailing the Christian faith in general, and while he had lived in Geneva he had persisted in his vile and detestable errors and called true Christians tritheists, atheists, sorcerers, etc.

Religious persecution or intoleration by sword in the name of God is the worst kind; it usually stems historically from a confounding of the Old and New Covenants. Since the time of Constantine, the Church has been intolerant toward the heathen and has practiced the persecution of those who were not Christians. The practice continued throughout the Medieval Period in the Church as the laws of the Church and the land forbid anyone from teaching or propagating what the Church considered error (How many martyrs were there who opposed the Roman Catholic Church with the truth of the Gospel and were persecuted and killed for their stand? I need only mention Hus, Jerome of Prague,

Savonarola, three English Reformers at Oxford and Giordano Bruno all who were burned by Rome for preaching the Gospel). In the Reformation, the practice unfortunately continued, although the seeds and implications of religious liberty only had to be worked out because the spirit of Protestantism is to believe what the Bible teaches and obey God rather than, no matter what persecution may come. Unfortunately, the tyranny and intolerance of Roman Catholicism was in many ways replaced with the intolerance of the Reformers, but it must be remembered that intolerance is against one of the foundational doctrines of the Reformation which was the freedom of the conscience. However, the time would come when the fruits of the Reformation would come forth and religious toleration would be promoted as in the United States. In the time of the Reformation, if they had not fought back, humanly speaking, the small Lutheran and Reformed movement (compared to Rome) might have died out completely. We do not desire to justify the actions, but it helps us in our current place in history to understand the practice a bit better. We should understand the principle that Luther articulated when he said: “Belief is a free thing which cannot be enforced [by Law]; if heretics were to be punished by death, the hangman would be the most orthodox theologian; to burn heretics is contrary to the will of the Holy Spirit.” Martin Luther said this early in his life, but as he grew older, Luther became more and more intolerant because he feared that the Reformation he had given his life for would be suppressed by a stronger intolerance from the Roman Catholic armies. Luther experientially came to support more of an intolerance with help from the state because he realized that this might be the only way the Gospel would continue safely to be preached. After Luther’s death, Melancthon would publicly in his letters to other pastors approve of Calvin’s support of Servetus’

death. Heinrich Bullinger in his *Second Helvetic Confession* chapter 30 taught that it is the duty of magistrates to use the sword against blasphemers. It is important to note that although Calvin supported Servetus' execution and handled the theological part of the exam during his trial, he had no direct influence or power upon the decision of the Council to execute. Calvin's theory was that the Church may convict and denounce the heretic theologically, but the State alone had the power to condemn and punish the heretic. Servetus was executed on October 27<sup>th</sup> 1553 in the 44<sup>th</sup> year of his life and his last words were: "Jesus Christ, thou Son of the eternal God, have mercy upon me!" Although this was wrong and sinful, we must not justify the act, but judge it as Christianly as possible from Calvin's perspective in history. Calvin, like all the Reformers, were sinners saved by grace. There have been many great sinful men who have fought for the truth like Calvin, who also made mistakes; mistakes made just like you and me in our own time. What mistakes do we make? We probably will not know a lot of them until we have hindsight that can see so much better. Praise be to God for his tolerance for sinners, and especially his mercy and grace to his Church. As Christ told Pilate his Kingdom is not of this world, and when we act as if it is, and we try to make laws based on enforcing Jesus' Kingdom teaching, we overstep the boundaries of the Church's mission. We must learn from history and make a distinction between the Church and the State. The Church has been given Word, Sacrament, prayer and discipline in order to defend herself against heresies and heretics.

Calvin's influence on the world has been astounding! His correspondence with other reformers throughout the world numbers over 4200 letters! Through Calvin's ministry

Geneva because an exemplary city of gospel preaching and living became in many ways the capital of all the Reformed cities. Perhaps no one other than Augustine has had as much influence on Christ's Church than John Calvin. We thank God for such men whom God raised up to teach His people and remember that they are gifts from the risen-ascended Christ according to Ephesians 4:11ff.

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