

CHAPTER 1

CONTINENTAL ORIGINS

Struggles to Reform

The situation of the church in the early 1500's called for changes to be made. In addition to Biblical and theological irregularities, greed and struggles for power were everywhere in the church.

Europe was ripe for a religious revolution. The seeds planted by early reformers burst into full bloom. Reform was in the air and all that was needed was a handful of bold and bright young revolutionaries to ignite it.

These young revolutionaries—called “Protestants” (because they were protesting the corruption in the church) or “Reformers” (because they wanted to reform the church)—were people of deep convictions, stubborn opinions, and strong wills. They did not want to split away from the Catholic Church in Rome. Instead, they wanted to make changes in the church. Separation was, nevertheless, often the result.

PRINCIPLES OF REFORMATION


Each of these young Reformers made unique contributions and many of their ideas have continued through the ages to the present day Christian denominations that are their descendants. For example,

the following three great principles were articulated by a reformer named Martin Luther and they became the focal point of the changes brought about by a massive upheaval in the church called the Reformation:

1. ***Justification by Grace through Faith.*** People are saved by God when they respond in faith. They are not saved by doing good deeds.
2. ***The Authority of Scripture.*** The ultimate authority for all Christian faith and practice is the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the writings of the Bible.
3. ***The Priesthood of All Believers.*** All believers have direct access to God's love and power and they do not have to go through a priest or minister to get God's attention.

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546)

Martin Luther, the son of a miner, was chosen by God to make sweeping changes in the Church and the world. As a young man, Luther became a monk to seek peace with God. He used religious methods of his time—going without food, performing



mysterious ceremonies, paying fees to the church, renouncing unwholesome things—but he was never able to feel “at one” with God.

Then, he read Romans 1.17 “(the one) who through faith is righteous shall live,” and began a journey that would change the church more than anything since the time of Jesus.



Luther was troubled by the selling of indulgences in the church. In his time, the church taught that some persons had not been good enough to earn enough “points” to get into heaven. At the same time, other people had led such saintly lives that they earned way more points than they needed. And, the friends and relatives of those who didn't have enough points could buy the

excess points of the others by giving money or services to the church. These excess points were called indulgences and the people were taught that when they accumulated enough indulgences, a person's spirit could be admitted to heaven.

Luther did not believe that anyone's way into heaven could be purchased and that it was wrong for the church to be selling it. He believed the forgiveness of sins was freely given by God and could not be bought or sold by anyone.

To announce his angry feelings, Luther followed the custom of writing out his ideas and nailing them to the main door of the town church for everyone to read. On October 31, 1517, he nailed a list of 96 complaints about indulgences and other abuses to the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany. This bold act marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

The head of the church in Rome, the Pope, was unhappy with Luther's attack on the practices which brought lots of money into the church and he issued a formal paper which barred Luther from doing anything in any church anywhere in the world. Luther burned the paper in public and the tensions increased rapidly.

In 1521, at a meeting of the German legislature, Luther was given an opportunity to take back his sayings and beliefs. He refused and thousands of his supporters revolted against the church in a movement we now call the Protestant Reformation. Eventually, they separated completely from the church of their time and began a whole new group of Christians called the “Lutherans” which is still one of the world's largest Christian movements.

Beliefs Are Formed

At about the same time that Martin Luther was developing a new way of thinking in Germany, others were developing similar ideas in nearby Switzerland.

HULDRYCH ZWINGLI (1484-1531)

At the time of Luther's activities in Germany, an even stronger foe of the practices of the Catholic Church was speaking out in Zurich, Switzerland. Huldrych Zwingli concurred with many of Luther's ideas, but could never agree that the body and blood of Christ were actually present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Although Zwingli was killed at an early age, he had set in motion the second wing of the Protestant Reformation called the "Reformed Movement." This movement eventually became Presbyterianism.

Zwingli was followed by several more young reformers in Switzerland but the Reformed Movement did not really become a major force until John Calvin arrived from France.

JOHN CALVIN, The Person (1509-1564)

Calvin was born in Noyon, France about 60 miles northeast of Paris. His parents were of humble means, but Calvin was educated in aristocratic society. His education started him toward ordination as a priest, but he changed his studies to law. He experienced what he described as a "dramatic conversion" when he was about 21 years old, but little is known about it. Because of his Protestant ideas, he was a fugitive for a period of time, was impris-

oned and released, and finally sought refuge in Basel, Switzerland.



JOHN CALVIN The Contributions

It was in Basel at the age of 26 that John Calvin first published the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* provide the basis for what is called "reformed theology"—the ideas which form the basic doctrines and practices of Presbyterianism.

Some of these "Reformed" ideas are:

1. Theology (knowledge about God) builds upon the work of Christ's church through the centuries.
2. The central focal point of our faith is the Triune God who is uniquely present in Jesus Christ.
3. All theology "stands under the Word of God" (the Bible).
4. Human life is rooted in the will and

intention of God (Predestination)

5. God is creator. Everything else is created.
6. Theology should lead to the practice of faith.
7. The study of the Bible and the presence of God's Spirit combine to give wisdom.

GENEVA, The Laboratory

It was in Geneva, Switzerland that Calvin sought to apply his theology to practical life. As chief official of both the

church and the city, he made the city a refuge for Protestants from many lands. He established standards for morality, food preparation, sewage disposal, water quality, and health care. In his clear preaching, he challenged lay people to do the work of the church and this is still reflected today by the fact that elders and ministers both take the same ordination vows in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Calvin urged all people in Geneva to high standards of service, morality and education in all aspects of life. He stressed that every aspect of life and faith are touched by God.

PREDESTINATION

“Behind everything that exists is the will and purpose of God. No human life is ever the simple result of the forces of biology and history.”

Introduction to the Reformed Tradition by John H. Leith.

OUR OWN REFORMATION DEBATES

Name two things that you have tried to change at home, school, or with friends _____

What were the areas of resistance? _____

Why do you think there was resistance to change? _____

What was the result of your effort to bring about change? _____

“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Matthew 5.17 TEV

The Presbyterian Way of Life

What we experience in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is more than the theology of Calvin and the practical experience of faith in Geneva. It is a “way of life” that has its roots in Geneva, in the experiences of the French Huguenots (Reformers) and in the lives of those in the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands. And, through the years, other peoples and ethnic groups have continued to enrich that Presbyterian way of life.

THE NETHERLANDS AND FRANCE

In the Netherlands and France, there were several areas where Reformed thinking took hold. It was not always easy, with

opposition from the government as well as the church in Rome. Stormy struggles for free expression of faith often accompanied efforts for political independence and geographical division.

In France, there was not a specific geographical section of Protestants. Instead, the stormy struggles ended with the agreement that the Protestant minority would be tolerated in the midst of the predominantly Roman Catholic population.

The French Protestants, known as the *Huguenots*, were mostly farmers, skilled laborers, and tradespeople with a few from the aristocracy. They strongly called for the freedom to worship in their own way and to develop their community of faith without harassment.



The Presbyterian way of life which had its origin in the Reformation struggles in Europe is notable for several qualities including the following:

- We try to live by our belief that God rules over all the created order.
- We study and use the Bible as the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ.
- We form ourselves into “covenant communities” for practical expression of our faith.
- We are called to servanthood, not power.
- We choose representatives (presbyters) to govern and guide us in various governing bodies.
- The focal point of church membership is the proclamation of the gospel.
- We participate in the life of the whole church throughout history, and in all parts of the world.
- We gather for worship and sacrament to express our commitment to God and to experience the nurture and support of our colleagues in ministry understanding that God in Christ provides salvation.
- We accept the tendency of humans to make mistakes and to sin, and we try to develop systems to balance power within the church
- We are enthusiastic and optimistic about what God can and is doing in the world
- We design our plans as “mission” carried out in the Lord's name and guided by God’s Spirit.

REVIEW

1. Luther nailed his complaints to the church door in _____
2. John Calvin was born in _____
3. Calvin wrote the _____
4. The two qualities of the “Presbyterian way of life” which I feel are most important are _____

5. List three questions you would ask John Calvin if you could interview him _____

6. In the time left, imagine you are a group of young Reformed preachers meeting together in a room in Geneva, Switzerland more than 400 years ago. You are all very excited because these are important times! God is using you—a group of unknown preachers—to build the most important Christian movement in several centuries. Make plans. Decide what must be done. Remember. Even though you are only a handful today, you will expand to millions of people in countries throughout the world!