

Chapter 1

The Reformers and Their Influence

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stands in the tradition of the Reformation. The Reformers whose statues mark the Reformation Wall in Geneva — John Calvin, William Farel Theodore Beza, and John Knox — are the preeminent personages for us. Their predecessors and contemporaries set the stage for their work that led particularly to the Presbyterian Church. Martin Luther, and a hundred years earlier, the Waldensians and the followers of Jan Hus, are also part of the Presbyterian tradition of “The Church having been reformed, always is being reformed.”

However, tradition goes deeper for us than just the Reformation. It goes back through the fifteen century development of the Roman Catholic Church and, before that, to the prior Biblical traditions of Judaism. In all that rich history and tradition, there have been many times when the experiences of God’s people and the presence of God’s Spirit combined for major change. Sometimes that change lead the church toward great progress in faith and mission development. Other times the change was disruptive and even destructive. However, the presence of God’s Spirit in those historic events can offer redeeming

value to all generations.

Certainly the Reformation was one of those major watersheds of history. The circumstances of history were right for reform in several key ways. In the geographical areas where the reform flourished — both the Catholic and Protestant phases of that reform — some common conditions existed.

- The areas (mostly geographical sub-units of today's European countries) were ruled by ostensibly Christian princes who were politically independent of non-Christian rulers.
- The areas were those that had escaped heavy Muslim domination in the preceding 200 years.
- There had just been a Renaissance, a burst of creative enthusiasm, in other disciplines such as science, art, and philosophy.
- Discoveries, commercial growth, and colonizing of the new world were to come from these “reform” areas.

Into that setting were born several men who are generally called the “Reformers.”

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is certainly the most prominent. The leaders normally identified with the Presbyterian wing of the Reformation — **John Calvin** (1509-1564), **William Farel** (1489-1565), **Theodore Beza** (1519-1605) and **John Knox** (1506-1572) — stand together in the sculptured *Reformation Wall* in Geneva. There were others as well, like **Huldreich Zwingli** (1484-1531), **Menno Simons** (1496-1561) and **Jacob Hutter** who was burned in 1536. The mystic **Sebastian Franck** (1499-c1542) also played an important role.

Many factors aided the cause of reform — some over which the reformers had little control. First, the spirit and desire for reform was running through many areas of the church. Even though it would later be referred to as a *Catholic Reformation* (for changes within the Catholic Church) and a *Protestant Reformation* (for changes which caused separation from the Catholic Church), the desire for reform originated in the same historic head waters.

Second, the attitude of the Pope and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church toward the more radical reformers made it virtually impossible for them to remain in the church as it was.

Third, with few exceptions the line of demarcation between the

Protestant and the Catholic loyalties was the boundary of what had once been the Roman Empire, therefore, most of Northern Europe became Protestant while Southern Europe remained Catholic.

Fourth, the Protestant Reformation seems to have sprung up largely among the lower social classes and Catholic reform happened primarily within the aristocracy.

A fifth thing which stimulated the desire for reform was that printing from movable type had recently been invented making books and pamphlets available to the general public for the first time. People, hungry and thirsty to learn and formulate their own ideas rather than simply being told what to believe, were ready to devour books in their native languages.

A sixth circumstance was the political environment and the marriages among monarchs from other nations. Some of these alliance marriages were “of convenience” to assure benefits for the nations such as better trade, relief from historic tensions, and protection from invasion. In many nations, the monarchs manipulated the religious practices to suit their ventures. Likewise, the church leaders were not above taking advantage of the political climate to enhance the “state of the church.”

The reformation of the church that occurred in the Sixteenth Century was not a concerted or concentrated effort of any one person in any one place. It was a kaleidoscope of change that took place over a period of history when people were open to new ideas and expressions about their faith. The reformers’ influence was as much the response of the people as it was the genius of their ideas.

Martin Luther

MARTIN LUTHER was born in Eisleben, Germany on November 10, 1483. His parents were frugal, hard working peasants. By the time Martin was a teenager, his father had become fairly prosperous by leasing land for iron mining and firing. It appears that their simple life at home provided a framework for a basic faith at that time.

He began his schooling at age seven and continued through university. He studied at Erfurt under a scholar named Ockham with whom he later disagreed.

Luther was headed toward a career in law, when a bolt of lightning struck — literally. In July, 1505, while he was out walking, a bolt of lightning felled him. Stunned, he called on St. Anne for help and, in response, he vowed to become a monk.

As a monk, he struggled with continuing periods of depression as he had in his student days at Erfurt. He sought desperately for assurance in his faith and for release from the dreaded sense of God’s judgment. He spent long hours in confession. He fasted. He mortified his body. He longed to be acceptable to the Lord. His monastic order hindered his search for peace with a heavy administrative load, but aided him by assigning him to teach theology.

In his studies in the Psalms, Romans and Galatians, he finally read Romans 1.17 with a new and growing light that gradually became as brilliant as the early flash of lightning — “the just shall live by faith” became a distinctive Reformation principle.

Luther was particularly peeved by the sale of indulgences by *Johann Tetzel*. He was deeply concerned over the claims that the purchase of indulgences (portions of divine merit left over from the saints who had died with an excess of merit) could assure a dead loved one’s entrance into heaven. Luther’s own inner struggles were becoming calmer and his response to Tetzel’s claim was strong. The immorality, greed, and political power plays of religious leaders were also offensive to Luther. On October 31, 1517, Luther prepared a document of the *95 Theses* on which he was prepared to debate and nailed it to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg — the town’s bulletin board. That event marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther’s three great theological premises were mined in the depths of his search for assurance and forged in the heat of turmoil — justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers.

- ***Justification by Faith.*** Or, more completely, “justification by grace through faith alone,” bases our relationship with God on God’s act of salvation in Christ and our total trust in the truth of that act. Our acts of goodness and righteousness are in response to what God has done but these good works can in no way influence God to forgive us or grant us salvation which comes through faith alone.

- ***Authority of Scripture.*** The second Reformation principle brought to the forefront by Luther is the authority of the Bible itself over all other sources of information. The Catholic position was that the church, through tradition and teaching, provided the “correct” understanding of the Bible. Virtually all Bibles were in Latin which could not be read by anyone except clergy so the people were dependent upon the church for interpretation. Luther declared that the people could be guided by God’s Spirit to directly read and interpret the Bible themselves.
- ***Priesthood of All Believers.*** This third Reformation principle departed abruptly from Catholic tradition of the time by insisting that all people had direct access to God’s love and power and were called to be in ministry. It was not only the priests who were ordained and who could serve. The function of ministry is for all believers and all are involved in sacred vocations.

Huldreich Zwingli and ***William Farel*** set the stage for ***John Calvin*** in Switzerland. By the time Calvin was born July 10, 1509 at Noyon about 60 miles north of Paris, Zwingli was in Zurich greeting Luther’s writings with enthusiastic joy.

Huldreich Zwingli

Huldreich Zwingli was born January 1, 1484 — only a few weeks after Luther. He, too, was from a peasant home but in Switzerland instead of Germany. Schooled and trained as a priest, he settled in Zurich and studied and wrote materials that provided the basis for much of ***John Calvin’s*** work. In December, 1520, the Swiss civil rulers granted freedom for clerics to preach openly. Zwingli shortly came out against many Catholic doctrines and practices including monastic vows, clerical celibacy, intercession of the saints, the existence of purgatory, the sacrificial elements of the mass and the teaching that salvation can be earned by good works.

Agreeing with Luther’s thought in many areas, Zwingli broke with him as much on temperament as on theology. He had an intellectual approach stressing the sovereignty of God while Luther focused on God’s grace in Christ. However, the greatest division between the two was over the interpretation of the Lord’s Supper — Luther holding that

the presence of Christ's body was paramount, Zwingli wanting the memorial aspects to be the highest priority.

John Calvin

John Calvin's ancestry was of humble estate, but his parents made sure he was raised in an aristocratic style with accompanying manners. He was never ordained, but his father assured that he would be educated in all aspects of theology and philosophy. He attended the University of Paris where he continued to express a very religious nature and to live a life that seems to have avoided the vices of most of his friends. It is ironic that two significant Catholic reformers attended the university while Calvin was there — *Francis Xavier* and *Ignatius Loyola*.

Calvin began to study law at age nineteen. At about the same time, he had what he referred to as a sudden conversion experience. Little is known of the circumstances, but it apparently had a profound, yet not very visible, impact on his life. He had to flee Paris at age 25 because of his involvement with Protestants. Later, he was imprisoned for a short time and then found a haven in Basel which had become a strong Protestant center. A year later at Basel, Calvin finished his book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Calvin's *Institutes* were not intended to be original thoughts, but a compilation of the teachings in the church before what Calvin called the "corruptions" brought in by the Roman Catholic Church. If not original, Calvin's logical mind brought order to those theological fragments.

The *Institutes* set out to describe the mighty acts of God among the people of God, with the *Apostles Creed* as a pattern:

- God as creator, preserver and governor of the universe.
- Redemption provided by God in Christ.
- The Holy Spirit.
- The church and its relation to civil governments.

His approach was not one of refutation of others' errors, but of a positive and systematic statement of the faith.

In a few years, Calvin moved to Geneva where he soon became the city's leading pastor and government leader. He sought to make Geneva a haven for oppressed Protestants from many lands. He wanted to train people to return to their countries to begin Protestant communities modeled after Geneva. He sought also to establish a church/state organization that would maintain church order and effect community improvement at the same time. He developed commerce and a weaving industry. He established a banking and money lending organization, urging fair interest be charged. He worked ardently for schools that would educate the laity as well as the clergy. He encouraged congregational singing of the Psalms.

The Anabaptists

The *Anabaptists* were made up of many small groups of Reformers and were, with few exceptions, different from the primary Reformers in two ways: they sought initially to separate from Roman Catholic authority, and they did not subscribe to baptism of infants. Those two practices were often looked on with suspicion by both the Protestants and the Catholics. The result was usually persecution of the Anabaptists by both Catholics and Protestants.

The piety and the feelings of the Anabaptists against the alliances between the church and the civil governments further put them at odds with Catholic and Protestant leaders. The Anabaptist groups were nearly annihilated and they survive today only in the Mennonites, followers of the peace advocate *Menno Simons*, and the Brethren. The theological influence of the Anabaptists is felt today in many denominations even though they are not historically linked. The most prominent of these are the various Baptist denominations in the United States and Great Britain.

Reflection Questions

1. With some common heritage in the Reformation, present day denominations have developed some differences. What

are some of the similarities and differences between Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Episcopalians?

- 2. The Reformation and the years following marked a time when differences were settled by violence and conformity was demanded as a sign of orthodoxy. How do you deal differently now with conflict and how do you affirm diversity and inclusiveness?**
- 3. In what ways can the influence of the reformers be found in worship, theology, the education of laity and church government in your particular church?**