

Calvin, Zwingli & the Reformed

The Swiss Reformation — Zurich's unheralded revolution, Geneva's disciplined city, and the theological tradition that reshaped Scotland, the Netherlands, and New England • c.

1519–1564

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 16 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — a supplementary lesson that picks up right beside **Luther (Lesson 15, Noll TP 6)**. The German and Swiss Reformations began almost simultaneously, but they diverged on the Eucharist at Marburg (1529) and produced two distinct magisterial Protestant traditions. This is the Swiss-French story — Zurich under Zwingli, Geneva under Calvin, and the Reformed streams that flowed out of them. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

The Reformation was never a single movement. Within three years of Luther's ninety-five theses, a parish priest in Zurich named **Ulrich Zwingli** had started an independent reform movement that would become the mother church of the Swiss Reformed tradition. A decade later, a young French lawyer named **John Calvin**, reluctantly detained in Geneva, would organize what became the most influential Reformation city in Europe outside Wittenberg. Together with their successors — Bullinger, Bucer, Beza, Knox — they produced the *Reformed* tradition: Calvinism, the Huguenots, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Church of Scotland,

English Puritanism, and ultimately most of colonial New England Congregationalism and American Presbyterianism.

For most American Protestants — including most Baptists, though we often forget it — the theology in the water you swim in is Reformed. The American Puritans were Calvinists. Jonathan Edwards was a Calvinist. Whitefield was a Calvinist. The First Great Awakening was mostly a Reformed revival. When we instinctively speak about God’s sovereignty, the depth of human sinfulness, the necessity of sovereign grace, and the whole-life claim of the gospel, we are speaking Reformed.

This lesson is about how two Swiss cities — one German-speaking, one French-speaking — produced that tradition in the forty-five years between 1519 and 1564.

Greek NT (Rom 11:36): ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸ ἅπαντα· αὐτῷ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας.

Romans 11:36 (ESV): “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

PART 1 — TWO PRIESTS, TWO CITIES (1519)

In January 1519, two priests took up new pulpits in two German-speaking cities separated by 500 miles.

- **Wittenberg (pop. ~2,000).** The small Saxon town where **Martin Luther**, age 35, had been preaching for seven years. He was now famous across Germany for his 95 Theses, about to be pushed by the Leipzig Debate into claims that would end in Worms two years later.

- **Zurich (pop. ~7,000).** The Swiss Confederation’s largest city. A new people’s priest had arrived at the Grossmünster cathedral on 1 January 1519 — a 34-year-old humanist scholar named **Ulrich Zwingli**, who began preaching verse by verse through the Gospel of Matthew, in German, from the Greek text of Erasmus.

Were they coordinating? No. Zwingli had never met Luther and later resented the suggestion that he was a disciple of the German monk. Both men, independently, had been changed by Erasmus's 1516 Greek New Testament. Both were reading the Bible anew. Both reached similar conclusions. But Zwingli's Reformation grew from humanist exegesis and Swiss civic politics; Luther's grew from Augustinian monastic crisis and imperial German law. The two streams would diverge on their Eucharist theology at **Marburg in 1529** — a divergence that persists in every Reformed-vs-Lutheran distinction today.

PART 2 — ZWINGLI AND THE ZURICH REFORMATION (1484–1531)

Ulrich (Huldrych) Zwingli

BORN 1 JANUARY 1484 AT WILDHAUS, SWITZERLAND — SEVEN WEEKS AFTER LUTHER • EDUCATED AT VIENNA AND BASEL (HUMANIST LEARNING) • PEOPLE'S PRIEST AT GLARUS, EINSIEDELN, ZURICH • KILLED AT THE BATTLE OF KAPPEL, 11 OCTOBER 1531

Swiss Reformation

Humanist

Memorialist Eucharist

Zwingli was shaped by two things Luther was not. First, Swiss humanism: he had studied under the celebrated humanist Thomas Wyttenbach at Basel; he corresponded with Erasmus; he knew Greek and Hebrew well. Second, Swiss politics: the cantons were self-governing republics, each theoretically sovereign. A Reformation in Zurich would not need an elector's protection like Luther had in Frederick of Saxony — it only needed the city council.

Key moments:

1 January 1519 • Zwingli arrives at Zurich's Grossmünster and begins preaching through Matthew, verse by verse, in German. He breaks the medieval lectionary.

March 1522 • The "Affair of the Sausages." Printer Christoph Froschauer serves sausages to his workers during Lent. Zwingli defends him publicly in the sermon

On the Choice and Liberty of Foods, arguing that no human law can bind the Christian conscience on matters Scripture leaves free. The Zurich Reformation has its first public crisis.

January 1523 • The First Zurich Disputation. The city council convenes a public debate between Zwingli (defending Scripture) and Johann Faber (representing the Bishop of Constance). The council declares Zwingli has won. Zurich is formally reforming.

October 1523 • Second Zurich Disputation — on images and the Mass. Zwingli argues for removing images and reforming the Mass. The council agrees.

1524–1525 • Images are removed from Zurich’s churches. In Holy Week 1525 the Zurich Mass is abolished and replaced by a new **German communion service** — wooden cups, plain bread, seated congregations, four times a year rather than weekly. The first Protestant communion.

1525 • Some of Zwingli’s younger followers (Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz) press for adult believer’s baptism; Zwingli, committed to the Christian city, refuses. The Anabaptist movement is born as a split from the Zwinglian Reformation (see our future Lesson on Anabaptists).

October 1529 • **Marburg Colloquy**. See Part 3.

11 October 1531 • The Catholic Forest Cantons (Schwyz, Uri, Unterwalden, Lucerne, Zug) declare war on Protestant Zurich. Zwingli, serving as a military chaplain, is among roughly 500 Zurich soldiers killed at the **Battle of Kappel**. He was 47. His body was quartered and burned by the Catholic troops.

What Zwingli contributed.

- **Radical biblicism.** Only what Scripture *positively commands* may be done in worship (the *regulative principle*). This is sharper than Luther, who kept anything Scripture did not prohibit.

• **Iconoclasm.** Images of Christ and the saints are forbidden; churches are to be whitewashed. This becomes a hallmark of Reformed worship.

• **Memorial Supper.** The Lord's Supper is a *memorial* of Christ's death and a sign of Christian fellowship. "This is my body" means "this signifies my body." Calvin later criticized this as too thin; but Zwingli's reading is the ancestor of the Baptist and evangelical view today.

• **Church-state unity.** Zurich's city council is the visible Christian community. There is no separate ecclesiastical hierarchy. This produced both the best of Swiss civic piety and the vulnerability that cost Zwingli his life on a battlefield.

Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), Zwingli's successor at Zurich for 44 years, consolidated the Swiss Reformed tradition, wrote the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) — for a century one of the most influential Reformed confessions in Europe — and maintained a correspondence of some 12,000 letters with Reformed leaders across Europe. If Zwingli launched the Swiss Reformation, Bullinger is the man who kept it alive.

PART 3 — MARBURG (OCTOBER 1529)

Philip of Hesse, a Protestant German prince, wanted to unite the Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformations into a single military and theological alliance. In October 1529 he summoned Luther, Zwingli, and their leading colleagues to his castle at Marburg for four days of theological discussion.

Luther, Melancthon, Oecolampadius, Zwingli, Bucer, and others produced fifteen articles. They agreed on fourteen of them: the Trinity, Christ, original sin, justification by faith, faith alone, baptism, the moral law, confession, civil government, and so on.

They could not agree on the fifteenth — the Lord's Supper.

CATHOLIC

LUTHER

ZWINGLI

Transubstantiation: the bread and wine cease to be bread and wine; their substance becomes the body and blood of Christ. The accidents (appearance) remain.

Real Presence / Sacramental Union: the body and blood of Christ are truly, substantially, bodily present “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. “This IS my body.”

Memorialism: the bread and wine are signs commemorating Christ’s death. “Is” means “signifies.” Christ’s body is at the right hand of the Father, not on a thousand altars.

The famous scene. Luther took a piece of chalk and wrote on the conference table *Hoc est corpus meum* (“This is my body,” Matt 26:26), covered it with a velvet cloth, and during every clash uncovered it and tapped it. Zwingli argued that a word like “is” can function metaphorically throughout Scripture (John 15:5 “I am the vine”; 1 Cor 10:4 “that Rock was Christ”). Luther replied that the plain sense of “this is” was non-negotiable.

On the last day, Zwingli, weeping, extended his hand to Luther. Luther, also weeping, refused to take it. “You have a different spirit than we do,” he said.

What Marburg produced. The Protestant tradition split into two permanently distinct families. The **Lutheran** churches kept the real presence and a more liturgically continuous worship. The **Reformed** churches pushed further toward a biblical-only worship and a more symbolic (in Zwingli) or spiritual (in Calvin, see Part 8) view of the Supper. Calvin would later try to bridge the gap with the *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549, with Bullinger). It mostly failed with Lutherans but unified the Reformed.

PART 4 – THE MAKING OF CALVIN (1509–1536)

Jean Calvin (John Calvin)

BORN 10 JULY 1509 AT NOYON, PICARDY, NORTHERN FRANCE •
UNIVERSITY OF PARIS (PHILOSOPHY), ORLÉANS AND BOURGES (CIVIL

LAW) • REFORMER OF GENEVA 1536–1564 • DIED 27 MAY 1564

Reformed

Geneva

Institutes

Luther was twenty-six years older than Calvin. By the time Calvin was a teenager, Luther had already stood at Worms. Calvin grew up inside a Reformation that had already broken open; he did not have to start it, but he had to *organize* it.

1509 • Born at Noyon, in Picardy. His father Gérard was a lay lawyer serving the local bishop. His mother died when he was five. Reserved, bookish, sickly.

1521–1528 • Student at the University of Paris, studying philosophy and preparing for a career in the church.

1528–1531 • Shifts to law (at his father’s direction) at Orléans and Bourges. Encounters humanist teachers including Melchior Wolmar, who introduces him to Greek and to sympathy for Reformation ideas.

1533 • Experiences what he later calls a “sudden conversion.” He never describes it in detail; his one brief account, in the Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms (1557), is almost all we have. God, he writes, “subdued my heart to teachableness.”

1 November 1533 • Calvin’s friend Nicolas Cop, new rector of the University of Paris, gives a rectoral address heavily influenced by Luther (and possibly co-authored with Calvin). The French authorities move to arrest them; both flee.

October 1534 • The “Affair of the Placards.” Reformation sympathizers post anti-Mass posters across Paris, including on the door of King Francis I’s bedroom at Amboise. The king launches a fierce persecution. Calvin leaves France for Basel.

March 1536 • At Basel, the twenty-six-year-old Calvin publishes the first edition of *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*) — a small book of six chapters in Latin, prefaced by an open letter to King

Francis I defending the persecuted French Protestants. It is an instant theological success.

July 1536 • Intending to travel from France to Strasbourg to live a quiet scholar's life, Calvin has to detour through **Geneva** because of local wars. William Farel, the fiery reformer who has just won Geneva for the Reformation, meets him at the inn, begs him to stay, and — when Calvin refuses — threatens him with divine judgment. “Farel called out that God would curse my retirement if I were unwilling to help,” Calvin later wrote. “I was so stricken with terror that I put off the journey I had undertaken.” He stays.

PART 5 — GENEVA, FIRST ATTEMPT (1536–1538)

Calvin's first Geneva residency was a near disaster. He and Farel tried to impose rigorous church order on a city that had only recently thrown off its bishop. They demanded a confession of faith from every citizen; they tried to institute church discipline with teeth; they wanted the civil government to subordinate itself to the consistory (the church's disciplinary body). The city's political party, the Libertines, opposed them at every turn.

On Easter Sunday 1538 Calvin and Farel refused to administer the Lord's Supper because the congregation was, they judged, too riven with open sin. The city council, enraged, expelled them from Geneva within days.

PART 6 — STRASBOURG (1538–1541) — BUCER AND IDELETTE

Calvin spent the three years of his Genevan exile in Strasbourg, then a free imperial city in the upper Rhine and one of the great Reformation centers under the magnanimous **Martin Bucer**. These years were formative. Three things happened.

- **Under Bucer’s tutelage**, Calvin learned how to be a pastor rather than a polemicist. Bucer’s irenic temperament, his emphasis on church discipline as pastoral rather than punitive, and his careful liturgical reform all shaped Calvin’s later Geneva.

- **Calvin served as pastor** to a French refugee congregation of about 500 souls. He revised and expanded his *Institutes* — the 1539 edition more than doubled the 1536 original. He also published his first biblical commentary (on Romans, 1540).

- **In August 1540 Calvin married Idelette de Bure**, the widow of a former Anabaptist who had converted to the Reformed faith. Bucer had urged Calvin to marry; Calvin had been hesitant but was eventually persuaded. Idelette brought two children from her previous marriage. She bore Calvin one son, Jacques, who lived only briefly. Idelette herself died in 1549 after nine years of marriage. Calvin, the cool Frenchman of every later stereotype, was devastated: “I have lost the best companion of my life,” he wrote, “one who, if it had been so ordered, would not only have been the willing partner of my exile and poverty, but even of my death.”

September 1541. Geneva, now chaotic without him, summoned Calvin back. He agreed reluctantly. He would spend the next twenty-three years there.

PART 7 — CALVIN’S GENEVA (1541–1564)

Calvin returned to Geneva on 13 September 1541 and mounted the pulpit of St. Pierre the following Sunday. Legend says he began preaching at the exact chapter and verse he had last preached from three years earlier, without mentioning his exile.

The Ecclesiastical Ordinances (November 1541). Within weeks of his return, Calvin drafted a new constitution for the Genevan church. The city council adopted it with amendments. It created a four-fold ministry and a disciplinary body that would reshape Reformed church polity permanently:

Calvin’s four offices (Ecclesiastical Ordinances, 1541):

- **Pastors** (preachers) — preach the Word and administer the sacraments.
- **Doctors** (teachers) — teach sound doctrine, preparing new pastors; the seed of the later Geneva Academy.
- **Elders** — lay members of the *Consistory*, who supervise the moral and spiritual life of the city.
- **Deacons** — care for the poor, the sick, and the widowed.

This four-fold pattern, derived by Calvin from Ephesians 4 and 1 Timothy, is the ancestor of every later Presbyterian, Reformed, and Congregational church polity. The elders-and-deacons model of most American evangelical congregations is a Calvinist inheritance.

The Consistory. The weekly meeting of Geneva’s pastors and twelve lay elders became the visible expression of Reformed church discipline. Citizens were summoned for sins ranging from blasphemy to adultery to drunkenness to not attending sermons. The Consistory did not have civil power; it could warn, rebuke, or (as a last resort) excommunicate, which meant exclusion from the Lord’s Supper. Later legend exaggerates the severity — in most years, the Consistory’s primary work was reconciliation between quarreling neighbors — but the Geneva of the 1550s was, by the standards of its day, an exceptionally ordered Christian city.

Preaching. Calvin preached continuously through books of the Bible, usually twice on Sundays and several weekdays. He produced over 2,000 surviving sermons — most taken down in shorthand by stenographers and published posthumously.

The Geneva Academy (1559). Near the end of his life, Calvin realized Reformed pastors from across Europe needed formal training. The **Académie de Genève** (now the University of Geneva) opened in June 1559, with Calvin giving the inaugural address and **Theodore Beza** as its first rector. Within a decade it had trained John Knox, Marnix of St. Aldegonde (leader of the Dutch Reformed), Caspar Olevianus (author of the Heidelberg Catechism), Zacharias Ursinus, Andrew Melville (father of Scottish Presbyterianism), and hundreds of others.

His death (27 May 1564). Calvin had been ill for years with tuberculosis, gout, kidney stones, and migraines. He preached his final sermon on 6 February 1564 and died on 27 May. At his own request, he was buried in an unmarked grave in the city cemetery to avoid becoming an object of veneration. The unmarked location is still debated today.

The *Institutio Christianae Religionis* — the **Institutes of the Christian Religion** — is the most influential single theological book produced by the Reformation and the most influential systematic theology in Christian history after Aquinas's *Summa*. Calvin revised it four times between 1536 and 1559. The final edition, in four books and eighty chapters, is the one every Reformed theologian still reads.

1536 • First edition. Six chapters in Latin, roughly 520 pages, designed as a catechism.

1539 • Second edition. Seventeen chapters, more than doubled.

1541 • First French edition (Calvin's own translation), a landmark in French prose.

1543 • Third Latin edition. Twenty-one chapters.

1550 • Fourth Latin edition. Divided into chapters and sections.

1559 • Final Latin edition. Four books, eighty chapters, the form still read today.

The structure of the 1559 *Institutes*:

• **Book 1: The Knowledge of God the Creator.** Natural knowledge of God in creation and conscience; Scripture as God's spectacles for fallen humanity; the divine nature and the Trinity.

• **Book 2: The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ.** The Fall and original sin; the bondage of the will; the covenants; the person and work of Christ; the threefold office (Prophet, Priest, King).

• **Book 3: The Mode of Obtaining the Grace of Christ.** Faith, justification, sanctification, the Christian life, prayer, election, the resurrection.

• **Book 4: The External Means by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ.** The church, sacraments (baptism and Supper), civil government.

Calvin's signature line:

"Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

— **John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1.1 (1559)**

PART 9 — REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

Reformed theology shares with Lutheran theology the five *solas* (see **Lesson 15 Part 7**). But the Reformed tradition developed its own emphases, some of them sharper than anything in Wittenberg:

1. The absolute sovereignty of God. God is the sovereign Lord of all creation, all history, all salvation. Nothing happens that he has not ordained or permitted. Calvin is often accused of over-emphasizing this; Calvin would have replied that over-emphasizing it is impossible.

2. Predestination. God from eternity has elected some to salvation and (in the fully developed Reformed view) passed over others in reprobation — a distinction Calvin handles with more nuance than his popular reputation allows. The doctrine is already in Augustine (**Lesson 9 Part 5**) and in Luther (the *Bondage of the Will*); Calvin's contribution is to work it out systematically.

3. The regulative principle of worship. Only what Scripture positively commands or pattern requires may be done in public worship. Lutherans kept liturgical elements Scripture did not forbid (vestments, crucifixes, the liturgy); the Reformed removed them. This is why Reformed churches are visually plain.

4. Spiritual real presence in the Supper. Calvin charted a middle course between Luther (bodily real presence) and Zwingli (memorial only). For Calvin, the Holy Spirit truly *lifts* believers up to feed on the risen body of Christ in heaven during the Supper. The body does not come down; we are lifted up. Calvin called this a “mystery I feel rather than understand.”

5. Covenant theology. God relates to his people through a series of covenants (with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the new covenant in Christ), which are organically one. The children of believers are included in the covenant and therefore baptized as infants. This is the main biblical argument for Reformed paedobaptism.

6. The whole-life claim of the gospel. Calvin believed a reformed church reforms not just worship but the city that holds the church. Education, poor relief, commerce, family life, government — all come under Christ’s lordship. This impulse would reshape the Netherlands, Scotland, colonial New England, and the American Constitution.

TULIP — a later summary, not Calvin’s. The acronym TULIP — Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints — was coined decades after Calvin’s death, as a summary of the five canons of the **Synod of Dort (1618–1619)**. Dort was the international Reformed response to the Dutch Remonstrants (followers of Jacobus Arminius), who had challenged Reformed doctrine on five specific points. Calvin would have recognized all five canons as his — but the TULIP formula itself is not his and is not the whole of his theology.

T

Total Depravity

U

*Unconditional
Election*

L

*Limited
Atonement*

I

*Irresistible
Grace*

P

*Perseverance of
the Saints*

Every honest account of Calvin has to name the execution of **Michael Servetus**. Servetus was a Spanish physician and polymath — a pioneer of research on pulmonary blood circulation — who also denied the doctrine of the Trinity. He published a book, *Christianismi Restitutio* (*Restoration of Christianity*, 1553), attacking both Catholic and Reformed Trinitarianism. The Catholic Inquisition at Lyon arrested him; he escaped and, for reasons still obscure, traveled to Geneva.

Servetus was recognized in a Genevan sermon Calvin was preaching. He was arrested. The city council, not Calvin personally, conducted the trial. Calvin testified against him for two months on points of doctrine. Servetus was condemned for anti-Trinitarian heresy and for blasphemy. On 27 October 1553 he was **burned alive** on a hill outside Geneva with a copy of his book chained to his wrist.

Calvin's role. Calvin urged the council to condemn Servetus; he did not urge burning specifically. Calvin's own preference was beheading — a faster death — which the council refused. A few days after the execution Calvin published his *Defense of the Orthodox Faith* justifying the execution on the biblical and Augustinian precedents. Sebastian Castellio, Calvin's former colleague, replied with *Concerning Heretics* (1554) — one of the earliest Protestant arguments for religious toleration. The argument continues.

Honest assessment. The execution was carried out by the city council, not the church, and was entirely typical of 16th-century European practice (Protestant and Catholic). That context does not excuse it. Calvin's treatment of Servetus is the gravest black mark on his reputation. It is also not the heart of his theology, and modern Reformed Christians — Protestant and Catholic scholars alike — have been honest about this for a long time. Every statue of Calvin in modern Geneva stands beside a monument to Servetus. Both stand beside each other rightly.

PART 11 — THE REFORMED SPREAD

By Calvin's death in 1564, the Reformed tradition was spreading across Europe more rapidly than the Lutheran had. Six major streams:

John Knox (c. 1514–1572) — Scotland

Scottish Reformation

First Book of Discipline

Scottish priest who fled Catholic persecution to Geneva, studied under Calvin for years, and returned in 1559 to lead the Scottish Reformation. The Scots Confession (1560) and the First Book of Discipline (1561) established a thoroughly Calvinist Presbyterian church. His *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) was aimed at the Catholic queens of his day but caused him lifelong trouble with Queen Elizabeth I, whom he had not meant to include.

The French Huguenots

French Reformed

Persecuted minority

Reformed Christians in Calvin's native France. The first French Reformed synod met in Paris in 1559. By the 1560s the Huguenots were roughly a tenth of the French population, including much of the nobility. The French Wars of Religion (1562–1598) killed tens of thousands. On St. Bartholomew's Day (24 August 1572), a state-sponsored massacre in Paris killed somewhere between 5,000 and 30,000 Huguenots. The Edict of Nantes (1598) granted limited toleration; Louis XIV revoked it in 1685, and most surviving Huguenots fled to the Netherlands, England, Prussia, and the American colonies (especially Charleston, New York, and Virginia).

The Dutch Reformed Church

Belgic Confession

Heidelberg Catechism

Synod of Dort

The Reformation swept the Netherlands in the 1560s, fused with the Dutch war of independence from Catholic Spain (1568–1648). The Belgic Confession (1561, by Guido de Brès) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563, by Ursinus and Olevianus, adopted by the Dutch) became the foundational Reformed confessional documents of the Low Countries. The Synod of Dort (1618–1619) produced the Canons of Dort (TULIP) in response to Arminianism.

English Puritanism

Westminster Assembly

Westminster Confession

English Protestants who wanted to “purify” the Elizabethan Church of England further along Reformed lines. Fed by Marian exiles who had sat at Calvin’s feet in Geneva (see the **Geneva Bible**), they grew into a decisive English party by 1600. The Westminster Assembly (1643–1649) produced the *Westminster Confession*, *Shorter Catechism*, and *Larger Catechism* — still the most widely confessed Reformed documents in the English-speaking world.

Colonial New England and American Presbyterianism

Mayflower 1620

Congregationalism

Edwards, Whitefield

The Pilgrims (1620) and the Massachusetts Bay Puritans (1630) were direct Reformed descendants of Calvin. American Congregationalism is Reformed; American Presbyterianism is Reformed; most of the First Great Awakening (Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield) was Reformed. **Much of early American Christianity** is Reformed in its theological backbone.

The Continuing Reformed World

Today the global Reformed family includes about 90 million Christians in the Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational, Reformed Baptist, and many evangelical traditions. Its influence in shaping modern democratic, educational, and economic institutions (Max Weber’s famous “Protestant Ethic” thesis notwithstanding) has been disproportionate and long.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

- **The Reformation was plural.** Christians sometimes speak of “the Reformation” as though it were one movement with one leader. It was not. Zwingli’s Zurich, Luther’s Wittenberg, Bucer’s Strasbourg, Calvin’s Geneva, and later the English and Anabaptist

reformations were distinct, arguing with each other as often as with Rome. The modern Protestant family is the child of all of them, not of any one.

• **God's sovereignty is pastoral, not just intellectual.** Calvin's insistence on God's sovereign election, when read in context, is meant to be comforting — not anxiety-producing. Your salvation does not rest on your own wavering faith; it rests on God's unwavering choice. Read Romans 8:28–39 again. That is the Reformed pastoral note.

• **The whole city is the church's concern.** Calvin's Geneva was not a retreat from the world; it was an attempt to baptize the city. Reformed Christians have historically been the Christians most committed to public schools, hospitals, poor relief, and civic life. A faith that has nothing to say to the public square is not quite the faith Calvin handed down.

• **Theological giants can do terrible things.** The burning of Servetus is in Calvin's ledger. It was wrong. Luther's writings against the Jews were wrong (**Lesson 15 Part 8**). Augustine's support of coercion against the Donatists was wrong. A tradition that cannot name the failings of its fathers is not strong enough to follow them. A tradition that defines itself by those failings throws away its own inheritance.

Greek NT (Eph 1:4–5): καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ προὐ καταβολῆς κόσμου... προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν δια Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν.

Ephesians 1:4–5 (ESV): “Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world... he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Luther and Zwingli agreed on fourteen articles at Marburg and split on one — the Lord's Supper. Is the unity-under-disagreement example a model we could follow today,

or is the 1529 split a cautionary tale?

2. Zwingli preferred the memorial view of Communion; Calvin preferred a spiritual real presence; Luther insisted on bodily real presence. Where does your church fall? Can you articulate why?

3. Calvin's "sudden conversion" story is just a sentence long. Luther gave us thirty pages on his conversion; Augustine gave us a whole book; Calvin gave us a line. What does Calvin's reticence tell us about him — and about how much or little testimony matters for a Christian life?

4. The four offices — pastor, teacher, elder, deacon — shape most Protestant polity still today. Does your congregation have something like all four? Which one is weakest?

5. The doctrine of God's sovereignty has been used to produce tremendous peace and tremendous anxiety. Where does it land on you — and why?

6. Sebastian Castellio's reply to Calvin on Servetus — "To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine; it is to kill a man" — was an early Protestant argument for toleration. How has the Reformed tradition grown on this question since 1553?

CLOSING PRAYER

Sovereign Lord, we thank you for Zwingli at the Grossmünster, for Bullinger who carried his work forward, for Calvin at St. Pierre, for Idelette whose death broke him and whose grief proved him human. Thank you for the *Institutes* and the Geneva Academy and Knox and the Huguenots and the Puritans who gave us our country's spine. Forgive Calvin for Servetus; forgive us for the times we have fallen into the same cruelty under different flags. Teach us Calvin's hunger for your Word, his vision of a

whole-life church, and his steel in your truth, without his worst instincts toward those who disagreed. Make us Reformed in the deepest sense: continually reformed by your Word. Through Jesus Christ our sovereign Lord. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources:

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 edition — John T. McNeill's Library of Christian Classics edition (2 vols., 1960), translated by Ford Lewis Battles, is the standard English version.
- Calvin's biblical commentaries — he wrote on nearly every book of the Bible except Revelation, most of the Psalms, and the minor-prophets wisdom literature. The 22-volume Calvin Translation Society reprint is complete.
- Calvin's sermons — over 2,000 preserved. Selections published throughout.
- Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541) — the constitutional document of the Genevan church.
- Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525); *On the Lord's Supper* (1526).
- The *Second Helvetic Confession* (Bullinger, 1566); the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563); the *Belgic Confession* (1561); the *Canons of Dort* (1619); the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms* (1647–1648).
- Sebastian Castellio, *Concerning Heretics* (1554) — the reply to Calvin on Servetus.

Modern studies:

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 6 treats the broader Reformation context including Calvin.
- Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (2009) — the best modern one-volume biography.
- T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (rev. ed. 2006).
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- Bruce Gordon, *Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet* (2021) — the current standard biography.
- W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (1986).
- Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (2000) — on reading Calvin without modern distortions.
- Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Reformers and Puritans as Spiritual Mentors* (2012) — pastoral retrieval.
- David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (2nd ed. 2010).

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