Section VII: The Protestant Movement

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3. The Reformed Formulation

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3. The Reformed Formulation

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Abstract
The Protestant movement on the Continent may be divided into three parts: a conservative expression in Lutheranism, a diverse radical expression typified by Anabaptism, and a medial expression in the Reformed churches. The latter arose from two separate representations of the Protestant spirit, both in Switzerland: the Zwinlian in Zurich and, later, the Calvinist in Geneva. [excerpt]

Comments
This is a part of Section VII: The Protestant Movement. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of “introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages.”

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker ’66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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3. The Reformed Formulation

The Protestant movement on the Continent may be divided into three parts: a conservative expression in Lutheranism, a diverse radical expression typified by Anabaptism, and a medial expression in the Reformed churches. The latter arose from two separate representations of the Protestant spirit, both in Switzerland: the Zwinglian in Zurich and, later, the Calvinist in Geneva.

There were marked differences in temperament and ideas between Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Martin Luther. Zwingli had no soul-shaking conversion experience like Luther's and claimed

2 - The Book of Concord contains the General Creeds: Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian; the Augsburg Confession (1530); Melanchthon's Apology for the Augsburg Confession (1530); The Schmalkald Articles (1537); Luther's Small Catechism (1529); Luther's Large Catechism (1529); and The Formula of Concord (1577).
to have learned no principle of religious reform from the Wittenberg professor. On only one occasion did the two reformers ever meet face to face. This was at Marburg in 1529 when, after heated discussion, they reached agreement on all doctrinal items under discussion except the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Zwingli with his humanist interpretation of Scripture contended that the sacrament is a memorial symbol, a public testimony to strengthen the faith of those witnessing it. Luther with his experiential interpretation of Scripture insisted that Christ is really present "in, with, and under" the elements and is truly received by the believer. The failure to agree on this one item was enough to end all immediate hope for a united Protestantism.

Zwingli was born to the chief magistrate of a small Alpine hamlet and the proud sister of a priest. He was educated in schools where humanism had replaced scholasticism, and he developed into a talented musician and classical scholar. He was ordained into the priesthood in 1506, one year before Luther. After serving two small parishes, Zwingli became people's priest at the Great Minster in Zurich (1518), the most important church in the canton of Zurich. He had already begun to attack two general practices which he believed were wrong. One of these was the use by other states of Swiss mercenaries, a practice which he regarded as the sale of Swiss valor. The other was the use of indulgences, then rife in Switzerland as well as in Germany. He could find no warrant in Scripture for such sale of Divine favor. Up to this point Zwingli had been the good humanist. Here was the follower of Erasmus and Pico, the parish priest who, on the appearance of Erasmus' Greek edition of the New Testament in 1516, had memorized all of Paul's epistles in this translation. Here was the preacher who, during his first years in Zurich, expounded the entire gospel of Matthew using the original Greek as his source. Throughout his whole life Zwingli retained something of humanist moralism and condemnation of externals in the church.

Yet Zwingli was emphatically more than a humanist. In time he rejected humanist views about human perfectibility and the freedom of the will. Instead he emphasized God's majestic and sovereign will, and the authority of Scripture as the binding law of life. "You are God's tool," he wrote. "He wills to wear you out by use not by idleness." "Christians are not bound to any works which Christ has not commanded." From the pulpit of the Great Minster, Zwingli soon began proclaiming (1519) a much broader reform program than he had hitherto espoused: rejection of papal authority; reliance on Scripture alone in matters of faith, conduct, and worship; abandonment of clerical celibacy; abolition of Lenten fasts and veneration of images; and the elimination of monasticism. In 1523 the Great Council which governed Zurich broke the ties which bound the city to Rome, and then cooperated with Zwingli in reorganizing the church along the lines he had suggested.

Zwinglianism was accepted by some, but not all, of the Swiss cantons. War broke out between the Protestants and
Catholics in 1531, and Zwingli was killed in battle. Peace was restored on terms which left Switzerland part Reformed, part Catholic, as it is today. For forty-four years as Zwingli's successor at Zurich, the scholarly and sympathetic Henry Bullinger (1504-1575) furnished a haven for Protestant exiles from elsewhere in Europe, and at the same time maintained a warm personal friendship with Calvin. In this way Bullinger provided the bridge between the Reformation in Zurich and that in Geneva.

Zurich and Geneva had much in common, and together provided settings for reform which were quite different from the German states in which Lutheranism developed. Both were hubs of small city-states which mutually treasured their freedom. Zurich preserved the idea of Swiss patriotism and individualism reflected in the legend of William Tell. Geneva, not yet a member of the Swiss confederation, had just thrown off the control of the duchy of Savoy. In both cities there was a somewhat wider base of popular participation in government than was true in Germany, and religious reform involved working with a city council rather than with a prince.

It was Calvinism that furnished the major and more international manifestation of the Reformed movement. Calvinism owes much to Zwingli and Luther, but it is properly named for John Calvin (1509-1564) and clearly shows his organizing and synthesizing genius. Calvin was born and bred a Frenchman; he was a humanist scholar and lawyer. His education and keen intellect gave him a superb mastery of Latin and French, and his legal training added a logical cast to his thought, together with an intense interest in ethical problems.

During his university days in Paris, Calvin was greatly influenced by scholars with Protestant leanings. About 1533 there occurred an event which might be called his conversion and which he later described as "God subduing my heart to docility." He was reticent in saying or writing much about this experience except to indicate that it finally came like a flash of insight out of a lengthy process of thought and discussion. Having associated himself with a group of Parisian Protestants, he came under the suspicion of the government and was forced to flee. This flight, together with his desire to find a scholarly retreat, accounted for his going to Switzerland in 1535. In the following year, a brief visit to Geneva brought him into contact with William Farel (1489-1565), who was then leading the Reformation in that city. Farel persuaded Calvin that it was his duty to remain and help with the great work. Except for a brief exile at Strasbourg (1538-1541), the remainder of Calvin's life is associated with Geneva.

The significance of John Calvin rests not only upon his genius in guiding the Reformation in Geneva and inspiring it elsewhere, but also upon his great work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536). The Institutes are generally regarded as the most important doctrinal summary produced by sixteenth century Protestantism. Systematic and inclusive, it has
been compared with the Summa Theologica of Aquinas. Calvin continued to revise and enlarge his work. It passed through many Latin and French editions before the final one in 1559. Although it grew to five times its original size, Calvin never changed the essential convictions which he expressed in the first edition. That first edition was composed of six chapters: on the law, on faith or the Apostles' Creed, on the Lord's Supper, on the true sacraments, on the false sacraments, and on Christian liberty or the problem of church and state. Later editions simply followed the order of the Apostles' Creed. The fact that Calvin translated each Latin edition into French played an important role both in popularizing his thought and in developing the French vernacular as a literary vehicle.

Throughout the Institutes we find Calvin, the humanist scholar, at work with the Bible. Scripture was for him the law of God, ever his guide, his authority, and his arsenal. Under the aegis of the Divine Word, Calvin developed his views concerning the absolute sovereignty of God, predestination, and election. While it is true that the lawyer turned churchman left a precision in organization and a prescription for conduct that became a significant part of the Reformed tradition, yet it is not fair to say that Calvin concentrated on the Old Testament God of justice at the expense of the New Testament God of grace. In the Institutes he quotes almost twice as often from the New Testament as from the Old; and he was always ready to remind his readers that God would remain far off and hidden, "if the brightness of Christ did not illuminate us."

There are several important logical corollaries to Calvin's basic affirmation about Scripture. First, since man had exercised the free choice given him by his Creator to sin, in the sight of a morally just God all men are worthy of death and damnation. But God, sovereign and inscrutable, yet chose to save some: the elect. Second, if God elected some men to salvation, the conclusion was that He had actually sealed the fate of all, both the saved and the damned, from all eternity. Calvin felt that this "dark doctrine" of double predestination maintained the proper "symmetry and agreement between His mercy and justice." Third, since men can never be absolutely certain whether they belong to the elect or the damned, they must fall back on the Scriptural assertion that a good tree brings forth good fruit. The elect, then, are known -- to the extent that they are known at all -- by their works. This is not to say that works in obedience to God's law can ever gain man's salvation. They are simply the only indication man has of God's great design, and they are never absolute proof of a man's election. This emphasis in Calvin resulted in an even stronger doctrine of vocation than Luther's, and a much more optimistic one as regards the social order. Calvin's stress on "hallowing each man's vocation" opened the possibility of establishing the kingdom of God on earth through the activity of all God's creatures. A fourth corollary applied to the area of politics. Since God alone is sovereign, it is impossible for any human institution, whether spiritual or temporal, to claim absolute power. Calvin
himself was careful to emphasize the Christian's duty to obey lawful government under all circumstances, unless it commands what is contrary to God's law. These views could easily lead to political passivity, but in the minds of Calvinist minorities outside Geneva they often justified resistance to what was considered tyranny.

The source selection which follows is a portion of the Instruction in Faith (1537), a catechetical summary of the main teachings of the Institutes. As in the latter, so here may be noted the logical and systematic procedure characteristic of Calvin. Deductively he shows how each doctrine necessarily follows from the basic affirmation that all men are born in order to know and glorify God. Since this work was intended to instruct the ordinary citizen of Geneva, Calvin was careful to use the clearest language at his command:

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Although Calvin hailed Luther as the one who began the great restoration of Christendom which he and others were furthering, the movements which bore their names exhibited increasing differences from each other. While both were Trinitarian, Calvin stressed God's sovereignty as revealed in Scripture while Luther found God's forgiveness to be the heart of the Scriptures. Though both insisted that man was justified by faith alone, Calvin believed that Christ's redeeming work was for the elect and not for all men, as Luther affirmed. For Calvin, Scripture was the one and only authoritative law of God, equally inspired throughout, and defining clearly what was permissible in church, politics, and conduct. What was not prescribed in Scripture was prohibited, in contrast with Luther's view that whatever in the Christian tradition was not expressly forbidden in Scripture was permissible.

Calvin believed that the true and universal church was invisible because the elect were known only to God. The visible church existed where the gospel was preached and heard, where the sacraments were administered according to the institution of Christ, and where discipline was maintained to sanctify the community. In the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva (1541) Calvin outlined principles for governing the visible church so effectively that their essential features are accepted among the Reformed churches to this day. Christ, he declared, had instituted four classes of officers: pastors, to preach, admonish, and administer the sacraments; teachers, called doctors, to instruct the young in sound doctrine; elders, to counsel with the pastors and promote morality among all members of the congregation; and deacons, to manage congregational funds and minister to the sick and needy. These officers were to be chosen by the congregation. Pastors and elders were to act together in a body known as the consistory, to govern the church and discipline its members. In Geneva the consistory was expected to work closely with the city council. The consistory, for example, might excommunicate an offender for refusing to obey its directions. If there were to be any further penalties, they would be meted out by the council. In this way religious and civil authority were expected to interpenetrate. The church, through its preaching, would inculcate respect in

the whole community for the secular authority, which in its turn would assist the church in carrying out its responsibilities. Calvin regarded the calling of the magistrate as one of the highest of all. For him, the good magistrate was the earnest layman who acted on the basis of the preaching he heard "to maintain the honor of God in accordance with His law."

As noted above, one of the functions of the church, as Calvin saw it, was to maintain discipline to sanctify the community. This was to include not only the elect, but everyone. To this end the consistory undertook "fraternal correction" of those who violated the rules of conduct and, if that failed, the council took over. In a five year period 76 persons were banished from Geneva and 58 were executed for crimes of heresy, adultery, blasphemy, and witchcraft. Lesser but still severe penalties were meted out for such deviations as absence from church, criticism of the pastors, quarrelsomeness, singing obscene songs, dancing, and gambling. The headmaster of a school was banished for questioning the inspiration of the Song of Solomon. An "irreverent and indecent freethinker" who erected anticlerical placards was beheaded. A manufacturer of playing cards was marched through the streets pleading for mercy. A distinguished Genevan family was jailed for dancing at a wedding. The most celebrated punishment, however, was visited on the Spanish humanist, Michael Servetus (1511-1553), who denied the Trinity and attacked the Institutes. His poor judgment in coming to Geneva in 1553 resulted in his apprehension, imprisonment, and extended trial with Calvin as the chief accuser. It ended with his being burned at the stake -- an act frequently cited to illustrate Protestant intolerance in this age.

Geneva, and particularly the academy for higher studies founded there in 1559, which became the University of Geneva, was the great school for international Calvinism. It was here that young Protestant enthusiasts and refugees flocked to experience what the Scottish reformer John Knox (1515-1572) called the "most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the apostles." From their associations with Calvin and the ardently Calvinist faculty of the academy, many drew inspiration to return from Geneva to reform the churches of their homelands.

By the time of Calvin's death (1564), the Reformed movement was pushing ahead on many fronts. There can be no doubt that it was more international than any other manifestation of Protestantism. In Switzerland, the German Rhine valley, and the Netherlands, where it was most influential, the followers of Calvin were called Reformed. In France, where Calvinism had gained considerable ground among the middle class and in the southwestern provinces, its adherents were known as Huguenots. The Calvinists were called Presbyterians in Scotland which, under the leadership of John Knox, embraced the Reformation in 1560. By 1600, there was a strong minority of Calvinists in England, known as the Puritans, and also in Poland, Bohemia, and
Hungary. The Zwinglian movement had by this time been absorbed within the Reformed tradition. Governed effectively by its consistories and higher church assemblies, where dedicated laymen and well-trained clergymen shared in the responsibilities, Calvinism proposed to shape the whole of individual and social life beyond anything that Lutheranism had ventured to do. In some areas Calvinists were in the majority, in most areas they were a growing minority, but everywhere they were the aggressive Protestants of the age.

An analogy is sometimes drawn between developments in Calvinist thought up to the Synod of Dort in Holland (1618-1619) and those in Lutheran thought up to the Book of Concord (1580). As Lutherans had divided into liberals and conservatives and as the struggle between them produced an ever increasing doctrinal rigidity called confessionalism, so the Reformed, especially in the Netherlands, divided between Arminian liberals and ultra-Calvinist conservatives. Each side drew up doctrinal articles on questions such as the following: Did Christ die for the elect alone, as the ultras claimed, or for all mankind, as the Arminians affirmed? Did God predestine all to salvation or reprobation, or did He simply foreknow those who should be saved? Was grace irresistible and the elect eternally secure, or could man resist the Holy Spirit? The Synod of Dort decided in favor of the ultra-Calvinists. So began a century of theological polemics in the Reformed as well as the Lutheran tradition, in which pure doctrine and correct teaching appeared to be the main objectives.