

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION (II)

— THE SWISS & FRENCH MOVEMENTS —

“It has been said that to omit Calvin from the history of Western Civilization ‘is to read history with one eye shut.’”¹

❖ S. M. HOUGHTON

T. M Lindsay has written, “If a reformation be judged by its later consequences rather than by its beginnings, the movement begun in Switzerland was even more important than that which had Wittenberg for its centre.”² That is to say, what first began as a ripple in Wittenberg soon sent waves throughout all Germany. By the time its wake reached Geneva, the Protestant Reformation had become a *bona fide* tidal wave. With growing momentum and building force, this religious movement swelled in size as it swept across the European continent. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the work of God in the Reformation was at high tide. This far-reaching, vast-sweeping movement could be eventually felt in other lands and on other continents. It cannot be explained other than it was a spontaneous act of a sovereign God. Philip Schaff, noted church historian wrote:

The Reformation began simultaneously in Germany and Switzerland, and swept with astonishing rapidity over France, Holland, Scandinavia, Bohemia, Hungary, England and Scotland; since the seventeenth century it has spread by emigration to North America, and by commercial and

¹ S. M. Houghton, *Sketches From Church History* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980, 2001), 106.

² T. M. Lindsay, *The Reformation* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1882, 2006), 59.

missionary enterprises to every Dutch and English colony, and every heathen land.³

THE REFORMATION: WHAT WAS IT?

Never has a movement had such an “across the board” effect upon culture and society as the Reformation. Birthed by the work of Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers, a new wave of education and learning suddenly emerged. A Protestant work ethic revitalized the work force. Schools and universities were raised up. The arts and architecture flourished. Music came of age. The study of medicine advanced. Inventions were many. Poets and authors appeared on the scene. Explorations of new worlds were daring. All of this *followed* in the wake of the Reformation. But at its very heart, this movement was intensely *religious*. *This* is what was driving the Reformation. It was a time of coming back to God. A time of returning to the sacred Scripture. A time of returning to the pursuit of Christ and His holiness. Schaff explains:

The Reformation was at first a purely religious movement, and furnishes a striking illustration of the all-pervading power of religion in history. It started from the question: What must a man do to be saved? How shall a sinner be justified before God, and attain peace of his troubled conscience? The Reformers were supremely concerned for the salvation of the soul, for the glory of Christ and the triumph of His gospel. They thought much more of the future world than of the present, and made all political, national, and literary interests subordinate and subservient to religion.⁴

DEEPER, YET DEEPER INTO THE SCRIPTURE

Behind all this was the real reason for the growing force of the Reformation. It was a season of increasing depth in the preaching and practice of the Scripture. The deeper they plunged into the Word, the deeper was their experience of the grace of God. The Reformation was all about *ad fontes*—“back to the fountain,” or “back to the source.” It was all about going back to the Scripture. No religious movement ever so wholeheartedly plunged itself in God’s Word. Schaff writes:

Every true progress in church history is conditioned by a new and deeper study of the Scriptures....While the Humanists went back to the ancient classics and revived the spirit of Greek and Roman paganism, the Reformers went back to the sacred Scriptures in the original languages and revived the spirit of apostolic Christianity. They were fired by an enthusiasm for the gospel, such as had never been known since the days of Paul. Christ rose from the tomb of human traditions and preached again His words of life and power. The Bible, heretofore a book of priests only, was now translated anew and better than ever into the vernacular tongues

³ Philip Schaff, *History of The Christian Church*, Vol. VII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910), 6.

⁴ Schaff, *History of The Christian Church*, Vol. VII, 15.

of Europe, and made a book of the people. Every Christian man could henceforth go to the fountain-head of inspiration, and sit at the feet of the Divine Teacher, without priestly permission and intervention.⁵

Schaff then made this startling statement:

In a few years Luther's version had more readers among the laity than ever the Latin Vulgate had among priests; and the Protestant Bible societies circulate more Bibles in one year than were copied during the fifteen centuries before the Reformation.⁶

No wonder the Reformation was so provocative and so powerful. It gave itself to the Scripture *completely*. Let us proceed now to consider the spread of the Reformation, especially to Switzerland and France.

SWISS REFORMATION

As the Reformation grew in Germany, it soon spread to the surrounding countries through Luther's writings and influence. In France and Switzerland, the Protestant Reformation became *the* issue of the day. In Switzerland, two key men, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, became the leading figures as they called for an even more well-defined, fully-developed system of theology. Their expounding the truth of Scripture only put the Reformation in more direct conflict with Rome.

ULRICH ZWINGLI

The first noted Swiss reformer was Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), a pastor in Zurich. He led the charge to establish the Reformed truth, and in 1519, he launched his protest attack upon Catholic dogma, especially its teaching on purgatory, invocation of saints, and monasticism. Further, Zwingli also rejected the authority of the pope, the Mass, images, and clerical celibacy, creating great momentum in Zurich. The city council soon voted to become a free Protestant city.

1. Zwingli was born in Wildhaus, St. Gall, Switzerland and studied at Berne and the University of Basel, where he came under the influence of the Reformation truths.
2. Zwingli became a priest in the Catholic church, serving in Glarus and Einsiedeln (1506-1516).
3. After diligently studying Erasmus's Greek New Testament and a long wrestling with his sin, Zwingli experienced the saving power of God's grace (1516).

⁵ Ibid, 17.

⁶ Ibid, 17.

4. Zwingli became the pastor of the Great Minister in Zurich (1521). He served as shepherd of this flock for the next decade of his life.
5. This Swiss Reformer called for an even more radical break with Rome than did Luther, influencing the city of Zurich to legalize the Reformation (1523).
6. Zwingli's core truth, as with the other Reformers, was *sola Scriptura*—by Scripture alone. In a sermon *Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, he declared:

No matter who a man may be, if he teaches in accordance with his own thought and mind his teaching is false. But if he teaches you in accordance with the Word of God, it is not he that teaches you, but God who teaches him....When I was younger, I gave myself overmuch to human teaching....But eventually I came to the point where, led by the Word and Spirit of God, I saw the need to set aside all these things and to learn the doctrine of God direct from His own Word.⁷

7. Zwingli was an outstanding expositor and was known for his verse-by-verse preaching through the entire book of Matthew.
8. Zwingli met Luther at the Marburg Conference, but lost his support over the issue of the presence of Christ in the communion, and the two parted ways (1529). To Zwingli, the Lord's Supper was primarily a remembrance of the death of Christ.
9. He was strongly predestinarian in his understanding of Scripture, although he was not as outspoken as Luther and Calvin.
10. A zealous Swiss patriot, he died in battle with the Catholic church (1531).

JOHN CALVIN

The greatest teacher and theologian of the Reformation was John Calvin (1509-1564), an extraordinary expositor and exegete of Scripture of unparalleled ability. Through his biblical preaching, teaching, and writing, Calvin became a spiritual *tour de force* in Geneva, Switzerland. His Genevan pulpit became the theological nerve center of the Reformation. The genius of his ministry was his masterful exposition of Scripture. Martin Luther was flamboyant, the proverbial "bull in a china shop," speaking with the thunder of a prophetic tone. But Calvin was more shy and reserved, and became "the brains" of the movement. The Genevan Reformer would write:

⁷ Ulrich Zwingli, "Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God," in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 24, Zwingli and Bullinger, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 90-91.

Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view....In short, while my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God led me about through different turnings and changes, that He never permitted me to rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, He brought me forth to public notice.⁸

1. Calvin was born in Noyou, France, twenty-six years after Luther. Thus, he was very much a second-generation Reformer. Calvin was only eight when Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses*.
2. Calvin was well-educated, studying at the Universities of Paris (M.A., 1528), Orleans, and Bourges (Law degree, 1532).
3. In the spread of Reformation truths to Paris, Calvin was converted to Christ. He joined the Protestant movement, leaving Catholicism (1533).

Since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.⁹

4. Being identified with the Protestants, young Calvin was forced to flee France for his life. It was believed that he helped write the inauguration speech for the new rector of the University of Paris, Nicholas Cop, a message filled with Reformation truths. Calvin spent the next year traveling around France under an assumed name, eventually going to Basel, Switzerland (1534).
5. There, Calvin studied in solitude and at the astonishing young age of 26 completed the first edition of his greatest work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion* (completed, August, 1535; published March, 1536). It was

⁸ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 169.

⁹ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2001), 60. [Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 59.]

immediately hailed as the finest systematic theology by a Protestant Reformer, the *manifesto* of the Reformation—Calvin’s *magnum opus*. His dedication began:

For the Most Mighty and Illustrious Monarch, Francis, Most Christian King of the French, His Sovereign, John Calvin Craves Peace and Salvation in Christ.

From this you may learn the nature of the doctrine against which those madmen burn with rage who today disturb your realm with fire and sword. And indeed I shall not fear to confess that here is contained almost the sum of that very doctrine which they shout must be punished by prison, exile, proscription, and fire, and be exterminated on land and sea.¹⁰

6. In returning from Italy, Calvin was unexpectedly, yet providentially rerouted to Geneva for one night where he was encountered by William Farel (1489-1565). Farel had introduced the Protestant movement there, and both urged and then threatened him to stay and help the cause of the Reformation. “The curse of God be upon you,” Farel said to Calvin, “if you do not stay.” Calvin was shaken, believing it to be the voice of God to him, and he agreed to stay and become the pastor of the church at Geneva (1536). Years later, he later wrote:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and find that the gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.¹¹

7. After two rocky years as pastor in Geneva (1536-1538), Calvin was forced out of his pulpit and withdrew to Strasbourg, where he pastored a congregation of French Protestant refugees (1538-1541) and wrote his first commentary on the book of Romans. There he met Idelette de Bure, a widow, a member of his church, whom he married.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 9.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2001), 178. [Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 61.]

I resolved to live in a private station, free from the burden and cares of my public charge, when that most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer, employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse before, drew me back to a new station. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he had set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching. And although I always continued....studiously avoiding celebrity, yet I was carried, I know not how as it were by force to the imperial assemblies, where willing or unwilling, I was under the necessity of appearing before the eyes of many.¹²

8. The Reformed forces soon gained control in Geneva and invited Calvin to return to his former pastorate. After declining them several times, preferring the peace of Strasberg, he reluctantly returned three years later—resuming his pulpit exposition at the next verse! There Calvin remained there the rest of his life (1541-1559).

If you desire to have me for your pastor, correct the disorder of your lives. If you have with sincerity recalled me from my exile, banish the crimes and debaucheries which prevail among you....I consider the principal enemies of the gospel to be, not the pontiff of Rome, nor heretics, nor seducers, nor tyrants but bad Christians....Of what use is a dead faith without good works? Of what importance is even truth itself, where a wicked life belies it and actions make words blush? Either command me to abandon a second time your town and let me go and soften the bitterness of my afflictions in a new exile, or let the severity of the laws reign in the church. Re-establish there pure discipline.¹³

9. As Calvin reestablished himself in Geneva, this newly Reformed city became a haven for countless persecuted Protestants from France, Scotland, etc. Especially was this true during the terrible reign of Bloody Mary in Scotland and England (1553-58), who set about to stamp out the Reformation. Under Calvin's preaching, these brave exiles would carry the Word back to their homeland, often at great cost. Among them was John Knox, Scotland's greatest Reformer. Knox would call Calvin's Geneva:

The most perfect school of Christ that ever was in this earth since the days of the apostles.¹⁴

¹² Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 180.

¹³ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 184. [Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 366.]

¹⁴ Lindberg, *Sourcebook*, 196.

10. His *Institutes* underwent five revisions over the years and became the theological standard of the Reformation (1559). This major work underscored the supremacy and glory of God in all of Christian theology. This God-centeredness by Calvin prompted the luminous Benjamin B. Warfield to write years later:

Here we have the secret of Calvin's greatness and the source of his strength unveiled to us. No one ever had a profounder sense of God than he.¹⁵

11. With the need to train young ministers, as well as equip lay leadership, Calvin established the Genevan Academy, with Theodore Beza the first rector (1559).

12. Some of the finest biblical scholars were exiles in Geneva produced a new English Bible based on the original languages. They produced a word-for-word accurate, English translation combined with study notes from Calvin's teaching to form the *Geneva Bible* (1560). This version was translated at Geneva by a committee of Protestant exiles including William Whittingham and John Knox.

- The Geneva Bible was the Bible of William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Bunyan, the Puritans, and the Pilgrims who sailed to America (1620).
- The Geneva was the *first* Bible that was a study Bible, providing readers with copious notes, cross-references, and biblical commentary.
- It was the *first* Bible to be printed in a portable and affordable edition.
- It was the *first* Bible to assign chapter and verse numbers, helping find the location of passages, and memorization and recitation.
- It was the Calvinist notes of the Geneva Bible that infuriated King James I at Hampton Court (1604), prompting him to authorize a group of scholars to produce the King James Version.
- These study notes provided a systematic worldview centered on the sovereignty of God over all His creation.

13. Calvin preached long series through books in the Bible. He preached twice on Sunday and every night of the week every other week, plus lectures.

¹⁵ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1932, 2000), 24.

His sermons were masterpieces of biblical exposition, preaching consecutively through entire books of the Bible. Some of these are:

- 1 & 2 Thessalonians (46 sermons)
- 1 & 2 Corinthians (186 sermons)
- 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus (86 sermons)
- Galatians (43 sermons)
- Ephesians (48 sermons)
- Micah (28 sermons)
- Job (159 sermons)
- Deuteronomy (200 sermons)
- Isaiah (353 sermons)
- Genesis (123 sermons)

14. Calvin lectured on and wrote an exegetical commentary series that covered three fourths of the *entire* Bible—one of the largest Bible commentaries ever written by a single man, 45 large volumes of over 400 pages each.
15. Calvin's theology, as applied to Geneva, gave rise to many remarkable advances in society. Among these are a democratic republic, the free enterprise system, the Protestant work ethic, and public schooling.
16. Calvin died on May 27, 1564 at the age of 55 in the arms of his successor, Theodore Beza. As per his request, he was buried in an unmarked grave, a reflection of his true humility in the service of God.
17. Perhaps no one in history has been so vilified by so many as John Calvin. But the fact remains; this Genevan Reformer was "the Theologian" of the Reformation, a man of unquestionable piety before God. His personal logo was a hand offering its heart upward to God. This personified Calvin, living in heart-devotion to God. He towers over the centuries as the greatest biblical expositor and commentator of the church. One of his biographers writes:

Whether friend, disciple, or foe, none could fail to recognize Calvin's transcendent ability. He might be slandered, the worst of motives might be imputed to him by traducers, but none who knew him could doubt his devotion to his cause. With all his frequent arrogance towards men, Calvin's spirit was humble towards God. To do and to teach His will was undoubtedly his prime intention....He submitted to his long bodily enfeeblement as from the wise hand of God. In the crises of his life, his conversion, his first settlement in Geneva, and his return to the difficult ministry in that turbulent city, he sacrificed ease, scholarly honours, and

personal inclination to what he deemed the imperative voice of God. He put God first. In the strength of that conviction that God had chosen his task, he fought His battles and did His work.¹⁶

THE GENIUS OF THE REFORMATION

The genius of the Reformation lay in this very simple truth, that it marked a return to God's Word. The chief cornerstone of this massive edifice was the sturdy, immovable rock of *sola Scriptura*. The Reformers returned to the Word, not merely in half hearted routine, but with a living, dynamic reality. They were men of the Book, and in so being, they rocked their world.

Putting his finger on the pulse of the Reformation, and feeling its heartbeat, James Montgomery Boice wrote concerning John Calvin:

Calvin had no weapon but the Bible. From the very first, his emphasis had been on Bible teaching. Calvin preached from the Bible every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to be transformed. As the people of Geneva acquired knowledge of God's Word and were changed by it, the city became, as John Knox called it later, a New Jerusalem from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, England, and the New World.¹⁷

Boice is correct in his assessment of the Reformation in Geneva. He writes that it was the "daily exposure to Calvin's sound exposition of the Bible" that "transformed the heart and mind of Geneva."¹⁸ This Swiss city became a place where the glory of God was displayed in the lives of His people. And it was a place from which an eternal influence was exerted and felt.

May we in this day commit ourselves to these same priorities once again. May we give ourselves to the pursuit, the proclamation, and the practice of the Scripture. May it reign in our churches yet again. May it usher in a new Reformation.

Soli Deo Gloria.

¹⁶ Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism 1509-1564* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 196.

¹⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 83-84.

¹⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 42.