

Reformation Roots



Three Reformers who changed history: Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin.

There were harbingers of the Reformation before the 15th century. In England, John Wyclif translated the Bible from Latin into English in 1382 so that people could read the Word of God in their own language. About a century later, the Czech priest Jan Hus discovered Wyclif's ideas about church reform when students returning from Oxford brought his books to the University of Prague. Hus began to advocate moderate reform. He argued that laypeople should be allowed to read the Bible and opposed the church's sale of "indulgences"—a widely-abused practice that allowed Christians to buy salvation by giving money and property to the church. Hus believed that Christ, not the Pope, was the head of the church; the New Testament, not the church's teaching authority, was the final authority; the Christian life was to be lived in poverty, not in luxury. Accused of heresy, he was burned by Roman Catholic bishops in 1415 (an act for which Pope John Paul II publicly apologized in Prague in 1999).

Martin Luther's protest

In 1517, Martin Luther—a Roman Catholic monk and teacher in the Saxon town of Wittenberg—nailed to the door of the university church "95 Theses" of protest against the sale of indulgences and other corrupt practices in the church. In the years that followed, Luther's teaching, preaching, and writing spread Lutheran reform throughout northern Europe. At first merely a movement to reform the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans soon separated from Rome.

Almost simultaneously, Reformation winds blew to France and Switzerland. In Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and in Geneva, John Calvin (1509-64), both Roman Catholic priests, became the outstanding leaders of the Reformation outside Germany. Their churches that followed them were simply called "Reformed." Their movement spread to several countries—including England. English Congregationalism was one of spiritual descendents of the Swiss Reformation, and Reformed churches were also planted in the Netherlands, France, Germany, Hungary and Romania.

The Reformed churches were more radical in their departure from Roman Catholic teaching and practice. Luther retained some of the ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Mass, including vestments and Gregorian chant, while at the same time abolishing devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary and invocations of the saints. His Reformation was more conservative; the Swiss Reformers were determined to go farther. They outlawed ceremonies, destroyed images of the saints and abolished the office of bishop. At the same time, Reformed and Lutheran Christians began to argue about the Lord's Supper—the sacrament of Holy Communion. Luther's doctrine was more Catholic: he believed the body and blood of Christ were present "in, with, and under" the symbols of bread and wine. Like Luther, Calvin emphasized the real presence of Christ—but Christ, he believed, was present in the community as it assembled to celebrate the Lord's Supper, not localized in the bread and wine. Nevertheless, Calvin believed, the sacraments were "signs and seals" of the promises of Christ: in the eating of bread and the drinking of wine in Holy Communion, Christ really gave himself to the community. Zwingli, on the other hand, taught that there was no real presence in Holy Communion, either in the bread and wine nor in the celebration of the sacrament: the Lord's Supper was simply the collective remembering of Christ by the community.

[The division between Lutheran and Reformed churches lasted more than four centuries. But late in the 20th century, Lutheran and Reformed churches throughout the world reached a common understanding of the Lord's Supper—agreeing after years of study that the traditional Reformed and Lutheran doctrines of the eucharist both affirmed the presence of Christ in the sacrament. The largest Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe and the United States, including the United Church of Christ, have been in a relationship full communion since the 1990s.]

Luther and Zwingli had other differences besides their interpretations of the elements of Communion. Zwingli was more of a humanist and Luther considered his political activism dangerously radical and theologically unsound.

John Calvin in Geneva

French refugee John Calvin arrived in 1536 in the Swiss city of Geneva—a crossroads for exiles and expatriates. He rapidly became more influential than Zwingli, second only to Luther. He wrote a popular, systematic presentation of Christian doctrine and life, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Most important of Calvin's Institutes was obedience to God's will as defined in the scriptures. Salvation, he wrote, came by faith in God's grace, mediated through word and sacrament by the power of the Holy Spirit. Good works were consequences of union with Christ in faith, not the means of salvation. Calvin considered the law an indispensable guide and spur to the Christian life; prayer provided nourishment for faith. He argued that faith was a divine gift resulting from God's unconditional decree of election.

Further, Christian life was maintained by the institutions of the church, by the sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism, and by discipline. Calvin followed the biblical model in providing pastoral care and church discipline through pastors, teachers, elders and deacons.

The Reformed faith eventually reached the German Palatinate around Heidelberg. Elector Frederick III (1515-76) was forced to mediate between his own warring Zwinglian and Lutheran chaplains; he dismissed them both. Sympathetic to Calvinism, Frederick entrusted the writing of a new confession to two young proteges of Calvin and Melancthon, Casper Olevianus (1536-87) and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83). The result was the remarkable Heidelberg Catechism, adopted in 1563, that unified the German Reformed Church and became a treasured resource for instructing the young, for preaching, and for theological teaching.

Social unrest

The Reformation was a time of theological unrest, but also a time of war and social revolution. From 1618 to 1648, the Thirty Years War ravaged the continent. Before the fighting ceased, most of Germany, and especially the Palatinate where the Reformed Church had been influential, was reduced to a wilderness. Churches were closed, many pastors and people starved or were massacred. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 divided the spoils. The Roman, Lutheran and Reformed churches were allowed to reclaim territories that had been theirs in 1624. Calvinist Reformed churches, for a time unrecognized, were honored along with Lutheran churches.

Protestantism in Germany had lost all its eastern territory. When two thirds of Hungary was regained for Catholicism, Hungarian Reformed Christians suffered intolerance. Their descendants emigrated to America and in 1890 organized in Cleveland the first Hungarian Reformed Church. As the Magyar Synod, Hungarian churches united with the Reformed Church in the United States in 1921. Forty Hungarian congregations continue in the United Church of Christ as the Calvin Synod.

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