The Reformation

UNIT 2

Magisterial Protestantism: Main Leaders and Foundational Principles

1. Martin Luther and Justification by Faith Alone

Magisterial Reformation

The sixteenth century Reformation began on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and college professor, nailed the so-called 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. At that time, Luther could hardly foresee that his actions would precipitate irreconcilable divisions in the Western church that would long outlive him.

The sixteenth century Reformation is a very large subject, for many Catholics an infamous one. It is a period in church history that brought about fragmentation in the church, which seems endlessly to have multiplied to this day. The Reformation also undermined the church’s authority vis-à-vis the state and even vis-à-vis individual believers. In fact, church historians considered the transformation of the sixteenth century to be so radical that the entire time period was named after it. Indeed, the Reformation differed from all the other church reforms that came before and that would come after, and it changed the church forever. As a subject of inquiry, the sixteenth century Reformation can be difficult to get a handle on, spawning questions such as the
Was the Reformation an attempt at a church reform that got out of hand? What were the reformers even trying to accomplish? And were their efforts successful?

One way to understand the changes that took place in the course of the sixteenth century is to see them in terms of a transition from what church historians call “Church Christianity” to “Biblical Christianity.” The distinction is simplified for emphasis, of course, but the main difference between Church Christianity and Biblical Christianity has to do with where authority is located in the church. It can be located either in the clerical hierarchy (through apostolic succession) that controls the sacraments (and through them most of the key ways in which the laity actually practice their religion) or in the Bible. Of course, this division is not as neat as it might seem, because the Bible does not interpret itself but rather needs skilled interpreters, who tend to be a part of the clerical hierarchy and who then assume authority for themselves. But even so, this distinction allows us to observe the major shifts and disruptions in the church that took place in the sixteenth century even as we follow some of the individual agents and events in greater detail.

In this unit, we shall consider the works of three different reformers, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli. Each of them proved to be quite influential in their ideas of how to reform the church. In fact, together they founded what we now call Magisterial Protestantism. Magisterial is related to the word “magistrate,” which means “officer of the state.” Magisterial Protestantism then refers to one part of the Protestant movement, the part that cooperated with what we might call the “establishment,” or secular authorities. Proponents of Magisterial Protestantism argued that there should be a connection between church and state (much like medieval popes and theorists of the church), that the church should be able to employ secular authorities to enforce matters of
morality, that secular authorities had a right to hold authority in the church and ought to legislate accordingly.

**Martin Luther**

Most narrative histories of the Reformation begin with Martin Luther. He was born in 1483 in Eisleben in Saxony (present day Germany), which was then a part of the Holy Roman Empire. His family was of a solid peasant stock with ambitions for upward social mobility. As the oldest son, Martin was selected to get an education and enrolled in a Latin school belonging to the quasi-monastic group, the Brothers of the Common life, and received an education (much like Erasmus and à Kempis) in the liberal arts. At the age of 19, Luther enrolled at a university in Erfurt, receiving a master’s degree in liberal arts in 1505.

Following his father’s wishes, Luther subsequently entered law school but dropped out almost immediately, after a mystical experience that he had while riding back to university one night in July 1505 during a thunderstorm. A thunderbolt struck near where Luther was passing on his horse. He was so afraid of death that he vowed “Saint Anna, help! I will become a monk.” He emerged from the storm unscathed and saw the event as binding for his future life. Selling his books, he said goodbye to his friends and family and less than two weeks later entered an Observant Augustinians monastery in Erfurt. The Observant Augustinians were not the self-indulgent, greedy and luxurious monks of Erasmus’s satire, but a very strict order known for their austerity and devotion. There Luther embarked on a life of strict asceticism, prayer and frequent confession of sins. He was ordained two years later and spent the next ten years as a monk while serving as a confessor to laity in Erfurt.
Luther’s experience as a confessor, someone who was intimately familiar with human frailties, augmented his university training and belief that all phenomena should be tested by reason and experience. His pastoral experience helped him see the limitations of reason, and Luther became convinced that although reason can (and should) be used to critique human institutions, it cannot lead us to God. By all accounts, Luther was a reflective, scrutinizing kind of person, keenly aware of his spiritual progress or lack thereof. It was perhaps his keen self-awareness that made him obsessed with his own sinfulness, knowing that he could never be “perfect” and convinced that penance could never be enough to assuage the wrath of a punishing God. This sense would later become key to his theological insight about justification.

But these thoughts and personal reflections would be fully fleshed out only later. Meanwhile, Luther went back to university, this time in Wittenberg, and received a bachelor’s degree in Biblical studies, and another bachelor’s degree in the Sentences of Peter Lombard (which was, in effect, a medieval textbook of theology). His studies culminated in 1512, when he was awarded a doctorate in theology and accepted a position as a professor of philosophy in Wittenberg, where he then lectured extensively on the Scriptures.

Luther was a highly regarded academic. In retrospect, many of the themes that would later become prominent in Luther’s writings were already in evidence in his lectures. He also rose in the hierarchy of the Augustinian order, becoming the second ranking Augustinian in Saxony, responsible for overseeing ten monasteries and fellow Augustinians at two universities. His reform efforts, when they would come, were the reform efforts of a well-established and much respected insider.
Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses

At first, Luther simply wanted to engage his fellow clergy to a debate about errant practices that he saw in the church. I have already alluded to Luther’s act of nailing his 95 theses (originally entitled “Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences”) on the church door in Wittenberg. It was an invitation to a disputation on the subject of contemporary practice of indulgences addressed to his bishop. Luther’s objections grew out of what happened earlier that year. Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and a papal commissioner, arrived in Germany to supervise the collection of indulgences to raise money to rebuild St. Peter’s church in Rome. Tetzel was acting in accord with the instructions of Luther’s bishop, Albrecht of Mainz, but Luther much resented this effort, and was becoming progressively more afraid that the simple faithful were being mislead by this campaign into believing that donations of money could replace good works.

Luther wrote up his objections, in Latin, which was still the preferred language of academic discourse, calling on the archbishop to halt the collections. By January of the following year, Luther’s objections were – without his knowledge – translated into German and spread far and wide thanks to the speed and relative cheapness of the printing press. The resulting pamphlets touched a nerve. Before he knew it, Luther emerged as a leading voice in the protests against indulgences and began gaining a popular following, and not only in Germany but also in France, Italy and England. Students and other interested people descended on Wittenberg, wishing to talk to Luther and obtain more of his writings. From what started as a strictly academic and ecclesiastical disagreement, Luther became a celebrity with a wide following among the laity.
Luther opened his “Theses” by quoting Jesus saying “repent” (Matthew 4:17) and goes on to explain that this command “cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.” (#2 of the Ninety-Five Theses) What follows is an explanation of Luther’s view of indulgences and their place in the life of a Christian. Luther argues that indulgences cannot be compared with works of mercy and insists that it is a far better deed to help the poor than buying indulgences.

When he wrote the 95 theses, Luther believed that the church would engage him, a high ranking monk and a university professor, in an open debate. His motivation was, as far as we know, to correct the prevailing practice of indulgences, reminding his fellow churchmen that indulgences were originally conceived as a part of the sacrament of penance, removing the temporal or earthly punishment.

The “Theses” were thus meant as an invitation to a discussion about the church’s theory and practice of indulgences. Luther feared that the practice of selling indulgences obscured the laity’s understanding of forgiveness, which is why many of the theses address misconceptions that Luther feared the laity had widely held about indulgences and their importance to Christian life. At the heart was Luther’s concern that the church’s practice of indulgences had obscured the truth of the gospel message, namely Jesus’s gracious and salvific action for us on the cross. He feared that the laity held onto an incorrect understanding of indulgences, and worse that they were kept deliberately in the dark by those in charge. But there was more than the practice of indulgences at stake: what Luther wished was that every Christian would have the right understanding of sin.
and forgiveness. He was direct in his remarks, but the Theses lacked any of the invective and insulting speech that peppered many of his later writings.

Later that year, at the Diet of Augsburg, Luther was asked to recant his views, but refused to do so saying that he would not recant unless the churchmen demonstrated to him, from the Scriptures, that his views were indeed erroneous. This insistence led to another, more wide-reaching, debate about whether papal authority was sufficient to pronounce on what was the correct interpretation of the Scriptures. Realizing that he could not win a direct confrontation about the nature of papal authority, Luther fled Augsburg to avoid being captured and brought before an ecclesiastical court.

His departure only postponed the final reckoning between the church and Luther. Their conflict came to a head in the following year, at a public disputation in Leipzig that took place in June 1519. The ecclesiastical authorities saw Luther as a threat and decided to silence him through sheer force. The churchmen showed little willingness to see where Luther was coming from, there was little openness to compromise. The more Luther protested, the more determined they were to insist that they were absolutely in the right. As is often the case in escalating crises, both parties hardened their stance as time wore on. When pushed, Luther followed the implications of his thoughts to their logical conclusion and began claiming that neither ecumenical councils nor the popes had been granted the authority to interpret the Scripture. In other words, he insisted that the Bible had its own authority and that it trumped even the authority of the pope or a council. Pushed into a corner, Luther insisted that the Bible alone was authoritative for Christian faith and life.

The crisis in Germany was closely watched by the pope from Rome. With Luther continuing to protest and with his writings gaining popularity, Leo X issued an “exsurge
domine” (“arise, o Lord”) granting Luther sixty days in which to recant his views or be excommunicated. This was in June of 1520. Luther responded by writing three treatises, hoping to address the widest possible audience of believers and persuade them that he was right. These would be the three treatises that caused him later to be excommunicated from the church.

Luther’s Address “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation”

In August of 1520, Luther published an address “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” attacking the pervasive corruption in the church and the culture of abuse of authority. Convinced that churchmen resisted any attempts to reform the church from among their rank, Luther appealed to secular leaders to lean on the church in any way possible (financial stipulations might have been the most persuasive) in order to persuade it to reform itself. This was a call on the nobility to go over the heads of ecclesiastical authorities, including the pope, and make reform happen. Luther’s desperation at the state of the church and his frustrations with those who could reform it but choose not to are palpable here.

The treatise was written in the German vernacular and described a number of abuses of power that Luther saw rampant in the church. It came as a series of refutations of accepted truths, which Luther thought were actually not true: that secular authority has no jurisdiction over the church, that only the pope is able to explain the Scriptures, and that nobody but the pope himself can call a general council.

Luther’s refutation of the second statement that “no one may interpret the Scriptures but the pope” was the first place where he developed the concept of priesthood
of all believers that would become one of his signature doctrines. His reasoning is quoted in full at the following website.

Please click to read – “…Nobility of the German Nation” – Scroll to “(b) The Second Wall”; Fordham website

Luther’s “Babylonian Captivity of the Church”

Two months later, in October of 1520, Luther published another treatise, entitled “Babylonian captivity of the church,” this time in Latin. The title is a deliberate play on the work by Petrarch (discussed in detail in the previous course), criticizing the church’s corrupt doctrine and ritual. The Bible is now Luther’s ideological platform, and his critique proceeds accordingly: he compares the church’s ritual practice with what he sees described in the Bible, and is shocked, noting many differences, accretions, and embellishments in the contemporary practice. In order to bring the sacramental practice in concord with the Bible, he argues that the number of sacraments should be reduced from seven to three – baptism, communion and penance are the only sacraments for which he finds evidence in the Scriptures. These are also the three sacraments that are acknowledged by Protestant churches in the present day. The Anglican church (and therefore also the Episcopal church of America), always positioning itself somewhere between the Catholic and the Protestant churches, recognizes seven sacraments, but distinguishes between three “major” ones and four “minor” ones.

Luther’s critique was savage in nature and tone, but it was the methodology behind his critique that proved most subversive in the long run. Many a reformer before him had claimed that the church was corrupt and had lost its way, but Luther’s comparison – between what he saw practiced in the church and what he read about in the
Scriptures – proved incendiary. The effect was exaggerated by the fact that the printing press made it possible for the laity to acquire copies of the New Testament relatively cheaply, which meant that growing numbers of laymen were reading it (or having it read to them) and drawing their own conclusions.

The Three Core Doctrines of Luther’s Theology

The third of the treatises, whose writing was prompted by the pope’s threat of excommunication, was entitled the “Freedom of a Christian,” and set out Luther’s theology of justification. A Christian, Luther insisted, was saved by faith alone. In this schema, salvation was viewed as a free and unmerited gift by God, which we, humans, can do absolutely nothing to earn on our own.

It was in this treatise that Luther developed his concept of justification by faith, which became one the three core doctrines of the Reformation and which will come up repeatedly during this course. Luther’s preoccupation with the question of sin went back to his days as the confessor to the laity. How, he asked, can we ever hope to achieve righteousness in the eyes of a wrathful, punishing God? The question was resolved for Luther when he experienced his own spiritual breakthrough, understanding in his heart that righteousness in God’s eyes was not something any believer could earn or amass through his or her works, but it was something that was given freely by God.

This means, Luther reasoned, that God’s rigorous standards were set out for us not so that we could master and fulfill them (which is impossible anyway), but to drive us to a realization that we cannot actually hope to fulfill them through our own efforts and from that realization to propel us into the arms of God. Luther thought that this core dynamic had been clearly set out in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letter to the
Romans, but was subsequently obscured by the church’s emphasis on external rites and good works. For that reason, Luther thought that medieval Christianity was an unhealthy detour that needed to be re-evaluated and, quite literally, re-formed in accordance with the gospel message.

The other two core doctrines had to do with the Scriptures and their importance as a standard of faith. Luther taught that the Bible was the final authority, trumping all man-made offices, laws and observances. He also believed in the priesthood of all believers meaning that clerics were not needed to serve as mediators of God’s grace to the laity. Their role was to proclaim the gospel and offer spiritual guidance, but laypeople could approach God on their own. Importantly, Luther did not advocate the subjective right of every believer to interpret the Bible for himself or herself and would have been horrified by the suggestion.

Luther did not seek to start his own church but wished to reform the one that already existed, hoping to call it back to its pure origins. However, the church did not accept his mission and pope Leo X excommunicated him in January 1521. Luther had one more chance to recant, four months later at the imperial assembly at Worms in Germany, but again refused to recant unless he could be shown that what his opponents were suggesting was based in the Scriptures. He famously stated:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

But the councilmen responded that they would not and could not use the Bible in the capacity that Luther requested, explaining that heretics in the past had used to Bible in
support of various nefarious doctrines. The Edict of Worms issued on May 25, 1521 by emperor Charles V, spelled out the assembly’s verdict on Luther with those words:

For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favor the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.

Luther was condemned as a heretic and all the faithful were asked to sever all contact with him. But before he could be placed before a tribunal and, most likely executed, Luther fled Worms. On his return to Wittenberg, he was abducted and taken to safety at a castle belonging to Frederick III of Saxony, a powerful prince who would prove to be his most powerful patron. Under the prince’s protection, Luther continued his work, writing more treatises, sermons, doctrinal explanations and scriptural commentaries whose implications would tear the fabric of Christianity.

Whatever our opinions about Martin Luther, it is no exaggeration to say that without Frederick, his political defender, Luther would have been a dead man, like other medieval heretics before him, unable to take his ideas to their logical conclusions, the exploration of which is the subject of the remainder of this course.

2. John Calvin and the Doctrine of Predestination

John Calvin

John Calvin (1509-1564) was a French-born reformer, whose ideas on what constituted necessary reform of the church became very influential in the sixteenth-century city of Geneva and from there spread across Europe. Often seen as colleagues and collaborators, Calvin and Luther were in agreement on a number of questions, but
disagreed on others with important consequences for the cause of reform. Their disagreements proved corrosive and although they tried to create a united front, Calvin’s ideas eventually gave rise to a different branch within the reform movement, which, after his death, came to be named after him, Calvinism, and gave rise to the denominations in the so-called Reformed Tradition.

Like many of the sixteenth century reformers, Calvin was educated at leading European institutions of higher learning. He first studied in Paris, where he learned Latin and began to study philosophy. However, a few years later, in 1525 or 1526, his father had him withdraw from studying philosophy and ordered him to enroll at a school of law in Orléans. Calvin’s contemporary biographers insisted that his father’s motivation was monetary, convinced (not unreasonably) that his son would be able to earn a lot more money as a lawyer than as a priest. A few years later, in 1529, Calvin transferred to the university of Bourges, which was then one of the centers of Christian humanism. He kept taking courses in law, but also explored humanistic ideals, which appealed to him. Becoming convinced about the need to read the Scriptures in its original language, he learned koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, as Erasmus did before him. Within a few years, in 1532, Calvin received his law degree and began writing, his first book being a commentary on Seneca’s work De Clementia (On clemency).

However, he soon ceased his law practice. In 1535, Calvin was forced to leave France on account of his pro-reform, humanist sentiments. The reasons for his exile are complicated and need not be explained here. Suffice it to say that Calvin was punished for his close friendship and association with Nicolas Cop, an outspoken supporter of church reform in France, who also happened to be the rector of Collège Royal. His inaugural address in 1533, in which he supported fundamental reforms in the church,
provoked a strong reaction in many of the faculty. Some even described Cop’s speech as heretical, and on that account it soon became necessary for him not only to resign his post but also to leave France.

This incident was a part of a larger struggle across France between supporters of reform, some of whom spoke up publicly against the status quo in the church. Others used more direct, and more provocative, means to show their support for reform and renewal in the church. For example, in October 1534, some pro-reform conspirators distributed placards with anti-church messages across the city of Paris and in four other important cities in France. The placards were entitled, “Genuine articles on the horrific, great and unbearable abuses of the papal mass, invented directly contrary to the Holy Supper of our Lord, sole mediator and sole savior Jesus Christ,” which referred to the doctrine of transubstantiation. The polemic against the church’s understanding of the mass was seen as a major insult against all Christians in the realm, including the king, and swift actions were taken silence the perpetrators. The former conciliatory policies towards Protestants were replaced with the policy of persecution and imprisonment. And so John Calvin and his colleagues had to flee France, with many finding refuse in the French-speaking, pro-reform cities in the Swiss Confederation. After several detours, Calvin ended up in Geneva, one of the Confederation’s major cities.

Unlike many of the reformers, Calvin was never ordained a priest or deacon, but this did not stop him from writing theology. He wrote a number of influential books, commentaries on most books of the Bible, theological treatises and other confessional documents. His most important book is the Institutes of the Christian Religion, in which he delineated his beliefs about the nature of God, of man, and of this world. It was, in a way, his Summa, the summary of beliefs and theological reasoning. He updated and
expanded the book several times during his life: the first edition appeared in 1536 and the last in 1556 just a few years before his death and it nearly tripled in size in the course of those twenty years. It would become a foundational document for the Reformed Tradition within Protestantism.

Like many of the other reformers, Calvin was very involved in the events of his day: he was hired by the church council in Geneva to reorganize the church there, he authored a new confession of faith and re-wrote liturgical documents. He also served as a preacher and worked towards the reformation of the church through all the different means available to him. His legacy, however, consists of his theological ideas, which became the bedrock for future generations of the reformers. Of them, his ideas about predestination proved most influential.

Calvin’s Doctrine of Predestination

Calvin laid out his doctrine of predestination in his Biblical commentaries (especially the book of Romans), but his most systematic account is contained in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, which revolves around his sense of God as completely sovereign and in control of everything. According to Calvin, “nothing happens but what [God] has knowingly and willingly decreed.” This view left little room for the activity of human free will; in fact, Calvin’s view of the human capacities to do good works or even love God are dim. Combined with his view of God’s power, they yield an extraordinary understanding of human actions in the world, a view that has proved to be quite influential.

The chapter that deals with predestination is much too long to be quoted in full here, and so I excerpted only the first few sentences of section 1, where Calvin is setting
up his argument, and then sections 5, 6, and 7, where he finally gets to the heart of his explanation. In the intervening sections, Calvin discusses why he finds the subject of predestination to be a very difficult and confusing subject, one rendered “perilous by human curiosity.” What he means to say is that although humans insists on exploring “the secret things of God,” it is very dangerous and can lead to error. It is also not easy, and those who “rush forward securely and confidently” will not find a straightforward answer but rather find themselves entering in “inextricable labyrinth.” Because, as Calvin points out, “it is not right that man should with impunity pry into things which the Lord has been pleased to conceal within himself and scan the sublime eternal wisdom which it is his pleasure that we should not apprehend but adore.” (chapter 21, section 1) In other words, Calvin argues that man should not try to comprehend the nature of the deepest divine mysteries, because of how easy it is to be mistaken, with disastrous consequences. This warning, however, seems to apply to other humans and not to him, and Calvin presses on with his own ideas.

Calvin believed that while it is impossible to unravel the divine mind, it is possible to glimpse it from the Scriptures. “Those secrets of his will,” those at least that God sees fit for us to know, Calvin said, “are revealed in his word.” (Ibid.) He quoted Augustine’s sermons on John to illustrate our indebtedness to the Scriptures as the only way in which we can gain insight into the ways of God. “If we give due weight to the consideration, that the word of the Lord is the only way which can conduct us to the investigation of whatever it is lawful for us to hold with regard to [God] … For it will show us that the moment we go beyond the bounds of the word we are out of the course, in darkness, and must every now and then stumble, go astray and fall.” (chapter 21, section 2) For that reason, Calvin is determined to stick closely to the words of the
Calvin’s stated dependence on the Scriptures (as well as his refusal to add anything to what the Scriptures set out) was clearly inspired by the Christian humanists and their fondness for the Bible. It is also not coincidental that his explanation of why he only followed the Scriptures directly contradicted the scholastic method, which was still taught at many universities.

This is not to say that the scholastics ignored the Scripture in their deliberations, they did not. But they had a much higher view of human reason and had no trouble philosophizing their way to various theological conclusions. Accordingly, the scholastic method was based on dialectical reasoning in order to resolve any perceived contradictions. Public disputation was the main vehicle for this method: The subject of inquiry would be formulated as a question, which was publicly presented. The respondents then offered their responses, which were then in turn evaluated and considered. Through the dialectical method (argument and rebuttal), the community would then arrive at a new understanding of the original question.

Calvin believed that the only way to truth about God was through the Scriptures. He rejected the scholastic deliberation and set forth principles that were reminiscent of the Christian humanists. Rather than a disputation, Calvin envisioned a solitary man, laboring over an interpretation of the Scriptures, going deeper in rather than on the outside of them. This is also why Calvin (and the Christian humanists) endeavored to lay their hands on the most accurate version of the Scriptures and, if possible, in the original
language. As mentioned above, Calvin knew New Testament Greek and provided his own translations of the Bible in his sermons and commentaries.

On the subject of predestination, Calvin believed that God destined some men for salvation while leaving the rest to receive eternal damnation. This view is called “unconditional election,” and it is the defining belief of Calvinism. In this view, God had – even before the creation of the world – chosen some people for eternal salvation and others for eternal damnation, without any discernible reason that had anything to do with the actual condition of those people’s lives. Calvin therefore also held that one’s conduct during one’s earthly life has absolutely nothing to do with whether one is saved or not.

Calvin’s belief had a basis in the teaching of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), the influential fourth-century Church Father, who argued that the grace of God (God’s willingness to save humans) was so precious and so undeserved (given the deep sinfulness of the humans) that there was absolutely nothing that one could do to earn that grace. Grace is, in Augustine’s view, unearned and un-earnable, bestowed on one by God’s merciful and gracious decision. However, the context in which Augustine’s doctrine was formulated is often forgotten. In talking about grace as God’s gift, Augustine tried to counter the teachings of Pelagius (390-418), who taught that humans were perfectly capable of fulfilling God’s law on their own, without divine aid, because Adam’s sin (if it had any bearing on the human condition at all, Pelagius was not sure) did not render humans unable to be good. The conflict dragged on for a long time, with large groups of supporters on both sides. Eventually, the Council of Carthage denounced Pelagius as a heretic by, and Augustine’s interpretation held. In comparison with Pelagius, Augustine held a very low opinion of the human ability to produce good works,
convinced that we are so weighted down by Adam’s (original) sin, our will so disordered and our nature so depraved, that we can get nowhere close to God’s approval on our own.

Calvin shared Augustine’s low opinion of the human capacity to do good works. This came to be called the doctrine of total depravity, and it held that humans were so sinful that on their own will, they were not even able to want to do God’s will let alone actually doing God’s will. When they did, the desire itself came from God. Calvin took this view to its logical conclusion. He taught that man is totally depraved and God is all powerful, fully in control of all human affairs and responsible for the creation of all the goodness on earth. Without God’s direct regeneration of the human soul, no one is able or willing to do God’ will. God’s choices are completely independent from any of the man’s actions or thoughts or abilities (which are all foreseen by God), but depend only on his power and will. The ability to do good is thus possible only thanks to God’s direct intervention. However, not all people do good works. This is because, Calvin taught, some people are never regenerated by God in this way. We do not and cannot know why some people are chosen and others not. The reasons are kept from the believers, relegated among the many divine mysteries.

Calvin supplies a number of Biblical passages to support this doctrine, for example, John 6:65 (the Parable of the Sower), John 15:16, Acts 13:48, Romans 9:15-16 and 9: 22-24, Ephesians 1: 4-5, and elsewhere. What follows in an excerpt from Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, on the subject of predestination.

Calvin’s view contradicts the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#600), which insists that God’s plan relies on free will, which is not an illusion (as Calvin would say)
but a reality. The Catechism (#1037) also affirms that God “predestines no one to go to
hell,” and the Church, in its Eucharistic and daily prayers, calls on God, who does not
want “any to perish, but all come to repentance” and eternal life.

However, Calvin’s view of predestination has proved very influential during his
life and after his death and became the signature doctrine of Calvinism and of the
Reformed tradition, which now has more than 80 million members in over 200
denominations around the world.

3. Ulrich Zwingli and the Limits of Sola Scriptura

Ulrich Zwingli

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), who was born and lived in Switzerland, is often
called the “Third Man of the Reformation,” after Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Like Luther, Zwingli was educated in Latin schools and at the university, and like
Luther, he was ordained to be a priest – in 1506 in Constance. Like Luther, Zwingli
wished to reform the church from within but ended up laying the foundations of a parallel
church structure. But there were important differences between the two reformers, and
they set up the differences between what would become the Lutheran and the Reformed
Tradition that persist to the present day.

Zwingli’s ideas developed independently from Luther, and first became public
through his sermons. A few years after his ordination, Zwingli took up a preaching post
in Zurich, one of the most important cities in the Swiss Confederacy. By all accounts, he
was an avid reader and a deep thinker, and before too long, his preaching in Zurich stirred
up a controversy.
The complaints against him were in part formal; Zwingli refused to follow the lectionary in selecting Biblical passages for his homilies. Instead of preaching on the readings that were pre-selected for him for each Sunday in the liturgical year, Zwingli picked up the gospel of Matthew and preached on it, every consecutive Sunday, until he has gone through the entire gospel. After that, he turned to the Pauline epistles and the rest of the New Testament, and preached on them again from start to finish.

This was a completely new way to preach, to work through biblical books systematically and study them in the larger context of the text as a whole rather than in short excerpts (though it is a custom that most Protestant denominations have since adopted). Zwingli got the idea from the humanists, who, as we have already discussed, brought new methods of textual analysis to the study of the Scriptures. The humanists also translated the Bible into the different vernacular languages and, with the help of the printing press, disseminated it to interested people.

Zwingli’s view of the Scriptures is encapsulated by the following excerpt:

Please click to read – “…Certainty of the Word of God” (September 6, 1522) – University of Toronto website

In the course of his preaching, in 1520, Zwingli became convinced that all preaching must be based in the Bible, and because by this point he had already won himself a following, he was able to persuade the city council in Zurich to make this opinion of his into a city mandate, which meant that every preacher in the city had to abide by it. Zwingli also had opinions about the on-going collection of indulgences (over a year after Martin Luther did), and he did not shy from making his reservations public. From the pulpit, Zwingli argued that indulgences were sold to the people under false
pretenses, agreeing with Luther that indulgences were corroding the laity’s understanding of forgiveness and misleading them into grave error.

By the following year, Zwingli became convinced that all ritual that was not based in the Scriptures was suspect and openly denounced a number of Catholic practices that he did not find described in the Bible. Around the same time, Zwingli was elected to the city council, which put him into a powerful position that allowed him to influence events and shape the future of this important town in the Swiss Confederation. As a councilmen, he needed to be taken seriously, which may be why he decided to write a petition to the bishop in Constance, asking that clerical marriage be permitted. This was not an entirely random request: Zwingli had earlier in that year married in secret, convinced that he violated no Biblical mandates by doing so.

With time, Zwingli became emboldened to apply the rule of the Scriptures (as he understood them) to all aspects of the Christian life. And so, during Lent of the same year, 1522, Zwingli spoke up against the customary Lenten food proscriptions. The Bible, he argued offered no valid rule why the faithful should abstain from meat and other foods, and he refused to think it sinful if some Christians chose to eat whatever they wished on fast days. The public proclamation of his decision and the subsequent debates came to be known, rather colorfully, as the “Affair of the Sausages,” and proved to be (at least when viewed in retrospect) the start of the Reformation in Switzerland.

But the main reforming action came in the following year, in 1523, during the first Zurich disputation. The main argument revolved around the question of authority in the church, whether it ought to be understood in the way that the church said or simply be based in the Scriptures. This was not only a theoretical question, but an intensely practical one. About 600 people participated in the disputation, with the proceedings
being conducted in German rather than Latin as had been customary for theological
disputations. The council heard the arguments on both sides and decided in favor of
Zwingli over against the bishop of Constance. This was important for a number of
reasons: it meant that all decisions about church matters in the city of Zurich would be
decided in accordance with the Scriptures (which Zwingli believed necessary) and that
the political governing body of Zurich had taken on the responsibility to rule on church
matters there.

Afraid of religious insurrection, the council made a decision worthy of King
Solomon, safeguarding the autonomy of individual preachers and parishes. Instead of
decreeing that all churches needed to obey Zwingli, the council allowed each parish and
each pastor to decide for themselves on a number of contentious matters. One of them
was the use of images in worship. Reform-minded clerics felt that the presence of images
misled the faithful into idolatry and detracted from the most important element of the
worship service, which was the spoken Word. Yet others did not see it as a problem as
long as the laity was well-educated on the matter.

The shape of the mass was another contentious matter and there too, pastors got to
decide for their parishes. Many stopped celebrating mass according to the traditional
rubrics. To fill the void, Zwingli designed a communion liturgy, which reflected his
understanding of the mass, one that rejected the late medieval understanding of the mass
as a “sacrifice” as well as the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Zwingli celebrated the first mass according to the new rubrics on Maundy
Thursday in 1525. The new rubrics shied away from anything that could be perceived as
unduly ostentatious: they called for wooden cup and plates instead of silver or gold.
There was to be no singing or music playing in order to allow for pure reflection and
prayer. The seating plan was different too; the parishioners sat at tables in order to bring out the meal aspect of the communion service. This service was to be celebrated four times a year, with other Sundays devoted to a simple preaching service that placed the word of God, rather than any kind of man-made object such as communion feast, at the center of the celebration.

If there was a center to Zwingli’s reform ideas, it was his effort to bring every aspect of the Christian life in line with what the Bible had to say. Every doctrine, ritual and custom that was not explicitly endorsed by the Scriptures was to be rejected as unnecessary and, what is worse, misleading.

Conflict between Zwingli and Luther

Although all of the reformers shared an overarching goal of reforming the church, what that meant in practice often differed. The disagreement between Zwingli and Luther, which was never resolved, shows that even when the reformers agreed on what the problems were, it was hard to come to an agreement about how to fix it.

Zwingli spoke often about his admiration for Luther, especially his firm stance against indulgences that led to his eventual excommunication. But even though both agreed about the misguidedness of indulgences, their views about key doctrines soon diverged. Reformation scholars are still debating the different influences on Zwingli’s doctrines and the extent to which he was dependent on the Christian humanists, such as Erasmus, or on the other reformers, such as Luther.

Zwingli’s conflict with Luther can be dated to the early years of his career, around 1525. The two corresponded, and in 1527 Zwingli met with Luther face to face for the first time in an effort to resolve some of their differences. The attempt at a reconciliation
was not only a matter of personal preference: the main figures of the Reformation in
different regions were in open disagreement about key issues such as the mass, and it
seemed a good idea to try to iron out their differences in order to present a unified
message to their opponents or potential converts. But there was another reason to try to
effect an agreement of all the major reformers: because theology went hand-in-hand with
secular government, the disagreements about doctrine made it impossible for the
Reformers to form a political union and move jointly against their opponents, which
significantly weakened the Protestant movement.

Zwingli’s home, the Swiss Confederacy, was a microcosm of these forces. The
Confederacy split along religious lines, with Zwingli leading the Reformed alliance of
eight (out of thirteen) cantons. He wished to find allies outside of the Swiss Confederacy,
but it proved difficult due to the many doctrinal disagreements among Protestants of
different stripe. Meanwhile, the five Catholic cantons reached out to Martin Luther’s
many opponents and sealed valuable alliances with them. At first cooler heads prevailed,
but eventually civil war between Protestants and their enemies could not be averted.
Zwingli himself was killed in battle at the young age of 47.

The Marburg Colloquy

Political unity was impossible without theological unity, which is why the
reformers spent so much effort speaking to one another, trying to persuade and cajole.
Some of their writings make it seem that other reformers were greater obstacles to the
cause of reform than traditional churchmen.

The Marburg Colloquy was one of the occasions when reformers from different
factions met and discussed matters of mutual interest, namely their beliefs in what needed
to be reformed and how. The meeting took place between October 1 and October 4, 1529 at the Marburg Castle in Germany. The leading Protestant reformers attended at the behest of prince Philip I of Hessen, who was interested in forming a Protestant political alliance, but knew that theological agreement among the Protestant reformers was an important pre-requisite. Luther (the leader of the reformation in Germany) and Zwingli (the leader of the Reformation in Zurich) were present, among others.

If the council’s goal was to arrive at a joint theology, then it failed. But the attendees did agree on fourteen articles, which had to do with fundamental Christian beliefs, as well as with reformed views of the sacraments and other matters. However, and most crippling, the reformers disagreed about the Eucharist.

Both Luther and Zwingli objected to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, but they could not agree on anything beyond that. Luther continued to believe in Christ’s “real presence” in the sacrament of the Eucharist (although he objected to the doctrine of transubstantiation): in the consecrated elements of bread and wine, the faithful came to partake in the true body and blood of Christ. But Zwingli had abandoned his belief in the real presence, thinking instead that in the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine were merely symbols of Christ’s body and blood.

Zwingli objected to transubstantiation for the predictable reason that he thought it was not supported in the Scriptures. John 6:63, “It is the spirit who gives life, the flesh is of no avail,” seemed to him especially a proof that Christ was not physically present in the Eucharistic elements. Scholars still debate about the origins of Zwingli’s thinking about the mass. It seems that he was reading the institution narrative through a different interpretative lens, thinking that when Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, “this is my body,” he meant “this signifies my body,” with important consequences for
doctrine. Zwingli tried to justify his beliefs and wrote an entire treatise on the Eucharist in 1525, in the months after the introduction of his new communion liturgy in the churches in Zurich.

This disagreement between Luther and Zwingli on the subject of the Eucharist proved an insurmountable obstacle to unity, and the reason for persistent divisions among the Reformers that continue into the present day.