

Men of Faith and Fervor

Calvin, Luther, Knox, Zwingli – these are the names of just a handful of men who, with their beliefs, though each slightly different, completely altered the course of history.

Perhaps the most popular and influential of those men was Martin Luther. Born into a family with great expectations for their son, Luther was put through schools from a very young age. Although he was on the right track to becoming a lawyer just as his father had hoped, all of Luther's scholastic investments were thrown by the wayside when, riding his horse late one night, a storm threatened Luther's life to the point that Luther cried out to the Virgin Mary's mother, Saint Anna, to save his life, promising that if she did, he would forfeit all and become a monk. This he did, albeit sadly: he knew he would be letting his father down, but he also knew it was more important to honor a promise to God than to obey the material wishes of his parents. But as oftentimes is true, there was more to Luther entering the monastery than simply his vow to the Lord—already a religious man, Luther was having some serious doubts about his salvation. The monastery would be the catalyst not only to Luther receiving the assurance of his salvation, but also to Luther developing his overall theological knowledge.¹

In 1521, having nailed the Ninety-Five Thesis to the door of the Roman Catholic Church in 1517, pioneered the idea of “a priesthood of believers,” confidently stated that the Bible was the sole source of religious authority, written several hymns, translated the Bible into the common tongue, and boldly challenged the papacy, Luther was called before the authorities at the Diet of Worms where they vehemently disputed his beliefs. For example, Luther debated that “humanistic linguistic studies were a necessity”² – in other words, one, at that time in history, would need a firm knowledge of the Biblical languages, no one would be able to read or study the text to fully grasp its meaning and apply its Biblical principles. The immediate result of this trial was the outlawing of Luther; some even had hopes of murdering him. Fortunately for Luther, a nobleman of Saxony, Fredrick III, was an admirer of Luther and was concerned about his well being. Taking action before the authorities could, Fredrick had Luther “exiled” to the Wartburg Castle where he took on a fake name and grew a beard to disguise himself. While hiding out in the castle (which he affectionately nicknamed his “Patmos” after the island to which John the disciple was exiled right before his death), Luther was able to continue his efforts to further what had finally been given the name “Protestantism.” Within the eleven months he resided there, Luther was able to translate the New Testament from Greek to the German tongue, regroup his stands on different subjects (such as the right of a church to elect or dismiss their own pastor³), affirm the value of private confession and

¹ David M. Whitford. 2006. *Martin Luther*. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

² R.W. Scribner, and C.S. Dixon. 2003. *The German Reformation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 50

³ R.W. Scribner, and C.S. Dixon. 2003. *The German Reformation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 50

absolution (confession being the closure of one's sins to a priest, and absolution being the formula declaring such remission), and form renewed and fresh attacks on controversial topics such as justification and indulgences. Having reloaded his theological canon, Luther secretly returned to Wittenberg in 1522 in response to the Anabaptists' rise. Unfortunately, those who had been moved by Luther's words before had been hard to find upon his return; Luther realized that the only way to reclaim the like-minded souls who had followed him before was to begin publicly proclaiming his desire for reform again through preaching. This religious intervention took effect almost instantaneously and soon Luther had won back those whom the papacy had tried to dissuade and even convert a few more. Soon, the people were calling themselves "Lutherans" or "Martinists" signifying whom it was they were following.

Luther's sermons – and particularly his famous Ninety-Five Thesis – were undoubtedly catalysts to the Protestant Reformation. But what of those who followed? We certainly cannot go without mentioning John Calvin when discussing the Reformation: based out of Geneva, Switzerland, this French Protestant was a key promoter and developer of Reformed theology. Having a remarkably similar background as Martin Luther, Calvin, too, was pressured at a young age to devote his life to studies and law. It is indefinite as to when Calvin "officially" converted to Protestantism, but it is clear that he was religious even in his early years.⁴ Passing by Geneva on return trip from France, Calvin was asked to stay and help the city where he acted as a pastor and also a metaphorical "beacon of hope" to the Protestant refugees from other countries.

Calvin was very interested in theology and was passionate about studying God's Word in comparison with the writings of the early Church fathers, medieval history, and the doctrine of his day. Among other things, Calvin is most known for the five specific arguments he most firmly believed needed reformed within the Roman Catholic Church (today it is commonly referred to by its acrostic "TULIP"):

- T – Total Depravity. (man cannot help but sin because of his sin nature instilled in him since the Fall of man)
- U – Unconditional Election. (God chooses to save people unconditionally, not based on their own goodness)
- L – Limited Atonement. (Christ dying on the Cross to purify all of sin)
- I – Irresistible Grace. (the idea that when God has chosen to save someone, He will)
- P – Perseverance of the Saints. (one cannot lose his salvation, even if he strays from God's will)

Being a well-educated man, Calvin was an excellent letter writer. Often composing his documents under the pen name "Charles Despeville,"⁵ Calvin scrolled scores of letters throughout his life, many times addressing sensitive philosophical issues or sometimes to encourage or advise young Protestant churches. Accused of trying to

⁴ H.J. Hillerbrand. 1985. *The Reformation, A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants*. Michigan: Baker Book House pp. 174

⁵ Philip Schaff. 1892. *History of the Christian Church, Volume VIII: Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation*. New York: Union Theological Seminary

form a new kind of papacy (along with some of his colleagues), Calvin was exiled from Geneva; alternatively, he chose to reside in Strasbourg during this period where he pastored a local church for three years. In 1541, Calvin returned to Geneva with the intentions of instituting a new form of church government within the local Protestant churches: the pastor being the head of the church, and “doctors,” elders, and deacons holding offices of authority beneath him. It is at this time that we begin to see the flaw in one of Calvin’s theories: though his reformation of the church government was indeed Biblical, Calvin believed that this form of church government deserved to rule not only the church, but also the members’ lives outside the church. Consequently, “Calvinists” were “scared” into living a holy life knowing that the “zero tolerance policy” was in effect at all times, and no punishment was considered *too* severe. Although this was – to say the least – extreme, it was highly effective inasmuch that Scottish Reformer John Knox called it “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the Apostles” – that’s pretty high praise!

Speaking of John Knox, he was yet another influential character of the Protestant Reformation. A Scottish notary-priest, Knox was impacted greatly by another reformer Wishart and soon after joined “the movement” of the Reformation. As a reformer, he was exiled to England in 1549 after being imprisoned by the French around the time of 1546. While residing in England, Knox was able to work in the Church of England and work his way up the social ladder to serve the King of England, Edward VI. Now holding this high position, Knox began exerting what influence he had concerning church reform; but he was soon forced to resign this position and commanded to leave the country. With no real place to call home, Knox relocated to Geneva (where he met John Calvin) and later to Frankfurt where he – much like Calvin – helped build up the churches of the English Christian refugees. But poor Knox: more doctrinal differences (this time concerning liturgy) forced him out of his clergyman position.

Returning to Scotland, Knox unflinchingly led the Protestant Reformation in Scotland, this time with backup from the nobility of Scotland. In addition to reforming the churches, it also helped the country politically in that it drove out the wicked queen regent (who had been governing Scotland in place of her young daughter Mary, Queen of Scots). Although he definitely had to work much harder for it, John Knox was finally able to see some fruit from his hard labor for reform.

The last of the reformers of whom I wish to speak is Huldrych Zwingli, another leader of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland. Like Calvin, Knox, and Luther, Zwingli was also a gentleman of higher learning having attended both the University of Vienna and the University of Basel (which happens to be the scholarly center of humanism) and was greatly influenced by the writings of the theologian Desiderius Erasmus. About the age of thirty-five, Zwingli became the preacher of the Grossmünster in Zürich – this is where he began teaching his theories on reforming the Church. Subjects on which he spoke publicly included teaching against the custom of fasting during Lent, teaching against the mercenary trade, teaching against the use of images and

icons in the place of worship, promoting clerical marriage, and replacing Mass with communion liturgy. Zwingli never got along well with the Anabaptists, but he and Luther *did* share some common ground in some areas of doctrine when they met at the Marburg Colloquy (although there was some controversy over the idea of the Eucharist: Zwingli believed that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper was nothing more than just that – bread and wine – while Luther firmly believed it changed to the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ).

At a public debate held at Berne in 1528, Zwingli with his followers brought forward a list with these ten propositions:

1. "That the Holy Christian Church, of which Christ is the only Head, is born of the Word of God, abides therein, and does not listen to the voice of a stranger."
2. "That the Church imposes no laws on the conscience of people without the sanction of the Word of God, and that the laws of the Church are binding only so far as they agree with the Word."
3. "That Christ alone is our righteousness and our salvation, that to trust to any other atonement as satisfaction is to deny Him."
4. "That it cannot be proved from the Holy Scriptures that the body and blood of Christ are corporeally present in the bread and in the wine of the Lord's Supper."
5. "That the Mass in which Christ is offered to God the Father for the sins of the living and the dead is contrary to Scripture and a gross affront to the sacrifice and death of the Saviour."
6. "That we should not pray to dead mediators and intercessors, but to Jesus Christ alone."
7. "That there is no trace of Purgatory in Scripture."
8. "That to set up pictures and to adore them is also contrary to Scripture, and that images and pictures ought to be destroyed where there is danger in giving them adoration."
9. "That marriage is lawful to all, to the clergy as well as the laity."
10. "That shameful living is more disgraceful among the clergy than among the laity."⁶

⁶ Paul Mizzi. 2001. *Huldrych Zwingli*. "Truth for Today."
<http://www.tecmalta.org/tft.htm>

Zwingli wanted more than anything for the Church to focus its conduct and doctrine back on the Word of God. Fitting, it was, that he died trying to achieve such things: Zwingli and his followers tried to form a food blockade against the Catholic cantons. This proved unsuccessful when the cantons fought back just at the worst time for Zürich, whose people were poorly prepared. Zwingli, approximately forty-seven years old, died in that battle.

It is because of these men, and many more like them, who “had faith as a grain of mustard seed”⁷ and then some that the Protestant Reformation transitioned from a concern to a public cause. Each of these great men contributed something unique, and because of their perseverance, the Roman Catholic Church lost much of its power (both over the masses and politically) and eventually did do some reforming as a result. The Protestant Reformation brought to light the fact that the Roman Catholic Church was not flawless and inspired a change, not only in the Church, but in Europe.

⁷ Luke 17:6. King James Version Bible.