

*Religious Persecution  
during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century  
Protestant Reformation*

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## Religious Persecution during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation

### I. Corruption in the Roman Catholic Church and Attempts to Correct It Internally

The Roman Catholic papacy had been corrupted for centuries before the Reformation. Sometimes the papacy had become a prize to be won at any cost including bribery, deceit, and murder. Part of the reason for this was that the papacy and many high level positions in the church had become economically and politically powerful due to the acquisition of land and wealth in a feudalistic society. Large tracts of land and wealth were donated to the church and to monasteries by generous patrons, some of whom were attempting to atone for their sins and ensure a path to heaven. Control of the church, therefore, meant control of vast wealth.

Serious intrigue in the papacy developed during the time of Pope John VIII before 887. He was poisoned; and since he was too slow dying, was clubbed to death in his own palace. This was the beginning of a series of homicides in which popes were strangled by hired assassins or starved to death in dungeons by their successors. Sometimes there were two or three popes at one time supported by two or three different factions in Rome, each one claiming to be the true successor to Peter. Rival families in Italy fought one another to gain control of the papacy. In 904, Sergius III had two of his rivals put in prison and killed with the help of one of the more powerful families in Italy headed by Theophylact and his wife Theodora. Their daughter, Marozia, was Sergius' mistress. After Sergius died, Marozia and her husband seized the palace of Pope John X, put him in prison and later suffocated him to death with a pillow. After the brief pontificates of Leo VI and Stephen VII, Marozia placed John XI on the papal throne who was her illegitimate son by Sergius III.

Thirty years later in 955, Marozia's grandson, John XII, became pope, serving from 955-963 (Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, p. 275; B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, p. 84; S.M. Houghton, *Sketches from Church History*, p. 51). John XII followed in the spiritual footsteps of his grandmother and was judged by a Roman synod as a thoroughly degraded and profligate man. He was charged by this council with various crimes including drinking to the devil's health and invoking the help of heathen gods and demons as he threw dice. To these charges he replied to the synod, "If you wish to set up another pope, by Almighty God I excommunicate you, so that you will not have power to perform mass or to ordain anyone" (Houghton, p. 51).

Marozia's nephew became Pope John XIII. Benedict VI, successor to John XIII, was strangled to death by John XIII's brother, Crescentius, also a nephew of "you know who"—Marozia! (Gonzalez, p. 275) Thus, Marozia and family represented the quintessential power brokers of the papal throne during the Middle Ages. John XIV was strangled to death by Boniface VII in 974. (Gonzalez believes Boniface poisoned him or starved him to death in a dungeon.) Boniface himself was later poisoned and was described by a synod of the church as "a papal monster who in his abject depravity exceeds all mortals" (Houghton, p. 51). Voltaire, a pagan French philosopher, once quipped that the Holy Roman Empire was neither "holy", nor "Roman", nor an "empire" (Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 187).

This legacy of corruption and death continued through the pontificate of Pope Sylvester III who was placed in power by the Crescentius family—relatives of Marozia! They were able

to remove Benedict IX from the papal throne in 1045 and replace him with Sylvester III. With the help of the rival Tuscan family, Benedict was able to regain his position but soon grew tired of it and sold it to another cleric for 1000 pounds of silver who became Gregory VI (Kuiper, p. 85).

Because of a strong popular reaction against selling the sacred office for money—a practice known as *simony* (cf. Acts 8: 18-24)—Benedict changed his mind and refused to step down as pope. This resulted in *three* popes being in office at the same time—Sylvester III, Benedict IX, and Gregory VI (Kuiper, p. 85). Henry III, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire who was favorable to reforming the papacy, stepped in and called the synod of Sutri in 1046 in which all three popes were deposed and the practice of simony condemned.

This is the kind of story that American movies are made of, and for about 150 years the papacy resembled the Italian mafia more than shepherds of the church for which Christ died. For skeptics and nominal Christians, the papacy was the object of scorn and the subject of jesting; for the faithful few, it was the object of mourning. The hierarchy of the church had been corrupted by money and political power but there were still faithful priests, monks, and common members of the church who knew and practiced the truth—or at least as much of the truth as they could understand, considering the times. Something had to change. That change would come with the reforming zeal of Bruno, Hildebrand, and Humbert. However, the reforms they brought were primarily ecclesiastical, not doctrinal, and this was also true of the monastical reforms which emphasized both ecclesiastical and moral reform.

The story of Bruno, Hildebrand, and Humbert goes back long before 1048 and the appointment of Bruno as Pope Gregory VII. The very idea of the papacy being for sale to the rich and powerful was scandalous and shameful to faithful Christians throughout Europe. There were many in the church during the reign of Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century who bemoaned the formalization and nominalization of the church. Thousands were pouring into the church who neither understood the Christian faith nor cared to understand it. They were there to ride the wave of preferential treatment from Emperor Constantine. As a protest to this formalization, the monastic movement was born, beginning with the solitary monks in the Eastern portion of the church and taking its final form in the communal monasteries in the West. Likewise, during the dark days of the papacy from about 890 to 1050, many of the faithful were turning once again to the monastic ideal. “Thus, it was out of the monasteries that a wave of reform arose that conquered the papacy, clashed with the powerful, and was felt even in the distant shores of the Holy Land” (Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 277).

Eventually, however, even the monasteries became the objects of greed because of vast land holdings and the political power which came with them. *Half of the land and wealth in France and Germany was controlled by bishops and abbots.* The Rule of Benedict requiring obedience and a simple life of prayer, scripture reading and manual labor was ignored for the most part. Many abbots (heads of monasteries) bought their posts with the help of powerful families, the same practice as those attempting to buy the papacy. Some even murdered to obtain their posts. Many priests and abbots could not even read or write. Being the head of a monastery could be a “cushy” job as long as you lived in areas protected from the invading Norsemen who regularly robbed monasteries as thieves robbed banks. And sometimes the monasteries resembled banks with chapels decorated with gold and jewels (Gonzalez, pp. 277-278, 280; Houghton, p. 51).

Abbots couldn't marry but were not forced to abstain from sex since there were many willing mistresses around who were happy to exchange sex for the financial security afforded by a wealthy monk, particularly an abbot. The priests and abbots were notorious for fathering illegitimate children who had the run of the palace or monastery, a situation which had not improved up to the time of the Reformation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the bishopric of Constance, to which the city of Zurich belonged, the requirement of celibacy had rendered the practice of keeping concubines a pardonable offense. Hugo von Hohenlandenberg, the bishop of Constance, forgave priests for this offense for the sum of four guilders for each child fathered by them. In a single year, 1522, and in the single diocese of Constance, he collected 7500 guilders (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 4261; my pagination and hereafter). (Doing the math, this calculates into 1875 illegitimate children fathered by priests in a single year within a single diocese.) Hundreds of years later when Luther married a nun, the Roman Catholic hierarchy charged that such a union of a priest and a nun would give birth to the antichrist. Erasmus, the famous humanist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, shot back that if it were true that sexual union between a priest and a nun would produce the antichrist then there must be thousands of antichrists all over Europe (Schaff, p. 4051).

Returning to the year 909, almost at the beginning of the corruption and homicide which plagued the papacy for another 150 years, a small monastery was founded by Duke William III in Cluny, his favorite hunting ground. The monastery was deeded to Saints Peter and Paul, insuring it against any seizure by corrupt bishops or even by the pope himself. William called upon Berno, a conscientious monk who followed the Rule of Benedict to be the abbot of this monastery, a post he served until his death in 926. Cluny became the center of monastic reform for 200 years until 1109, being ruled by only six dedicated abbots in succession, each of whom lived to old age. Cluny became the base of operations by which 1100 other monasteries in every country of Western Europe were also reformed and the Rule of Benedict practiced—with the exception that manual labor was replaced by longer hours of prayer and scripture reading. Keep in mind that while this reform movement was going on, corruption in the church was continuing at the same time, but at least the “sheep” could see a definite contrast between good and evil, that is, between those who were serious about their calling and those who weren't (Cairns, p. 201; Gonzalez, pp. 278-279; Kuiper, pp. 95-97).

The ecclesiastical reform of the church, which began in 1048, eventually emerged from the monastic reform of the Cluny monasteries spanning some 200 years from 900 to 1100. The Cluniac movement was successful, to a large measure, because it was independent of civil powers. This, in turn was the dream of ecclesiastical reformers—Bruno, Hildebrand, Humbert—and their followers who wanted church leaders who were not obligated to kings or nobles for their positions. As stated earlier, it is ironic that Bruno received his appointment from his cousin, Henry III, the Holy Roman Emperor. So how could he be consistent in taking this appointment while at the same time opposing simony—the buying and selling of church offices—and the interference of emperors in the affairs of the church—called lay investiture? Bruno was not blind to this dilemma (problem), and he had been warned by his trusted friend, Hildebrand, that if he simply took the papacy from the emperor it would mean that he was accepting the position “not as an apostle, but as an apostate”. Bruno therefore purposed to accept the papacy only with the public affirmation of other priests and the people of the Holy Roman Empire. Rather than enter Rome with much pomp, wealth, and political power, he chose instead to enter the city as a barefooted pilgrim. As he made his way to Rome across northern Italy, thousands of people waited for him along the roads and cheered him as he went by, an indication that the masses supported the reform measures Bruno championed. Stories of miracles attending his pilgrimage began to circulate widely

(Gonzalez, p. 283). Bruno accepted the papacy from the emperor, but he had also made an important statement on the way to Rome. While officially receiving the papacy from Henry III, his actual confirmation as pope had not come from the emperor, but from the clergy and the people. This clerical and popular affirmation represented his ultimate goal of removing the papacy from the control of secular rulers.

It was the monastic rule of *selective poverty* that proved the undoing of the Cluniac reform. While the *monk* should live a simple life of poverty, the *monastery* itself could own vast properties of land and other wealth bequeathed by generous donors who either heartily endorsed monastic reform or wished to earn their salvation. With all the lands being accumulated by hundreds of Cluny monasteries and under the control of the abbots, it was impossible for abbots to avoid being the objects of bribery and political intrigue. An abbot was a good ally for any noble or king to have, for one can purchase an army with enough money. The accumulation of wealth invited the practice of buying and selling ecclesiastical posts and hindered the reformation of the church. Eventually, even the Cluny monasteries fell into spiritual ruin and the Benedictine ideal and desire for reform was lost (Gonzalez, pp. 280-281). Doubtless there were many wealthy people in Europe who were enthusiastic about the reforms taking place in the Cluny monasteries, but their zeal and generosity was not matched by their intelligence. As a result, the Cluny monasteries “grew fat and kicked” (Deut. 32: 15) and became ineffective and irrelevant for reform.

[Applying this principle to the African church, it would be difficult to overestimate the damage that the love of money and the misuse of money has done to the church throughout its history and down to the present day. In sub-Saharan countries with 60 to 80% unemployment, the office of pastor has become a prize to be won by many who are well connected to Western churches and Western sponsors. Moreover, some of these pastors are paid \$500 or more per month, five to ten times the average monthly income of their members. When they begin driving cars, the members know where the money is coming from and no longer feel obligated to pay his salary or support other church ministries. To complicate matters, African Christians are generally negligent in giving to the ministry of the church, anyway. Western sponsors are not guiltless, but bear the responsibility for the distribution and donation of funds. The lesson of history is that money often produces more problems than it solves. “If we fail to learn the mistakes of history”, one wise person has said, “we are doomed to repeat them.”]

Late in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, another monastic movement—the *Cistercian* reform—replaced the Cluniac movement for the purpose of reforming the church. The eventual leader of the Cistercian monastery was *Bernard of Clairvaux* who came to the monastery at 23 years of age in 1112 or 1113. He was a mystic who meditated constantly on the love of God and the true humanity of Christ. He became a powerful and eloquent preacher, eventually emerging as an arbitrator in many political and ecclesiastical controversies. From this responsibility he eventually would become the power behind the papacy (Gonzalez, p. 282).

Following the Cistercian reform were the mendicant orders of the friars—the *Franciscans* and the *Dominicans*. The monks lived in monasteries and were supported by grants from the wealthy, while the friars of the Franciscan and Dominican orders lived among the people and were supported through alms. The Franciscans were founded by Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and became the missionaries of the church going as far as Spain, Egypt, and Peking, China. When the Americas were discovered, most of the missionary work there was done by the Franciscan order. The Dominican order—the order of preachers—established by Dominic



(1170-1221) became the scholarly order of the Catholic Church, producing scholars like Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. The order also produced the Roman Catholic Church's most famous theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), whose work, *Summa Theologica*, became the systematic theology of the Roman church to this present day. (Because he was big and quiet in his youth, Aquinas' schoolmates laughingly called him the "dumb ox". Thomas got the last laugh.) Savonarola was also a Dominican, and in 1233, the Dominican Order was given the task of "running the machinery of the Inquisition" to purge the church of heretics. The Dominicans also became missionaries, and developed hospitals all over the world. Ten thousand friars died while taking care of the sick during the Black Death of 1348-1349, but by the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the mendicant movement of "beggars" had gone the way of the Cluny monasteries, becoming so wealthy that they formed corporations for managing their wealth (Carnes, p. 226). Therefore, the orders of the friars—like the monasteries—were a mixed bag, producing both good and bad.

All of these movements—the monasteries and the religious orders—were *internal* attempts to reform the Catholic Church.

## II. External Corrections to Corruption in the Church

But there were also lay movements *outside* the established church to renew the church and to restore spiritual zeal, and these movements did not agree to some of the hierarchical standards imposed by the church. Some of these outsiders were orthodox and some were heretical. The Waldensians adhered to the standard creeds of the faith, but they were excommunicated for the charge of lay preaching and lay administration of the sacraments in 1184. They also believed that the Bible should be translated into the local vernacular and that it should be the final authority for one's faith and practice. After appealing to Rome, they were persecuted and forced to withdraw into the remote valleys of the Swiss Alps where they kept a low profile until the turbulence of the Reformation drew them out.

The Albigenses, on the other hand, believed in the same dualism between the soul and body as the Gnostics. The Dominican friars attempted to win them back by preaching, but when that failed, the crusade in southern France practically exterminated them. Other attempts were the Synod of Toulouse in 1229 which forbade laymen to use vernacular translations of the Bible and the Inquisition which used torture and burning at the stake.

Contrary to the Roman Catholic Church's intention, the intellectual repression of free thought within the church and outside the church coupled with the persecution of heretics actually drove people into some of the "heretical" sects (some heretical and others biblical); and thus, fuel was stored up for the fires of the Reformation (Cairns, p. 228). Popular confidence in the papal office was at its highest point during the pontificate of Leo III and his coronation of Charlemagne as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 800. From this point popular support of the papacy and the clergy began to sink into despair and ridicule with the "Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1309 to 1377) in which the papacy was held hostage by the French monarchy in Avignon and by the Great Schism (1378-1417) in which rival popes were struggling to take control of the papacy.

Fast forwarding to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the morals of the papacy were at their worst from 1492 to 1521. Leo X, who commissioned the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michaelangelo, was far more interested in the arts and the revival of

classical literature than religion, and is said to have doubted the historicity of the gospel accounts (Schaff, p. 3767).

No wonder that many cardinals and priests followed the scandalous example of the popes, and weakened the respect of the laity for the clergy. The writings of contemporary scholars, preachers and satirists are full of complaints and exposures of the ignorance, vulgarity and immorality of priests and monks. Simony and nepotism were shamefully practiced. Celibacy was a foul fountain of unchastity and uncleanness. The bishoprics were monopolized by the youngest sons of princes and nobles without regard to qualification.... James V. of Scotland [after the Reformation had begun] (1528–1542) provided for his illegitimate children by making them abbots of Holyrood House, Kelso, Melrose, Coldingham and St. Andrews, and entrusted royal favorites with bishoprics (Schaff, p. 3767).

Charles de Hangest, bishop of Nyon (hometown of Calvin) received many offices from the pope when he was 15; his nephew and successor Jean de Hangest, was made bishop at 19; Odet de Chatillon became a cardinal at 16; Pope Leo X, the pope during the Reformation, received the tonsure (the special priestly haircut) at 7, became an archbishop at 8, and cardinal deacon at 13. Leo X was also a “canon in three cathedrals, rector in six parishes, prior in three convents, abbot in thirteen additional abbeys, and bishop of Amalfi, *deriving revenues from them all!*” (Schaff, pp. 4478-79; emphasis mine).

One can see that the multiple reform movements within the Roman Catholic Church were not movements demanding *doctrinal* reform, but *moral and ecclesiastical reform*; and it is highly unlikely that the doctrinal Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century would have occurred apart from strenuous reaction to moral decay within the church.

Honest Roman Catholic scholars, while maintaining the infallibility and consequent doctrinal irreformability of their church, admit in strong terms the decay of discipline and the necessity of a moral reform in the sixteenth century (Schaff, p. 3768).

But by the time of the Reformation, nothing much had changed. For example, consider the following description of Geneva, Switzerland before the reforms of John Calvin were implemented.

The Genevese were a light-hearted, joyous people, fond of public amusements, dancing, singing, masquerades, and revelries. Reckless gambling, drunkenness, adultery, blasphemy, and all sorts of vice abounded. Prostitution was sanctioned by the authority of the State and superintended by a woman called the *Reine du bordel* [the “Brothel Queen”]. The people were ignorant. The priests had taken no pains to instruct them and had set them a bad example (Schaff, p. 4514).

One whole district in Geneva was designated for prostitution. Sister Jussie, one of the nuns who left Geneva when the bishopric was removed to Annecy, blamed the Protestant reformation of Geneva on the dissolute Catholic leaders.

“Ah,” she said, “the prelates and churchmen did not observe their vows at this time, but squandered dissolutely the ecclesiastical property, *keeping women in adultery and lubricity* [lewdness], and awakening the anger of God, which brought divine judgment on them” (Schaff, p. 4431).

After banishing Calvin and Farel in 1538, the city reverted to the moral chaos which prevailed before they came.

Tumults and riots multiplied in the streets; the schools were ruined by the expulsion of the best teachers; the pulpit lost its power; the new preachers [from Bern] became objects of contempt or pity; pastoral care was neglected; vice and immorality increased; the old licentiousness and frivolities, dancing, gambling, drunkenness, masquerades, indecent songs, adulteries, reappeared; persons went naked through the streets to the sound of drums and fifes (Schaff, p. 4563).

### III. Continuing Immorality in Reformed Churches in Germany

The Lutheran Reformation in Germany did not eliminate the carnal excess of the masses who often employed the doctrine of justification by faith as an excuse for immorality.

The fact is undeniable, that the Reformation in Germany was accompanied and followed by antinomian tendencies and a degeneracy of public morals. It rests not only on the hostile testimonies of Romanists and separatists, but Luther and Melancthon themselves often bitterly complained in their later years of the abuse of the liberty of the gospel and the sad state of morals in Wittenberg and throughout Saxony (Schaff, p. 3775, my pagination, and hereafter).

As a solution to this morally chaotic situation, Luther developed a system of visitation carried out by princes in their respective domains. It was supposed to be a temporary situation until properly ordained evangelical bishops could be put in their place.

It was a dangerous step, and the entering wedge of a new caesaropapacy—the rule of statecraft over priestcraft. But it seemed to be the only available help under the circumstances, and certainly served a very useful purpose. Luther had full confidence in the God-fearing Elector, that he would not abuse the authority thus temporarily conferred on him.

The Elector [John, brother to Frederick] directed Melancthon to prepare a "formula of doctrine and rites" for the instruction of the visitors....The work was finished in December, 1527.

Luther wrote a popular preface and notes to the German edition, and explained the object. He shows the importance of church visitation, from the example of the apostles and the primary aim of the episcopal office; "for a bishop, as the term indicates, is an overseer of the churches, and an archbishop is an overseer of the bishops. But the bishops have become worldly lords, and neglect their spiritual duties. Now, as the pure gospel has returned, or first begun, we need a true episcopacy; and, as nobody has a proper authority or divine command, we asked the Elector, as our divinely appointed ruler (Rom. 13), to exercise his authority for the protection and promotion of the gospel. Although he is not called to teach, he may restore peace and order, *as the Emperor Constantine did when he called the Council of Nicaea for the settlement of the Arian controversy.*" ... (emphasis mine)

The Elector appointed Luther, Melancthon, Jonas, Spalatin, and Myconius, besides some prominent laymen, among the visitors. They carried on their work in 1528 and 1529.

They found the churches in a most deplorable condition, which was inherited from the times of the papacy, and aggravated by the abuse of the liberty of the Reformation. Pastors and people had broken loose from all restraint, churches and schools were in ruins, the ministers without income, ignorant, indifferent, and demoralized. Some kept taverns, were themselves drunkards, and led a scandalous life. The people, of course, were no better. "The peasants," wrote Luther to Spalatin, "learn nothing, know nothing, and abuse all their liberty. They have ceased to pray, to confess, to commune, as if they were bare of all religion. As they despised popery, so they now despise us. It is horrible to behold the administration of the popish bishops."

"...the fear of God, and discipline are gone; the common people have lost all respect for the preachers, pay no more offerings, and let them starve; since the Pope's tyranny is abolished, everybody does as he pleases. We shall soon have no churches, no schools, no pupils, unless the magistrates restore order, and take care at least of the youth, whatever may become of the old people" (Schaff, pp. 4100-4101.).

#### IV. The Radical Reformers (Anabaptists)

##### A. Criticism of Reformed Congregations

The disconnect between faith and practice became one of many bones of contention between the *Magisterial Reformers* (Luther, Zwingli, and later, Calvin) and the *Radical Reformers* (Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Menno Simons. Menno Simons (1496-1561), founder of the Mennonites, writing about the same time as John Calvin, made this excoriating observation about Lutheranism:

"The Lutherans teach and believe that faith alone saves, without any contribution from works. They emphasise this doctrine so much, it looks as if works were totally unnecessary—in fact, as if faith by its nature could not tolerate any work standing beside it... They start up a psalm, 'The chain is broken, now we are free, praise the Lord!' while the beer and wine come running out of their drunken mouths and noses. Anyone who can simply recite this off by heart, no matter how sinfully he lives, is regarded as a good evangelical man and a brother!" (N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, pp. 282-283.

It appears from this quote that Menno denied justification by faith alone, thus ironically allying himself soteriologically with the same Roman Catholics who would have gladly roasted him alive had they caught up with him. Some historians have disputed this charge against Simons. Simons, like most Anabaptists, believed that the doctrine of justification by faith alone produced license. What is unclear is whether the Anabaptist objection to this doctrine came *before* their aversion to the moral license of many Lutherans or whether it came as a *consequence* of this aversion. [At any rate, it is always dangerous to formulate one's theology upon the practice of its adherents, which is commonly misleading. One must first ask himself, "Do the Scriptures teach this doctrine?" If they do, then he must ask, "What do the adherents misunderstand about the doctrine?"]

Luther himself lamented that the behavior among the Lutheran Reformed people was inferior to that of the Radicals. He had made the doctrine of justification by faith the quintessential platform of the Reformation against which standard everything else was to be measured. (For

this reason, Luther had denied the apostolicity of the book of *James*. Doctrine had become more important than practice.

“Doctrine and life are to be distinguished, the one from the other. *With us* [the Lutheran church in Germany] *conduct is as bad as it is with the papists*. We don’t oppose them [the papists] on account of conduct. Hus and Wyclif, who made an issue of conduct, were not aware of this...but to treat of doctrine, that is to really come to grips with things” (Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, p. 108, emphasis mine).

In fact, the litmus test of whether a person was an orthodox Lutheran reformed or an Anabaptist Radical was often made on the basis of his moral conduct. When some people were being investigated upon the charge of being Anabaptists, the following testimony was given:

Because their children are being so carefully and devoutly reared and because they do not have the practice of cursing and swearing, therefore they are suspected of being Anabaptists (Verduin, p. 108).

At the hearing of Hans Jeger, also accused of being an Anabaptist, we have the following:

Now because he does not swear and because he leads an unoffensive life, therefore men suspect him of Anabaptism...He has for a long time passed for such, because he did not swear, nor quarrel, nor did other such-like things (Verduin, pp. 108-109).

On the other hand, many people were cleared of the charge of Anabaptism by their bad deportment, for example, the case of Casper Zachers.

He is not commonly by the rank and file thought to be an Anabaptist, because he is a churlish fellow who can’t get along with others, starts fights and discord, swears and curses, disturbs the peace and carries weapons on his person (Verduin, p. 109).

The superiority in conduct among the Radicals was sadly acknowledged by the Reformed preachers of the Swiss city of Bern.

The Anabaptists have the semblance of outward piety to a far greater degree than we and all the other churches which in union with us confess Christ; and they avoid the offensive sins that are very common among us (Verduin, p. 109).

The successor to Zwingli in Zurich, Henry Bullinger, admitted the false accusations of Anabaptism against those in the Reformed church of Switzerland who were living upright lives.

There are those who in reality are not Anabaptists but who do have a pronounced aversion to the sensuality and frivolity of the world and for that reason reprove sin and vice and are *as a consequence* called or misnamed Anabaptists by petulant persons (Verduin, p. 109, emphasis mine).

Bullinger, unwilling to concede that the Anabaptists could be true Christians, concocted the theory that their good behavior was bait to attract naïve victims into their heretical sects.

Those who unite with them will by their ministers be received into their church by rebaptism and repentance and newness of life. They henceforth lead their lives under a semblance of quiet spiritual conduct. They denounce covetousness, pride, profanity, the lewd conversation and immorality of the world, the drinking and the gluttony. *In fine, their hypocrisy is great and manifold* .

[The exemplary lives of the Anabaptists are] hypocrisy, for ...even Satan can transform himself into an angel of light...he who wishes to catch fish does not throw out an unbaited hook (Verduin, p. 110, emphasis mine).

Nevertheless, Schaff writes that “Bullinger...gives the Zurich Radicals the credit that they denounced luxury, intemperance in eating and drinking, and all vices, and led a serious, spiritual life” (Schaff, p. 4310).

The reformer of Strasburg, Martin Bucer, lamented the fact that the reformed church was justly accused of moral laxity by the Anabaptists and that some of the magistrates and preachers of Strasburg were ungodly men. On the other hand, Bucer, like Luther, was careful to distinguish between *the priority of doctrine over that of practice*.

Their most pointed argument is always this that we keep house so badly; with this argument they lead astray many people. God help us, so that we may one day be able to take this argument away from them, yes from our own conscience and from the Lord our God. Of truth it is getting to be high time that...we deal seriously with the matter of our housekeeping... for if this is not considered and remedied all our counsels against this rod of the Lord will be in vain....

The magistrates are rather coarse and carnal men and the preachers are very neglectful; many of them frequently get drunk. Since the lords and the council-men are that kind of people...they drive the poor people away with their wild way of life....The plain man cannot bring himself to recognize the Church of Christ among such wild persons, and, *to distinguish correctly between doctrine and life* (Verduin, p. 111, emphasis mine).

Moreover, the Catholics themselves noticed the distinctive difference in conduct and character between those of the Catholic faith and those of the heretical Anabaptists.

Among the existing heretical sects there is none that in appearance leads a more modest or pious life than do the Anabaptists. As to their outward life they are without reproach—no lying, deception, swearing, strife, harsh language, no intemperate eating or drinking, no outward personal display; but humility, patience, uprightness, neatness, honesty, temperance, straight-forwardness, in such a measure that one would suppose that they had the Holy Spirit of God (Verduin, pp. 109-110).

The Roman Catholic, Salat, makes the following observation after witnessing many Anabaptist executions:

...with "cheerful, smiling faces, they desired and asked death, and went into it singing German psalms and other prayers” (Schaff, p. 4310).

## **B. Calvin’s Criticism of Schismatics**

Calvin acknowledged the discrepancy between faith and practice among the Reformed, but was unwilling to concede the justice of Anabaptist separatism.

The Cathari of old were of this sort, as well as the Donatists, who approached them in foolishness. Such today are some of the Anabaptists who wish to appear advanced beyond other men.

There are others who sin more out of ill-advised zeal for righteousness than out of that insane pride. When they do not see a quality of life corresponding to the doctrine of the gospel among those to whom it is announced, they immediately judge that no church exists in that place. ***This is a very legitimate complaint, and we give all too much occasion for it in this most miserable age.*** And our cursed sloth is not to be excused, for the Lord will not allow it to go unpunished, seeing that he has already begun to chastise it with heavy stripes. Woe to us, then, who act with such dissolute and criminal license that weak consciences are wounded because of us! But on their part those of whom we have spoken sin in that they do not know how to restrain their disfavor. For where the Lord requires kindness, they neglect it and give themselves over completely to immoderate severity. [Considering the punishments instituted in Geneva—see below—was this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?—DM] Indeed, because they think no church exists where there are not perfect purity and integrity of life, they depart out of hatred of wickedness from the lawful church, while they fancy themselves turning aside from the faction of the wicked.

They claim that the church of Christ is holy [Eph. 5: 26]. But in order that they may know that the church is at the same time mingled of good men and bad, let them hear the parable from Christ's lips that compares the church to a net in which all kinds of fish are gathered and are not sorted until laid out on the shore [Matt. 13: 47-58]. Let them hear that it is like a field sown with good seed which is through the enemy's deceit scattered with tares and is not purged of them until the harvest is brought into the threshing floor [Matt. 13: 24-30]. Let them hear finally that it is like a threshing floor on which grain is so collected that it lies hidden under the chaff until, winnowed by fan and sieve, it is at last stored in the granary [Matt. 3: 12]. But if the Lord declares that the church is to labor under this evil—to be weighed down with the mixture of the wicked—until the Day of Judgment, they are vainly seeking a church besmirched with no blemish (***Institutes of the Christian Religion***, IV. I. 13.).

Always penetrating, Calvin's views can never be casually dismissed. Although beyond the scope of this paper, his comments concerning the church in Corinth are helpful in understanding his irritation toward Anabaptist views.

But, they cry out, it is intolerable that a plague of vices rages far and wide. Suppose the apostle's opinion here again answers them. Among the Corinthians no slight number had gone astray; in fact, almost the whole body was infected. There was not one kind of sin only, but very many; and they were no light errors but frightful misdeeds; there was corruption not only of morals but of doctrine. What does the holy apostle—the instrument of the Heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the church stands or falls—do about this? Does he seek to separate himself from such? Does he cast them out of Christ's Kingdom? Does he fell them with the ultimate thunderbolt of anathema? He not only does nothing of the sort; he even recognizes and proclaims them to be the church of Christ and the communion of saints [1 Cor. 1: 2]! Among the Corinthians quarrels, division, and jealousies flare [1 Cor. 1: 11; 3: 3; 5: 1; 6: 7; 9: 1ff]; disputes and altercations burgeon

together with greed; an evil deed is openly approved which even pagans would detest [1 Cor. 5: 1]; the name of Paul (whom they ought to have honored as a father) is insolently defamed; some mock the resurrection of the dead, to the destruction of the whole gospel as well [1 Cor. 15: 12]; God's free gifts serve ambition, not love [cf. 1 Cor. 13: 5]; and many things are done without decency or order. Yet the church abides among them because the ministry of Word and sacraments remains unrepudiated there. Who, then, would dare snatch the title "church" from these who cannot be charged with even a tenth part of such misdeeds? What, I ask, would those who rage with such churlishness against present-day churches have done with the Galatians, all but deserters of the gospel, among whom this same apostle still recognized churches [Gal. 1: 2]? (*Institutes*, IV. I. 14.).

### C. Fanatical Fringes of the Radical Reformers

It must be said at this point that these positive descriptions of the Anabaptists do not apply to the fanatic, lunatic fringe of the Munster Radicals in northwestern Germany from 1534-35. The leaders of Munster claimed daily supernatural visions and argued for common property among all Christians and later argued for polygamy because of the increasing shortage of men in the city after a 16 month siege by Catholic troops. They put to death those who disagreed with them, and after the long siege those who had grown disillusioned with the Munster movement opened the gates to Catholic armies who quickly dispatched with John of Leiden's forces. Moreover, even after this rebellion had been defeated, and their leaders executed, a minority of the Dutch and German Anabaptists still cherished the vision of the kingdom of God on earth by means of violence and military force. Guerilla squads were organized by John of Batenburg who went about the countryside destroying church buildings and killing anyone who resisted them. But Menno Simons, through his preaching and exemplary behavior, was able to curb this violence and reclaim the original pacifism of the movement (Needham, pp. 279-280).

Perhaps this was Menno's greatest achievement, to convert Dutch and north German Anabaptism from a movement of revolutionary anarchism to a Church of peace-loving martyrs (Needham, p. 280).

To Menno, the theology of pacifism was intensely personal. At the same time the Munster rebellion was under way, His brother Peter Simons had joined a group of 300 militaristic Anabaptists who seized the monastery of Bolsward in March, 1535. The monastery was surrounded by government troops and all 300 of them were killed. A few months later in June, 1535, Munster fell, and its leader, John of Leiden, was executed. The Münster rebellion colored the entire Radical reformation as a fanatical movement, but by far the majority of the Radical Reformers repudiated the spiritualist and militaristic presuppositions which led to Munster. Most of them were pacifists who went so far as saying that Christians could not in good conscience become civil magistrates because their job required the use of force, a view which had been previously published in the Schleithem Confession (formulated in Schlatten am Rande) of February, 1527 (Needham, pp. 280-281).

The two ideas of a pure church of believers and of the baptism of believers were the fundamental articles of the Anabaptist creed. On other points there was a great variety and confusion of opinions. Some believed in the sleep of the soul between death and resurrection, a millennial reign of Christ, and final restoration; some entertained communistic and socialistic opinions which led to the catastrophe of Münster (1534). Wild excesses of immorality occurred here and there.



***But it is unjust to charge the extravagant dreams and practices of individuals upon the whole body.*** The Swiss Anabaptists had no connection with the Peasants' War [1524-25], which barely touched the border of Switzerland, and were upon the whole, like the Moravian Anabaptists, ***distinguished for simple piety and strict morality.***

The Anabaptists produced some of the earliest Protestant hymns in the German language, which deserve the attention of the historian. Some of them passed into orthodox collections in ignorance of the real authors....

They dwell on the inner life of the Christian, the mysteries of regeneration, sanctification, and personal union with Christ. They breathe throughout a spirit of piety, devotion, and cheerful resignation under suffering, and readiness for martyrdom. They are hymns of the cross, to comfort and encourage the scattered sheep of Christ ready for the slaughter, in imitation of their divine Shepherd (Schaff, pp. 4310-11; emphasis mine).

It cannot be denied, however, that the Anabaptists were guilty of egregious excess in their response to the preaching of Luther in Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland. We will discuss the Swiss Radicals later. In Germany, while Luther was hiding out in a castle in Wartburg under the protection of Frederick the Wise of Saxony, Carlstadt and his comrades, the ***Zwickau prophets***, were destroying icons and images in the Catholic churches of Wittenberg. One of them, Thomas Mūntzer (not to be confused with the city of Mūnster), was the leading Anabaptist leader in the Peasants' War of 1524-25. Mūntzer is the Radical Anabaptist who thus provides the "connecting link" between the Anabaptist movement in Wittenberg and the more violent social revolution of the Peasants' Revolt (Schaff, p. 4026). He had preached in Zwickau from 1521 to 1522. Some of the Zwickau excesses included the priority of direct revelation from God above the Scriptures and the need for church membership consisting only of believers who received this direct revelation. They also claimed direct communication with the angel Gabriel. The German peasants were drawn by Mūntzer's

...overflowing sympathy for the poor and oppressed which made him burn with a constant, smouldering sense of outrage against the ruling classes. In Muntzer's concept of reformation, the true churches of the Spirit-filled would be God's instruments for establishing a new society of justice and love, in which there would be no priest, nobles, princes, or private property, but perfect equality and democracy. If necessary, ũtaught, the elect would have to take up arms and impose this perfect society by force, slaughtering all the ungodly (Needham, pp. 129-30).

Undoubtedly, the same extremist views later erupted during the Mūnster episode from 1533-35, a decade later, during which the occupants of Mūnster who disagreed with the increasing fanaticism of its leaders were put to death. Mūntzer's signature was "Mūntzer with a hammer" and "Mūntzer with the sword of Gideon". Imagining himself as God's chosen prophet of the new dispensation, he encouraged open defiance against any existing spiritual and secular authorities and the killing of all the ungodly.

"Look not," he said, "on the sorrow of the ungodly; let not your sword grow cold from blood; strike hard upon the anvil of Nimrod [the princes]; cast his tower to the ground, because the day is yours" (Schaff, p. 4027, words in brackets his).

Thus we can understand Philip Schaff's statement that among the fringe Anabaptists "there was a great variety and confusion of opinions". The society of "justice and love" would

apparently have to wait until all the “ungodly” were slaughtered. He was the forerunner of modern socialism, communism, and anarchism (Schaff, p. 4027). However, to distance Mūntzer from the mainline Anabaptist movement, Schaff says that he “can hardly be called an Anabaptist and was disowned by the better portion” (p. 4311). Moreover, before we paint the entire Peasants’ Revolt with the broad brushstroke of fanaticism and anarchy, consider that before the killing started, the leaders of this movement petitioned the German princes to examine their grievances and demands; and that if any were not scriptural, they would withdraw them (Needham, p. 131, also found in Schaff). Their grievances were not addressed, and the fanatical leaders like Thomas Mūntzer carried the day with them. The poor peasants were desperate, and as I commonly say about the constant theft in African culture, “Desperate people do desperate things” (without excusing their sin).

#### **D. The Break between the Anabaptists and Zwingli**

Turning now to Switzerland, what happened between Zwingli and his erstwhile supporters among the Anabaptists? In September of 1523, some of Zwingli’s followers in Zurich responded to his preaching by disrupting Catholic worship services, stirring up strife over the payment of tithes, and smashing Catholic icons and images. In principle, Zwingli agreed with them that these things were wrong, but he also believed in a lawful society. To him, *Zurich was a Christian community* whose religious life should be sanctioned by the Christian political leaders of Zurich. He was also opposed to the suggestion from the Anabaptists to establish separatist congregations made up of “true” Christians, a principle which denied the long-established view that everyone in the city of Zurich was part of the Christian community by baptism and religious profession. Moreover, they were part of the Christian community in spite of any contrary evidence of poor behavior. In other words, the Anabaptists were pressuring Zwingli to abandon the long-held tradition of the *Corpus Christianum*—that everyone within a geo-political realm was considered Christian. He, on the other hand, wished only to reform the church by using the existing means of reform at his disposal, including the Christian magistrate (Needham, p. 256).

In October, 1523, a public disputation was held in Zurich on the question of using icons in the church. Zwingli argued that icons were not biblical and should be abolished from public worship. So far, so good, but that was as far as he was willing to take it. The decision to abolish icons was now up to the city council of Zurich and their magistrates. In other words, Zwingli believed that his job was done with the preaching of the word, and he was satisfied to take a gradualist approach. On the other hand, the job of the civil magistrate was not done. The city council, not individual citizens, and not Zwingli as pastor, had to decide what must be done about icons.

This marked the parting of the ways between Zwingli and the Radicals, who believed that something should be done immediately. One of them, Conrad Grebel, said, “Anyone who thinks, believes, or says that Zwingli is performing his duty as a pastor believes and says what is ungodly” (Needham, p. 257). After the Anabaptist leaders had been banished, some of their followers marched through the streets of Zurich denouncing Zwingli as the Great Red Dragon of the book of Revelation (Needham, pp. 255, 261). They denounced him as a hypocritical apostate because in principle Zwingli agreed with them about Catholic worship and icons. Earlier, Zwingli had also been sympathetic with the Anabaptist position on baptism (before inventing the derogatory term, “Anabaptist”), saying that it would be a better practice to baptize children after being instructed in the Christian faith (Needham, p. 268, also Schaff, p. 4309).

“I leave it untouched; I call it neither right nor wrong. If we were to baptize as Christ instituted it, then we would not baptize anyone until he reached the age of discretion” (Needham, p. 268).

However, a flat denial of the legitimacy of infant baptism would have compromised the *Corpus Christianum* ideal of Zurich as a Christian city, a platform of Zwingli’s theology which he could not relinquish. He therefore never denied the right of infant baptism which, to many, represented the incorporation into civil society.

The Anabaptists, on the other hand, viewed baptism as an ethical, symbolic break with the old sinful life and the initiation into the life of obedience. If, as Luther and Zwingli had both taught, the Lord’s Supper confers no benefits without faith, how could baptism? Zwingli responded to this criticism with an appeal to OT circumcision, thus laying some of the initial foundation for covenant theology. Luther went as far as presumptive regeneration, believing that “baptism, as God’s visible Word, actually creates a seed of faith in the baptized infant” (Needham, pp. 268-270).

### **E. Persecution of Anabaptists by Reformed Churches in Switzerland**

Fundamentally, Zwingli was a Constantinian who disagreed with the Anabaptists over the separation of church and state. But while the leaders of the Radicals (all of them educated men) were fighting their battles with words, their uneducated followers (peasants and farmers) were putting feet to their words by disrupting Reformed worship services in various parishes of the canton (politically equivalent to a US state) of Zurich, the very same thing that happened in Wittenberg. But their activity in Zurich and Wittenberg was nothing close to the bloody events of the Peasants’ Revolt during which over one thousand castles and convents were destroyed, hundreds of villages burned to ashes, and priests tortured, hanged, beheaded, or burned to death (Schaff, p. 4029-30). Timing is important. The problems in Zurich began in January, 1525; the Peasants’ Revolt was still going strong in the fall of 1525. The Swiss Reformers’ attitude toward Anabaptist ideas had already been heavily influenced by the bloody revolution in Germany. Thus, the religious motives of the Swiss Radicals to separate into their own congregations were easily interpreted as politically seditious.

In response to these aggressive tactics, the Zurich city council held a disputation on the subject of baptism in January, 1525. Zwingli and Bullinger defended infant baptism while Grebel, Mantz, and two others defended believer’s baptism. Zwingli and Bullinger were awarded victory by the council. The parents of families in the various parishes who had refused to bring their children for baptism were thereby ordered by the city council to present them for baptism. If not, the families would be banished from the canton of Zurich. No baptism; no citizenship. Moreover, all Anabaptist preaching on baptism and all Anabaptist religious services were forbidden.

Unwilling to subject themselves to this ruling, the Anabaptists continued to organize themselves into separatist churches. For us as modern Christians, we hardly know what the fuss was about. Churches split all the time over things which have no ostensible theological foundation—building programs which some members want and some don’t want, relocating the church, the calling of a certain pastor rather than another pastor, or—as the proverbial joke goes—the color of the choir robes or the location of a water fountain. (At least, I hope this saying got started as a joke.) But in the medieval mindset, one’s faith was the unifying

principle of life and community. Separation into different religious groups was an aberration which upset the community because religion was the glue that held society together.

Consequently, Zwingli saw no inconsistency with his Christian faith when the city council rounded up the leaders of the Radicals and put them in jail. The Radicals were banished from the city of Zurich but continued preaching within the canton (or state) of Zurich. They were rounded up a second time and jailed. Another disputation followed, ending predictably in their defeat. Totally frustrated with the Radicals, the city council warned them in March, 1526, that the penalty of rebaptizing was death by drowning—the cruel irony imposed by the Reformed church and Catholic Church, as if to say, “You want to be re-baptized? Okay. Here it is, but it will be your last.” Of course, the Anabaptists refused to submit their consciences to a secular council that had usurped the prerogatives of the church. They continued preaching. Mantz was rounded up, had his hands and feet bound together and was dropped into Limmat River—the first of six Anabaptists leaders drowned in the Limmat from 1527 to 1532 (Schaff, p. 3793). Blaurock was beaten and released, only because he was not a citizen of Zurich; otherwise, he would have suffered the same treatment as Mantz. He made it to Innsbruck, was rounded up by the Catholics and burned at the stake. Grebel avoided execution by dying of the plague in the summer of 1526. Hubmaier, after a rough handling by Zwingli and a forced recantation, was released only to be burned at the stake in 1528 by the Catholics. His wife was drowned three days later (Needham, *“Flowers for the Bees: the Radical Reformation”* in *Two Thousand Years of Christ’s Power—Part Three: Renaissance and Reformation*).

Other Swiss cantons took the same measures against the Anabaptists as Zurich. In Zug, Lorenz Fürst was drowned, Aug. 17, 1529. In Appenzell, Uliman and others were beheaded, and some women drowned. At Basel, Oecolampadius held several disputations with the Anabaptists, but without effect; whereupon the Council banished them, with the threat that they should be drowned if they returned (Nov. 13, 1530). The Council of Berne adopted the same course (Schaff, p. 4312).

Ironically, the Swiss Reformers treated the Catholic armies of the Swiss Forest cantons with respect and mercy during the First War of Cappel in 1529. Schaff gives this account:

The hostile armies faced each other from Cappel and Baar, but hesitated to advance. Catholic guards would cross over the border to be taken prisoners by the Zürichers, who had an abundance of provision, and sent them back well fed and clothed. Or they would place a large bucket of milk on the border line and asked the Zürichers for bread, who supplied them richly; whereupon both parties peacefully enjoyed a common meal, and when one took a morsel on the enemy’s side, he was reminded not to cross the frontier. The soldiers remembered that they were Swiss confederates, and that many of them had fought side by side on foreign battlefields. “We shall not fight,” they said; and pray God that the storm may pass away without doing us any harm.” Jacob Sturm, the burgomaster of Strasburg, who was present as a mediator, was struck with the *manifestation of personal harmony and friendship in the midst of organized hostility*. “*You are a singular people,*” he said; *“though disunited, you are united”* (Schaff, p. 4371; emphasis mine).

## F. Persecution of Anabaptists in Catholic Domains

The Anabaptists suffered far more in Catholic domains than in Swiss cantons. In 1528, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, ordered that Anabaptists be executed *on the basis of an ancient Roman law which had been instituted during the time of the Donatist rebellion in North Africa*. In Luther's Saxony, Anabaptists were accused of heresy and sedition. Heresy could be punished by the church and sedition by the state, thus exposing the Anabaptists to both excommunication by the church and execution by the state. *Gonzalez estimates that more people died of martyrdom during this period of time than in all three centuries of persecution before the time of Constantine*. Some were subjected to the cruel irony of death by drowning, others by burning; still others were drawn and quartered (Gonzalez, pp. 56-57).

In the city of Görz, Catholic forces set fire to a house in which Anabaptists were worshipping. By 1531, one thousand Anabaptists had been executed in Tyrol and Görz, six hundred in Ensisheim. Seventy-three were executed in Linz within a period of six weeks. Not to be outdone, Duke William of Bavaria burned Anabaptists who *refused* to recant and beheaded those who *agreed* to recant, sparing none. Schaff describes their relentless persecution in Catholic countries with these words,

Throughout the greater part of Upper Germany the persecution raged like a wild chase.... The blood of these poor people flowed like water so that they cried to the Lord for help.... But hundreds of them *of all ages* and both sexes suffered the pangs of torture without a murmur, despised to buy their lives by recantation, and went to the place of execution joyfully and singing psalms" (Schaff, p. 4313; emphasis mine).

The irony of the situation was that the *original pacifism* of the Radical movement had been deemed unacceptable and threatening to the social order of Germany which was always in danger of the threatening hordes of Turks always knocking on its doors. *Now that this initial pacifism of the first generation of Radicals had been violently suppressed, the movement took a turn for the worse by means of violent revolution* (Gonzalez, pp. 56-57).

## V. Fundamental Reason for the Persecution of Anabaptists

So why were the Radical Reformers in Switzerland persecuted? The Peasants' Revolt in Germany undoubtedly incited suspicions of subversion, but fundamentally there were differences over the question: *What is the church and what is its relationship to the state?* Shortly after the martyrdom of Felix Mantz in 1526, the Anabaptists convened what is now known as the *Schleitheim* conference in which the Anabaptist confession was drawn up with the following items: (1) believer's baptism; (2) believer's-only participation in the Lord's Supper; (3) separation of believers from unbelievers in all things religious and political; (4) the importance of the pastoral office; (5) pacifism and non-violence and the rejection of the magistrate as a legitimate Christian calling; (6) rejection of oaths; and (7) the rigorous use of excommunication, *the ban*, as an important means of purging the church of unbelievers. It was this last item which became the most important distinction in Anabaptist churches (Needham, pp. 256-263).

### A. Anabaptist Doctrine Set Forth in the Schleitheim Confession

It is very interesting that theological doctrines other than baptism were ignored by the *Schleitheim Confession*—doctrines concerning God, Christ, or salvation. *One theory* is that they, as a group, were together on most of these things and wanted to formulate a confession dealing only with the controversial things which caused a separation with the Reformers. But this theory doesn't really hold up in light of the fact that there were many theological issues besides baptism which separated them from Reformed churches. For example the Anabaptists were anti-Augustinian in their view of man, grace, and salvation. By and large they were Pelagian in their view of human nature, and they rejected the Lutheran view of the bondage of man's will. Man was *not* born with a sinful nature, and he could respond willingly to God's saving grace. They were Semi-Pelagian in their view of grace. Sinful men had the ability to reject grace. They were also against predestination which also did not fit into their interpretation of man's free will.

*Another theory* is that the Anabaptists as a group were not so much interested in theology as Christian lifestyle, and this seems to be the answer to the lack of theology in the Schleitheim Confession. It was *lifestyle, not dogma*, which dominated their thinking from the very time they suggested to Zwingli that they form congregations of the faithful which were separate from the general citizenry of Zurich—a church *within* the state rather than a *state* church. The Reformers were more concentrated on the doctrinal issues, as we have seen in one quote from Luther and another from Bucer. From Luther,

Doctrine and life are to be distinguished, the one from the other. *With us* [the Lutheran church in Germany] *conduct is as bad as it is with the papists*. We don't oppose them on account of conduct. Hus and Wyclif, who made an issue of conduct, were not aware of this...but to treat of doctrine, that is to really come to grips with things (Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, p. 108, emphasis mine).

And from Bucer,

The plain man cannot bring himself to recognize the Church of Christ among such wild persons, and, *to distinguish correctly between doctrine and life* (Verduin, p. 111, emphasis mine).

In Schaff's estimation,

*Calvin aimed at a reformation of discipline as well as theology*, and established a model theocracy in Geneva, which lasted for several generations. Luther contented himself with a reformation of faith and doctrine, *leaving the practical consequences to time*, but bitterly lamented the Antinomian disorder and abuse which for a time threatened to neutralize his labors in Saxony (Schaff, p. 4264; emphasis mine).

[But as we have seen, Luther did take serious steps to discipline the church through the use of German princes under the supervision of the Elector of Saxony.]

Nevertheless, the Radical Reformation was deeply theological in the sense that they rejected any doctrinal position which they believed *threatened the primacy of holy living*. They rejected *justification by faith alone* apart from the necessity of good works because, in their view, it produced the license to sin—the very same accusation pronounced against the doctrine by the Roman Catholic Church. *Predestination* would be viewed with similar suspicion. For them, if a person is elect before the foundation of the world, there would be

no need for repentance and faith. **Total depravity**, in turn, would make man's faith depend ultimately on the activity of God, rendering the demand of repentance a moot point. They also rejected **infant baptism** because it seemed to emphasize the possibility of entry into the church by being **born** rather than **reborn**. **Fundamentally, the Anabaptists rejected the Reformed distinction between justification and sanctification.** Forensic justification, in which a person is declared to be righteous before God by faith, was a threat to the life of obedience. Justification and sanctification were intertwined as a **process** whereby a person was made holy and justified before God. "As one historian has argued, for the Magisterial Reformers, the essential question was, 'What must I do to be saved?', but for the Anabaptists, it was, 'How should a Christian live?'" This focus on subjective holiness won them the criticism of Luther who called the Anabaptists "the new monks" (Needham, p. 264-266). Just as Luther's theology was driven by his emphasis on justification by faith, causing him to reject the apostolicity of the book of **James**, Anabaptist theology was driven by the doctrine of sanctification, causing them to question any doctrine which appeared to sacrifice the call to holy living.

There may have never been a Reformation without the appalling moral degeneration throughout Roman Catholic Europe. The theology of the Roman Catholic Church was judged deficient **first by its fruits** which were morally destitute, **not by its theology.** We will never know what would have happened, for instance, if Luther's journey to Rome had been a positive, morally uplifting experience confirming the efficiency of the church in producing a godly Christians. If he had had this experience, would he have come to the light of justification by faith alone in the book of **Romans**? Likewise, had Luther's Wittenberg and Zwingli's Zurich reflected moral order, the Swiss Radicals would have been robbed of their arguments for a church separate from society.

Schaff agrees with Verduin that "the baptismal question was secondary." The Radical Reformation "involved an entire **reconstruction of the Church and of the social order.** It meant revolution" (p. 4306; emphasis mine).

The Reformers aimed to reform the old Church by the Bible; the Radicals attempted to build a new Church from the Bible. The former maintained the historic continuity; the latter went directly to the apostolic age, and **ignored** the intervening centuries as an apostasy. The Reformers founded a popular state-church, including all citizens with their families; the Anabaptists organized on the voluntary principle select congregations of baptized believers, separated from the world and from the State. Nothing is more characteristic of radicalism and sectarianism than an **utter want of historical sense and respect for the past.** In its extreme form it rejects even the Bible as an external authority, and relies on inward inspiration. This was the case with the Zwickau Prophets who threatened to break up Luther's work at Wittenberg (Schaff, pp. 4306-07; emphasis mine).

Schaff has a point about the **lack of historical continuity** in sectarianism; yet he would have to admit that the Magisterial Reformers were making their own break with history, and if they had not done so, where would the church be today? He admits the distinction between most of the Anabaptists and the extreme fringes of the movement. He also says that the Radicals "ignored the intervening centuries as an apostasy"; yet, much of what we see in the centuries between the Apostles and the Reformation can be, and should be, described as apostasy. What other word can be used to describe it?

I also do not believe Schaff is entirely equitable in pointing out that sectarianism in its “extreme form... rejects even the Bible as an external authority, and relies on inward inspiration.” This is surely true, and the Swickau prophets proved it. However, it should also be said that the Magisterial Reform in *its* “extreme form” resorted to *special pleading* from the Bible and a speculative interpretation of Luke 14: 23, “compel them to come in”, which supported their Constantinianism—a text which Augustine used, as well as many of his Reformed admirers, to justify political force against heretics. They also “ignored” as historically obsolete Jesus’ rebuke to Peter to put away the sword and that those who live by the sword will also perish by the sword, and Christ’s statement to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36 NASB). It is the same kind of special pleading that goes on in many theological battles today. We keep strangely quiet about the texts of Scripture which don’t support our position.

Schaff, who is generally fair with the Anabaptist, does say that

The Radicals made use of the right of protest against the Reformation, which the Reformers so effectually exercised against popery. They raised a protest against Protestantism. They charged the Reformers with inconsistency and semipopery; yea, with the worst kind of popery. They denounced the state-church as worldly and corrupt, and its ministers as mercenaries [mercenaries of the state which paid their salaries]. They were charged in turn with pharisaical pride, with revolutionary and socialistic tendencies. They were cruelly persecuted by imprisonment, exile, torture, fire and sword, and almost totally suppressed in Protestant as well as in Roman Catholic countries. The age was not ripe for unlimited religious liberty and congregational self-government. The Anabaptists perished bravely as martyrs of conscience (Schaff, pp. 4306-07).

[Returning to John 18, Pilate made it clear with his question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” that he was interested in any possible threat to Rome’s political authority in Palestine. Jesus makes it clear with his answer that, although a king, His kingdom is unlike any other kingdom with which Pilate is familiar and is, therefore, no political threat to Rome or to Pilate—at least, not in any sense that Pilate would understand. His kingdom had no *immediate* interest in physical territory or worldly dominions which must be conquered with sword and spear. “Immediate” must be emphasized lest we forget that the whole purpose of Jesus coming into the world was to regain what had been compromised in the fall—the whole physical universe and a people for God’s own possession. Thus, Jesus does not suggest that His kingdom has no goal of conquering this present world, but that the *method of dominion* is entirely different, a difference which is very evident in the fact that His disciples are not presently fighting to keep Him from being handed over to the Jews. Moreover, Christ had a few hours earlier suppressed any such military interpretation of his kingdom by ordering Peter to put down his sword and by undoing the damage Peter had done—by restoring the man’s ear (Lk. 22: 51) and thereby showing love to His enemies (Matt. 5: 44).

Therefore, to say that Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world does not imply a distinction between a *spiritual* kingdom versus a *physical* kingdom. The Kingdom of Christ is both physical and spiritual. The distinction is in the method of inauguration, development, and fulfillment. And this is why the kingdom of Christ is unstoppable. Even the most powerful armies on earth can be stopped, and have been stopped; but ideas and influence which rest upon infallible truth cannot be stopped any more than the law of gravity can be stopped. “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh,<sup>4</sup> for the weapons of our



warfare **are not of the flesh**, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. <sup>5</sup> *We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking **every thought captive to the obedience of Christ**” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 NASB; emphasis mine).

It is no coincidence that Zwingli’s Reformation was stopped for a time when he perished at the Battle of Cappel (1531) or that the Crusades centuries before secured no lasting Christian foothold among the Muslims. Wrong method. It seems that every time the church has strapped on the sword and made one step forward to convert people through the sword, the gospel of Christ has taken three steps back. I am not suggesting that nations which are ostensibly Christian are not allowed to protect their borders, or that the American Revolution was an illegitimate rebellion. I am not saying that the OT law, properly interpreted and contextualized for modern society, should not be used in modern jurisprudence. Any form of legal justice is the legislation of morality. You can’t escape from the legislation of some kind of morality, and I would rather it be biblical morality. I am also not saying that natural law is the proper substitute for biblical law in modern legal theory, since the knowledge of God and nature is suppressed and distorted by the natural man. I am simply saying that you can’t evangelize the world with military might nor can you maintain an orthodox theology by employing the civil magistrate to eliminate minority denominations. God must be worshipped in spirit and truth, not through coercion, lest worship become a mockery. Such means misunderstand the discontinuity between the Old Covenant administration and the New Covenant administration—the difference between full-grown sons and children under a disciplinarian (Gal. 4: 1-6), the difference between the Church and Israel.]

## **B. The Influence of Erasmus upon the Swiss Anabaptists**

### **1. Positive features of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century humanism**

Many Anabaptist ideas were the result of the influence of the humanist Erasmus (1466-1536). And here, we must not think of Erasman humanism in league with the secular humanism of the present day which is thoroughly anti-Christian. Furthermore, the humanism of England and Germany was more Scriptural than that of France and Italy, in spite of the Christian emphasis of the French humanist, Jacque Lefevre, and the Italian humanist, Francesco Petrarch. The humanists of England and Germany were far more preoccupied with the church Fathers and the Greek New Testament than the humanists of Italy and France who were more impressed with the Greek philosophers, Cicero and Plato. [Pope Leo X was a product of Italian humanism with its emphasis on the arts rather than the Bible.] German humanists wished to clear people’s minds of ignorance and superstition through education for the purpose of nurturing Christian citizens to use their God-given abilities in art, business, craftsmanship, and politics. So we can see that the Christian humanism of the Renaissance was different from the secular humanism of today and differed greatly even among European countries. Moreover, we can see the humanism of Erasmus, whom Calvin revered, reflected in the theology of the Reformation and its emphasis upon living one’s whole life for the glory of God, not simply his religious life. This was the mistake of Medieval theology with its contempt for the present life and its preoccupation with “death, judgment, heaven, and hell” (Needham, pp. 15-25). The present life was just something to get through and survive until a person got to heaven. Not so for humanism, nor indeed for Calvin who believed all of life was to be lived for the glory of God.

### **2. Erasmus’ theology**

Erasmus wanted to use the tools of humanism to reform society. He believed in the Bible as divine revelation and fervently encouraged others to study it. Schaff says, “He anticipated Luther in the supreme estimate of the word of God as the true source of theology and piety” and it is a well-known statement of his Catholic enemies, “Erasmus laid the egg [of the Reformation] and Luther hatched it.” But he refused to follow Luther in his eventual separation from the Roman Catholic Church. He also differed with Luther over the “bondage of the will”, publishing his book, *The Freedom of the Will* in 1524, thus calling forth Luther’s response, *The Bondage of the Will* in 1525. Erasmus also rejected Luther’s doctrine of eternal predestination and taught that “conversion and salvation were a shared work of human free will and divine grace; grace was essential, but free will must cooperate with it and could always at any point reject it”—a Semi-Pelagian view denying the irresistibility of God’s grace (Needham, pp. 134-135). Melancthon, initially agreeing with Luther, later modified his views of human will to a more Erasmian and semi-Pelagian view, partly due to Erasmus’ influence. Erasmus also denied justification by faith alone (Schaff, 4018).

### **3. Erasmus’ concern about the excesses of the Reformation**

More importantly for our purposes, Erasmus believed that some of the Reformed doctrines were producing moral laxity and abusive behavior in Lutheran churches. Here is what he said.

“Where is your dovelike spirit? Did the apostles spread the gospel in the way you do? You cry out against the luxury of priests, the ambition of bishops, the tyranny of the pope, the prattling of scholastics, against prayers and fasts and masses. But your purpose is not so much to reform as to destroy. You will uproot the wheat along with the tares! Look at these ‘Evangelicals’ of yours. Are they any less enslaved to luxury, immorality, and money? The gospel is supposed to make the drunkard sober and the cruel person kind. But I can show you people whom your preaching has made worse than ever! You throw images out of the churches, but what good is that if people continue to bow down to sins in their hearts?” (Needham, p. 136).

According to Schaff, “The Lutheran tragedy...gave [Erasmus] more pain than the stone which tortured him.” At the end of his life (1536, the year Calvin was invited to Geneva) in two letters to his friend, John Froben, he confessed,

“It is part of my unhappy fate that my old age has fallen on these evil times when quarrels and riots prevail everywhere”.... “This new gospel is producing a new set of men so impudent, hypocritical, and abusive, such liars and sycophants, who agree neither with one another nor with anybody else, so universally offensive and seditious, such madmen and ranters, and in short so utterly distasteful to me that if I knew of any city in which I should be free from them, I would remove there at once” (Schaff, p. 4011).

### **4. Erasmus’ emphasis on Christian life-style rather than doctrine—rejection of Constantinianism and acceptance of religious liberty**

Erasmus was not primarily interested in doctrinal disputes.

He emphasized the moral, and depreciated the doctrinal element in Christianity. He deemed the Apostles' Creed sufficient, and was willing to allow within this limit freedom for theological opinions. "Reduce the number of dogmas," he advised Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, "to a minimum; you can do it without injury to Christianity; *on other points, leave every one free to believe what he pleases*; then religion will take hold on life, and you can correct the abuses of which the world justly complains" (Schaff, p. 4013, emphasis mine).

Spoken in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this was an amazing statement which distanced Erasmus from the prevailing practice of punishing heretics. Erasmus believed in religious liberty which made room for differences of opinion at least on those points which were not essential to the Christian faith.

For Erasmus, the teaching of Christ on the *Sermon on the Mount* summarized the essence of what it meant to be a Christian—living a pure Christ-like life. Although a brilliant humanist scholar, he took a very "minimal attitude to doctrine" (Needham, p. 37). "He wished," says Schaff, "a reform of the discipline, but not of the faith, of the church and cared little for dogmatic controversies." As you can see from some of the previous quotations, he loved peace rather than controversy. He also admitted that he cringed at the thought of martyrdom and would likely follow the example of Peter (Schaff, p. 4013). But in his extolling of the *Sermon on the Mount* we can readily see his selectivity of choosing what he likes and dismissing what he doesn't like. After all, Christ spends a lot of time explaining the deeper implications of the Law of Moses and expects people to keep it. I think that Erasmus—as well as the Anabaptists—concentrated more on the *Beatitudes* in the *Sermon on the Mount* as well as passages like, Matt. 5: 43-44, "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44 NASB).

Although Erasmus emphasized the importance of studying the Bible in the original languages, historians will point out that the Old Testament was not Erasmus' favorite book. To quote Needham, "He did not stress Hebrew because he was not very interested in the Old Testament; he found it a rather crude and violent sort of book" (Needham, p. 37). Naturally then, Erasmus would have objected to capital punishment for idolatry in the OT and certainly to capital punishment of heretics in Zurich, Basel, Geneva, and other cities in Europe. In this sense, he was ahead of his day theologically before the discontinuity between the OT and the NT had been thoroughly examined. Calvin and Zwingli based their magisterial discipline of heretics strictly upon the Mosaic Law which apparently Erasmus thought "rather crude and violent" (Needham's words).

[And let's face it, the debate between continuity and discontinuity still rages in Reformed circles, not so much in non-Reformed circles where everyone has become "a New Testament Christian". Probably many evangelical Christians today, like Erasmus, consider some parts of the OT somewhat of an embarrassment. I remember preaching a sermon a few years ago at a conference for missionaries in Uganda. I preached from 2 Samuel 8 and 9. The ninth chapter is about David's kindness to Mephibosheth, but the eighth chapter includes the story about David lining up the defeated Moabites with their faces to the ground. He spares one line but executes the other two lines. The point of my sermon was that David is a type of Christ, sparing those in covenant relationship to him but coming in wrathful judgment upon his enemies who are not in covenant relationship with him. I received some very positive comments about the part dealing with Mephibosheth, but none at all concerning David's

treatment of the Moabites—in spite of what the writer says about David in 2 Samuel 8, “And the Lord helped David wherever he went”. This occurs twice in the passage for emphasis. Well, anyway.)

Erasmus was especially disturbed by the hatred exhibited between professing Christians of the Reformed camp who differed over theological issues which he deemed as nonessential. For example, he lived until 1536, seven years after the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 when Luther and Zwingli parted company, forever, over the ubiquity of Christ’s body in the bread and wine. The two Reformed camps of Switzerland and Germany had agreed on 14 out of 15 points, but disagreed over this one point. While Zwingli extended his hand of Christian fellowship to Luther, Luther would not shake it; and to he seriously questioned the sincerity of Zwingli’s conversion.

Aquinas especially objected to Luther’s writing style and manner—what Luther called his “peasant’s axe”—which offended Erasmus’ more cultured sensibilities. In 1521, he wrote in a letter,

"If Luther had written more moderately, even though he had written freely, he would both have been more honored himself, and done more good to the world; but fate has decreed otherwise. I only wonder that the man is still alive ...” (Schaff, p. 4020).

Luther was equally critical of Erasmus. In a letter to Oecolampadius, the Reformer of Strasburg, he wrote,

"May the Lord strengthen you in your proposed explanation of Isaiah..., although Erasmus, as I understand, does not like it....He has done what he was ordained to do: he has introduced the ancient languages, in the place of injurious scholastic studies. He will probably die like Moses in the land of Moab. He does not lead to better studies which teach piety. I would rather he would entirely abstain from explaining and paraphrasing the Scriptures, for he is not up to this work....He has done enough to uncover the evil; but to reveal the good and to lead into the land of promise is not his business, in my opinion” (Schaff, p. 4021).

Quoting Schaff,

Luther abandoned Erasmus, and abused him as the vainest creature in the world, as an enraged viper, a refined Epicurean, a modern Lucian, a scoffer, a disguised atheist, and enemy of all religion. We gladly return from this gross injustice to his earlier estimate, expressed in his letter to Erasmus as late as April, 1524: “The whole world must bear witness to your successful cultivation of that literature by which we arrive at a true understanding of the Scriptures; and this gift of God has been magnificently and wonderfully displayed in you, calling for our thanks.”

## **5. Erasmus’ Influence: Conclusion**

Well, again, what is Erasmus’ connection with the Anabaptists? The Anabaptist leaders in Switzerland—Grebel, Mantz, and Hubmaier—were all educated scholars who had studied

Erasmian humanism. Virtually every educated man in Europe had studied Erasmus, including Calvin. Needham says that Erasmus “was the first thinker in history to see his own ideas become internationally famous in his lifetime. He wrote some 226 works: two and a half million copies of them were circulated. He was called ‘the schoolmaster of Europe’” (Needham, p. 33). Everyone: Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, the Radical Swiss included, had studied Erasmus at one time or another, and everyone agreed with him on certain issues—the Anabaptists much more than the Reformers. The Anabaptists subscribed to Erasmus’ theology which denied the bondage of the will, predestination, and irresistible grace. And although Erasmus did not repudiate infant baptism, he did say that a person could be baptized again once he reached an age in which he could understand the significance of the sacrament (Needham, p. 36), a view which was once shared by Zwingli.

The agreement with Erasmus on many points of theology was substantially important; but one was more significant than all others—*his toleration of religious dissent in areas not essential to the Christian faith*. In this toleration, he was out of step with traditional Constantinianism. As long as the Radical Reformers could worship according their conscience, these other differences—baptism included—would have passed by as footnotes in history. The reason that they are not footnotes is the wholesale acceptance of *Constantinianism* by the *Magisterial Reformers* who could not allow the Anabaptists to “de-Christianize” the state through their doctrine of the church.

## VI. The Constantinianism of the Magisterial Reformers

### A. The Constantinian “Change”

The Constantinian “*change*” marked the transition from state-sponsored *pagan* worship to state-sponsored *Christian* worship was initially set in motion at the Edict of Milan in 313 when Christianity was given legal status in the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great. Constantine was a Roman emperor who was supposedly converted to the Christian religion in the thick of the battle at Milvian Bridge. When Christianity was legalized in 313 and later made the established religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius in 380-381, Christianity became the *new substitute* for the old Roman religions which bound society together into a common loyalty (Cairns, p. 125). Since religion was the glue that held society together, the ancient Christians were persecuted and killed in the Roman arenas for their “atheism” and their treason to the emperor for not bowing the knee to the state religion and being loyal members of Roman society.

There was nothing essentially different about ancient Rome from ancient Babylon of which we read in the prophecy of *Daniel 3* that Daniel’s three friends along with the satraps and governors of all the provinces, “men of every language” representing the conquered nations of Babylon, were ordered to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s 90-foot golden statue. It was Nebuchadnezzar’s way of establishing the common religion of Babylon that cemented the society together. Of course, you could worship other gods if you wished, but you also must participate as a good citizen in the *common religion* which prevented the whole empire from splintering in every direction. Daniel and his three friends, as well as all committed Christians during the first three centuries AD, could remain true to their faith only by worshipping their God exclusively.

[A modern version of common religion is John Dewey’s theory of state-sponsored public education. Apart from the thousands of godly Christian teachers and administrators who work

in public schools, Dewey's goal for public education was the propagation of secular humanism. He said that the "rotting corpse of Christianity will be buried under the new religion of secular humanism" inculcated in the public schools. Though not yet buried, many elites in public education have done a very efficient job in suppressing the Christian faith.]

There are divergent views of the genuineness of Constantine's conversion. Some say it was genuine; others say that he was simply using Christianity the same way other pagan emperors used the Roman religions. Concerning Constantine's conversion, E. E. Cairns has the following perspective:

When his enemies seemed about to overwhelm him in 312, he had a vision of a cross in the sky with the words, "in this sign conquer" in Latin. Taking it as a favorable omen, he went on to defeat his enemies at the battle of the Milvian bridge over the Tiber River. Though the vision may have occurred, it is likely that Constantine's favoritism to the church was a matter of expediency. ***The church might serve as a new center of unity and save classical culture and the empire.*** The fact that he delayed baptism till shortly before his death and kept the position of Pontifex Maximus, chief priest of the pagan state religion, would seem to support this view. Moreover, his execution of the young men who might have had claim to his throne was not in keeping with the conduct of a sincere Christian (*Christianity Through the Centuries*, Earle E. Cairns, p. 124, emphasis mine).

Similarly, Leonard Verduin questions the validity of Constantine's conversion.

The facts are that Constantine was a worried statesman, as well he might have been. The empire he had inherited was coming apart at the seams. He had his sleepless nights about this fact. How could he conquer this problem: How bind the sprawling domains together again? How regain the ancient stability and inner cohesion? Then came the much celebrated "vision," a cross in the clouds and the words... (in this sign conquer). There he had it! Make the religion of Jesus the religion of the empire and then look to it to achieve the consensus that he, sacralist that he was, and remained, felt he had to have (Verduin, p. 31).

N.R. Needham writes that Constantine constructed churches with his own money and gave gifts to local congregations. He also incorporated Christian bishops into the Empire's court system. In a civil law suit, the two opposing parties could present their case to the local bishop whose decision would have all the force of law. Thus far, these measures would be consistent with Constantine's desire to establish the Christian religion as substitute to the old pagan religion. However, he also did other things which in Needham's estimation "reveal an enlightened conscience at work". He set up a system of "child maintenance grants" for children of poor families, thus discouraging the prevalent Roman custom of killing or exposing unwanted children at birth. (In spite of what we personally believe about social welfare, this measure shows genuine concern for children and families going beyond merely an interest in a statist religion.) He outlawed crucifixion as a form of execution as well as branding a criminal on the forehead with a heated branding iron with the explanation, "because the human face, created in the image of heavenly beauty, should not be disfigured." He also attempted to outlaw the gladiatorial games, but he failed in this attempt (Needham, p. 165).

His record, therefore, has exemplary elements which give evidence of genuine conversion. The difference of opinion among historians and theologians pertains to the long-term

consequences to the church which Constantine set in motion. Many people still believe that the Constantinian era is the *ideal* toward which the church should strive. Verduin thinks otherwise. Concerning the Edict of Milan in 313, he says,

“We can easily imagine the joy of the Christians in having finally obtained a firm guarantee against the persecutions, but we are not obliged to share that elation”; but one cannot stomach any longer the hundreds of pages of extravagant praise heaped on Constantinus Magnus by his biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea! For it is and remains a fact that **“Christianity grows alien to its essence when it is made into law for those who have been merely born instead of reborn.”** Yet that is what the Constantinian change effected (Verduin, p. 31, emphasis mine).

From Eusebius’ “Oration of the Emperor Constantine”, we read, “Our divinely favored emperor, receiving, as it were, a transcript of divine sovereignty, directs, in imitation of God himself, the administration of this world’s affairs.” “With divine mandate, therefore, the emperor ‘subdues and chastens the open adversaries of the truth in accordance with the usages of war’” (my thanks to Mike Boyett for this quotation from Eusebius and comment).

Verduin is well aware that it was much later that Christianity became the legal religion of the Roman Empire. It was not until Theodosius in 380 and 381 that the pagan religion was banned altogether and the new religion of Christianity became the established religion. For this reason, some scholars call the **“change”** Theodosianism rather than Constantinianism. Whatever it is called, the end result was that the same religious rites which at one time had been required were now banned, and those which were once banned were now required. During the reign of Decius in 250, a person had to have a written affidavit signed by a notary public proving that he had always sacrificed to the gods and that the notary had personally witnessed him tasting of the sacrificial victim. If one could not produce this affidavit, he was subject to punishments of various sorts, even death. In 380, Theodosius had commanded that

...all peoples over whom our rule extends shall live in that religion which was revealed to St. Peter.... **We give orders** that all these are to adopt the name ‘Catholic Christians’; the rest we shall let pass for fools and they will have to bear the reproach of being called heretics. They must come first under the wrath of God and **then also under ours** (Verduin, p. 36; emphasis mine).

## **B. Constantinianism as the Basis for the Persecution of Anabaptists**

Fast forwarding twelve centuries to the Reformation, we must remember that to the common medieval mind the religion of any culture was *still* the glue that held society together. In this particular sense, the Reformation was more a medieval phenomenon than a modern one. Theocratic Israel lent strong support for this belief in which the worship of other gods was forbidden and punishable by death. Then Christ came into the world, and he was rejected by most of the Jewish nation because He did not bring political deliverance from the Romans nor unify the entire nation under the paradigm of a renewed Davidic kingdom. Had He done so, He would not have been crucified. Christ did not come initially to create a new theocracy or a sacral society of only believers as evidenced by his words, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>35</sup> “For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW;<sup>36</sup> and A MAN’S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD” (Matthew 10:34-36 NASB).

Implied in Jesus' response is the fact even as one's family is an institution distinct from the Church; far more is the state an institution distinct from the church. Society is a composite made up of Christians and those who are not Christians. Every citizen living in the same geo-political realm is not a member of the church by virtue of being a member of the state. As Israel was separate from other nations, the church within each nation is separate from the nation. As Jesus said in His prayer, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*."<sup>16</sup> "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:15-16 NASB). Whether this inter-family warfare will continue or whether we will ever see something closely resembling a Christian state is a matter for further consideration.

This kind of distinction between the church and the state was a foreign concept to the Roman Catholic Church, which at the time of Leo III considered the pope to be the supreme spiritual head of the church *and* the one who conferred temporal power upon kings—manifested by Leo crowning Charlemagne as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 800 AD, the emperor who marched his conquered foes through rivers for hasty baptisms. The pontificate of Leo III marked the zenith of the power and recognition of the Roman Catholic pope.

But in the same way, the Reformers would not repudiate the *Corpus Christianum*, the body of Christ united together in a temporal, geo-political realm under the same spiritual and magisterial authority—this time not the Roman Catholic Church, but the Reformed Church under the protection of the Christian civil magistrate—hence the name *Magisterial Reformers*. In Zwingli's Zurich, Oecolampadius' Basel, Bucer's Strasburg, Calvin's Geneva, and every city in Europe, the church and civil society were "two sides of the same coin". Contrarily, the Anabaptists...

...saw the church as a stark alternative to civil society, and restricted church membership to those who gave evidence of their inward sincerity and commitment. They completely repudiated the medieval concept of Christendom, in which everyone born into a 'Christian society' soaked up Christianity from his culture and was automatically regarded as a Christian unless he opted *out* through heresy or unbelief. For the Anabaptists, the Church of Jesus Christ was a radically separate community which an individual had to opt *into* by a personal act of faith. The moral purity of this community was then to be preserved by a strict and unsentimental use of the ban: the Anabaptists may have advocated religious toleration in society at large...but they tended to be extremely intolerant of what they considered moral lapses among their own... (Needham, p 266-267).

Moreover, the Anabaptist conviction that "opting *into*" the church meant also "opting *out*" of the society implied a revolt against the state and rejection of one's ordinary responsibilities of citizenship. Refusal to take oaths implied the rejection of the legal system, and, by logical extension, treason against the state. Further, their refusal to serve in the military meant that they would not play their part in defending the cantons of Switzerland against invading armies. There were no standing armies in Switzerland, thus refusal to take up arms when needed was very unpatriotic. According to the Anabaptists, although the state was instituted by God, it was "outside the perfection of Christ" and contrary to Christ's teaching. Consequently, being a civil magistrate was not an appropriate occupation for a Christian (Needham, p. 268). As you can see, this whole Anabaptist paradigm was contrary to Calvin's and Zwingli's desire *to reform not merely the church, but the whole society*.



Therefore, the same offenses that got a person excommunicated from Anabaptists churches also got a person banished from Calvin's Geneva or executed. Unrepentant adulterers would be executed from Anabaptist churches, but the second offense of adultery in Calvin's Geneva would get you executed, whether you repented or not.

### C. The Anabaptist Rejection of the State Church—Nothing New

More importantly for our purposes, however, the Anabaptists believed that the state had no jurisdiction over the church *in matters of faith*. In Geneva, Calvin agreed to the appointment of elders by the civil magistrate and defended the right and duty of the civil magistrate to punish doctrinal heresy. For the Anabaptists, who believed the government had no right to appoint pastors, it followed that they had no right to punish doctrinal heresy or idolatry. And *this*, Needham points out, was the prohibition which stuck in the throats of the Reformers who were accustomed to believing that the State was the divinely appointed protector of true doctrine. This, indeed, was “radical” thinking to those *who believed that such drastic measures would “de-Christianize” the state* (Needham, p. 268).

Many historians are willing to let Zwingli and Calvin off the hook because “they were men of their times”. Needham says for example,

The fact is that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant governments, with the consent of the Reformers, did execute some people for heresy—almost always Radicals who denied the Trinity or the incarnation. [That they were “almost always” heretics who denied the Trinity or the incarnation, Verduin and Schaff would seriously dispute.] The real issue here is purely a theological one, namely, whether the Bible authorizes governments to put a heretic (or a blasphemer) to death. If the Bible does authorize this, as *virtually all* Protestants in that era believed, we can no more reproach our forefathers as unregenerate killers than we can affix that stigma to present day Christians who sincerely believe in capital punishment for murder (Needham, p. 226, footnote, words in brackets mine).

In another quote, Needham says essentially the same thing concerning the execution of Servetus in Geneva. “Like almost all Christians in his day,” he says, “Calvin accepted that the state was under moral obligation to God to punish heretics....” (Needham, p. 225).

But is it really true that “virtually all Protestants in that era believed” that the Bible authorized the execution of heretics or that “almost all Christians in his day” believed in the moral obligation of God to punish heretics? Some of Calvin's closest associates disagreed with Calvin over the banishment of Bolsec, who challenged Calvin's views on predestination (*Calvin's Commentaries*, preface to *1 and 2 Corinthians*). Many disagreed with him over the burning of Servetus to the extent that Calvin thought it necessary to write a book in 1554 dedicated to the defense of capital punishment for heresy (Schaff, pp. 4780-81). Erasmus didn't believe in the execution of heretics, and he was “the schoolmaster of Europe” whose writing had circulated throughout the continent. Luther didn't either for some time until his frustrations with the Anabaptists changed his mind, and even by 1528 he was not supportive of the measure. The Anabaptists, who numbered in the thousands, didn't believe the state had this right, and *the Reformers knew their convictions very well*. Henry Bullinger, the successor to Zwingli in Zurich, makes this complaint.

They say that one cannot and may not use force to compel anyone to accept the faith seeing that faith is a free gift from God. It is wrong, say they, to compel anyone by force

or coercion to embrace the faith, or, to put anyone to death because of erring faith. It is an error, they assert, that in the Church any other sword is used than that of the divine Word. The secular kingdom, they hold, should be separate from the Church and no civil ruler ought to exercise his authority there. The Lord has commanded, they hold, simply to preach the Gospel and not to compel any one by force to accept it. The true Church of Christ, according to them, has this characteristic that it suffers and endures persecution but does not inflict it upon any (Verduin, p. 76; emphasis mine).

Clearly, Bullinger understood the contrary opinion and rejected it. Bucer, likewise, was not ignorant of Anabaptist convictions. One Anabaptist wrote him the following:

This work of the Lord will be done without the help of the sword and without show of physical force, solely by the spiritual power and grace, not without many afflictions and tribulations....Those who have the sovereignty and the faith also...ought to be subject to the discipline of God together with the other members of the Church...for the magistrates have not been called by God to uproot and exterminate the tares by persecuting them or by confiscating their goods and industry or by depriving them of their life for the cause of religion (Verduin, p. 76).

There are many who believe that the undercurrents of dissent away from “Christian sacralism” had been brewing for 1200 years previous to the Reformation. Adolph von Harnack (1883), for example, claims that

“In the twelve centuries that went before the Reformation it has never lacked for attempts to get away from the State-Church Priest’s Church and to reinstitute the apostolic congregational structurization” (Verduin, p. 35).

Verduin adds this to the discussion,

Contemporaries who were in position to know have gone on record to the effect that there were then [during the Reformation] more men committed to the views of the “heretic” than there had ever been before. *In many areas the populace was so much on the side of the “heretic” that executions had to be carried out at night or early in the morning for fear of tumult.* Sometimes the age-old provision that death sentences had to be announced with the tolling of the bell *was conveniently ignored.* At times jails in which the ‘heretics’ had been incarcerated were stormed and their prisoners set free....

There is every reason to believe that the Reformers were quite aware of the ancient battle [from the time of Constantine]. How could it be otherwise? It may safely be said that a person could not spend the span of a human life anywhere in Europe without coming in contact personally with the “heretic.” There were inquisitors everywhere. Some of these had a record of consigning men to the flames at the rate of almost one a day. How could an informed person remain unaffected by the tradition of the “heretic”? (Verduin, p. 36; emphasis mine)

Therefore, I don’t think Needham and others are quite accurate in saying that *most* Christians in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century agreed that the state had an *obligation* to punish heretics. Certainly they believed that this was, indeed, *the case*, but there were no popular referendums floating around to change the system. Those in power—Roman Catholic clerics, the Magisterial Reformers, and the civil magistrates who did their bidding—whole-heartedly agreed with Constantinianism. Why wouldn’t they, other than a firm Scriptural life-changing conviction

to the contrary? They were satisfied with the status quo as long as they were the ones making the rules. The poor masses, on the other hand, had little choice but to accept the situation as it existed, and they knew that their heads could be the next ones rolling off the chopping block if they went public with their dissent.

But where did the Reformers get the idea that the state is the God-ordained protector of the church? Calvin defended this position theologically from the Old Testament theocracy, but the idea also had *other historical precedent*. Statist persecution of nonconforming members of the church actually began with Constantine's use of power to force dissenting Donatists in North Africa back into fellowship with the Catholic Church. Here, we must digress to trace the developments of Donatism and its implications for the Reformed churches of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

## VII. Constantine and the Donatists

As I interpret Leonard Verduin, Constantine's biggest mistake was his intervention in the Donatist controversy following the persecution under Emperor Diocletian. In 303, Diocletian outlawed all Christian meetings, ordered the destruction of any buildings in which churches were meeting and the government confiscation of church property. He also ordered the imprisonment of Christians and especially Christian leaders, and *the burning of the Scriptures*. This last measure, the burning of the Scriptures, created the Donatist controversy in North Africa when the bishop of Carthage, *Caecilian*, was consecrated by another bishop who had buckled under persecution and surrendered the Scriptures to be burned by Roman authorities. People who had buckled under persecution were called "traitors" (not "traitors")—especially bishops who had surrendered the Scriptures—while those who did not yield to persecution were called "confessors".

Two rival churches came out of this controversy: one led by Caecilian and the other led by the rival bishop, *Donatus*. Donatus and his followers claimed that *the consecration of Caecilian by a "traitor" was invalid*, and any baptisms or administration of the sacraments from Caecilian or any other falsely-consecrated bishop were invalid administrations. Thus, the Christians baptized by invalid bishops were not duly baptized. The members of the Catholic Church coming over to the Donatists had to be rebaptized while Donatists coming to the Catholic Church were not required to be rebaptized. In other words, the validity of the baptism, according to the Donatists, depended on the character of the priest who performed it (Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, p. 153). You can see the problem with this position. What if a pastor baptizes you, but then later runs off with the church secretary. Is your baptism valid? Well, yes, because your baptism does not depend on character of the baptizer, but the validity of Christian baptism itself. But to the Donatists, the purity of the whole church was at stake.

After 313, when Constantine ordered the return of properties confiscated during Decius' reign, they were awarded to Caecilian and his followers. The Donatists protested to Constantine that they alone were the true church in Northwest Africa because they had not surrendered the Bible to be burned. Constantine turned the matter over to various tribunals of bishops who upheld the former decision to recognize Caecilian and his followers as the rightful church (Needham, pp. 166-167).

But there were also reasons other than the purity of the church. Gonzalez has mentioned some of the social and geographical divisions between the Donatists and the Catholics. The wealthy

Romanized classes of North Africa—those who had been influenced by Roman culture and had embraced it—controlled the shipping trade from Carthage to Italy while the agricultural Numidians and Mauritians were rewarded less for the actual production of crops for export. Further, the Numidians and Mauritians had retained much of their cultural traditions while the Carthaginians had become increasingly influenced by Roman culture. The lower class agriculturalists were therefore, very suspicious of anything Roman. Long before Constantine, the Numidians and, to a lesser extent, the Mauritians, had embraced Christianity, but a relatively small number of the wealthier Romanized Africans in Carthage had embraced it.

This changed with the coming of the Constantinian “change” that allowed people to be both Roman and Christian. Following the lead of Constantine, these wealthier Romanized classes flocked into the church. The new converts from the Romanized classes were welcomed by those of the same socio-economic class, who had become Christians before it became popular, but were viewed with suspicion by the less wealthy agricultural classes of the Numidians and Mauritians. They simply saw these new converts as a corrupting influence in the church as if to say, “Where were you when things were tough? Now you come into the church when being a Christian is easy, and we question your sincerity.” What the lower classes feared, and what actually happened, is that the same wealthy class that controlled politics and the economy would now control the church. Thus, the Donatist rebellion was not just about the purity of the clergy, baptism, and the sacraments; it was about the fears of Christians in the lower classes of being marginalized by incoming Christians from the wealthier class.

Getting back to the original story, the Romanized Christians of Carthage supported the consecration of Caecilian while the lower classes followed Donatus (Gonzalez, pp. 153-155). Donatist resistance to this ruling resulted in Constantine’s decree in 316 to confiscate their churches and exile them from Northern Africa. Resistance continued resulting in a retraction of the decree in 321 (Needham, p. 167). The significance of the Donatist controversy for the future of church-state relationships is summarized by Needham.

Constantine’s intervention in the Donatist controversy meant that for the *first time*, an emperor had used the power of the state to try to force dissenting Christians back into fellowship with the Catholic Church. Here was the seed which soon blossomed forth into a full-blooded practice of religious persecution by a *Christian* state of all religious nonconformists (pagan and Christian) (Needham, p. 167, emphasis mine).

[Recalling our earlier discussion of Anabaptist persecution by the Roman Catholics, in 1528, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, ordered that Anabaptists be executed on the basis of an ancient Roman law instituted during the time of the Donatist rebellion in North Africa (see p.14). Part of the difference between the Donatist and the Anabaptist movements is that the Donatists would have gladly accepted preferential treatment from Constantine, while the Anabaptists would have argued that Constantine should not have been involved in the controversy in the first place.]

The date of the decree, 316, to banish Donatists from North Africa and confiscate church buildings is important; and one wonders how much religious violence was propagated by the Donatists in North Africa by this time. The lunatic fringe of Donatism, known as the Circumcellions, did not occur until 340, a full 26 years later. Most of the Circumcellions were peasant farmers who were Numidian or Mauritanian. They were religious to the point of fanaticism, viewing martyrdom as the highest form of religious devotion to the point that

sometimes Circumcellions committed suicide in mass by jumping off cliffs. But they didn't just kill themselves; they also murdered many of the Romanized people who had remained committed to the Catholic Church. They were feared so much that wealthy people and those who represented the Roman Empire needed armed escorts to travel through the countryside. Donatist leaders commonly distanced themselves from the radical Circumcellions but used them from time to time when they needed troops. In response to the violence, Roman authorities persecuted and massacred the Donatists and occupied their land (Gonzalez, p. 156). It is not unlikely that some of the Donatists massacred were not actually part of the radical Circumcellion movement.

Whether we are talking about the Circumcellions in North Africa, the Anabaptist followers of Thomas Muntzer (leader of the Peasants' Revolt), or the lunatic fringe of the Anabaptists in Munster, the "hotheads" of every movement sabotage the positive achievements. "Liberty has more to fear from the abuses of its friends than from the opposition of its foes" (Schaff, p. 4307).

## VIII. Augustine and the Donatists

### A. Augustine's Theory of Coercion

But in spite of intense persecution, the Roman government could not stamp out the Donatist movement, and the church in North Africa was "equally and bitterly divided between Catholics and Donatists for a hundred years (Needham, p. 167). The movement itself continued for *hundreds* of years until it was suppressed in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century by the Muslim conquest of Northern Africa (Gonzalez, p. 156). Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa from 391 to his death in 430, had to deal with the controversy during his lifetime. He came to the conclusion that the Roman government's war against the Donatists was a "just war". A "just war" must be conducted by "properly instituted authority". On the other hand, the Circumcellions were not the proper authorities and did not have the right to wage war on the Roman government. This principle was employed centuries later by the state as a justification for declaring war on any population rebelling against governmental authority (Gonzalez, p. 214).

Augustine himself had originally championed the ideas of religious liberty, but his frustrations with the Donatists in North Africa had influenced him to make certain *retractions* of his original views (Verduin, p. 37). Concerning this, Schaff says,

Augustine, who himself belonged nine years to the Manichaeian sect, and was wonderfully converted by the grace of God to the Catholic Church, without the slightest pressure from without, held at first the truly evangelical view, that heretics and schismatics should not be violently dealt with, but won by instruction and conviction; but after the year 400 he turned and retracted this view, in consequence of his experience with the Donatists, whom he endeavored in vain to convert by disputation and writing, while many submitted to the imperial laws. Thenceforth he was led to advocate the persecution of heretics, partly by his doctrine of the Christian state, partly by the seditious excesses of the fanatical Circumcelliones, partly by the hope of a wholesome effect of temporal punishments, and partly by a false interpretation of...the parable of the great supper, Luke xiv. 23. ["And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel *them* to come in, so that my house may be filled.'" (Luke 14:23 NASB)] "It is, indeed, better," says he, "that men should be brought to serve God by

instruction than by fear of punishment or by pain. *But because the former means are better, the latter must not therefore be neglected.... Many must often be brought back to their Lord, like wicked servants, by the rod of temporal suffering, before they attain the highest grade of religious development.... The Lord himself orders that the guests be first invited, then compelled, to his great supper.*”

This father thinks that, if the state be denied the right to punish religious error, neither should she punish any other crime, like murder or adultery, since Paul, in Gal. v. 19 attributes divisions and sects to the same source in the flesh. He charges his Donatist opponents with inconsistency in seeming to approve the emperors’ prohibitions of idolatry, but condemning their persecution of Christian heretics. It is to the honor of Augustine’s heart, indeed, that in actual cases he earnestly urged upon the magistrates clemency and humanity, and thus in practice remained true to his noble maxim: “Nothing conquers but truth, the victory of truth is love.” But his theory, as Neander justly observes, “contains the germ of the whole system of spiritual despotism, intolerance, and persecution, even to the court of the Inquisition.” *The great authority of his name was often afterward made to justify cruelties from which he himself would have shrunk with horror.* Soon after him, Leo the Great, the first representative of consistent, exclusive, universal papacy, advocated even the penalty of death for heresy (Schaff, p. 1382; emphasis mine).

Bucer’s associate in Strasbourg, Adam Krafft, following Augustine’s “compel them to come in” theory, wrote,

“It can happen that he who is coerced today may come willingly tomorrow... and then is saved, and thanks his magistrate for coercing him.... So did also Nebuchadnezzar when he threatened with death all sacrilegious persons. This imperial edict of Nebuchadnezzar teaches all Christian magistrates that they certainly have the prerogative to coerce men to the faith” (Verduin, p. 77).

## **B. Augustine’s “Enlarged Fulfillment” Theory**

The Donatists, in defense of their desire to go their own way apart from the Catholic Church, quoted Christ’s words to the disciples after many of His erstwhile followers had turned away from Him. From John 6 we read, “And He was saying, ‘For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.’”<sup>66</sup> As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.<sup>67</sup> So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’” (John 6:65-67 NASB). To this Donatist objection Augustine replied,

I hear that you are quoting that which is recorded in the Gospel, that when the seventy followers went back from the Lord they were left to their own choice in this wicked and impious desertion and that He said to the twelve remaining “Do you not also want to go?” But what you fail to say is that *at that time* the Church was only just beginning to burst forth from the newly planted seed and that the saying had not as yet been fulfilled in her “All kings shall fall down before Him, all nations shall serve him” [Ps. 72: 11]. It is in proportion to the more *enlarged fulfillment* of this prophecy that the Church *now wields greater power*—so that she may now *not only invite but also compel* men to embrace that which is good (Verduin, pp. 65-66; emphasis mine).

Now observe how that with reference to those who came in during the *former period* it was “bring them in” and not “compel them,” by which the incipient [first stage of existence] condition of the Church is signified, during which she was but *growing toward the position of being able to compel*. Since it was right by reason of greater strength and power to coerce men to the feast of eternal salvation therefore it was said later...“Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in” (Verduin, p. 67; emphasis mine).

Therefore, through the lens of the Constantinian change, Augustine justified the coercive tactics of the Catholic Church to force Donatists to return (Verduin, p. 67, footnote). In this instance, the historical development of the church dictates the exegesis of Scripture.

### C. Influence of Augustine’s Theories upon the Reformers

In his contribution to this “larger fulfillment” theory of Luke 14, Beza, Calvin’s associate in Geneva, says,

After God had launched Christianity by *unarmed apostles* he afterward raised up kings by whose wisdom *He intended to protect His church*...They do not like it that civil laws are enacted against their wickedness, saying that the apostles have asked no such thing of kings—but these men do not consider that those were *different times* and that all things agree with *their own times*. What emperor had at that time believed in Christ, in days in which Psalm 2 was still in effect: “Why do the nations rage...” (Verduin, p. 83).

Returning again to Augustine’s “just war” theory, Luther applied the same reasoning toward the German peasants in the Peasant’s Revolt of 1524-25. He was appalled at the anarchy prevailing in Germany when hundreds of thousands of peasants rebelled against the tyranny of the German princes. The peasants of Germany had rebelled before during 1493, 1501, 1512, and 1514, but now they had been awakened by the preaching of Luther and the Reformation’s emphasis on...

Christian freedom and the spiritual equality of all believers, and its attack on the religious authorities for robbing Christians of their Scriptural rights. Many peasants took this one step further: they demanded political freedom and social equality, and denounced the secular authorities for robbing Christians of their human rights...The peasants often appealed to Luther’s teaching to justify their actions, and when asked whom they would accept as a mediator in their dispute with the nobles, they responded with a single name—“Luther!” (Needham, p. 131).

Schaff enumerates their claims as follows:

Professing to claim nothing inconsistent with Christianity as a religion of justice, peace, and charity, the peasants claim: 1. The right to elect their own pastors.... 2. Freedom from the small tithe (the great tithe of grain they were willing to pay). 3. The abolition of bond-service, since all men were redeemed by the blood of Christ (but they promised to obey the elected rulers ordained by God, in everything reasonable and Christian). 4. Freedom to hunt and fish. 5. A share in the forests for domestic fuel. 6. Restriction of compulsory service. 7. Payment for extra labor above what the contract requires. 8. Reduction of rents. 9. Cessation of arbitrary punishments. 10. Restoration of the pastures and fields which have been taken from the communes. 11. Abolition of the right of heriot, by which

widows and orphans are deprived of their inheritance. 12. All these demands shall be tested by Scripture; and if not found to agree with it, they are to be withdrawn (p. 4029)

At first, Luther was sympathetic to the interests of the peasants, blaming the German princes for their provocative oppression of the poor and urging them to address some of the peasants' grievances. But he also believed that armed revolt against the secular government was wrong no matter how oppressive it might be. On a preaching tour through Saxony in April 1525, Luther attempted to calm the peasants from their rampage of destroying monasteries and castles, but he was not successful. (He had been successful in Wittenberg when Carlstadt and the Zwickau prophets had attempted to derail the Reformation.) He finally sided with the German princes, whom he deemed essential to the future success of the Reformation, and gave them the go ahead in suppressing the rebellion. In his tract, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, he advised the German princes to show no mercy (Needham, p. 133).

When the dark cloud of war rose up all over Germany, and obscured the pure light of the Reformation, Luther dipped his pen in blood, and burst out in a most violent manifesto "against the rapacious and murderous peasants." He charged them with doing the Devil's work under pretence of the gospel. He called upon the magistrates to "stab, kill, and strangle" them like mad dogs. He who dies in defense of the government dies a blessed death, and is a true martyr before God. A pious Christian should rather suffer a hundred deaths than yield a hair of the demands of the peasants.

So fierce were Luther's words, that he had to defend himself in a public letter to the chancellor of Mansfeld (June or July, 1525). He did not, however, retract his position. "My little book," he said, "shall stand, though the whole world should stumble at it." He repeated the most offensive passages, even in stronger language, and declared that it was useless to reason with rebels, except by the fist and the sword (Schaff, pp. 4029-30).

With Luther's approval, the princes of Germany then went to work; and before it was all over, 100,000 peasants were slaughtered, leaving behind wives and children who were now completely destitute.

Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, who had saved Luther's life by hiding him in Wartburg Castle in 1521, died May 25, 1525, several months before the war was over. As a prince, he did not champion the peasants' cause; nevertheless, he understood how abusive German princes could be toward the poor. Just before his death, he gathered his servants together and confessed, "Dear children, if I have wronged any one of you, I beg you to forgive me for God's sake; we princes do many naughty things to the poor people" (Schaff, p. 4029). Understated, to be sure, but commendable.

***The Peasants' War ended the forward movement of Lutheranism in Germany.*** Luther had been the religious leader in the whole country. He was now reduced to religious leader in only some areas of the country with strong Catholic holdouts elsewhere in western Germany along the borders of France and the Netherlands and the territories of southern Germany (especially Austria and Bavaria). Many of the lower classes were now alienated from the Reformation, some turning to the Radical Reformation, others losing interest in any kind of Reformation at all and, therefore, returning to the Catholic Church. Moreover, the Peasant's Revolt had become a strong argument in the mouths of Catholic leaders to the effect that if this is the fruit of the Reformation, the tree also must be bad. Still further, Luther's use of



German princes as “emergency bishops” who were taking the place of an apostate episcopacy had now emerged into a permanent status. From this point forward in Lutheran Germany “the princes would be the absolute rulers of the Lutheran churches in their domains” (Needham, p. 133). Schaff writing his “History” in the late 1800’s (from 1858-1890) adds this comment:

Luther had once for all committed himself against every kind of revolution, and in favor of passive obedience to the civil rulers *who gladly accepted it*, and appealed again and again to Rom. 13:1, as the popes to Matt. 16:18, as if they contained the whole Scripture-teaching on obedience to authority. Melancthon and Bucer fully agreed with Luther on this point; and the Lutheran Church has ever since been strictly conservative in politics, and *indifferent to the progress of civil liberty* (Schaff, pp. 4030-31; emphasis mine).

[If Schaff is correct in his assessment of Lutheranism up to his day in 1890, the Presbyterian tradition of Samuel Rutherford is its opposite. Author of *Lex Rex* and one of the Reformed divines of the Westminster Assembly, Rutherford and others taught that the relationship of rulers to their subjects is not the divine right of kings or governments to do as they please, subject only to God; rather, the relationship is a social contract in which not only the people but the king himself must honor the terms of the contract. If either fails, the other party to the contract has recourse to arms, if necessary, to correct the grievance. In other words, the king is not the law, but *under* the law. This position is not like that of Augustine, followed by Luther and others, who believed that only the ruling authority may legitimately take up arms against rebellious subjects.]

Like Augustine 1100 years earlier, Luther himself made certain “*retractions*” to his former position. The Peasant’s Revolt had wrecked his confidence in the German people who had hijacked the Reformation by perverting the gospel of *spiritual freedom* and made it into a platform for *political freedom* through armed revolution—an armed revolution, I might add, that was provoked by the callous indifference of German princes and replicated by the callous indifference of countless despots (e.g. Russian Czars provoking the Bolshevik Revolution of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Just as the Peasants’ Revolt was theologically weighted to the side of political freedom and economic and social egalitarianism, Liberation Theology (and Marxism) has had the same emphasis—and the same dismal outcomes.

Yet, there is just enough biblical truth in Liberation Theology and Communism to be confusing to those who are oppressed by the prevailing systems and who are not sufficiently astute to see a balanced biblical approach to government and economics. Likewise, there is short-sightedness and imbalance on the part of those who are living comfortably with the prevailing systems. Those who live in palaces (broadly defined to include middle-class opulence) generally have little empathy for social revolutions. The peasants of 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany correctly believed that Luther’s theology *should* have made a difference in their day to day lives. When the Reformation was restricted to one’s spiritual salvation to the neglect of his social and economic betterment, the peasants lost interest. [The same lack of interest in Christianity has occurred among many low-income black people in the US who consider it “the white man’s religion”.] In January, 1523, Luther had published a book on the duties of Christians to obey the civil magistrate, based on Romans 13: 1 and 1 Pet. 2: 13 but with the limitations of Acts 5: 29, “We must obey God rather than man.”

“God has ordained two governments among the children of Adam, the reign of God under Christ, and the reign of the world under the civil magistrate, each with its own

laws and rights. [See John E. Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, in which Frame challenges the “two kingdoms” approach of Michael Horton and Daryl Hart of Westminster Seminary, California. Luther’s statement here resembles the same kind of nature/grace dichotomy.] The laws of the reign of the world extend no further than body and goods and the external affairs on earth. But over the soul God can and will allow no one to rule but himself alone. Therefore where the worldly government dares to give laws to the soul, it invades the reign of God, and only seduces and corrupts the soul. This we shall make so clear that our noblemen, princes, and bishops may see what fools they are if they will force people with their laws and commandments to believe this or that...In matters which relate to the soul’s salvation nothing should be taught and accepted but God’s word.... As no one can descend to hell or ascend to heaven for me, as little can anyone believe or disbelieve for me; as he cannot open or shut heaven or hell for me, neither can he force me to faith or unbelief. ... Faith is a voluntary thing which cannot be forced. Yea, it is a divine work in the spirit. Hence it is a common saying which is also found in Augustin: Faith cannot and should not be forced on anybody.” [Augustine’s earlier position before his trouble with the Donatists]

“If the civil magistrate interferes with spiritual matters of conscience in which God alone must rule, we ought not to obey at all, but rather lose our head. Civil government is confined to external and temporal affairs.... If an emperor or prince asks me about my faith, I would give answer, not because of his command, but because of my duty to confess my faith before everybody. *But if he should go further, and command me to believe this or that, I would say, ‘Dear sir, mind your secular business; you have no right to interfere with God’s reign, and therefore I shall not obey you at all.’*” (Schaff, p. 4095; emphasis mine).

But later on, after the Peasant’s Revolt in Germany (1524-25), Luther assigned Urbanus Rhegius the task of writing a book against the Radicals in which Rhegius writes,

The truth leaves you no choice; you must agree that *the magistracy has the authority to coerce his subjects to the Gospel*. And if you say, “Yes, but with admonition and well-chosen words but not by force” then I answer that to get people to the services with fine words and admonitions is the preacher’s duty, *but to keep them there with recourse to force if need be and to frighten them away from error is the proper function of the rulers*....What do you suppose [“compel them to come in”] means? (Verduin, p. 74; emphasis mine).

Drawing upon his own experience, he had defended religious liberty and toleration from 1517-1521 and had argued against Leo X and the Roman Catholic practice of executing heretics. Things were now different for Luther following the Peasant’s Revolt. *He still argued against the death penalty for heretics*, but he came to accept the idea that the state should “silence and banish religious Radicals” (including the radicals who instigated the Peasant’s Revolt). The strange thing is: although rejecting the death penalty for *heresy*, he accepted the death penalty for *blasphemy*; and one can only imagine how vague the distinction became between heresy and blasphemy. Although a “*protest-ant*”, Luther did not “protest too much when Evangelical governments executed Radicals for religious dissent” (Needham, p. 134).

There is some ambiguity here between Needham and Philip Schaff (who wrote his *History of the Christian Church* from 1858-1890). Here is a quote from Schaff on Luther's view of Christian liberty.

Luther was the most advanced among the Reformers in the ideas of toleration and liberty. He clearly saw the far-reaching effect of his own protest against Rome, and during his storm- and pressure-period, from 1517 to 1521, he was a fearless champion of liberty. He has left some of the noblest utterances against coercion in matters of conscience, which contain almost every essential feature of the modern theory on the subject. He draws a sharp line between the temporal power which is confined to the body and worldly goods, and the spiritual government which belongs to God. He says that "no one can command or ought to command the soul, except God, who alone can show it the way to heaven;" that "the thoughts and mind of man are known only to God;" that "it is futile and impossible to command, or by force to compel any man's belief;" that "heresy is a spiritual thing which no iron can hew down, no fire burn, no water drown;" that "belief is a free thing which cannot be enforced."

He opposed the doctrine of the Anabaptists with every argument at his command, but disapproved the cruel persecution to which they were subjected in Protestant as well as Catholic countries. "It is not right," he said in a book against them (1528 [after the Peasant's Revolt]), "and I deeply regret that such wretched people should be so miserably murdered, burned, and cruelly put to death; *everyone should be allowed to believe what he pleases*. If he believes wrongly, he will have punishment enough in the eternal fire of hell. Why should they be tortured in this life also?" .... "I can in no way admit," he wrote to his friend Link in 1528, "that false teachers should be put to death: it is enough that they should be banished" (Schaff, pp. 3791-92; emphasis and words in brackets mine).

After Luther returned to Wittenberg in March of 1521 in the wake spiritual chaos caused by Carlstadt, Zwilling, and the Zwickau prophets, Luther made this comment in one of eight sermons.

"I will preach, speak, write, but I will force no one; for faith must be voluntary. Take me as an example. I stood up against the Pope, indulgences, and all papists, but without violence or uproar. I only urged, preached, and declared God's Word, nothing else. And yet while I was asleep, or drinking Wittenberg beer with my Philip Melanchthon and Amsdorf, *the Word inflicted greater injury on popery than prince or emperor ever did*. I did nothing, the Word did everything. *Had I appealed to force, all Germany might have been deluged with blood*; yea, I might have kindled a conflict at Worms, so that the Emperor would not have been safe. But what would have been the result? Ruin and desolation of body and soul. I therefore kept quiet, and gave the Word free course through the world. Do you know what the Devil thinks when he sees men use violence to propagate the gospel? He sits with folded arms behind the fire of hell, and says with malignant looks and frightful grin: 'Ah, how wise these madmen are to play my game! Let them go on; I shall reap the benefit. I delight in it.' But when he sees the Word running and contending alone on the battle-field, then he shudders and shakes for fear. The Word is almighty, and takes captive the hearts" (Schaff, p. 4002; emphasis and words in brackets mine).

Luther also later adopted harsher views concerning the Jews. Initially, Luther was ahead of his time in his toleration of the Jewish people, decrying their rough treatment at the hands of Christians as if they alone had been personally responsible for Christ's crucifixion.

In 1523 he protested against the cruel treatment of the Jews, as if they were dogs, and not human beings, and counseled kindness and charity as the best means of converting them. ***“If the apostles,” he says, “who were Jews, had dealt with the heathen, as we heathen Christians deal with the Jews, no heathen would ever have been converted, and I myself, if I were a Jew, would rather become anything else than a Christian.”*** But in 1543 he wrote two violent books against the Jews. His intercourse with several Rabbis filled him with disgust and indignation against their pride, obstinacy and blasphemies. He came to the conclusion that it was useless to dispute with them and impossible to convert them. Moses could do nothing with Pharaoh by warnings, plagues and miracles, but had to let him drown in the Red Sea. The Jews would crucify their expected Messiah, if he ever should come, even worse than they crucified the Christian Messiah. They are a blind, hard, incorrigible race. He went so far as to advise their expulsion from Christian lands, the prohibition of their books, and the burning of their synagogues and even their houses in which they blaspheme our Saviour and the Holy Virgin. In the last of his sermons, preached shortly before his death at Eisleben, where many Jews were allowed to trade, he concluded with a severe warning against the Jews as dangerous public enemies who ought not to be tolerated, but left the alternative of conversion or expulsion (Schaff, p. 3792; emphasis mine).

## **IX. Reasons for the Loss of Momentum in the Reformation between 1531-1540**

### **A. The Peasant's Revolt**

The period of 1531-41 witnessed a loss of momentum in the Reformation. Part of this was because of the Peasant's Revolt which resulted in the disillusionment of the poor masses with Luther in particular and with the Reformation in general and the continuation of the status quo domination of German princes in religious matters. Schaff reports that Melancthon himself deeply regretted this unintentional substitution of magisterial powers for episcopal powers.

The transfer of the episcopal and papal power to the head of the state was not contemplated by the Reformers, but was the ***inevitable*** consequence of the determined opposition of the whole Roman hierarchy to the Reformation. [I would question whether this transfer was inevitable. It was inevitable only for those who insisted on the episcopal model of the church. And even Calvin distinguished between bishops (whom he called “pastors”) and elders—IV. IV. 2.] The many and crying abuses which followed this change in the hands of ***selfish and rapacious princes*** were deeply deplored by Melancthon, who would have consented to the restoration of the episcopal hierarchy on condition of the freedom of gospel preaching and gospel teaching (Schaff, p. 3785, emphasis mine).

The Reformation in Germany essentially ***exchanged the power of the pope for the power of the prince*** who had the authority of deciding the religion in his particular domain and choosing pastors for individual parish churches.

### **B. Infighting among the Magisterial Reformers**

Another reason for the loss of momentum was the infighting among the Magisterial Reformers—the Lutherans on one side and the Zwinglians on the other. At the Diet of Marburg in 1529, which had been the hope of many for bringing the Lutherans and Zwinglians together, Luther had refused Zwingli’s right hand of fellowship. The two never reconciled, though Zwingli would have desired it. Commenting on the divisions between the Lutheran and the Reformed, Schaff says,

The controversies among the Protestants in the sixteenth century roused all the religious and political passions and cast a gloom over the bright picture of the Reformation. Melancthon declared that with tears as abundant as the waters of the river Elbe he could not express his grief over the distractions of Christendom and the “fury of theologians” (Schaff, p. 3785).

I don’t know when it was that Melancthon expressed his dismay at the “fury of theologians” (he died in 1560), but he did not live to see the devastating effects of Lutheran intolerance upon his own family. As early as 1535, Melancthon had changed his position on the “bondage of the will” taught by Luther—partly due to the influence of Erasmus—and opted instead for what Schaff calls a *synergistic* position or a Crypto-Calvinism [before Calvin’s doctrines had been formulated] in which there is a cooperation of the human will with the divine will. In this he approached the older semi-Pelagianism and anticipated Arminianism. In 1535, 11 years before Luther’s death in 1546, Melancthon said,

“God is not the cause of sin, and does not will sin; but the will of the Devil and the will of man are the causes of sin.” [So far, a direct quote, followed by this summary from Schaff] Human nature is radically, but not absolutely and hopelessly, corrupt; it cannot without the aid of the Holy Spirit produce spiritual affections such as the fear and love of God, and true obedience; but it can accept or reject divine grace. God precedes, calls, moves, supports us; but we must follow, and not resist. Three causes concur in the conversion—the word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the will of man. Melancthon quotes from the Greek Fathers who lay great stress on human freedom, and he accepts Chrysostom’s sentence: “God draws the willing” (Schaff, p. 3993).

Forty-five years later in 1580, Melancthon’s synergistic position was outlawed in Lutheran Saxony where the Reformation had begun. Preachers, professors, and school teachers who would not subscribe to the Formula of Concord were deposed. Dr. Caspar Peucer, husband of Melancthon’s daughter and professor of medicine at Wittenberg, also Elector Augustus of Saxony’s personal physician, was imprisoned for ten years (1576-1586) for the charge of “Philippism” or Crypto-Calvinism (Arminianism, in other words, though the term had not yet been coined). Nicolas Crell, chancellor of Saxony, was also imprisoned for ten years and afterward beheaded in Dresden in 1601 for “Philippism” (or Melancthonianism) and for supporting the Huguenots in France—an act of treason to Lutherans *who by that time hated the Calvinists* (Schaff, p. 3793). Writing in the late 1800’s Schaff says,

Since that time the name of Calvin was as much hated in Saxony as the name of the Pope and the Turk....

In other Lutheran countries, Zwinglians and Calvinists fared no better. John a Lasco, the Reformer of Poland and minister of a Protestant congregation in London, when fleeing with his followers, including many women and children, from the persecution of the bloody Mary, was not allowed a resting place at Copenhagen, or Rostock, or Lübeck, or

Hamburg, because he could not accept the Lutheran doctrine of the real presence, and the poor fugitives were driven from port to port in cold winter, till at last they found a temporary home at Emden (1553) (Schaff, p. 3793).

Calvin himself became a much lighter victim of Lutheran intolerance in his beloved Strasburg in 1556.

An exclusive Lutheranism, under the lead of Marbach, obtained the ascendancy in Strasburg, and treated the Calvinistic Christians as dangerous heretics. When Calvin passed through the city on his way to Frankfort, in August, 1556, he was indeed honorably received by John Sturm and the students, who respectfully rose to their feet in his presence, *but he was not allowed to preach to his own congregation* [The Church of the Strangers] because he did not believe in the dogma of consubstantiation. A few years later the Reformed worship was altogether forbidden by order of the Council, Aug. 19, 1563 (Schaff, pp. 4523-24; emphasis mine).

But there were also bright spots of toleration among the great minds of the Reformation. Calvin sent letters to Melancthon expressing his dismay that such a great theologian could reject the Scriptural doctrine of eternal predestination. Nevertheless, Calvin maintained an enduring friendship with him until Melancthon died in 1560 (Schaff, p. 3993).

### C. Persecution of the Radical Reformers

Another hindrance to the Reformation was the persecution and marginalization of the Radical Reformers who would never accept the concept of a state-church or infant baptism which they believed was inextricably interwoven into the state-church paradigm. Moreover, the small fringes of the Radical Anabaptists at Munster had frightened many people away from the Reformation, reasoning that you will know a religious movement by its fruits—which is true to a point except that *most of the Radical Reformation* had repudiated the movement of Munster and what they had seen in the Peasant's Revolt. To quote Needham,

Munster had become the supreme disaster for the Radical Reformation. From now on, all Roman Catholic and almost all Protestant authorities assumed that *all Radicals* were violent enemies of social stability and Christian morality, *plotting to overthrow* the established order and introduce communism and polygamy. Governments henceforth persecuted them with an unreasoning fear and a savage ferocity that were otherwise directed only at witches. The *bulk of peace-loving Radicals* suffered grievously for the sins of the fanatical few. But the cause of Luther and Zwingli suffered as well. Men blamed the Magisterial Reformers and their revolt against Rome for having unloosed the storms of revolution which led to Munster (Needham, pp. 190-191; emphasis mine).

I would agree with Needham partially. The Mūnster disaster was surely a watershed issue hindering the Reformation and bringing untold persecution upon the Radicals. However, Mūnster took place from 1534 to 1535 and until then resembled any other city gradually coming under Luther's influence until the movement was hijacked (cf. Needham, p. ?). But what do we make of the persecutions of peace-loving Radicals *before* Mūnster? As Schaff points out, by 1531—three years *before* Mūnster—one thousand Anabaptists had been executed in Tyrol and Görz, six hundred in Ensisheim. Seventy-three were executed in Linz within a period of six weeks, including women and children. If anything serves as the essential disaster for the Radical Reformation, it was the Peasant's Revolt that had been

suppressed at the end of 1525. This was by most accounts not a heretical movement, per se, so much as a socio-political movement demanding economic and social improvements—although, as I indicated, there were also religious demands.

However, I would suggest that Radicals like Mantz and Hubmaier would have been put to death regardless of the fanaticism of the Peasants' Revolt because they did not believe in the *Corpus Christianum, the church that includes everyone in a given realm*—the same church which was vehemently supported both by the sword of the Reformed magistrates and the sword of the Catholic bishops. That kind of thinking was threatening to the existing social and political order—with or without aggressive tactics. Doubtless, the Peasants' Revolt in Germany, although not involving the Swiss Cantons directly, had aggravated the Reformed response to Swiss Radicals. Moreover, it certainly did not help the Anabaptist cause for the Swiss Radicals to sweep through Catholic churches destroying icons and images. However, it was perfectly clear that Mantz, Grebel, Hubmaier—all scholars—were not dangerous political subversives. It is true that mistakes were made by both sides of the controversy; it is also true that the Radicals suffered far more for their mistakes than the Reformers.

In spite of the mess that was made, Jesus' prayer, "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done" would not be denied. From 1541 and to a considerable degree because of Calvin's influence in Geneva and abroad (cf. XII. What Calvin Achieved in Geneva through Systematic Discipline), the Reformation gained momentum and was spread across France, southern Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and large areas of Eastern Europe, including Hungary. Reformed teaching began to transform cities and cultures. The United States of America is to a very large degree the product of a thorough-going Calvinism. Yet, the American religious experience and its freedom of expression are largely—I would say, mostly—the result of Anabaptist convictions and their willingness to die for those convictions. Although the principles of Calvinism would eventually lead to religious freedom, Calvin himself would not be the Moses to lead us into this promised land (see below; also, for further reading on the Puritan experiment of *Corpus Christianum* in America, see Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*).

## **X. Calvin in Geneva from 1536 to 1538**

### **A. William Farel's First Experience in Geneva**

The Reformation in Geneva, as well as Western Switzerland, begins with William Farel, the traveling evangelist. Schaff describes Farel as a man...

incessant in labors, a man full of faith and fire, as bold and fearless as Luther and far more radical, but without his genius. He is called the Elijah of the French Reformation, and "the scourge of the priests."

Without a regular ordination, he felt himself divinely called, like a prophet of old, to break down idolatry and to clear the way for the spiritual worship of God according to his own revealed word. He was a born fighter; he came, not to bring peace, but the sword. He had to deal with priests who carried firearms and clubs under their frocks, and he fought them with the sword of the word and the spirit. Once he was fired at, but the gun burst, and, turning round, he said, "I am not afraid of your shots." He never used violence himself, except in language. He had an indomitable will and power of endurance. Persecution and violence only stimulated him to greater exertions. His outward

appearance was not prepossessing: he was small and feeble, with a pale but sunburnt face, narrow forehead, red and ill-combed beard, fiery eyes, and an expressive mouth (Schaff, p. 4427).

Farel was known to many Reformers besides Calvin. Oecolampadius, the Reformer of Basel, exhorted him to more moderation in his ministry. “‘Your mission,’ he wrote to him, ‘is to evangelize, not to curse. Prove yourself to be an evangelist, not a tyrannical legislator. Men want to be led, not driven.’” Likewise, Zwingli advised him against his practice of rashly exposing himself to danger as opposed to preserving himself for a more extended ministry (Schaff, p. 4428). To his eternal credit, Farel knew his limitations. Despite a similar temperament, he knew that he was no theologian like Luther; and when John Calvin came on the scene, he was quite willing to decrease so that Calvin could increase, despite the fact that Farel was 20 years older than Calvin.

Farel, of course, was quite independent of Calvin in his basic understanding of Reformation teaching—as Zwingli was of Luther. He was introduced to the doctrine of justification by faith through the pioneer of the Reformation in France, Jacques Lefevre, who told Farel prophetically, “My son, God will renew the world, and you will witness it” (Schaff, p. 4428). He followed LeFevre to Meaux and was for a time allowed to preach, but his style of preaching was not tame enough for that city, and he was chased away. He then went to Gap and was used by God to convert four of his brothers, but eventually he was driven from that city as well. He finally made his way to Basel and was received by Oecolampadius, but even there he got into trouble by attacking Erasmus who was living in Basel at the time. Farel accused Erasmus of cowardice and called him a Balaam. Erasmus countered by calling Farel a “dangerous disturber of the peace”. The Council of Basel then expelled Farel from that city as well. This occurred sometime after February, 1524 (Schaff, p. 4429). You could say that Farel was a *driven* man—in more ways than one. He was driven by the fire of the gospel in his bones, and he was driven *away* by those who heard him preach it.

In that same year, 1524, he made a brief visit to Zurich, Schaffhausen, and Constance and became acquainted with Zwingli, Myconius, and Conrad Grebel—before the blowup between the Anabapists in Zurich and Zwingli which reached its peak in March, 1526, and the decree to execute anyone rebaptizing in the Canton of Zurich. After this brief visit he spent a year in Strassburg with Bucer and Capito (Schaff, 4429). Farel later made his way to Neuchâtel, France where he later became pastor in 1538 and continued there until the end of his life.

His first visit to Geneva was in October, 1532. Sitting down with the city Council, which was still Catholic at the time, Farel aroused a great commotion and was ordered out of the city with the shout, “Away with him to the Rhone! Kill the Lutheran dog!” He was beaten, shot at, and pursued by priests armed with clubs. This was Farel’s first experience at Geneva. He returned in 1534 under the protection of the City Council of Bern and from that point the Reformation made steady progress under his preaching in house churches until eventually the priests, monks, and nuns left the city. In August, 1535, the Great Council of Two Hundred abolished the mass and removed images and relics from the churches. The Catholic bishop was forced to remove his see to Annecy and was now the one being driven away rather than Farel (Schaff, pp. 4430-31). However, it was not until May, 1536, that the public announcement of the Reformation was made, two months before Calvin arrived in July.



Introducing us to the spiritual and moral situation which prevailed at Geneva at the time, Schaff informs us that...

Sister Jeanne de Jussie, one of the nuns of St. Claire...saw in the Reformation a just punishment of the unfaithful clergy. "Ah," she said, "the prelates and churchmen did not observe their vows at this time, but squandered dissolutely the ecclesiastical property, *keeping women in adultery and lubricity* [lewdness], and awakening the anger of God, which brought divine judgment on them"....

This was the first act in the history of the Reformation of Geneva. It was the work of Farel, but only preparatory to the more important work of Calvin. The people were anxious to get rid of the rule of Savoy and the bishop, but had no conception of evangelical religion, and would not submit to discipline. They mistook freedom for license. They were in danger of falling into the opposite extreme of disorder and confusion (Schaff, p. 4432).

## **B. Calvin's Journey to Geneva**

### **1. His conversion and initiation as a scholar**

Calvin was a devout Catholic of impeccable character, unlike the licentious Augustine before his conversion. He does not indicate any particular person as instrumental in his salvation, not even LeFevre.

"God himself," he says, "produced the change. He instantly subdued my heart to obedience.... Only one haven of salvation," he says, "is left open for our souls, and that is the mercy of God in Christ. We are saved by grace—not by our merits, not by our works" (Schaff, p. 4484).

However, Needham believes that Etienne de la Forge, a Waldensian merchant, may have had some influence on Calvin. Calvin resided in his house in Paris. Like many Waldensians, Etienne had embraced the Reformation and used his house as a refuge for Protestants escaping persecution from the Netherlands. Possibly another influence on Calvin was his cousin Pierre Olivetan who had come to the protestant faith in the 1520's (Needham, p. 205).

Within a year of his conversion, Calvin became the leader of the evangelical party and was sought out in all directions by people looking for the truth. After teaching, he would close with "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Schaff, p. 4484) Early on, Calvin was a typical humanist scholar and very familiar with the writings of Erasmus—as were all the Reformers. After leaving the study of law and pursuing theology at the College de France in Paris, he came into contact with the writings of Jacques LeFevre, the most renowned Christian humanist in France (Needham, p. 205).

### **2. Calvin's first experience of persecution in Paris and his life as a fugitive**

Catholic persecution of Calvin began on November 1, 1533, just before the trouble began in the city of Munster. His friend, Nicolas Cop, had been elected Rector of the University of Paris and delivered the regular inaugural address on All Saint's Day in the Church of Mathurins. It so happened that Calvin, not Cop, was the author of the oration which was a bold attack on Catholic scholastic theologians ignorant of the gospel (Schaff, p. 4487). If this

were not bold enough, Calvin also quoted Erasmus' and Luther's writings with affirmation (Needham, p. 206).

“They [the scholastics] teach nothing,” says Calvin, “of faith, nothing of the love of God, nothing of the remission of sins, nothing of grace, nothing of justification; or if they do so, they pervert and undermine it all by their laws and sophistries. I beg you, who are here present, not to tolerate any longer these heresies and abuses” (Schaff, p. 4487).

One rather embarrassing thing about the speech was that Cop's father was the personal physician to King Francis I (Needham, p. 204). The Catholic authorities regarded the presentation as a declaration of war. Cop fled to his relatives in Basel; and Calvin, much like the Apostle Paul fifteen centuries before him, escaped from a window by tying sheets together. He eventually escaped from Paris disguised as a gardener with a hoe on his shoulder.

Following this in October, 1534, posters were planted throughout Paris, and even laid at the door of the king's residence, decrying the mass as a “blasphemous denial of the one and all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ”. The pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, and monks were also branded as hypocrites and servants of the Antichrist. King Francis I acted predictably, imprisoning anyone who might be vaguely suspected of the crime. An ostentatious procession from the Louvre to Notre Dame took place on January, 1535 with the king and his three sons walking, not riding, and bareheaded, “followed by the princes, cardinals, bishops, priests, ambassadors, and the great officers of the State and of the University, walking two and two abreast, in profound silence, with lighted torches.” Of course, someone had to die whether they were guilty or not, therefore six Protestants were lowered slowly over a fire, then raised up, and finally roasted alive.[Incidentally, this same mode of execution was used by the African king, Mutesa, in Uganda who roasted five young Christian pages over an open fire in the late 1800's.] From November 1534, to May 1535, twenty-four more Protestants were burned alive in various public places of Paris, including Etienne de la Forge, the close friend of Calvin mentioned earlier. Calvin fled to either Strasburg or Basel. There is a difference of opinion between Schaff and Needham (Schaff, pp. 4487-88; compare with Needham, p. 206).

Remember that this was 1535, the same year as the lunatic excess of the Anabaptists at Munster; and this is the way these executions were “spinned”—if I may use a current term for the propaganda. In a public letter in 1535, King Francis I portrayed the executions as the necessary means of thwarting the efforts of subversives to overthrow the government (Needham, p. 207). Thus, the excesses of men like Thomas Muntzer of the Peasant's Revolt and John of Leiden of the Munster disaster produced consequences which hindered the reformation in France. In the same year, the faculty of the Sorbonne, the theological university of Paris, urged the king to stop the printing presses, the medium they well knew had fueled the Reformation from the very outset. From 1500-1536, 17 million volumes had been printed, but after that it was impossible to calculate just how many were being printed per year. Printing was temporarily suspended in 1536 and censorship was put into effect in 1542 (Schaff, p. 4488).

From 1533-1536 Calvin moved secretly as a “fugitive evangelist” living under false names in Southern France, Switzerland, and Italy. He broke all connections with the Catholic Church in 1534; that same year marked the founding of the *Jesuit* order which led the Catholic Counter-Reformation. He left France in October, 1534, to the safety of Switzerland, where

he stayed in Strasburg a short time before making his way to Basel. He stayed in Basel over a year in the company of Bucer and Oecolampadius from January, 1535, until March, 1536.

### 3. Calvin in Basel—*Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Living in seclusion in Basel, Calvin was able to finish and publish the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—at the ripe old age of 26. But we should not get the impression that the monumental two volumes we now have in our possession came all at once. The first edition had only six chapters, the second edition, 17, the third, 21. The last edition of 1559 was four to five times the length of the original edition, and was divided into the four books we have now. Therefore, the final edition in 1559 was the product of Calvin's prodigious labors over a period of 24 years from 1535 to 1559. He died in 1564 at the age of 55, so he was 50 when he completed the final edition. However, it should also be said that the first edition contained all the essential features of his teaching (Schaff, pp. 4495).

The Roman Catholic Church immediately perceived the threat and went to work on a smear campaign, calling the *Institutes* the *Koran* and *Talmud* of heresy. One edition followed another with the *Institutes* translated into nearly all European languages (Schaff, pp. 4489-90). He dedicated the *Institutes* to King Francis I of France who had executed Protestants in Paris in 1535, including Calvin's personal friend. Francis had also spent fortunes on his favorite hobby, women (Scott, p. 49), so the dedication was not intended as Calvin's imprimatur of his reign. It was Calvin's *apology* (not to be confused with "I'm sorry.")—similar to the apology of Justin Martyr to the Roman Emperors—to vindicate all accusations against his protestant countrymen, and a *petition* to the king for toleration (Schaff, p. 4493).

### 4. Calvin's first experience in Geneva

In July, 1536, Calvin arrived in Geneva with plans to stay only one night; then William Farel discovered that he was in Geneva. He immediately pressed Calvin into service to complete the Reformation in Geneva with Calvin protesting his youth, inexperience, and timidity. None of these protests were accepted by Farel who proceeded to put Calvin under a curse if he chose instead to live the quiet life of a scholar.

Farel, "who burned of a marvellous zeal to advance the Gospel," threatened him with the curse of Almighty God if he preferred his studies to the work of the Lord, and his own interest to the cause of Christ. Calvin was terrified and shaken by these words of the fearless evangelist, and felt "as if God from on high had stretched out his hand" (Schaff, p. 4512).

Geneva only had 12,000 people at the time, so how did Calvin find the little town? Here is one description by Schaff.

The Genevese were a light-hearted, joyous people, fond of public amusements, dancing, singing, masquerades, and revelries. Reckless gambling, drunkenness, adultery, blasphemy, and all sorts of vice abounded. Prostitution was sanctioned by the authority of the State and superintended by a woman called the *Reine du bordel* [the "Brothel Queen"]. The people were ignorant. The priests had taken no pains to instruct them and had set them a bad example (Schaff, p. 4515).

One whole district in Geneva was designated for prostitution. Recall the words of Sister Jussie, one of the nuns who left Geneva when the bishopric was removed to Annecy,

"Ah," she said, "the prelates and churchmen did not observe their vows at this time, but squandered dissolutely the ecclesiastical property, *keeping women in adultery and lubricity* [lewdness], and awakening the anger of God, which brought divine judgment on them."

### C. Calvin and Farel Implement Discipline in Geneva

Calvin and Farel proceeded to establish a rigorous discipline governing the morals of the citizenry of Geneva. They prepared a *Confession of Faith and Discipline* and a *Catechism* both of which were accepted by the Council in November, 1536. Article 19 of the Confession made provision for the admonition of an offender and his ultimate excommunication if necessary. The purpose of excommunication was threefold, which Calvin makes plain in his *Institutes*: the *first* is the honor and glory of God whose name would be profaned by persistent offenders; *second*, the preservation of the godly from the leavening influence of sin; and *third*, the restoration of the sinner back to full communion in the church (*Institutes*, IV. XII. 5.). On January, 16, 1537, the Great Council of Two Hundred gave orders prohibiting "immoral habits, foolish songs, gambling, the desecration of the Lord's Day, baptism by midwives, and directed the remaining idolatrous images should be burned; but nothing was said about excommunication" which was to become the main point of controversy between the Reformers, the council members, and the citizenry of Geneva (Schaff, p. 4513). At first, the magistrates were cooperative of discipline.

A gambler was placed in the pillory with a chain around his neck. Three women were imprisoned for an improper head-dress.... Every open manifestation of sympathy with popery by carrying a rosary, or cherishing a sacred relic, or observing a saint's day, was liable to punishment. The fame of Geneva went abroad and began to attract students and refugees. Before the close of 1537 English Protestants came to Geneva to see Calvin and Farel. On July 29, 1537, the Council of the Two Hundred *ordered all the citizens, male and female, to assent to the Confession of Faith in the Church of St. Peter*. It was done by a large number. On Nov. 12, the Council even passed a measure to banish all who would not take the oath [hence, the large number signing it] (Schaff, pp. 4516, emphasis and words in brackets mine).

Essentially, Scott claims, there was nothing new about this, for the governance of civil morals had also been the practice of the Roman Catholic Church throughout Europe; but a morally lax clergy was not overly zealous to enforce the moral purity of the whole society.

Neither Calvin nor Farel nor any other reformer introduced the idea of monitoring morals in Geneva. The Vatican had done that, uncounted centuries before, and maintained that system for generations. But the bishops grew lax in the late Middle Ages and indifferent during the Renaissance (Otto Scott, *The Great Christian Revolution—How Christianity Transformed the World*, p. 46).

Oecolampadius had also done something very similar in Basel, and Zwingli in Zurich. In Basel, the ban was introduced in 1530 in which three laymen cooperated with the ministers of Basel to keep watch over the morals of citizens and to discipline the unruly. If necessary, excommunication was to be implemented for moral offenses; and, in case of heresy denying

any of the twelve articles of the Apostle's Creed, the offender would be punishable by banishment, death, or confiscation of property. There was also this little bit of Roman Catholicism still latent in the council's ban in Zurich. A person...

“shall be punished according to the measure of their guilt in body, life, and property, who despise, spurn, or contemn the eternal, pure, elect queen, the blessed Virgin Mary, or other beloved saints of God who now live with Christ in eternal blessedness, so as to say that the mother of God is only a woman like other women, that she had more children than Christ, the Son of God, that she was not a virgin before or after his birth...” (Schaff, p. ?).

Apparently, however, Zwingli's efforts at discipline were deficient for the Radical Reformers. Grebel and Mantz had urged Zwingli to form a church distinct from society and independent of the city magistrate of Zurich in which the Christian deportment of its members would be strictly enforced, but Zwingli would have no part of a separatist church—“separated” from the general society. I am not aware of extensive literature from the Radical Reformers outlining their ecclesiology. Most of it would be in Swiss or German. You don't do much writing when you have Catholics on one side trying to roast you alive and Reformers on the other side trying to drown you or behead you. For the Radical Reformers, excommunication from the church was the only legitimate task of church discipline; but in Zurich, Basel, Geneva, and any other European city, the city council would then take over where the church left off; or, to put it another way, the church would then hand the offender over to the Christian city council if the situation demanded it, even if the offense were heresy.

#### **D. Calvin's Aim—Reforming the Whole Society, not Merely the Church**

The reason for this was that Zwingli and Calvin were not content with the reformation of the church only, but would stop short of nothing less than the reformation of the whole society. This is an important point to consider when judging the actions of the Magisterial Reformers. Their motives were not selfish. They sincerely believed that the *cooperation of the church and state* was necessary for the formation and welfare of the Christian society. The Radical Reformers, on the other hand, followed what they perceived to be the model of the early church which survived under any governmental system, however hostile. Not only could they point to the fact that the Christian church grew by leaps and bounds before the legalization of Christianity under Constantine, but they could point to the survival of exiled Jews under the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek Empires. Why, then, was it necessary to wed the bride of Christ to the bridegroom of the State to ensure her survival? Was Christ incapable of taking care of His church?

They did not believe that a *Christian society*, per se, was possible on this side of the second coming of Christ. They were not saying, however, that the Christian should not exercise considerable influence in society nor that the civil magistrate had no legitimate function. Christians should go about their business with moral integrity, but their business did not include government office, since this involved the use of the sword. The ideas inherent in the differences between the Radicals and the Magisterial Reformers are too complex for our discussion here, but the same essential debate is still continuing today. It is the same argument between Postmillennial Reconstructionism and Premillennial Dispensationalism—which teaches that there is no need to polish the brass on a sinking ship—as well as Reformed Amillennialism. It also includes the current debate between traditional Reformed theology, which believes that Christianity should transform culture, and the “two kingdoms”

approach of Westminster Seminary, Escondido, California (cf. *The Escondido Theology*, John Frame).

Zwingli aimed at a reformation of the whole religious, political, and social life of the people, on the basis and by the power of the Scriptures.

The patriot, the good citizen, and the Christian were to him one and the same. He occupied the theocratic standpoint of the Old Testament. The preacher is a prophet: his duty is to instruct, to exhort, to comfort, to rebuke sin in high and low places, and to build up the kingdom of God; his weapon is the Word of God. The duty of the magistracy is to obey the gospel, to protect religion, to punish wickedness. *Calvin took the same position in Geneva, and carried it out much more fully than Zwingli* (Schaff, p. 4304; emphasis mine).

The enemies of Calvin raised, in anonymous and pseudonymous pamphlets, a loud protest against the new tribunal of popery and inquisition in Geneva, which had boasted to be an asylum of all the persecuted. The execution of Servetus was condemned by his anti-trinitarian sympathizers, especially the Italian refugees in Switzerland, and *also by some orthodox Christians in Basel and elsewhere, who feared that it would afford a powerful argument to the Romanists for their persecution of Protestants.*

Calvin felt it necessary, therefore, to come out with a public defense of the death-penalty for heresy, in the spring of 1554. He appealed to the Mosaic law against idolatry and blasphemy, to the expulsion of the profane traffickers from the temple-court (Matt. 21:12), and he tries to refute the arguments for toleration which were derived from the wise counsel of Gamaliel (Acts 5:34), the parable of the tares among the wheat (Matt. 13:29), and Christ's rebuke of Peter for drawing the sword (Matt. 26:52). The last argument he disposes of by making a distinction between private vengeance and public punishment.

Concerning the parable of the wheat and the tares, Calvin says,

This passage has been most improperly abused by the Anabaptists, and by others like them, to take from the Church the power of the sword. But it is easy to refute them; for since they approve of excommunication, which cuts off, at least for a time, the bad and reprobate, why may not godly magistrates, when necessity calls for it, use the sword against wicked men? They reply that, when the punishment is not capital, there is room allowed for repentance; as if the thief on the cross (Luke 23: 42) did not find the means of salvation (*Harmony of the Gospels*).

So, it seems that for Calvin, if the heretic repents, he better do it in a hurry.

This is essentially the position of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in its original version before the liberty of conscience prevailed in the United States resulting in its amendment.

[As magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with about matters of religion; so if magistrates be open enemies to the church, the ministers of Christ, of themselves, by virtue of their office, or they, with other fit persons upon delegation from their churches, may meet together in such assemblies.](WCF 31.2).

[This whole section is omitted from the American edition. (WCF 31:2 WCS)]

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience [that is apart from conscience], is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also (WCF 20.2).

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the Church, [and by the power of the civil magistrate] (WCF 20.4).

[The clause "and by the power of the civil magistrate," is omitted in the American version of the Westminster Confession.]

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God (WCF 23.3.).

[American Edition] Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; ***or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.*** Yet as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, ***without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest,*** in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, ***no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief.*** It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever; and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance (WCF 23.3.; emphasis mine).

Ch. XXIII., 3; Comp. Ch. XXXI., 1, 2. These sections were changed and adapted to the separation of Church and State by the united Synod of Philadelphia and New York which met at Philadelphia, May 28, 1787.

### **E. Calvin and Farel Ousted from Geneva**

Submission of Geneva to Farel's and Calvin's confession and catechism did not last long. Some of the most powerful citizens had never signed the confession—despite threat of punishment—and the inability of the council to enforce compliance brought contempt. The general Council of Two Hundred assembled at St. Peter's Church in April, 1538, and without a trial, ordered Farel and Calvin to leave the city within three days. The people of Geneva celebrated their departure with public rejoicing in the streets. Farel never returned, but carried on the remainder of his ministry in Neuchatel. Calvin went to Strasburg for three years until 1541 when the council recalled him to Geneva.

In Strasburg, Calvin became pastor to about 400 refugees in the Church of the Strangers. It was a very fruitful time in Calvin's life, and one which he would have been satisfied to continue. He also introduced church discipline and was not hindered in this by the council of Strasburg (Schaff, p. 4524).

### **F. Sadolet's Letter to the Genevese and Calvin's Recall to Geneva**

Back in Geneva, after ousting the two Reformers, the city reverted to the moral chaos prevailing before they came.

Tumults and riots multiplied in the streets; the schools were ruined by the expulsion of the best teachers; the pulpit lost its power; the new preachers [from Bern] became objects of contempt or pity; pastoral care was neglected; vice and immorality increased; the old licentiousness and frivolities, dancing, gambling, drunkenness, masquerades, indecent songs, adulteries, reappeared; persons went naked through the streets to the sound of drums and fifes (Schaff, p. 4563).

Within two years of Calvin's banishment, the four major instigators had fallen on bad times. One was beheaded for homicide in June, 1540; two others were condemned to death as forgers and rebels; the fourth died of an injury while attempting to escape from the law. Their demise was a "death-blow" to all of Calvin's opponents (Schaff, p. 4564).

However, the primary occasion of his recall to Geneva was the letter of James Sadolet, a very respectable Catholic cardinal who believed in the necessity of reform within the Catholic Church. Sadolet had written a commentary on *Romans* expressing views on grace and free will offending church leaders in Rome and Spain. For this he was advised against the study of Paul's epistles by his colleague, Cardinal Bembo, who told him that Paul would spoil his classical learning. It was Sadolet who attempted to win back the Genevese to the Roman Church (Schaff, pp. 4536-38). One excerpt from this letter states,

"Whether it be more expedient for their salvation to believe and follow what the Catholic Church has approved with general consent for more than fifteen hundred years, or innovations introduced within these twenty-five years by crafty men" (Schaff, p. 4538).



The letter created quite a stir in Geneva with many requesting that they be released from their obligations to obey the Confession they had signed two years earlier. The Roman faction within the city took heart, for there was no one in the city who could answer Sadolet's accusations against the disunity of the church supposedly caused by Calvin and Farel. The letter was delivered to Geneva in March; Calvin in Strasburg received a copy of it and answered by letter in September—one that is twice as long as Sadolet's (Schaff, p. 4539).

"We deny not," says Calvin, "that those over whom you preside are churches of Christ, but we maintain that the Roman pontiff, with his whole herd of pseudo-bishops, who have seized upon the pastor's office, are ravening wolves, whose only study has hitherto been to scatter and trample upon the kingdom of Christ, filling it with ruin and devastation....

For iniquity has reached its height, and now those shadowy prelates, by whom you think the Church stands or perishes, and by whom we say that she has been cruelly torn and mutilated, and brought to the very brink of destruction, can bear neither their vices nor the cure of them. Destroyed the Church would have been, had not God, with singular goodness, prevented. For in all places where the tyranny of the Roman pontiff prevails, you scarcely see as many stray and tattered vestiges as will enable you to perceive that these Churches he half buried. Nor should you think this absurd, since Paul tells you that Antichrist would have his seat in no other place than in the midst of God's sanctuary (2 Thess. 2:4)....

"Let your pontiff boast as he may of the succession of Peter: even if he should make good his title to it, he will establish nothing more than that obedience is due to him from the Christian people so long as he himself maintains his fidelity to Christ, and does not deviate from the purity of the gospel.... A prophet should be judged by the congregation (1 Cor. 14:29). Whoever exempts himself from this must first expunge his name from the list of the prophets ....

"As to your assertion that our only aim in shaking off this tyrannical yoke was to set ourselves free for unbridled licentiousness after (so help us!) casting away all thoughts of future life, let judgment be given after comparing our conduct with yours. We abound, indeed, in numerous faults; too often do we sin and fall. Still, though truth would, modesty will not, permit me to boast how far we excel you in every respect, unless, perchance, you except Rome, that famous abode of sanctity, which having burst asunder the cords of pure discipline, and trodden all honor under foot, has so overflowed with all kinds of iniquity, that scarcely anything so abominable has ever been before" (Schaff, pp. 4540-45).

Against Sadolet's accusation of greed, Calvin responds,

"Would not the shortest road to riches and honors have been to accept the terms which were offered at the very first? How much would your pontiff then have paid to many for their silence? How much would he pay for it even at the present day? If they were actuated in the least degree by avarice, why do they cut off all hope of improving their fortune, and prefer to be thus perpetually wretched, rather than enrich themselves without difficulty and in a moment? (Schaff, p. 4545)

Reflecting on Calvin's success, Pope Pius IV later complained,

The strength of that heretic consisted in this, that money never had the slightest charm for him. If I had such servants, my dominion would extend from sea to sea (Scott, p. 58).

Although Geneva later offered Calvin pay increases, he routinely refused them; instead, he raised money for the poor (Scott, p. 58).

Calvin's response to Sadolet made a great impression on the Reform party in Geneva, and he was recalled in September 1, 1541. But he was not inclined to return. Strasburg had been good to him, and there he had married Idelette de Bure in 1540, the widow of a prominent Anabaptist whom Calvin had converted to the Reformed faith. After being informed of his recall, he said in one correspondence,

“Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which I had to perish a hundred times over” (Scott, p. 48).

Besides, Strasburg didn't want him to go and only agreed to loan him to Geneva for six months and then for him to return. Geneva replied that they were inclined rather to keep him permanently. He did not arrive until September 13. He was detained by a labor of love in Neuchatel where Farel was pastoring. It seems Farel had been deposed by the city magistrate without trial for attacking a prominent member for “scandalous conduct”—during a public sermon. With the combined support of the city councils of Zurich, Strasburg, Basel, and Bern, Calvin was able to persuade the authorities at Neuchatel to forgive Farel, enabling him to remain and preach in Neuchatel until his death (Schaff, p. 4567).

## **XI. Calvin in Geneva from 1541 to 1564**

Upon his second arrival in Geneva, Calvin made clear that he had not changed his mind about the need for discipline, and he insisted on its restoration as terms for his return (Schaff, p. 4566). In light of the prevailing moral chaos and the deaths of his top four opponents, the council was not inclined to deny this ultimatum. However, this was not the end of the matter by any means.

### **A. The Organization of the Government of Geneva**

The organization of Geneva consisted of the general assembly consisting of all citizens of all ages which met annually in St. Peter's church. The administrative power resided in four magistrates (Syndics) while the legislative power resided in two councils, the *Council of the Sixty* and the *Council of the Two Hundred*. Members of the Council of the Sixty were also members of the Council of Two Hundred. From the Council of Two Hundred, a third *Council of Twenty-Five* was elected. The real power in Geneva actually resided in this *Little Council of Twenty-Five* plus the four *Syndics*—an oligarchy with legislative, executive, and judicial powers. The *Venerable Company* consisted of all the pastors of the city and district of Geneva. It had no political power, but was limited to spiritual discipline. The Consistory or Presbytery consisted of five city Pastors and twelve Lay-Elders—two from the Council of Sixty and ten from the Council of Two Hundred. *Thus all twelve Lay-Elders of the Consistory were members of the civil government.*

Calvin was consulted on all important matters of state, but he never occupied a political office in Geneva. Officially, he was simply the pastor of St. Peter's Church, not even becoming a citizen of Geneva until 1559, just five years before his death (Schaff, p. 4586).

Calvin opposed the civil government meddling in the internal affairs of the church and despised the situation in Lutheran Germany in which the church had subjugated itself to the power of the princes with congregations not having the power to choose their own pastors. He was also opposed to the meddling of the church in civil and political affairs.

In theory, Calvin made a clearer distinction between the spiritual and secular powers than was usual in his age, when both were inextricably interwoven and confused. He compares the Church to the soul, the State to the body. The one has to do with the spiritual and eternal welfare of man, the other with the affairs of this present, transitory life. Each is independent and sovereign in its own sphere. He was opposed to any interference of the civil government with the internal affairs and discipline of the Church. He was displeased with the servile condition of the clergy in Germany and in Bern, and often complained (even on his death-bed) of the interference of Bern with the Church in Geneva. But he was equally opposed to a clerical control of civil and political affairs, and confined the Church to the spiritual sword (Schaff, p. 4590).

### **B. The Practical Separation of Powers in Geneva in the Exercise of Discipline**

However, in practice, it did not always work out this way in Geneva. Magistrates were criticized by ministers from the pulpit; and magistrates, in turn, rebuked ministers for their sermons. The government also paid the salaries of pastors, and magisterial approval was necessary for the nomination and transfer of pastors to different churches around Geneva—although the individual congregations elected their own pastors, a practice not permitted in Lutheran Germany (Schaff, p. 4588). The Council of Two Hundred gave the Confession of Faith and Discipline the power of law, and the practice of discipline was common to both the Consistory—a mixed body of pastors and laymen—and the Council (Schaff, p. 4590).

Twelve lay-elders were selected for observing the moral conduct of the citizenry, although they were accompanied on household visitations by one of the pastors. Two of these Lay Elders were selected from the Little Council of Twenty-five—the most powerful council in Geneva—four were selected from the Council of Sixty, and six from the Council of Two Hundred. Thus all of the elders responsible for watching over the congregation were selected from the civil magistrate. Each elder was assigned special districts in Geneva. Every household in Geneva was visited annually by a minister and elder; therefore, the Consistory in Geneva made up of lay elders, selected from civil offices, and pastors, were responsible for church discipline.

The severest discipline administered by the *Consistory* was excommunication from the church. At first not even this was allowed by the civil magistrate of Geneva which was working off the model of Bern and Basel in which excommunication was a matter for the *Council*, not the Consistory. The Council and the Consistory also butted heads concerning the consequences of excommunication. The Consistory insisted that members excommunicated for serious offenses be banished from the State for a year or until they repented. The Council did not agree to this. *This was one of Calvin's long-fought battles, the right of the Consistory alone to excommunicate serious offenders without the approval of the Council.* He did not get his way until his victory over the Libertine Party in Geneva in 1555 following the execution of Servetus (Schaff, p. 4595). Contrary to much popular opinion, Calvin was not the “pope” of Geneva.

### **C. Discipline in the Church of Geneva**

The unrepented sins which deserved excommunication included the following, in Calvin's own words:

Therefore, in excluding from its fellowship manifest adulterers, fornicators, thieves, robbers, seditious persons, perjurers, false witnesses, and the rest of this sort, as well as the insolent (who when duly admonished of their lighter vices mock God and his judgment), the church claims for itself nothing unreasonable but practices the jurisdiction conferred upon it by the Lord (*Institutes*, IV. XII. 4.).

Calvin was opposed to undue severity in church discipline, at least in principle.

This gentleness is required in the whole body of the church, that it should deal mildly with the lapsed and should not punish with extreme rigor, but rather, according to Paul's injunction, confirm its love toward them.... Similarly, each layman [lay elder] ought to temper himself to this mildness and gentleness. It is, therefore, not our task to erase from the number of the elect those who have been expelled from the church, or to despair as if they were already lost. It is lawful to regard them as estranged from the church, and thus, from Christ—but only for such time as they remain separated. However, if they also display more stubbornness than gentleness, we should still commend them to the Lord's judgment, hoping for better things of them in the future than we see in the present. Nor should we on this account cease to call upon God in their behalf. ***And (to put it in one word) let us not condemn to death the very person who is in the hand and judgment of God alone***; rather, let us only judge of the character of each man's works by the law of the Lord. While we follow this rule, we rather take our stand upon the divine judgment than put forward our own. Let us not claim for ourselves more license in judgment, unless we wish to limit God's power and confine his mercy by law. For God, whenever it please him, ***changes the worst men into the best***, engrafts the alien, and adopts the stranger into the church. And the Lord does this to frustrate men's opinion and restrain their rashness—which, unless it is checked, ***ventures to assume for itself a greater right of judgment than it deserves*** (*Institutes*, IV. XII. 9; emphasis mine).

What happened, then, in the practical exercise of discipline in Geneva? Schaff offers this description.

Dancing, gambling, drunkenness, the frequentation of taverns, profanity, luxury [there were sumptuary laws in Geneva outlawing some forms of extravagance], excesses at public entertainments, extravagance and immodesty in dress, licentious or irreligious songs were forbidden, and punished by censure or fine or imprisonment. ***Even the number of dishes at meals was regulated.*** [I fail to see how Schaff could make this up.]

Drunkards were fined three *sols* for each offence. Habitual gamblers were exposed in the pillory with cords around their neck. Reading of bad books and immoral novels was also prohibited... A morality play on "the Acts of the Apostles," after it had been performed several times, and been attended even by the Council, was forbidden. Parents were warned against naming their children after Roman Catholic saints who nourished certain superstitions; instead of them the names of Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Nehemiah became common. (This preference for Old Testament names was carried even further by the Puritans of England and New England.) The death penalty against heresy, idolatry, and blasphemy, and the barbarous custom of the torture were retained. Adultery, after a second offence, was likewise punished by death....

**Attendance on public worship was commanded on penalty of three sols.** When a refugee from Lyons once gratefully exclaimed, “How glorious is the liberty we enjoy here,” a woman bitterly replied: “Free indeed we formerly were to attend mass, but now we are compelled to hear a sermon.” Watchmen were appointed to see that people went to church. The members of the Consistory visited every house once a year to examine into the faith and morals of the family. Every unseemly word and act on the street was reported, and the offenders were cited before the Consistory to be either censured and warned, or to be handed over to the Council for severer punishment. No respect was paid to person, rank, or sex. The strictest impartiality was maintained, and members of the oldest and most distinguished families, ladies as well as gentlemen, were treated with the same severity as poor and obscure people.

Calvin did not play favorites. There were no “big men” in Geneva who could muscle or buy their way out of discipline. Continuing with Schaff,

Let us give a summary of the most striking cases of discipline. Several women, among them the wife of Ami Perrin, the captain-general, were imprisoned for dancing (which was usually connected with excesses). [Ami Perrin, once a supporter of Calvin, later abandoned him. The arrest of his wife doubtless contributed to this.] Bonivard, the hero of political liberty, and a friend of Calvin, was cited before the Consistory because he had played at dice with Clement Marot, the poet, for a quart of wine. A man was banished from the city for three months because, on hearing an ass bray, he said jestingly: “He prays a beautiful psalm.” **A young man was punished because he gave his bride a book on housekeeping with the remark: “This is the best Psalter.”** A lady of Ferrara was expelled from the city for expressing sympathy with the Libertines, and abusing Calvin and the Consistory. **Three men who had laughed during the sermon were imprisoned for three days.** Another had to do public penance for neglecting to commune on Whitsunday. Three children were punished because they remained outside of the church during the sermon to eat cakes. A man who swore by the “body and blood of Christ” was fined and condemned to stand for an hour in the pillory on the public square. A child was whipped for calling his mother a thief and a she-devil (*diabless*). **A girl was beheaded for striking her parents, to vindicate the dignity of the fifth commandment.**

A banker was executed for repeated adultery, **but he died penitent and praised God for the triumph of justice.** A person named Chapuis was imprisoned for four days because he persisted in calling his child Claude (a Roman Catholic saint) instead of Abraham, as the minister wished, and saying that he would sooner keep his son unbaptized for fifteen years. Bolsec, Gentilis, and Castellio were expelled from the Republic for heretical opinions. Men and women were burnt for witchcraft. Gruet was beheaded for sedition and atheism. Servetus was burnt for heresy and blasphemy....

The official acts of the Council from 1541 to 1559 exhibit a dark chapter of censures, fines, imprisonments, and executions. During the ravages of the pestilence in 1545 more than twenty men and women were burnt alive for witchcraft, and a wicked conspiracy to spread the horrible disease....[Medical workers had conspired to spread the disease in order to plunder the dead of their possessions. Thus, these executions, other than their method, were justifiable.]...From 1542 to 1546 fifty-eight judgments of death and seventy-six decrees of banishments were passed. During the years 1558 and 1559 the cases of various punishments for all sorts of offences amounted to four hundred and fourteen—a very large proportion for a population of 20,000 (Schaff, p. 4598-99).

We must keep in mind that this was not 21<sup>st</sup> century United States. In Calvin's defense Schaff says,

Calvin was, as he himself confessed, not free from impatience, passion, and anger, which were increased by his physical infirmities; but *he was influenced by an honest zeal for the purity of the Church, and not by personal malice*. When he was threatened by Perrin and the Favre family with a second expulsion, he wrote to Perrin: "Such threats make no impression upon me. I did not return to Geneva to obtain leisure and profit, nor will it be to my sorrow if I should have to leave it again. *It was the welfare and safety of the Church and State that induced me to return.*" He must be judged by the standard of his own, and not of our, age. The most cruel of those laws—against witchcraft, heresy, and blasphemy—were inherited from the Catholic Middle Ages, and continued in force in all countries of Europe, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, down to the end of the seventeenth century. Tolerance is a modern virtue (Schaff, 4599).

#### D. Opposition to Calvin's System of Discipline

It took Calvin ten years to fully implement his system of discipline. Fierce opposition began in 1545 during the plague and came to its zenith during the trial of Servetus in 1553. By 1552, the Libertine Party had come to dominate the Little Council of Twenty-five, the most powerful council in Geneva. The leaders of this council demanded the list of excommunicated church members along with explanations for their excommunication from the Venerable Council (consisting only of pastors). The pastors of Geneva refused to submit this list, resulting in their expulsion from the General Council of Two Hundred. Calvin could only proclaim a guarded victory over the Libertines and Patriots by 1555. For a man of ill health, it was a trying ten years. Writing to Farel and Viret in December, 1547, he said,

"Affairs are in such a state of confusion that I despair of being able longer to retain the Church, at least by my own endeavors. May the Lord hear your incessant prayers in our behalf."

"Wickedness has now reached such a pitch here that I hardly hope that the Church can be upheld much longer, at least by means of my ministry. Believe me, my power is broken, unless God stretch forth his hand."

The people who were opposing Calvin during this period were the same who had banished him and Farel the first time. They had consented to his recall perhaps out of political necessity and the extremity of the moral chaos in Geneva, but his disciplinary system was far more rigorous than they had predicted. They despised Calvin more than the Pope, calling him Cain and giving his name to the wild dogs on the street. One night they fired fifty shots "before his bed-chamber" [presumably, *into* his bed-chamber], and they threatened his life while he was preaching. They would even come up to the communion table and attempt to take the bread from his hands.

Although pleading with Farel and Viret to pray for him, he showed no weakness in public. On one occasion he walked into the middle of a crowd and offered his chest to their daggers. To one friend he wrote in October, 1554 (after the execution of Servetus in 1553),

"Dogs bark at me on all sides. Everywhere I am saluted with the name of 'heretic,' and all the calumnies that can possibly be invented are heaped upon me; in a word, the enemies

among my own flock attack me with greater bitterness than my declared enemies among the papists” (Schaff, p. 4601).

I don’t know how he did it, but during this same period he wrote some of his most important works (Schaff, p. 4601). He was opposed primarily by two factions in these later years. The earlier opposition represented by the *Romanists* had been defeated by Calvin’s mastery of Sadolet, but during these ten years he was opposed by the *Patriots* and the *Libertines*. The *Patriots* represented the most influential families of Geneva who had been instrumental in winning Geneva’s political independence. The Reformation, which they had helped introduce in Geneva, was merely a means of keeping that independence. They saw Calvin as a foreigner, and looked upon all the refugees coming into Geneva...

“as a set of adventurers, soldiers of fortune, bankrupts, and spies of the Reformer. ‘These dogs of Frenchmen,’ they said, ‘are the cause that we are slaves, and must bow before Calvin and confess our sins. Let the preachers and their gang go to the —.’ [here, Schaff lets the reader fill in the blank]

The second were the *Libertines* who were antinomians of the most extreme variety whose leaders taught that sin was an illusion which ceased to exist as soon as it is identified and disregarded. (I don’t know that that means, but it sounds pretty Gnostic to me.) “Salvation consists in the deliverance from the phantom of sin.” They also taught the “community of goods and women”, and the wife of one of them justified her promiscuity by an appeal to the doctrine of the communion of saints, and by the commandment “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth” (Gen. 1:28). They justified their excesses through allegorical interpretation and they appealed to the parables of Jesus to justify fraud.

One Libertine, Jacques Gruet, who was also a Patriot from a high-ranking family, wrote derogatory and threatening messages against Calvin.

“Gross hypocrite, thou and thy companions will gain little by your pains. If you do not save yourselves by flight, nobody shall prevent your overthrow, and you will curse the hour when you left your monkery. Warning has been already given that the devil and his renegade priests were come hither to ruin everything. But after people have suffered long they avenge themselves.... We will not have so many masters. Mark well what I say” (Schaff, p. 4603).

Gruet had made public threats against Calvin before, and the authorities had found in his house papers and letters accusing Calvin of being a proud, ambitious and unyielding hypocrite who thrived on admiration. Worse still, they also found some pages written in Latin in his own handwriting ridiculing the Scriptures, blaspheming Christ, and calling the immortality of the soul a dream and a fable. The Council arrested him and tortured him every day for a whole month. He confessed that the papers were his, but refused to name anyone else who may have been involved in any threats to Calvin’s life. He was condemned on the charge of threatening Calvin and the Council, for declaring that all human laws were arbitrary, including the laws against fornication when the two parties were consenting. On July 26, 1547, he was beheaded. Needham makes the statement in a footnote that Servetus was the only person put to death for heresy in Geneva (p. 226). And maybe he is correct if Gruet was executed more for *sedition* than *heresy*; but again, there was a fine line between sedition and heresy in those days.

The execution only made matters worse. Calvin was now insulted and threatened publicly in the streets, and three days after Gruet's death the Council was tipped off about a plot of twenty men to drown Calvin in the Rhone River. A few months later in December 16, 1547, the Libertines call for a special assembly of the Council of Two hundred. Calvin walks into the middle of an armed crowd with some of them calling for his death. One historian, Audin, who was not an admirer of Calvin, describes the event.

“The Council of the Two Hundred was assembled. Never had any session been more tumultuous; the parties, weary of speaking, began to appeal to arms. The people heard the appeal. Calvin appears, unattended; he is received at the lower part of the hall with cries of death. He folds his arms, and looks the agitators fixedly in the face. Not one of them dares strike him. Then, advancing through the midst of the groups, with his breast uncovered: ‘If you want blood,’ says he, ‘there are still a few drops here; strike, then!’ Not an arm is raised. Calvin then slowly ascends the stairway to the Council of the Two Hundred. The hall was on the point of being drenched with blood; swords were flashing on beholding the Reformer, the weapons were lowered, and a few words sufficed to calm the agitation. Calvin, taking the arm of one of the councilors, again descends the stairs, and cries out to the people that he wishes to address them. He does speak, and with such energy and feeling, that tears flow from their eyes. They embrace each other, and the crowd retires in silence. The patriots had lost the day. From that moment, it was easy to foretell that victory would remain with the Reformer. The Libertines, who had shown themselves so bold when it was a question of destroying some front of a Catholic edifice, overturning some saint's niche, or throwing down an old wooden cross weakened by age, trembled like women before this man, who, in fact, on this occasion, exhibited something of the Homeric heroism” (quoted in Schaff, p. 4606).

## **E. The Trial and Execution of Servetus**

As far as the average American and European citizen is concerned, *Calvin is best known as the man who had Servetus burned at the stake*. As Scott notes, no one ever points a finger at the Catholic authorities all over 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe who were putting many thousands more to death at the same time and would gladly have disposed of Servetus had they caught up with him. I think the hatred of John Calvin must have something to do with his doctrine of predestination, but even this would make little sense if people had some historical perspective. Calvin did not originate the doctrine of predestination. He was simply following the Catholic theologian to whom all the Reformers were indebted—Augustine of Hippo—who himself simply read and understood the Apostle Paul. Moreover, Calvin was not a first generation reformer. He was a second generation reformer building on some of the theological foundations of Luther and Bucer. Quoting Benjamin B. Warfield from his book, *Calvin and Augustine*, Scott offers the following perspective:

And this Augustinianism is taught by him not as an independent discovery of his own, but fundamentally as he learned it from Luther...in much detail from Martin Bucer, into whose practical, ethical point of view he perfectly entered. Many of the very forms of statement most characteristic of Calvin—on such topics as Predestination, Faith, the stages of Salvation, the Church, the Sacraments—only reproduce, though of course with that clearness and religious depth peculiar to Calvin, the precise teachings of Bucer, who was above all others, Calvin's master in theology.



Calvin did not originate this system of truth; as ‘a man of the second generation’ he inherited it...it is as a systemizer that he makes the greatest demand on our admiration and gratitude. It was he who gave the Evangelical movement a doctrine (Scott, p. 59).

But it is from his involvement with the death of Servetus that Calvin gained notoriety. Servetus was a Spanish physician born either in 1509, the same year as Calvin, or 1511 (Scott, p. 63). He was brilliant, anticipating the work of William Harvey (1578-1658) by suggesting the pulmonary circulation of the blood. He published this theory in his book, *Restitution of Christianity* in connection with his speculative theology on the “vital spirits” in which he identified the soul with blood (Schaff, p. 4750; Scott, p. 65).

In his earlier work of 1531, *Seven Errors about the Trinity*, he attacks the doctrine of the Trinity as a three-headed monster—one third lion, one third goat, and one third dragon. He was also a forerunner of the modern higher critical method of ridding OT prophecies of their Messianic predictions (Scott, p. 64). The *Restitution of Christianity*—published as the collection of his works in 1553—was aimed against Calvin’s *Institutes*. He initiated contact with Calvin by sending him letters with difficult questions. Calvin patiently responded with answers and eventually sent him a copy of his *Institutes*. Servetus sent the *Institutes* back to Calvin replete with critical remarks scribbled almost everywhere. Calvin said later, “There is hardly a page that is not defiled by his vomit” (Schaff, p. 4752). Concerning the Trinity, Servetus wrote Calvin, “I have often told you that triad of impossible monstrosities that you admit in God is not proved by any Scriptures *properly understood*” (Scott, p. 64; emphasis mine). After many other insults, Servetus requests from Calvin a pledge of safe-conduct to Geneva (Scott, p. 64). But he was really asking the wrong person, since Calvin occupied no magisterial office in Geneva. He was simply the pastor of St. Peter’s Church, one of the nine churches in the area. At any rate, Calvin did not promise Servetus safe conduct.

Keep in mind that Servetus, although arguably brilliant, is dealing with another greater genius who admitted himself that he was often impatient. While Luther and Zwingli appear to Schaff as men who were down to earth and popular with the common people, Calvin’s upbringing in a family of some notoriety left him with a less familiar and intimate disposition. Upon being addressed as “Brother Calvin” by one of the French refugees, he countered that he preferred being addressed as “Monsieur Calvin” (Needham, p. ?). In his comparison of Calvin with Luther and Zwingli, Schaff says,

Calvin’s character is less attractive, and his life less dramatic than Luther’s or Zwingli’s, but he left his Church in a much better condition. He lacked the genial element of humor and pleasantry; he was a Christian stoic: stern, severe, unbending, yet with fires of passion and affection glowing beneath the *marble surface* (Schaff, p. 4439; emphasis mine).

We have often heard stories of Luther’s lightheartedness, but I have never heard any stories of Calvin’s levity. Apparently, he was mostly business. Scott’s comments are similar.

The personality of this thin, short, frail man was complex, and suffered from the usual lack of comprehension that attends genius. He had a strong will and remarkable energy, but was often ill. Surrounded by lesser minds, he often lost his temper. And he had frightful migraines (Scott, p. 58).

Let's face it. Had we been as sickly as Calvin, and had we been laden with the load of responsibilities he carried, we would not have been as civil as he was. At the very early age of 26, Calvin's *Institutes* were being hailed as the most important theological literature of the age. Now, at 44, an entire printing industry had emerged primarily to print his books, and he was known widely as "The Theologian", a title given him by none other than Luther's successor, Philip Melancthon. As we keep all of this in mind, just imagine Calvin's reaction to Servetus' statement that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not proven in the Scriptures "properly understood".

After the publication of Servetus' *Restitution*, his whereabouts were made known to the Roman Catholic authorities in Lyons. This was done through William Trie, a reformed convert and native of Lyons and cousin to a Roman Catholic, Arneys. Arneys had attempted to reclaim Trie for the Roman church and had argued that the church in Geneva lacked discipline. Trie shot back that *while dangerous heretics were tolerated in France*, blasphemy and immorality were punished in Geneva. Proof of this accusation was found in the fact that even as he wrote, Michael Servetus, a heretic who denied the Trinity and called infant baptism an invention of the devil, was now living in Vienne under the assumed name of Villeneuve, a practicing physician. To confirm this report, Trie sent the first page of the *Restitution* along with the name of the printer, Balthasar Arnoullet (Schaff, p. 4764). Schaff says that the letter from Trie appeared to be written by Calvin, something for which Servetus attacked Calvin during the trial. This was blatantly denied by Calvin as false.

At the same time [Calvin] speaks rather lightly of it, and thinks that it would not have been dishonorable to denounce so dangerous a heretic to the proper authorities. He also frankly acknowledges that he caused his arrest at Geneva. He could see no material difference in principle between doing the same thing, indirectly, at Vienne and, directly, at Geneva. He simply denies that he was the originator of the papal trial and of the letter of Trie; but he does not deny that he furnished material for evidence, which was quite well known and publicly made use of in the trial where Servetus' letters to Calvin are mentioned as pieces justificatives. There can be no doubt that Trie, who describes himself as a comparatively unlettered man, got his information about Servetus and his book from Calvin, or his colleagues, either directly from conversation, or from pulpit denunciations. We must acquit Calvin of direct agency, but we cannot free him of indirect agency in this denunciation (Schaff, p. 4765, emphasis mine).

When the inquisitors of Lyons asked Arneys for more proof, he provided them with several *autographed letters from Servetus to Calvin* as well as some pages from Calvin's *Institutes* on which Servetus had written his caustic remarks concerning infant baptism—all conveniently in his own handwriting. These are the documents Trie said he had difficulty obtaining from Calvin who thought heresy should be dealt with theologically but that the church should make no use of the sword in such matters (Schaff, p. 4765). Trie says concerning this,

I tell you one thing: I had the greatest difficulty getting [the letters] out of M. Calvin. Not that he wants such execrable blasphemies to go unproved, but because it seems to him that his duty, as one who does not bear the sword of justice, is to convict heresies by doctrine rather than pursuing them with the sword... (Scott. p. 65).

That may well be, but Calvin did release the documents to the Roman Catholic authorities in Vienne which he must have suspected could result in Servetus' death. Schaff provides another very interesting bit of information.

*Seven years before the death of Servetus [Calvin] had expressed his determination not to spare his life if he should come to Geneva.* He wrote to Farel (Feb. 13, 1546): "Servetus lately wrote to me, and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious fancies, with the Thrasonic boast, that I should see something astonishing and unheard of. He offers to come hither, if it be agreeable to me. **But I am unwilling to pledge my word for his safety; for if he does come, and my authority be of any avail, I shall never suffer him to depart alive**" (Schaff, p. 4735; emphasis mine).

In a footnote to the above comment, Schaff quotes Calvin's statement in Latin (for my readers who know Latin, because I don't).

*996. Servetus nuper ad me scripsit ac litteris adjunxit longum volumen suorum deliriorum, cum Thrasonica jactantia, me stupenda et hactenus inaudita visurum. Si mihi placeat, huc se venturum recipit. Sed nolo fidem meam interponere. Namsi venerit, modo valeat mea auctoritas, vivum exire nunquam patiar." Opera, VIII. 283; Henry, III. Beil. 65-67; Bonnet-Constable, II. 17. Grotius discovered this damaging letter in Paris, which was controverted, but is now generally admitted as genuine. There is an exact copy of it in Geneva.*

After telling a series of lies to his inquisitors, Servetus decided that it was not wise to wait for a verdict. Pretending a call of nature, he was able to get the key to the garden from the unsuspecting jailor, jump from the outhouse into the courtyard and over the bridge across the Rhone River. Two months later, the authorities found him guilty of heresy in absentia, ordered his books burned, and Servetus to be burned to death in a slow fire. Since he was not there, they had to content themselves with burning him slowly in effigy (Schaff, p. 4766).

Having escaped one fire, Servetus makes his way to another one. It is not known why he wished an audience with Calvin. Scott's theory is that he coveted Calvin's reputation as a scholar and desired to debate him publicly, confident that he would emerge the victor. Having made it to Geneva and stayed there for an entire month, he was finally recognized by someone at St. Peter's Church as he was listening to Calvin preach (Scott, p. 68). At Calvin's instigation, he was immediately arrested. In another footnote, Schaff says,

1166. In the *Refutatio*, *Opera*, VIII. 461, 725, and in letters to Farel (Aug. 20) and Sulzer (Sept. 8, 1553). "Servetus," [Calvin] wrote to Sulzer in Basel during the trial, "escaped from prison some way or other, and wandered in Italy for nearly four months. At length, in an evil hour, he came to this place, when, **at my instigation**, one of the Syndics ordered him to be conducted to prison; **for I do not disguise it that I considered it my duty to put a check, so far as I could, upon this most obstinate and ungovernable man, that his contagion might not spread farther.** We see with what wantonness impiety is making progress everywhere, so that new errors are ever and anon breaking forth; we see how very inactive those are whom God has armed with the sword for the vindication of the glory of his name." The reference to a four months' wandering in Italy (*per Italiam erravit fere quatuor menses*, that is, from April 7th to the end of July) is an error. Servetus at the trial denied that he had been in Italy at that time or at Venice at [any] time.

This footnote is significant since it may be pertinent to Calvin's motives in pursuing the death sentence for Servetus. Quoting Schaff again,

[Calvin] was under the false impression that Servetus had just come from Venice, the headquarters of Italian humanists and skeptics, to propagate his errors in Geneva, and *he considered it his duty to make so dangerous a man harmless*, by bringing him either to conviction and recantation, or to deserved punishment (Schaff, p. 4768).

As it turns out, the Libertines and Patriots, who had been Calvin's fiercest opponents of discipline in Geneva, had, by 1553, taken majority control of the Little Council. Amy Perrin, once supportive of Calvin but now his bitter enemy, had become the chief of the four Syndics on the Little Council. Moreover, several of his relatives and personal friends were also members of the Little Council.

*The main issue at this point seems to have been Calvin's insistence that church discipline be left exclusively in the hands of the Consistory consisting of pastors and elders.* The Little Council, on the other hand, wished to remove disciplinary matters out of Calvin's hands altogether (Schaff, p. 4768). Thus, Calvin was actually fighting on two fronts. On the one hand, he wanted Servetus to receive just punishment for heresy, something he knew the Little Council would rather omit. On the other hand, Calvin wanted to wrest control of all church disciplinary matters away from the council—in other words, “the state”—and leave them with the church. This did not mean that he was now an advocate of religious freedom as we know it. It only meant that he was against the state meddling in the business of *defining heresy or in excommunicating members for other offenses* (Schaff, p. 4768).

During the trial of Servetus the Council sustained Philibert Berthelier against the act of excommunication by the Consistory, and took church discipline into its own hands. The foreign refugees were made harmless by being deprived of their arms. Violence was threatened to the Reformer. He was everywhere saluted as "a heretic," and insulted on the streets. Beza says: “In the year 1553, the wickedness of the seditions, hastening to a close, was so turbulent that both Church and State were brought into extreme danger . . . . Everything seemed to be in a state of preparation for accomplishing the plans of the seditious, since all was subject to their power” . . . (Schaff, p. 4768).

Fighting two major battles at once, Calvin protested the ruling of the Council to rescind the ruling of the Consistory to excommunicate Berthelier. Calvin warned them that he had no intention of offering the elements of communion to someone whom the Consistory had already judged as unworthy. He declared to them that he would rather die than violate his conscience in this matter. The council advised Berthelier secretly not to approach the table, but this arrangement was not known to Calvin. Consequently, he thundered from the pulpit of St. Peter's Church, Sept. 3, 1553, that he would refuse communion to an excommunicated member even if it cost him his life. “Berthelier,” says Schaff, “did not dare approach the table. Calvin had achieved a moral victory over the Council” (Schaff, p. 4773).

We do not know whether Servetus was aware of this state of things. But he could not have come at a time more favorable to him and more unfavorable to Calvin. Among the Libertines and Patriots, who hated the yoke of Calvin even more than the yoke of the pope, Servetus found natural supporters who, in turn, would gladly use him for political purposes. This fact emboldened him to take such a defiant attitude in the trial and to overwhelm Calvin with abuse (Schaff, pp. 4868-69).

Servetus' jailor had informed him that he had the support of the civil judges ruling on his case (Needham, p. ?).

Another important element of the story is that the council was in serious deliberations to restore the legal status of prostitution in Geneva and to "eliminate sumptuary laws" (laws regulating personal extravagance), contrary to everything Calvin had achieved since 1541. However, the appearance of Servetus in Geneva was not helpful to this campaign because taking sides with him would associate the Council with the most infamous heretic in Europe (Scott, p. 69).

Nevertheless, had it not been for the influence of the Swiss reformers and Melancthon, as well as the complicity of the government of Bern—all of whom agreed to the burning of Servetus—the Little Council would possibly not have executed him. The Swiss had not agreed with Calvin's handling of Bolsec, a fact which encouraged Servetus to demand the Council's consultation with them (Schaff, p. 4869, 4772). However, their verdict was the same.

...[the execution]was unconditionally counseled by four Swiss magistrates which had been consulted before the execution (Zurich, Berne, Basel, and Schaffhausen), and was expressly approved by all the surviving reformers: Bullinger, Farel, Beza, Peter Martyr, and...even by the mild and gentle Melancthon. And strange to say, Servetus himself held, in part at least, the theory under which he suffered: for he admitted that incorrigible obstinacy and malice deserved death, referring to the case of Ananias and Sapphira; while schism and heresy should be punished only by excommunication and exile (Schaff, p. 4794).

Even Bern, which was not on good terms with Calvin, and had two years earlier counseled toleration in the case of Bolsec, regarded Servetus a much more dangerous heretic and advised to remove this "pest." *Yet none of the Churches consulted expressly suggested the death penalty.* They left the mode of punishment with the discretion of a sovereign State. Haller, the pastor of Bern, however, wrote to Bullinger of Zürich that, if Servetus had fallen into the hands of Bernese justice, he would undoubtedly have been condemned to the flames (Schaff, p. 4775; emphasis mine).

The theological examination of Servetus was carried out by Calvin, but his conviction was that his *sentence and punishment was "the exclusive function of the State, and that it is one of its most sacred duties to punish attacks made on the Divine majesty* (Schaff, p. 4869; emphasis mine).

But not everyone agree with the sentence of Servetus, even some of Calvin's close associates. Moreover, they feared that his execution would strengthen the Roman Catholics in their resolve to persecute more Protestants throughout Europe (Schaff, p. 4780). To Calvin's credit, he and the other pastors of Geneva suggested to the Council that beheading be the method of execution rather than burning. This request was denied. Farel, who had come from Neuchatel to offer the customary pastoral visit to the condemned, accused Calvin of being too soft. Also Bucer, who said Servetus should have been "disemboweled and torn to pieces [quartered]" (Scott, pp. 70-71). Summarizing the episode, Scott remarks that they were living in different times.

What seems difficult for secular moderns to grasp is that all Sixteenth Century governments believed the *Biblical teaching* that a *nation* religiously divided against itself cannot stand [And here, Scott cites Mark 3: 25 as support for the preceding statement].

It was, after all, not a nationalistic period, but [quoting Fernand Braudell, a Marxist historian] “a period in which people were united only by the bonds of religious belief.” In no region was this better understood than in Spain “which had no room for Erasmianism [Erasmus who deplored religious persecution] or for the doubtful *converso* [false convert] any more than for the Protestant.”...

In other words, the example of Spain—a land violently divided by religion for centuries—as well as the examples of internal strife provided by the rise of various heretical movements inside Christianity through the centuries provided both the theorists and rulers of the Sixteenth Century with ample evidence that *toleration of religious dissent* could have, and indeed often had, *frightful results* (Scott, pp. 71-72; bold emphasis mine).

This is an interesting analysis, and I wonder what Balthasar Hubmaier (who was burned to death at the stake) and his wife (who was drowned two weeks later) would have to say about it. It is very true that “all Sixteenth Century governments believed” that religious disunity would destroy a nation. Certainly this is a major part of the justification for the wars of devotion in the OT. “They [the heathen nations] shall not live in your land, because they will make you sin against Me; for *if* you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you” (Exodus 23:33 NASB). Nevertheless, we cannot read the OT as if the NT had never been written. Jesus was crucified by Jews looking for a political kingdom which He had denied them. In Mark 3: 24-25, Jesus says,

“If a **kingdom** is divided against itself, that **kingdom** cannot stand.<sup>25</sup> If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”

Scott says that a “*nation*” religiously divided against itself cannot stand, but that is not specifically what Christ says. He says a “*kingdom* divided against itself cannot stand”, where *kingdom* has a much broader connotation than the nation of Israel or any other geo-political nation. Christ later said that we should go and make disciples of all the “nations” (*ethne*, more accurately rendered, “people groups”, not political nations), but the method He tells us to employ is that of “*teaching them* to obey” all that he commanded us. I am assuming Christ meant teaching them to obey *from the heart*, not forcing them into submission—like Emperor Charlemagne who forced armies across rivers as a means of baptizing them.

Winning the hearts of individuals one at a time, or one family at a time, is the prerequisite to discipling the nation or people group. Otherwise, by hard political maneuvering we may win the senate, congress, and white house only to lose it in the next election or the one after. The only nation I can recall that has had a genuine theologian as prime minister is the Netherlands. His name was Abraham Kuyper. But look at the bleak spirituality of the Netherlands today. Losing the nation or the church is always only a generation away. You can’t win the soul of a nation through political elections. Again, this is a complicated subject beyond the scope of our subject, and I’m not implying that Christians should not labor and pray for the election of Christian legislators or for legislation that is based on Biblical teaching. The only other alternative is to push for legislation that is *not* biblical. But political solutions are not ultimate solutions. “Do not trust in princes, In mortal man, in whom there is no salvation” (Psalm 146:3 NASB). The failure of all the kings of Israel, and even the godly

kings of Judah, should alert us to the necessity of a divine king who alone is capable of ruling the heart.

Doubtless Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer, et al. sincerely believed that the kingdom of Christ could not stand unless they united the State under one religion and unless the power of the State could be pressed into service to punish heretics. They were working conscientiously off the OT paradigm of theocratic Israel. The Puritans in New England believed the same thing, and Baptist preachers doing ministry in Puritan precincts were severely beaten as a result (Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*). The Anabaptists and their Mennonite and Quaker descendents believed that no matter where you lived, you should be free to exercise your faith, and thousands of other believers throughout the twelve centuries intervening between the Church Fathers and the Reformation died for this belief. God did a very good job of taking care of His church during the 300 years that it existed as a politically weak minority under several Roman Caesars, some of whom actively persecuted the church. The irony is that far more Christians died from persecution by “Christian” states during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation than by Roman Caesars during the first three centuries. Thus the “frightful results” Scott mentions have been produced mainly by Christian *states* rather than Christian *sectarianism*.

This brings me to the statement by Scott that the internal strife and heretical movements down through the centuries was “ample evidence that toleration of religious dissent could have, and indeed often had, frightful results.” Yes, Munster had “frightful results” as well as the Peasants’ Revolt, which was not the whole fault of the peasants by a long shot. A great deal of the blame can be laid at the feet of oppressive and rapacious princes who cared only for their landed estates rather than their people. However, “frightful results” can also be applied to the persecution of religious minorities, especially the Anabaptists who simply could not accept a church in which all who belonged to a political realm were, *by definition*, Christians until proven otherwise.

Scott also asserts that

Christians believe that heresy is an attempt to misdirect God’s Plan, and Servetus was more than a simple heretic: he was a scholar who, *while pretending to be a Christian*, attacked the foundations of Christianity. He was a dangerous enemy of the faith. Left unchecked, Servetus would have *unhinged both the Reformation and Catholicism, and left Europe bereft in the ashes of its faith centuries before that situation was actually realized*.

The confrontation between Calvin and Servetus, therefore, was one of the high moments of history; heavy with not simply earthly, but eternal significance (Scott, pp. 72-73).

Schaff makes a similar statement.

Protestant persecution violates the fundamental principle of the Reformation. Protestantism has no right to exist except on the basis of freedom of conscience. How, then, can we account for this glaring inconsistency? There is a reason for everything. Protestant persecution was *necessary in self-defense and in the struggle for existence. The times were not ripe for toleration. The infant Churches could not have stood it.* These Churches had first to be consolidated and fortified against surrounding foes. *Universal toleration at that time would have resulted in universal confusion and upset*

***the order of society.*** From anarchy to absolute despotism is but one step. The division of Protestantism into two rival camps, the Lutheran and the Reformed, weakened it; further divisions within these camps would have ruined it and prepared an easy triumph for united Romanism, which would have become more despotic than ever before. ***This does not justify the principle, but it explains the practice, of intolerance*** (p. 4740).

I would have to ask once again how the church survived and thrived the first 300 years against a despotic, blatantly pagan government. Would toleration have resulted in universal confusion and upset the order of society? That argument would be used by the Taliban in Afghanistan or by the former Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. But it seems that universal toleration upsets the order of society only by those who are *intolerant*, not by those who are tolerant. “The infant Churches could not have stood [toleration]” (?) What about the Anabaptist churches? Could ***they*** have stood toleration? “From anarchy to absolute despotism is but one step,” Schaff insists. But the Reformers were already there. As far as the Anabaptists were concerned, they were already living under a despotic government.

Are we to believe that the execution of Servetus was the only means of checking the advancement of Anti-Trinitarianism in Europe? Would the Reformation in Europe have become “unhinged” had he lived to old age? Has the situation now changed according to what Augustine and others called “the enlarged fulfillment”—or what we may call today, “realized eschatology”—in which the church, once politically powerless, had the power during Augustine’s day to coerce erring members to return to the mother church? Do we wish to return to this, and do we believe that the steel sword more powerful than the sword of the Spirit? Has the Roman Catholic Church ever repudiated the coercive power of the state to protect the true religion.

I also disagree with some of B.B. Warfield’s conclusions quoted with approval in ***The Great Christian Revolution—How Christianity Transformed the World*** by Otto Scott (which I recommend, in spite of my differences in some areas). As noted above, in 1553 Calvin scored a “moral victory” over the Little Council in Geneva when he refused to give communion to Berthelier who had been excommunicated by the Consistory (consisting of pastors and lay elders). The Council had claimed the prerogative of canceling any discipline ordered by the Consistory. Finally in 1555, the Council backed down and permitted the Consistory to exercise church discipline independently of the Council. Scott quotes Warfield’s assessment of the significance of this event.

In asking for this he [Calvin] was asking for something new in the Protestant world.

Of course, Calvin did not get what he asked for in 1537, nor did he get it when he returned from his banishment in 1541. But he never lost it from sight; he was always ready to suffer for it...and at last he won it.

In the fruits of that great victory we have all had our part. ***And every church in Protestant Christendom which enjoys today any liberty whatever...owes it all to John Calvin.*** It was he who first asserted this liberty in his early manhood...it was he who first gained it in a lifelong struggle [sic] against a determined opposition; it was he who taught his followers to value it above life itself, and to secure it to their successors with the outpouring of their blood. And thus Calvin’s great figure rises before us not only in a true sense the creator of the Protestant church, but the author of all the freedom it exercises in its spiritual sphere (B.B. Warfield, ***Calvin and Augustine***, quoted in Scott, pp. 73-74).



Warfield's accolades of Calvin are a bit lop-sided. Are we to give the thousands of martyred Anabaptists *no credit at all* for the religious liberties and separation of ecclesiastical and magisterial powers we now take for granted? Was it not they, rather than Calvin, who first cried "foul" to this alien marriage of church and state, and were they not the first to shed their blood for the freedom to worship wherever and however they saw fit according to their own conscience—provided they did not trample upon the freedoms of others? Calvin's own confused mixture of ecclesiastical and magisterial powers, following the time-honored tradition of Constantinianism and Augustinianism, actually produced some of his problems in Geneva—according to the proverb, "Give the mouse a cookie, and it will also ask for a glass of milk." Give the state the prerogative to execute heretics, and it will also assume the prerogative to *define* what a heretic is. Although Calvin was not Lutheran—and he deplored the way that German princes had usurped the authority of the Lutheran Church—the powers he freely granted to the civil magistrate could logically progress to Lutheranism at any given time. Adding to this confusion was his—as well as Zwingli's, Bullinger's, Beza's, Bucer's, et al—misreading of redemptive history and the conviction that the OT theocracy was the continuing biblical paradigm for church and state rather than a temporary dispensation until the fullness of time in which the Kingdom of God would permeate and conquer all other kingdoms through preaching and teaching rather than legal conformity (Matt. 28: 19-20; "teaching them to observe", not "forcing them to observe", "all that I commanded you.")

All of them could be excused for this misconception had it not been for twelve centuries of dissenters who had bled and died to challenge the Constantinian change. Had all the Reformers, including Calvin, listened to their Anabaptist brothers—and brothers they were—the continuing absorption of the church into the State would have been mitigated. Warfield and Scott present Calvin as saving the church from the tyranny of the State by segregating ecclesiastical from magisterial powers. Yet, Calvin's Augustinian view of the State opens the very door which leads to their union. Moreover, as we have observed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup>, the encroachment of the state into the prerogatives of the church are far more likely given the power of the sword.

## **XII. What Calvin Achieved in Geneva through Systematic Discipline**

I do not wish to discredit Calvin's achievements in Geneva, and I have cited the testimonies of Schaff as well as eyewitnesses of Geneva's glory relative to the moral chaos characteristic of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

### **A. Philip's Schaff's Assessment of Geneva from His Research (Late 1800's)**

After the final collapse of the Libertine party in 1555, the peace was not seriously disturbed, and Calvin's work progressed without interruption. The authorities of the State were as zealous for the honor of the Church and the glory of Christ as the ministers of the gospel. The churches were well filled; the Word of God was preached daily; family worship was the rule; prayer and singing of Psalms never ceased; the whole city seemed to present the aspect of a community of sincere, earnest Christians who practiced what they believed. Every Friday a spiritual conference and experience meeting, called the "Congregation," was held in St. Peter's, after the model of the meetings of "prophesying," which had been introduced in Zürich and Bern. Peter Paul Vergerius, the former papal nuncio, who spent a short time in Geneva, was especially struck with these conferences. "All the ministers," he says, "and many citizens attend. One of the preachers reads and briefly explains a text from the Scriptures. Another expresses his views on the subject,

and then any member may make a contribution if so disposed. You see, it is an imitation of that custom in the Corinthian Church of which Paul speaks, and I have received much edification from these public colloquies (Schaff, pp. 4609-10).

## **B. The Description of Geneva by Bernardino Ochino (1542)**

Bernardino Ochino was an Italian protestant who at one time was considered the best preacher in Italy rivaling the famous Savonarola who died in 1498. Most of the Italian reformers were educated men who had come into the Reformation by way of the Renaissance. He came to Geneva in September, 1542, and was profoundly impressed with what he witnessed there. In one of his sermons in 1542, he wrote,

“In Geneva, where I am now residing, excellent Christians are daily preaching the pure word of God. The Holy Scriptures are constantly read and openly discussed, and everyone is at liberty to propound what the Holy Spirit suggests to him, just as, according to the testimony of Paul, was the case in the primitive Church [an eyewitness confirmation of Schaff’s quote above about the Corinthian church]. Every day there is a public service of devotion. Every Sunday there is catechetical instruction of the young, the simple, and the ignorant. Cursing and swearing, unchastity, sacrilege, adultery, and impure living, such as prevail in many places where I have lived, are unknown here. There are no pimps and harlots. The people do not know what rouge is, and they are all clad in a seemly fashion. Games of chance are not customary. Benevolence is so great that the poor need not beg. The people admonish each other in brotherly fashion, as Christ prescribes. Lawsuits are banished from the city; nor is there any simony, murder, or party spirit, but only peace and charity. On the other hand, there are no organs here, no noise of bells, no showy songs, no burning candles and lamps, no relics, pictures, statues, canopies, or splendid robes, no farces, or cold ceremonies. The churches are quite free from all idolatry” (Schaff, p. 4700).

Sadly, Ochino would later drift into dangerous speculations about Christ’s atonement as well as Unitarianism, but the beginning of his fall was occasioned by one of his dialogues which placed polygamy in a favorable light. In his books “Labyrinths” (1561) and “Thirty Dialogues” (1563), Ochino treats the doctrines of predestination, free will, the Trinity, and monogamy. He does not give sufficient emphasis to the orthodox view of monogamy, and this omission got him into trouble with the authorities of Zurich in December, 1563. His most objectionable writing seems to have been the dialogue on polygamy which he appears to have defended on the basis of its practice by OT patriarchs and kings. The book may not have created such a stir had it not been for the infamous case of the Reformed Prince Philip of Hesse, who had been given permission by Luther, Melancthon, and Bucer to marry a second wife after his first wife refused to follow him to Zurich. Hesse, who had recently adopted Reformed views, attempted to woo her from the Catholic faith back to him; but she refused to budge even though he assured her of the right to practice her faith. After this, Hesse was given permission by the Reformers to marry another wife. At any rate, the Reformers got some bad press out of the affair which may have led to a politically motivated reaction against Ochino’s writing.

Ochino was banished from Zurich in December, 1563, a 77 year old widower with four children. [Apparently he had either married late in life or perhaps this was his second wife.] Here is Schaff’s account of his troubles.

In vain did he protest against misinterpretation, and beg to be allowed to remain during the cold winter with his four children. He was ordered to quit the city within three weeks. Even the mild Bullinger did not protect him. He went to Basel, but the magistrates of that city were even more intolerant than the clergy, and would not permit him to remain during the winter. Castellio, the translator of the obnoxious books, was also called to account, but was soon summoned to a higher judgment (December 23). The printer, Perna, who had sold all the copies, was threatened with punishment, but seems to have escaped it.

Ochino found a temporary hiding-place in Nürnberg, and sent from there in self-defense an ill-tempered attack upon Zürich, to which the ministers of that city replied.

Being obliged to leave Nürnberg, he turned his weary steps to Poland, and was allowed to preach to his countrymen at Cracow. But Cardinal Hosius and the papal nuncio denounced him as an atheist, and induced the king to issue an edict by which all non-Catholic foreigners were expelled from Poland (Aug. 6, 1564).

Ochino entered upon his last weary journey. At Pinczow he was seized by the pestilence and lost three of his children; nothing is known of the fourth. He himself survived, but a few weeks afterwards he took sick again and ended his lonely life at the end of December, 1564, at Schlackau in Moravia: a victim of his skeptical speculations and the intolerance of his age. A veil is thrown over his last days: no monument, no inscription marks his grave (Schaff, pp. 4702-03).

### **C. John Knox's Evaluation of Geneva in 1556**

The Reformer of Scotland, John Knox, became the pastor of the English congregation in Geneva. In 1556, he wrote to a friend,

"In my heart I could have wished, yea, I cannot cease to wish, that it might please God to guide and conduct yourself to this place where, I neither fear nor am ashamed to say, is *the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles*. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so seriously reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place besides" (Schaff, p. 4611).

### **D. The Testimony of the Lutheran, Dr. Valentine Andreae**

Dr. Valentine Andreae, the Lutheran grandson of Jacob Andreae, chief author of the Lutheran Formula of Concord, visited Geneva in 1610, almost half a century after Calvin's death. The following testimony indicates that the disciplinary system of Calvin had effects which lasted for generations to come.

"When I was in Geneva, I observed something great which I shall remember and desire as long as I live. There is in that place not only the perfect institute of a perfect republic, but, as a special ornament, a moral discipline, which makes weekly investigations into the conduct, and even the smallest transgressions of the citizens, first through the district inspectors, then through the Seniors, and finally through the magistrates, as the nature of the offence and the hardened state of the offender may require. All cursing and swearing, gambling, luxury, strife, hatred [I wonder how the government forbids hatred], fraud, etc., are forbidden; while greater sins are hardly heard of. What a glorious ornament of the

Christian religion is such a purity of morals! We must lament with tears that it is wanting with us, and almost totally neglected. If it were not for the difference of religion, I would have forever been chained to that place by the agreement in morals, and I have ever since tried to introduce something like it into our churches. No less distinguished than the public discipline was the domestic discipline of my landlord, Scarron, with its daily devotions, reading of the Scriptures, the fear of God in word and indeed, temperance in meat and drink and dress. I have not found greater purity of morals even in my father's home (Schaff, p. 4611).

### **E. Calvin's Promotion of Sanitation and Economic Development in Geneva**

Calvin introduced a program to clean up the city of Geneva, insisting on the removal of "filth" from the houses and streets. He influenced the civil magistrate to prohibit the sale of unhealthy food, all of which would be thrown into the Rhone River. (So, I suppose Calvin and Mayor Bloomberg of New York, who recently forbade the sale of soft drinks, would have something unusual in common.) Prostitution ("low taverns") and bars were abolished in Geneva after many years of one whole district being devoted to the sex trade. Begging on the streets was outlawed, but Calvin made sure the poor were taken care of by providing a hospital and home for the poor. Moreover, an employment service was implemented which helped the unemployed find useful work.

In a speech before the Council in 1544, Calvin proposed a plan for the introduction of the cloth and silk industry in Geneva followed two months later by a plan to lend money from the public treasury to one of the four Syndics (top civil magistrate) to start this business. (And all the socialists rejoiced.) This industry laid the foundation for the material prosperity of Geneva for many years to come until the city of Lyons in France surpassed Geneva in the manufacture of silk—again with governmental patronage from the French king. But by this time Geneva had already begun the manufacture of watches which made up for the loss. Geneva's mastery in watch-making was not surpassed until 1885, when mechanized manufacturing of watches produced successful alternatives to the hand-made Swiss variety (Schaff, p. 4609).

Another economic advantage which Calvin brought to Geneva inadvertently was the printing industry. Calvin preached often to audiences of a thousand people, and from 1549, a stenographer was hired to record all of his sermons. He never made any royalties from his writing, which was common in those days, but others benefitted quite a bit. As Geneva became the center of the Reformation, the literary output of Calvin and his colleagues stimulated the growth of the printing industry in the city. And, of course, printers need ink and paper, so the printing industry spawned the manufacture of paper and ink producers. Along with the ink and paper manufacturers came editors, translators (since his works were published in multiple languages), salesmen, and other authors. Thus, the sheer volume of Calvin's literary output was an industry all by itself (Scott, p. 62).

## **XIII. Applications**

**A. Let's learn to appreciate the contributions of Christians from other theological perspectives.**

As you have seen, I believe the American phenomenon of religious liberty is to a large degree the outgrowth of Anabaptist persecution which continued in Puritan New England. The church has learned a lot by doing things the wrong way. The original version of the Westminster Confession read as follows:

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the Church, [and by the power of the civil magistrate] (WCF 20.4).

[The clause "and by the power of the civil magistrate," is omitted in the American version of the Westminster Confession.]

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, *and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemes and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed.* For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God (WCF 23.3.) (emphasis mine)

[American Edition] Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; *or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.* Yet as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, *without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest,* in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, *no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief.* It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever; and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance (WCF 23.3.; emphasis mine).

Ch. XXIII., 3; Comp. Ch. XXXI., 1, 2. These sections were changed and adapted to the

separation of Church and State by the united Synod of Philadelphia and New York which met at Philadelphia, May 28, 1787.

I believe we have such amendments to the Confession because of the former persecutions of Anabaptists in Europe and for a short time on American soil. For the persecution of Baptists on American soil, Leonard Verduin's book, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, is very informative.

**B. Let's have more dialogue between opposing camps within the Reformed faith.**

We have seen what can happen when strong personalities clash over doctrinal issues. Luther was unwilling even to shake Zwingli's hand although they agreed on 14 out of 15 important issues. Melancthon's own descendents were persecuted in Saxony. Calvin was shunned in his own church, The Church of the Strangers, when passing through Strasburg in 1556.

I was at RTS Seminary in 1976-79 at the beginning of the Theonomy debates, although I was too green and ignorant to understand the significance of what was going on. Looking back after more reflection and experience, I think much hostility could have been avoided had both sides been willing to sit down, dialogue, and discuss their differences rather than hurling labels like "antinomian" and "legalist" against each other. This may sound naïve, but why? To some extent, the difficulties between the opposing camps were more about egos than theological positions, and I have learned over the last 40 years that theologians can be just as immature as the rest of us with fewer wrinkles in our brains. Theologians are just men who make mistakes and whose lives are generally like ours—their practice falls short, far short, of their theory. If you hang around enough theologians in your lifetime, you might be amazed at how remarkably human they are. Appreciate them, read them, pray for them, but don't celebrate them and don't canonize their theological positions.

John Frame openly discusses some of the problems he encountered with the "Two Kingdoms" camp in Escondido, California many years ago. The segregation into parties became so intense that he felt he had to leave. A very good article to read about this is P. Andrew Sandlin's review of Frame's *The Escondido Theology* entitled, "The Irenic Polemicist" (found in the book).

**C. Third, let's recognize that if we reach the masses of American people—not to speak of the masses of people throughout the world—we must reach their hearts as well as their minds.**

If we don't reach their hearts first we will not reach their minds later. We are living in a very anti-intellectual age of TV viewers, Twitter and FaceBook users. They don't read much, except in spurts, and what they read doesn't require much philosophical reflection. I'm inclined to believe that our culture no longer thinks very much at all. If we reach them, they must see the gospel in action. They must see our churches (including the PCA, to which I belong) become churches which practice community. Luther had the Anabaptists in Germany in the palm of his hand, and they did think sufficiently about the Reformed faith to believe that Luther's theology encompassed their social, economic, and political well-being. When he sold them out to the princes, he lost the masses who then either lost faith altogether or reverted back to the Catholic Church, or continued in the Anabaptist congregations.

Calvin, I believe, was successful in Geneva partly because he instituted economic developments for the poor. Begging on the streets was outlawed, but Calvin made sure the

poor were taken care of by providing a hospital and a home for the poor. Moreover, an employment service was implemented which helped the unemployed find useful work. In a speech before the Council in 1544, Calvin proposed a plan for the introduction of the cloth and silk industry in Geneva followed two months later by a plan to lend money from the public treasury to one of the four Syndics (top civil magistrate) to start this business. (With his view of church and state, this was Calvin's equivalent to "compassionate conservatism"). This industry laid the foundation for the material prosperity of Geneva for many years to come until the city of Lyons in France surpassed Geneva in the manufacture of silk—again with governmental patronage from the French king. But by this time Geneva had already begun the manufacture of watches which made up for the loss. Geneva's mastery in watch-making was not surpassed until 1885, when mechanized manufacturing of watches produced successful alternatives to the hand-made Swiss variety (Schaff, p. 4609).

Now, as fiscally conservative evangelicals, we would not encourage socialistic economic measures, nor would our abundant personal resources require us to do so; but we could come up with other biblically responsible alternatives to social improvements for the unemployed. The real question is whether we are thinking about the economically disadvantaged at all. As stated earlier, those who live comfortably under the prevailing systems are generally unsympathetic to social revolution. For instance, are there people in our churches who would like to start small businesses, but who can't qualify for small bank loans? Are there others in our churches with sufficient funds to help them? I am not sure about the religious beliefs of the man who started the Grameen Bank providing microenterprise loans for the poor in India, but I am assuming he is Hindu. Should Hindus work from a Christian world-view more than Christians?

All I am saying is that people must see the gospel lived out. We must first gather the sheep with a message which demonstrates compassion before we earn the right to teach them the complicated doctrines of our faith.

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