

# The Major Figures of the Reformation

The 16th-century Protestant Reformation is a living testimony of God's commitment to uphold His Word and preserve the purity of His church amidst an era of widespread spiritual decadence in Christendom. The Lord raised faithful men to purge and reform the church that had gone wayward far too long. Among those whom God raised up for this purpose, three stand out because of the extent of their contributions to the cause of the Reformation. They are Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin.

## **Martin Luther and the 95 theses**

Of the three, Martin Luther is considered to be the "Father of the Reformation". Born on the 10th of November 1483 in the mining town of Eisleben in Germany, Luther was brought up in a Catholic family. He studied advanced Latin and was educated in the philosophy of Aristotle. In 1505, he took up law at the University of Erfurt.

After a summer vacation, on his way back to school to continue his studies, Luther was caught in a severe thunderstorm in the dark woods near Stotternheim where he almost lost his life. When a lightning bolt hit a nearby tree, he was knocked to the ground. The dagger that was tucked under his belt seriously wounded his thigh, barely missing an artery. Being afraid to die, he cried out to St Anne, the patron saint of the miners. "St Anne, help me. I will become a monk!" Two weeks later, he

quit his studies at the College of Law and joined the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt.

In 1507, at the age of 24, he was ordained an Augustinian priest and celebrated his first mass. In 1511, his holy order sent him to pursue a Doctorate of Theology at the University of Wittenberg. The following year, he completed his Doctorate and became a professor of the Bible in that university. He was then 29 years old.

Being a lecturer of the Bible, Luther had to spend much time reading the Word of God. While he was reading and meditating on the words of Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith", he understood that justification is by faith in Christ alone. He realized that none can be justified by works, but by faith in Christ alone. This good news of salvation brought him great joy. He was delighted to find the answer to his life's greatest question – "How can man get right with God?"

Later, when he heard that a Dominican friar named John Tetzel was selling indulgences in Saxony, he could not afford to keep quiet. He was so enraged with holy anger that he wrote no less than 95 theses (or statements) in his protest against the sale of indulgences. These also included his rejection of the Roman Catholic church as the "institute of salvation for souls". Thus Luther was not just protesting against the peddling of forgiveness tickets but the whole system of the Roman Catholic church. Warfield rightly said of Luther, "He calls in question the entire basis of

the Catholic system and came forward in opposition to it, as an Evangelical.”<sup>1</sup>

It was customary in those days to post theological propositions open for debate on the door of the Wittenberg church, the gateway to the university. Many people passing by read Luther's theses and were convicted of the truths embedded in the statements. Others took a copy to the printing press and circulated hundreds of copies to their relatives and friends.

Little did Luther know that God would use his humble effort to launch and lead the historic 16th-century Protestant Reformation! It is remarkable to note that he was only 34 years old at that time. Today, God continues to look out for men like Luther who are totally committed to His cause for the sake of His truth.

## **Ulrich Zwingli and the sovereignty of God**

Ulrich Zwingli started the Reformation in German-speaking Switzerland. He was born on the 1st of January 1484 in the mountain town of Wildhaus to a considerably rich and influential family. His father was the magistrate of the town and a successful farmer. His parents noticed his exceptional abilities from an early age and they sent him to reputable schools. He studied in the University of Vienna (Austria) and later in the University of Basel (Switzerland). He was a scholar of broad discipline, a learned man in humanities, classics, languages, philosophy and theology. He was an accomplished musician too, who could play a variety of instruments.

Upon graduation in 1506, he joined the priesthood and for 10 years was loyal to the interests of the pope. By 1516, Zwingli

was assigned to serve in Einsiedeln. In this parish, the truth of God's Word reformed his life and theological thinking. Through his quest for the knowledge of God in His Word, he understood that salvation is purely by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

In the summer of 1518, Samson of Milan, the 'Tetzel of Switzerland', tried to enter Zurich to sell forgiveness tickets. Zwingli strongly protested before the civil government and managed to persuade them to ban Samson's false gospel. As Van Halsema recounted, "Zwingli preached so mightily against him that Samson could not get permission to enter the city of Zurich. Instead, Zurich invited Zwingli to become the parish priest in its Grossmunster Church."<sup>2</sup>

Zwingli's contribution to the 16th-century Reformation was twofold. Firstly, he managed to reform the German-speaking cantons which became Protestant through his preaching and writing ministry. At the end of his life, his literary efforts totalled eight large octavo volumes, eighty German and fifty-nine Latin books and tracts, and two volumes of letters from his correspondence. The most famous were his *Sixty-Seven Articles* (1524), *True and False Religion* (1525), *Treatise on Divine Providence* (1530), and *Confession* (1531).

Secondly, Zwingli developed a sound biblical theology based on the Greek New Testament which Erasmus had published. The objective principle that formed his reformation and theological views was *Sola Fide* (Faith Alone) built upon *Sola Scriptura* (Scriptures Alone). This led him to propound a Christ-centred theology. He proclaimed that Christ is the head of the church, visible and invisible, and the only mediator between God and man. He emphasized the authority of the Bible,

the understanding that salvation is by faith alone, the commemorative view of the Lord's Supper as against Luther's consubstantiation, and the belief that infants born to Christian homes are saved when they die an untimely death.

One of his major contributions to theology was the propagation of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. By this, Schaff accounted that Zwingli believed that God "is the supreme and only good, and the omnipotent cause of all things. He rules and administers the world by His perpetual and immutable providence, which leaves no room for accidents... Salvation is possible without baptism, but not without Christ. We are elected in order that we may believe in Christ and bring forth the fruits of holiness"<sup>3</sup>.

All of Zwingli's doctrinal efforts were rewarded in that he managed to remove the traditional practices of the Roman Catholic church such as the veneration of images and relics; payment for baptism and burials; and the prohibition of clergymen marrying, leading to the abolition of the mass in Zurich in 1525.<sup>4</sup>

Zwingli died at the Battle of Cappel in 1531. He did not leave us a denomination like Luther and Calvin but his influence extended beyond denominational barriers and his contribution to the 16th-century Protestant Reformation was so invaluable that one historian said, "The dogmatic works of Zwingli contain the germs of the evangelical Reformed Theology."<sup>5</sup>

### John Calvin and TULIP

If Luther was considered the father of the Reformation, then John Calvin was the mastermind of that 16th-century

movement. He was the youngest of the three major figures of the Reformation and considered a second-generation reformer; but God reserved a place for him that is higher than that of his seniors. He earned the title "theologian of the Protestant church", being one who systematized the Protestant faith. His contribution to the Reformation influenced not only the church but also shaped the Western world.

Calvin was born on the 10th of July 1509 in Noyon, Picardy in northeastern France. Raised in a middle-class family, his father served the Roman Catholic church as an attorney, but his mother passed away when he was only three years old. God blessed Calvin with remarkable intelligence and he is considered one of the most intelligent persons in the 1500s.

Calvin enjoyed the mentorship of the best teachers around. He studied classics, philosophy and theology at the University of Paris. Under his father's influence, he left Paris to study law at the University of Orleans and later at the University of Bourges where he finished his Doctors of Law.<sup>6</sup> After his father's death, he continued his studies in theology, his greatest passion. He also sought mastery of the original languages of the Bible, both Greek and Hebrew, to be more equipped in studying the Word of God.

John Calvin's contribution to the Reformation was monumental. Firstly, he founded the Academy of Geneva which trained the next generation of church leaders who would carry his reformed thought to faraway lands. There were men like Guido de Bres who wrote the *Belgic Confession*; Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus who wrote the *Heidelberg Catechism*; John Knox who

wiped out Roman Catholicism in Scotland; John Foxe who wrote the *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*; Anthony Gilby and William Wittingham who translated the *Geneva Bible*. We also must not forget Theodore Beza who succeeded Calvin and edited the Greek New Testament *Textus Receptus*; and Miles Coverdale who completed the work of William Tyndale and published the first Bible in the English language.

Secondly, Calvin was a prolific writer. He left us a voluminous set of Bible commentaries on most books of the Bible. In addition, there were fifty-seven volumes preserved from his *Corpus Reformationum* and a copy of two thousand sermon extracts.

Thirdly, Calvin left us a rich legacy in the Reformed Faith, also known as Presbyterianism or Calvinism. This theological school of thought was the fruit of his theological treatise entitled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* which is considered the most important contribution of Calvin to the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. From a small booklet, Calvin edited it many times until its final edition in 1559 consisted of four books and eighty chapters.

Calvin drew up the doctrines of grace in his 5-points of Calvinism known by its mnemonic acronym TULIP, summed up as follows:

**1. Total Depravity** – All men are born in a fallen condition, destitute of spiritual life as a result of the fall of the first Adam. Therefore, every human being at birth is dead in sin, without the will to do what is good, and without the power to repent and believe. Man, because of his fallen condition and left to his own choice, will

never choose God (Genesis 6:5; Isaiah 64:6; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10, 23).

**2. Unconditional Election** – This refers to the sovereign, free, eternal, unmerited and unalterable choice on the part of God in choosing persons to everlasting life and salvation (Ephesians 1:4-5; 11).

**3. Limited Atonement** – This doctrine teaches that Christ's atoning work is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect. Although the offer of the Gospel of salvation is to be preached to all, the atonement that Christ achieved is efficient only for the elect (John 3:16, 36).

**4. Irresistible Grace** – It points to the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing a person to salvation which cannot be resisted by the elect. The outward call in Gospel preaching alone may be refused, rejected, put away, neglected and disobeyed. But when the outward call of the Gospel is combined with the inward, effectual call of the Spirit of God, it is holy (2 Timothy 1:9), potent (Romans 1:16), attracting (John 12:32), life-giving (John 5:25; Ephesians 2:5), effectual (John 6:44) and irresistible (John 6:37).

**5. Preservation of the Saints** – All those who are chosen to salvation by God the Father, redeemed by God the Son, and quickened by God the Holy Spirit, will receive grace so to endure to the end as that they must infallibly be saved. This doctrine stamps the seal of security to God's work of salvation (John 6:39; 10:28-29; Romans 8:38-39; Jude 24).

At the close of his life, Calvin was last seen preaching on February 6, 1564, spitting blood. He died a few months later in the evening of May 27, 1564, aged exactly 54 years 10 months and 17 days. Calvin gave his

life for the cause of the Reformation, which he believed to be worthy of any and all sacrifice. His last words were: "The sufferings

of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to be..."

### ENDNOTES

1. Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, 487
2. Thea B. Van Halsema, *This Was John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 18.
3. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Volume III - Modern Christianity The Swiss Reformation* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 92-93.
4. Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries, A History of the Christian Church* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 295.
5. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Volume III - Modern Christianity The Swiss Reformation* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 89.
6. Henry C. Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church: Volume 3 - The Modern Church Part One* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 144.



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Reformation, also called Protestant Reformation, the religious revolution that took place in the Western church in the 16th century. Its greatest leaders undoubtedly were Martin Luther and John Calvin.Â The Reformation became the basis for the founding of Protestantism, one of the three major branches of Christianity. The Reformation led to the reformulation of certain basic tenets of Christian belief and resulted in the division of Western Christendom between Roman Catholicism and the new Protestant traditions.Â Who were some of the key figures of the Reformation? The greatest leaders of the Reformation undoubtedly were Martin Luther and John Calvin. The major reformer from the reformation is Martin Luther. He is the major reformer from the reformation, because he started the Reformation. As well, as the Swiss reformer Uldrich Zwingli. John Knox, John Calvin, and Henry VIII helped a great deal as well.Â The English Reformation was a series of events in 16th Century England by which the Church of England broke away from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.