

John Calvin

The Reformation of the Refugees and Church Discipline

1) Luther 1483-1546 Zwingli 1484-1531 Calvin 1509-1564

Important Dates

Lutheran Germany: Augsburg Interim: 1548 Peace of Augsburg: 1555
 Thirty Years War 1618-1648

France: “Affair of the Placards” 1536 / St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: 1572 / Edict of Nantes: 1598 / Edict of Fontainebleu: 1685 (canceled in French Revolution, 1790)

Netherlands: Persecutions date from 1521. Founding of the Dutch Republic 1588. End of wars with Spain: 1648.

England: Edward VI, 1537-1553 / Mary I (Bloody Mary) 1553-1558 / Elizabeth I, 1553-1603
 Spanish Armada: 1588

2) Calvin: Providence and Predestination (Election): Their Meaning in Persecution

Persecutions in France and soon also in the Netherlands created thousands of refugees. Belief in election and in providence was a highly significant comfort. Calvin, “pastor to pastors” in France, once wrote, “We have no other place of refuge than God’s providence.”

Calvin frequently refers to 2Tim.2:19 on the doctrine of election: God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: the Lord knows those who are his. “He will not forsake the work of his hands.”

3) Heiko Oberman (in his book “Two Reformations”) quotes from a journal of a French school teacher who, after persecution, flight, long travail, and the loss his wife and four children, finds refuge in the Netherlands. He thanks God for the strength he has received from the assurance of election and providence. Oberman comments: “Within the horizon of the experience of persecution, this text is a precious experiential asset which churches subject to persecution can only dispense with to their great detriment and which we, for as long as we may live under the protective canopy of our democratic rights, must keep alive and pass on...”

“We are not just engaging in the historical analysis of an old debate but dealing with the recognition of the structures of the existence of refugees in our own time.”

4) “At the beginning of the Reformation, before French and Dutch Calvinists became refugees escaping persecution, all theologians regarded the forced dispersal of the Jews from Judea by the Romans as evidence of Jewish guilt. In Calvinism fifty years later this argument had completely disappeared.” (Oberman)

5) Calvin and the Development of Puritanism: Church Discipline and the Role of Secular Authority (quotations from Institutes)

As the doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does the discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together... Discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and sometimes like a father's rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ's Spirit those who have more seriously lapsed.

6) Civil government has as its appointed end...to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to society, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.

7) Civil government ... prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound... In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, that humanity be maintained...

Magistrates are ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency and tranquility, and their sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all.

If they remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice. ... They are deputies of God, to whom they must hereafter render account of the administration of their charge.

8) The Law of the Bible has three uses: (1) "It shows the righteousness of God, and as a mirror discloses our sinfulness, leading us to implore divine help," the grace of God in Christ.

(2) Its "dire threats" restrain doers of evil.

(3) "The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. ... Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it. ... By frequent meditation upon it the servant of God will be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression." (Institutes, II, 7)

Puritans: 1) Calvin's 3rd use of the law is integrated into the first: the law convicts of sin *and always also* requires obedience, so that the grace of forgiveness occurs within the inclusive requirement of obedience. Puritans call themselves "visible saints." For Calvin, as for Luther and Zwingli, forgiveness is not conditioned by the added requirement to fulfill the law. Faith receives

God's love unconditionally, which expresses itself as love of God and neighbor in the life of the believer.

2) Civil government, whose members are elected only by church members, supervises behavior more strictly. For example, kissing in public is forbidden; clothing may not be ostentatious or show signs wealth (e.g. lace).

9) Brief Comparison of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin

Luther: God's will is revealed once-for-all in Christ. In according with New Testament texts, God elects true Christians, who demonstrate their election by freely accepting grace and by behavior in the Spirit of Christ, both often challenged by "Anfechtung," including persecution. Natural human reason is free in areas outside Revelation; in matters of Revelation it can only be obedient to Revelation. Secular rulers should be educated in the church, especially in the Ten Commandments. -- Time: Luther has no thought about the future, other than that the end of the world is near. God leads evil finally to this end.

Zwingli: God's will is partly available to philosophical reason, but Revelation is always superior to what reason can know. Reason prepares for, opens to and receives Revelation. God elects true Christians, although all citizens of Zurich are included in the covenant of the city with God. -- Zwingli's progressive politics demonstrate his belief in a better future.

Calvin: In addition to revealing God's ultimate will in Christ, the Bible reveals God's covenant with the church, a community of mixed true and false Christians held together by church discipline. God's will governs all things, but in time and history it is hidden. In trusting in election and providence, one trusts that God leads all things to their predestined end.

Reason: "The human mind, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. ...the Spirit of God is the sole fountain of truth; we neither reject nor despise it wherever it appears. ... Those men whom Scripture [1Cor.2:14] calls "natural" were indeed sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. ... [However] human reason neither approaches nor strives toward, nor even takes a straight aim at understanding who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us." (Institutes, II, 2, 12-18)