

# Church History - Zwingli, Calvin, & the Counter-Reformation

by David Guzik

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*This sermon explores the lives and contributions of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, two key figures in the Reformation, and the Roman Catholic Church's response to the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation.*

**Duration:** 28:20

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33

**Topics:** "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the life and work of John Calvin, a prominent figure in the Protestant Reformation. Calvin was known for his book, Calvin's Institutes, which became a classic in Christian theology. Despite initially being reluctant, Calvin was convinced by a pastor named Pharel that God wanted him to pastor a church in Geneva. Calvin's Geneva became a remarkable city with a population that was largely born again. Calvin's contribution was not as an original thinker, but as a great organizer who compiled the basic doctrines of the Bible into his Institutes of the Christian Religion. The Reformation period is significant in church history and has shaped Christianity more than any other era.

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## Transcript

You might ask yourself, why are we talking so much about the Reformation? Oh, there's a couple of reasons. One is that it's a very important time in church history. Very important.

I mean, in a lot of ways you could say where we are at today as Christians is much more shaped by what happened in the 16th century, the 1500s there, than by what happened, you know, certainly in the 5th century, in the 400s. So, you know, it's a very important time in church history. The second reason is that in time of Reformation it's just good to study history because it's so interesting.

I mean, so many compelling people, compelling characters during this time. And the one that we've considered in real depth so far is a fellow named Martin Luther, right? We talked about Martin Luther a lot. And today we're going to just mention, I'm sorry to say we're not going to go into a great deal of depth, a couple of other Reformers.

One of them is a guy named Ulrich Zwingli. Now, when talking about Ulrich Zwingli, you're talking about the German and then also the Swiss Reformation here. Now we're talking about the Reformation as it

spreads to Switzerland.

Now, let's remember Switzerland is this land in the center of Europe. They're surrounded in the Alps and a cultured land, educated people. And what you have is you have the Reformation spreading from Germany all around.

You have Europe there and you've got the Reformation going north from Germany into the Netherlands, into Holland, eventually up into Scandinavia. You have the Reformation going westward over to France with the Huguenots and the movements of the French aspects of the Reformation. You also have it coming to England in something that we'll talk about later with the Anglican Church.

You have the Reformation sort of going to the south at least somewhat in Germany, having to do with Switzerland, but really not going much more beyond Switzerland. Then you have the countries in which the Roman Catholic Church really stayed strong and the Reformation didn't really touch. Italy, Spain, Poland, those lands around there were not really touched by the Reformation.

The political rulers were strong enough and loyal enough to the Roman Catholic Church to prevent any significant inroads from the Protestant Church. But one of the leaders of the Reformation in Switzerland, a very important influential man was this fellow Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli was raised with what might be called a Renaissance education, this education that was interested in looking at original sources, getting back to the truth, getting back to things.

And he was converted after he entered the ministry as a career. He decided to become a priest, a career in ministry. Back then this was just another career track that any young man might go on, and a fairly promising one.

The church could be seen back then as a big corporation, right? And a very successful one. A young man today wants to go to IBM, I could go to Microsoft, I could go to General Motors, where am I going to make my career? And this, I mean, truly the Catholic Church was right up there in the fortune top ten companies, corporations. It probably was number one.

And so it was not illogical for a young man to say, well look, I want to make my career, let's join the Roman Catholic Church. And so he entered into ministry and became a priest, but something funny happened to him along the way. Well, he got saved.

He got saved in this quest here. And when he was converted, you know, a lot of it had to do with getting back to the Bible, with getting back to the truth. And he started being a little bit antagonistic.

His reforms in what he was trying to do in the church that he pastored over as a priest really began to gain steam after he got the better of a bishop in a debate. He debated a bishop over certain issues in the Roman Catholic Church, and he really whooped this bishop pretty good in the debate. Now, Zwingli was really a co-reformer with Martin Luther.

He was not just a warmed over Martin Luther. Zwingli came... it's interesting to see the historical development of this. It's easy to assume that Luther was the guy, okay? Here's Luther, and that all these other people just kind of derive from Luther, which it really wasn't the case.

Zwingli seemed to come to his understanding of biblical truth and to an accurate understanding of the scriptures really all on his own. So we should regard Zwingli and Luther as co-reformers. Now, it's

probable that without what Martin Luther did, Zwingli would have backed down because the pressure was so hot, or he would have just been another martyred guy.

But because of what Martin Luther did, it really enabled what Zwingli was doing to have some steam. So Zwingli was doing his thing, leading a reformation movement in Switzerland, and one of the things Zwingli was noted for was, we talked last time together about the Anabaptists, about this movement, the radical reformation. Zwingli turned on the Anabaptists with a real vengeance.

He was out after them, and very effectively he persecuted the Anabaptists. But he also had troubles with the Roman Catholic armies as well. And I mean literally armies.

You know, Europe back then was not a collection... For example, you know, you have Germany. You know, that's a rough drawing. You have Germany.

And today, you know, you have Germany. It's a state. It's not even two anymore, right? I mean, it's one nation.

You have Germany. Well, back then, you didn't have Germany. You had a bunch of small principalities, you know, all over the place.

And all these different princes and dukes and rulers, you know, they would all have like a city, you know, and then like a county that they would have reign over. And they would battle with each other. So you have all these... And so each one of these guys would have like their own little personal army and militia, things like that.

And the same kind of thinking. So, you know, this guy here might be a Protestant. And this guy here might be a devoted Roman Catholic.

Well, it would not be unusual for those two guys to get together and fight a war, fight a battle. And it happened in a larger scale. Because let's say all four of these guys were Protestants.

And all these guys were Roman Catholics, right? Well, you could expect them to join together in battle. And so it's hard for us to understand this. But in the 16th century, there were wars, Protestant against Catholic, in Europe.

Now, here's what's interesting about this. Is it worked just the way it works today. These guys are Protestants.

Now remember, these are political leaders. Now, why are these guys Roman Catholics? Why do they have a Roman Catholic, you know, region or county under their control? Is it because they are so persuaded that the theology of Roman Catholicism is correct? And they are absolutely unswervingly loyal to the Pope. Because they know that that's what God wants them to be.

And it's the passion of their conscience. Why? No. Yeah, it's because, you know, they consider it in their political advantage to align with the Pope.

And why are these guys Protestants? Really, especially the rulers. Is it because they're absolutely persuaded that, you know, Martin Luther... Well, some of them were probably that. But for several of them, for many of them, it's because they're sick and tired of the Pope.

And here's a guy who wants to lead them against them. So let's join with him. So what I'm saying is that when these guys got together and fought a war against these guys, you shouldn't think that the issues were necessarily theological.

As is, most of the time in a religious war, the real issues aren't religious. Take Ireland for an example. Is that the real issue? Protestant versus Roman Catholic in Northern Ireland? No.

It's political. It's British, it's English versus Irish. It's upper middle class or upper class against lower class.

You know, believe me, these guys aren't out there fighting for the true gospel of Jesus Christ. That's not what it's all about. Now, again, there are instances and times and places where it really was about something about truth in the Bible.

But for the most part, no. For the most part, political battles and Protestant or Roman Catholic was used as a rallying point to bring people under your fold. So there are all these different kinds of wars.

Now, the reason I bring all that up is, you know how Zwingli died? He died early, a premature death. He died as a chaplain in battle. Chaplain for a Protestant army fighting against a Roman Catholic army.

So that's an interesting way to go, isn't it? That was Zwingli. What about John Calvin? Next guy that we're going to deal with all too quickly here. Now, John Calvin, he made his big splash in the Swiss city of Geneva.

But he was not a Swiss man himself. He was French. Now, this is very important to understand about a guy like Calvin.

John Calvin was a second generation reformer. Calvin was born in 1509. So he was five years old when Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg.

This guy's second generation. He was not first generation. But he believed it.

Now, as far as the difference doctrinally between Luther and Calvin, you could say that Luther was a Calvinist and Calvin was a Lutheran. They're very similar in their doctrinal positions. Interestingly, what doctrines do you associate with John Calvin? Yeah, double election.

How about predestination? Isn't that the big one? Do you know that Martin Luther taught predestination more vigorously than John Calvin ever did? You'd say Luther was more Calvinistic than Calvin himself was. Calvin's interest in those matters, predestination and such, is amazingly pastoral. In other words, Luther argued these things more for their theological truth and principle.

Calvin argued them more as putting his arm around a troubled believer and saying, You know what? God loves you. He chose you from before the foundation of the world. He's not going to drop you now.

That's how Calvin, more in a pastoral way. Luther brought it up more in a, if you want to say combative, a theological debate kind of way. Now, Calvin was not an original thinker.

But what he was, was he was a great organizer. And what he did was he took what was understood to be the basic doctrines of the Bible in light of what Luther and Calvin, I mean just how they understood the Bible. And what he did was he put it all into a good book that he called his Institutes of the Christian Religion.

Calvin's Institutes. Classics today. And it was just a basic systematic theology.

You know, this is what we believe. This is what the truth is. And as Calvin wrote this, he dedicated it to a French prince or ruler of some kind.

Because he wanted to explain what Christian doctrine was to this French ruler. Now, understand this. Calvin was kind of a bookish guy.

He liked nothing better than just, leave me alone. Let me go to my study. Let me read.

Let me study. Let me do that. Calvin didn't like controversy.

He didn't like people problems. He didn't like all the hassles that came from stuff. He just wanted to be left alone and to study.

He was a scholar. This scholarly man was a great organizer. He wrote this book, Calvin's Institutes, which he revised a couple times.

And like I say, it's really a classic today. Worth reading for anybody. And as he made his travels around and did some things after writing these books and after coming to some idea of where the Lord wanted him and all, Calvin was traveling through Geneva.

And a guy came up to him. I believe his name was Pharrell. Pharrell came up to him, who was a pastor, leader in the church in Geneva.

And basically, he came up to Calvin and he said, God is telling you to come and pastor this church here. And Calvin was like, no way. You've got to be kidding me.

But eventually, he was convinced that the Lord did want him there. And if you want to say reluctantly, he came to Geneva. And Calvin's Geneva was one of the most remarkable things.

Because here you had a population that was pretty much born again. You had a large city, a large vibrant city. And a good proportion of the people in the city were born again.

And the leaders of the government, city government, were born again. And basically, it would be like the mayor, when he had a problem, when he had an issue, he'd go to his pastor. And so there was a sense in which Calvin pretty much ran the city.

Not in an official way. I mean, he was never elected mayor or anything like that. But in an unofficial way, Calvin had a huge influence over the city.

And you know what? It was like something really wonderful. People from all over Europe came to Calvin's Geneva just to see it, to live there, to learn. It had a huge effect on English Protestantism.

Because these Protestants in England, when they were being persecuted by the Catholics, they'd leave the country, right? Why hang around and get yourself killed? And where would they go? A lot of them went to Calvin's Geneva. Then they'd get really on fire. Oh man, this is amazing! Wow! Incredible! And so when a new king or queen would come up in England, who was friendly to Protestantism, what would they do? They'd go back home, but they'd go back home fired up.

And so Calvin's Geneva was amazing. A really unique thing. I mean, if I could take the time machine and go back to ten different times and places, probably one of those ten was, I'd like to go back to Calvin's Geneva and see what that was like.

I'd like to go back to Spurgeon's London, back in those days. I'd like to go back to Calvin's Geneva. Now, Calvin had his share of controversy.

I mean, any time you have that much influence in a city, you're going to have a lot of controversy. But Calvin didn't dig the controversy. He wanted to be left alone.

But it's like, he couldn't be left alone. God wanted to use him. I think that's a pretty good example for us, right? I mean, sometimes that's how we feel, isn't it? We should have the attitude of, Lord, don't let me draw back.

Don't let me just say, I'm not going to do it. Even though there's going to be times where I feel like it. John Calvin was like a lot of us.

I mean, he had the feeling sometimes, like, oh, it's just not worth the hassle, it's not worth the trouble. He needed to know it was, and God spurred him on to do it. Alright, Zwingli, Calvin.

Let me talk about another phenomenon here that we'll just mention briefly. It's known as the Counter-Reformation. Alright, we talked before about the Roman Catholic Church being like a corporation at this time.

And it was, man. It was like the Microsoft, you know, of that day. It was big.

It was big, big corporation. Big business, big corporation. Well, here you have the situation, okay, you've got this whole organization, you've got all this.

And then all of a sudden, Martin Luther comes along, right? And what does Luther do? He takes away a substantial portion of your market share, doesn't he? Now, you'd be wrong to say that he cuts you in half, because he didn't. But maybe he took away 20%, maybe 25%. That's a big part of your market share, right? Here's your business, and you just lost 20-25% of your business.

And your competitor is gaining more market share. So what do you do? Do you just blindly go on and say, Oh, we're going to do things like we've always done, and that? No. Any business is going to stand back and say, Wait a minute.

What have we got to change? I mean, what are we not going to change? What are we going to change? What do we have to do different to hold on to what we've got, and maybe even make some more? That's basically what the Roman Catholic Church did in the Counter-Reformation. You've got to understand, the reaction in the Roman Catholic world when Martin Luther came forth, the Pope said, This is an argument between monks. He goes, What do I care? You've got just a bunch of monks arguing about this or that.

Who cares? He goes, Let's get the sales reports from indulgences from the last three months. That's what I want to look at. And look at the sales trends and the marketing plan.

Come on. Let's go. But it didn't take too long until they realized that they had a big issue on their hands.

Now, the Pope had... Okay, you've got Popes and you've got councils. Councils decide, make pronouncements on significant theological disputes, on problems. Basically, they get together and solve problems.

When everything's fine in the church, you don't call a council. But when enough of the church, and especially when it comes down to it, when the Pope thinks that there's a significant enough problem that needs to be dealt with, he calls a council to deal with it. And so you have famous church councils throughout the history of the church.

How about the Council of Nicaea? That's the one that dealt with the Aryan country. The Council of Constantinople. The Council of Chalcedon.

I mean, important church councils through the ages deciding theological issues. Here's the thing. The Pope had already condemned Luther.

The Pope issued some kind of proclamation, some papal bull. I love that. You remember where it came from, papal bull? It comes from the Latin *bulla*, which means a seal.

You know, it has to do with a document that's official and sealed. So, the Pope had already issued a pronouncement against Luther. Now, what's interesting about this, was it made them very slow to call a council.

Why would the issuing of a papal bull, of a papal decree against Luther, make them slow to call a council? Because it pretty much admitted that that wasn't enough. It's an admission. It's saying, well, I guess it's not enough that the Pope just condemned it, right? We've got to have a council too.

And it's kind of admitting the weakness of the Pope. Because he's saying, well, you know, he obviously didn't settle it with his papal bull. But they finally did call a council, which was known as the Council of Trent.

By the way, do you know how they normally name councils? By the city that they're held at, that they're headquartered at. So, you've got the Council of Trent. The Council of Trent took place in 1564.

When did Martin Luther nail the 95 Theses? 1517. You're talking 50 years after the time. You see how slow they were to call a council? Now, a lot of this was because, first of all, a big bureaucracy moves slowly no matter what.

Right? And that's what the church was at this time. But the other reason was important also. It was because, you know, they knew it was an admission that the Pope's power wasn't enough.

And so they got together at the Council of Trent. And what did they do at the Council of Trent? Well, first of all, they did two major things. Two major doctrinal declarations.

By the way, when they called the Council of Trent, they invited Protestants to come. Protestant churches were just cooking. I mean, they were doing great.

You just don't call them councils. They're also known as ecumenical councils. Now, ecumenical, it's a dirty word kind of for us today because of the ecumenical movement, you know, where churches that deny that Jesus Christ ever walked this earth seek to have fellowship with churches that believe the Bible.

But you kind of had some of that same issue in those days. And the idea of an ecumenical council is that it's the whole church getting together. At Nicaea, they invited 300 bishops from all over the Christian world.

In other words, look, this isn't just the American Christians getting together. This isn't just the California Christians. Man, this is an ecumenical council.

You get everybody who's out there. Now, everybody would also include everybody who's a real Christian, right? These are the leaders of the Christian world gathering. So, if you're the Roman Catholics and you're putting on an ecumenical council, what do you do with the Protestants? They invited them.

But to do what? To debate? No. No. There wasn't going to be any debate.

Not with Protestants. The Catholics could debate among themselves. You know what they invited the Protestants to do? Well, if you want to, you can repent.

Come on in. Come to our council. If you'd like to repent, you can.

We're open to you. So, they invited Protestants, but not to debate with them. This was a chance for any Protestants present to repent.

Now, the Council of Trent decided a few things. I mean, many things. It's very interesting.

We just don't have time to go into it all. First of all, at the Council of Trent, it was said very strongly that the Roman Catholic Church is the only and infallible interpreter of God's Word. You can only know the truth of the Bible by getting it from the Roman Catholic Church.

That's it. Secondly, the Roman Catholic Church is an infallible interpreter of God's Word. So, I mean, that pretty much shuts it out, right? So, if you say, well, look at what Luther said about this passage.

Who cares? The only thing to care about is what the Roman Catholic Church says about a passage of the Bible. Secondly, and I mean very soundly, the Roman Catholic Church rejected justification by faith alone as heresy. Now, this is right into what we're talking about on Sunday mornings, isn't it? Does the Roman Catholic Church believe in justification by faith? No? Everybody said, no, you're wrong.

Of course they believe in justification by faith. Faith plus works. But if you ask them, do you need faith to be justified? Absolutely.

They believe in justification by faith plus works. What does the Bible teach? Justification by faith alone. That's what they don't believe in.

At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church called justification by faith alone heresy. They called it heresy. They said there is no way a person... I mean, when you look at the documents that came forth in the Council of Trent, not only do they condemn justification by faith alone, but they do it so specifically and so repeatedly that you can't miss the message.

Also, they pronounce a curse on anybody who teaches it. The picture of salvation from the Council of Trent is that salvation comes through the Roman Catholic Church, period. If you're not part of them, you're not saved.

And you've got to believe what they teach, and they teach that you're justified by faith plus works. Which, again, is exactly what Paul deals with in Galatians. I mean, Martin Luther got fired up for the truth by reading Galatians.

And he read that book and he realized, listen, I mean, this is exactly the issue. Are you justified by faith plus circumcision? Faith plus eating a kosher diet? No. Paul makes a point, it's by faith alone.

Now, on October 31st, a group of Roman Catholics and a group of Lutherans, and I mean officially appointed groups, this was no renegade group of the Roman Catholic Church, signed documents that were the product of a long agreement where the Roman Catholics said, we now believe in justification by faith alone. Which, according to the Council of Trent, makes them heretics. And it's interesting.

Now, I've only read the newspaper reports of this. I haven't read the actual documents itself. But from the newspaper reports, it seems like the Roman Catholic Church has made amazing concessions.

Amazing concessions. I've got to scratch my head at it. Because I don't know what's changed at the Roman Catholic Church.

Alright, so I don't know. I've just got to say, well, we'll wait and see. Can I give you my suspicion here? You might call me a cynic.

I might be proved wrong on this. But this is my suspicion. Do you want to know why I think Roman Catholics have done this? Because for Roman Catholics in the modern world today, theology, doctrine, truth, it ceased to be important to them.

In America, that's how Roman Catholics are. Yeah, something you need to understand about Roman Catholic theology today. I mean, this stuff that the Pope has taught, this current Pope.

They believe that everybody who is saved, is saved through the Roman Catholic Church. Period. And they say, well, what do they think of Protestants? Do they think all Protestants are going to hell? No, they used to think that.

But they don't think that anymore. They call Protestants, laxed brethren. And what that means is, a Protestant is a sinning brother.

And a Protestant is still saved by the Roman Catholic Church. They just don't know it. Alright, well, I went longer than I wanted to on that.

So we're not going to get into the next thing. And we'll talk next week, beginning with the legacy of the Reformation. And talking about Lutheranism after Luther.

Calvinism after Calvin. I'll get into that next week. Alright, let's wrap it up.

Father, we thank You for this time together. Thank You for Your presence with us. And we ask, Lord, that You keep our hearts and our minds focused on You and Your truth.

Thank You, Lord, for the salvation that's ours in Jesus Christ. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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