

### **Colloquy of Marburg**

The colloquy at Marburg in 1529 marked the impossibility of Protestant unity. Notably present were Ulrich Zwingli (from Zurich) and Martin Luther (Germany). Of the 14 points on which these Protestant leaders sought unity, complete disagreement over the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist prevented their accord.

Prior to the colloquy, several developments set the stage for the disagreement between Luther and Zwingli. Among these, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, the former in England and the latter in Bohemia, began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to criticize the Roman Catholic Church. Wycliffe believed that the Bible should be translated into the local vernacular and “rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, insisting that, although the body and blood of Christ are present in the Eucharist, this is not a material presence.”<sup>i</sup> Wycliffe's criticism of Catholic Eucharistic doctrine is an example of the proliferation of discussion regarding Eucharistic theologies among church theologians. The heightened regard for the Eucharist reflected in the doctrine of transubstantiation was one of the main points of contention between Protestant reformers and the Catholic Church. Eucharistic theology was also the one point that prevented unity between Luther and Zwingli.

Also, the rise of humanism in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries stressed the importance of studying the original texts of philosophical and theological thought. Erasmus is a notable 16<sup>th</sup> century humanist who wrote extensively in favor of reformation of the Roman Catholic Church. Erasmus, however never dissented from the Roman Catholic Church, but remained an internal critic. Humanism's return to original texts became a major catalyst to the Reformer's emphasis on Scripture as the source of the Christian faith.<sup>ii</sup> Not only that, scholasticism and humanism marked an increasing reliance on reason as a means for understanding the divine and became pivotal in the development of Protestant critiques of Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology and the formulation of new theologies.

In the centuries following Wycliffe and Hus, and as contemporaries of Erasmus, Luther and Zwingli developed support for their own ideas in opposition to the doctrine and practices of the Catholic Church. According to Luther, a sacrament must have been instituted by Christ and must be a physical sign of the promise of the gospel.<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, only the Eucharist and baptism are sacraments. Regarding the Eucharist, Luther rejected transubstantiation and called for the complete Eucharist, bread and wine, to be celebrated among common people. Luther advocated “consubstantiation”—the idea that the bread and wine remain, but also take on the actual presence of Christ. For Zwingli, “the material elements [of the Eucharist], and the physical actions that accompany them, can be no more than signs or symbols of spiritual reality.”<sup>iv</sup> Ultimately, Luther cited scripture, “Hoc est corpus meum,” and insisted that Christ's presence must truly be in the sacrament. Zwingli could not agree, and Protestants have been forever fragmented.

Followers of Zwingli and Luther developed their lines of thought. John Calvin in Geneva became the most notable Reformed theologian and Philip Melancthon developed a more moderate version of Lutheranism. In response, the “Formula of Concord” sought to unite Lutherans, but affirmed the sharp distinction between Lutheran and Reformed Eucharistic theologies. Strict Lutherans united Calvin and Zwingli's Eucharistic theologies, though subtly different, and began expressing itself “in terms of contrast with Calvinism.”<sup>v</sup>

Clearly separate, Lutheranism developed in Germany and Northern Europe while Calvin continued to develop Reformed theology in Switzerland. Calvin established a school in Geneva that fueled the English Reformation and Scotch Presbyterianism.

## Michael Servetus

The trial and execution of Michael Servetus, Spanish physician and theologian, in Geneva was the event that galvanized the authority of John Calvin and the Genevan Consistory. Servetus published several theological treatises that argued for a separation of church and state and also accused the Council of Nicea of angering God by propagating Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>vi</sup> After escaping imprisonment by the Catholic Inquisition in France, Servetus was captured, tried and executed by Calvinist Protestants in Geneva, 1553. Servetus' execution is evidence that Protestants defended their theology as ardently/violently as the Catholics from which they dissented.

John Calvin came to Geneva in 1536 after attending the university of Paris, where he studied humanist works in Law and Theology. Calvin had become a famous theologian by publishing *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which became the benchmark of Protestant systematic theology. William Farel was serving as the religious leader of Geneva and found the city "sorely lacking in personnel;" Farel asked Calvin to be an aid to Geneva's religious leaders, but Calvin quickly became the central figure.<sup>vii</sup> Calvin soon found that the bourgeoisie who controlled the city desired a break from Rome, but not religious reform.<sup>viii</sup> Calvin was banned from the city in 1538 and journeyed to Strasbourg, where he made great contributions to the French Reformation by publishing a French liturgy and several Psalms. Calvin married Idelette de Bure while exiled from Geneva.

Three years after Calvin's exile, Geneva came under new governance and Calvin was invited to return. In Geneva, Calvin established the Consistory—a governing body of five pastors and twelve lay leaders who regularly clashed with the civil government over the rule of the city.<sup>ix</sup> Calvin sought to consolidate the government of the city into the hands of religious leaders and to strictly regulate Geneva's laws and morality according to his interpretation of Scripture. This tenuous relationship between Calvin's Consistory and the Genevan government existed for twelve years, and the trial and execution of Michael Servetus was the event that solidified Calvin's authority. "After Servetus' execution, Calvin's authority in Geneva had no rival. This was especially true since the theologians of all the other Protestant cantons had supported him, while his opponents found themselves in the difficult position of defending a heretic who had been condemned by both Catholics and Protestants."<sup>x</sup> Servetus' work, while directed at Constantine's consolidation of civil and religious authority, directly confronted Calvin's vision of a theocratic Geneva. Servetus' execution, then, was a sign of Calvin's power over opposition.

In 1559, following Servetus' execution, Calvin established an academy for theological study in Geneva under the direction of Theodore Beza, who became his successor as religious leader of Geneva. The Genevan Academy became a hugely significant center of Reformed theological training for Protestant ministers. During Calvin's years in Geneva, reformation was underway in England, and as support for Protestants waxed and waned, several protestant supporters migrated to Geneva for theological training. Included is John Knox, who carried Calvinist theology back to his native Scotland, where he led the formation of the Reformed Church of Scotland, which later became Presbyterianism. The remaining influence of John Wycliffe complimented the influx of Reformed thought from the Genevan Academy because of Wycliffe's emphasis on predestination and the spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist meal. Ultimately, the Genevan Academy, which never could have been established without the galvanization of Calvin's authority in Geneva fueled the English Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I should also note that many Lutherans considered Calvin the theological heir to Zwingli, and his work further solidified the division among Protestants after the Marburg colloquy.

### **Westminster Confession**

Calvin's Academy in Geneva became a significant theological resource for the English reformation. John Knox, the early leader of the Reformed Church of Scotland was trained in Geneva. During years of Protestant persecution, especially under Mary Tudor, many Protestant leaders migrated to Geneva for theological training, and returned under the tolerant rule of Elizabeth in 1558. This influx of Calvinism ultimately developed into Scottish Presbyterianism and English Puritanism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to increased Calvinism, England and Scotland saw the rise of a wealthy mercantile class in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of these merchants were Puritans who served in England's House of Commons and had close economic ties to English aristocracy who had invested in their business ventures. The House of Commons represented the interests of the growing Puritan population in England, and as such, maintained tenuous relations with King James I and his Anglican Bishops.

James needed Parliament's approval to instate new taxes, but the Puritan House of Commons would not comply without religious concessions. To limited avail, James commissioned a new translation of the Bible in 1611 in order to appease the scripture-centric Puritans.<sup>x1</sup> Ultimately, James dissolved Parliament several times and attempted to reign as an absolute monarch, but was severely limited by lack of funds.

Charles I succeeded James I to the throne of England. Charles struggled with the Puritan Parliament much as his father. In 1629, Charles dissolved his third Parliament and reigned without Parliament for eleven years. This period brought great disparity between the Anglican aristocracy and the rest of England. In 1633, Charles named William Laud archbishop of Canterbury, whose "measures against Puritans were both harsh and cruel."<sup>xii</sup> In Scotland, Laud's measures incited rebellion and the Church of Scotland was organized on a Presbyterian basis.<sup>xiii</sup>

In 1640, Charles assembled Parliament to raise funds to fend off Scottish rebellion. Parliament, however had the upper hand because English aristocrats were feeling the economic repercussions of Charles repression of the mercantile and working class and also because the Scottish were threatening Charles' reign, which united the two houses of Parliament. In 1641, "The Long Parliament" passed a law that the assembly could not be dissolved without Parliament's approval. Parliament discovered Charles' plot to incite an Irish rebellion and turn Scottish rebels against the Puritan Parliament. Parliament fled to London and Civil War was imminent. "In its effort to attract the Scots, Parliament took a series of measures that leaned to Presbyterianism."<sup>xiv</sup> Parliament abolished the episcopacy and convened the Westminster Assembly, over which the Scots had decisive influence because of the strength of their army. The Westminster Assembly and Confession, then, were a triumph of Calvinist unity over and against the Anglican monarchy in England (and more subtly Catholicism in Ireland). Ultimately, Puritan Parliamentarian Oliver Cromwell rose to power when the Parliament Army defeated Charles and he was able to unite the Presbyterians, Puritans and Independents for a relatively peaceful period of eleven years.

The Westminster Confession remains a foundational document in the Reformed tradition. The Confession became a litmus test of Calvinist orthodoxy among Presbyterians and other "true Calvinists," and was heavily influenced by the reactionary statement of the Synod of Dort against Arminius. With the reinstatement of Anglicanism and the *Book of Common Prayer* under Charles II in 1662, English Puritans were again marginalized and further so under the Act of Toleration. Many Calvinist Puritans migrated to the New World, where Calvinist social and religious ideals were even more ardently enacted.

- <sup>i</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *Church History: An Essential Guide*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 63.
- <sup>ii</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2, The Reformation to the Present Day*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985) 51.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* 67.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.