

# THE REFORMATION



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## *The Theology of the Reformers*

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A Sunday afternoon stroll through the park in Worms, Germany, will arrest the unsuspecting tourist when confronted with the large monument of Martin Luther—Bible in hand and the resolution of a Reformer sketched on his face. This towering Augustinian monk is not alone. On the fringes of the *Lutherdenkmal* stand Frederick the Wise of Saxony and Philip of Hesse, supporting political cast for the Reformation. On the far corners are Philipp Melancthon and Johannes Reuchlin, prominent scholars linking the Reformation to the Renaissance in Europe. Closest to Luther sit the four progenitors of the Reformation—Peter Waldo, Jan Hus, John Wycliffe, and Girolamo Savonarola.

Designed in 1868 by Ernst Friedrich August Rietschel, who died before its actual construction, the memorial reveals that the artist of Saxony understood two salient truths about the Reformation. The first insight is that the Reformation of the fifteenth century was far broader in its scope than the average man on the street in Europe has ever comprehended and in America is as illusive as the Loch Ness Monster. Religious roots for the Reformation spread like tentacles for at least 200 years prior to the Reformation's formal inauguration, and many would argue for even greater antiquity as observed, for example, in the work of Vigilantius of Leon in the Pyrenees.<sup>1</sup>

The Renaissance is often paired with the Reformation, and for good cause, since the two are linked together as a steam engine to a coal car. Intellectual pursuits in art, literature, and industry were the fuels that propelled the Reformation of religious faith. The monumental insights of Erasmus, as Abraham Friesen has argued, spawned various aspects of Reformation development, even including that of the Radical Reformers.<sup>2</sup>

The Reformation was also social and political as the presence of the two princes in the Worms monument testifies. They provided protection for Reformers, many of whom would have died a martyr's death without the friendly oversight of these political authorities. The Peasants' War, while

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the attack of Jerome on Vigilantius: Jerome, "LETTER LXI. To Vigilantius," in *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans. W.H. Fremantle, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 131–33.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

brutally brought to a climax, speaks to the level of social unrest that also encompassed the efforts of the Reformers. Luther's own marriage underscores the social developments of the Reformation. Urging his preachers to marry as sort of a stick in the eye for Catholic authorities, Luther himself remained single, saying that he had been a monk for too long; and besides, he did not want to leave behind a widow and children if he paid for his faith with his life.

This failed to take into consideration the tsunami named Katie Zell, who had married Matthew Zell and desired the same bliss for Luther. Katie von Bora, one of several nuns, whom Luther had arranged to be smuggled out in fish barrels, from a convent in a Roman diocese also had a target on Luther's heart. Eventually, he acquiesced. Later, a trifle worried over his devotion to her, he noted, "I give more credit to Katherine than to Christ, who has done so much more for me."<sup>3</sup>

While the Reformation was not monolithic and would have happened without Luther, there is one more truth enshrined in the monument of Worms. Luther stands at its center, Bible in hand. The Reformation was essentially a theological and spiritual movement, and it was, above all else, about the nature of divine communication. The need for a charismatic leader with a scholar's capabilities and a preacher's temperament was essential. Furthermore, if that man were confident of the veracity of his convictions, he would emerge as a formidable force. Luther imaged that profile to perfection. This deeply contemplative and sometimes irreverent monk was uniquely prepared for the task of leading the Reformation in its formative stage.

### **The Unique Authority of the Bible**

All students of the Reformation are acquainted with Luther's view of Scripture. The now famous assertion from April of 1521 at Worms is well-known:

Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

What is less obvious to many is that Luther did not wake up one spring morning with this conviction burning in his soul. Like any good monk, there was always a reverence for the Word of God, but the trek that led him

<sup>3</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 293.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.

to conclude that the Bible is the sole authority was lengthy. The road led through the dungeon of despair about his relationship to God and eventually to a moment of confrontation at Leipzig with Catholic debater Johann Eck. This is the same Eck who served as the mentor of Balthasar Hubmaier, the man who would eventually become the primary writing theologian and pastor of the Anabaptist movement.<sup>5</sup> Eck, with penetrating insight, hung the mantle of “Bohemian” around Luther’s neck. This reference to Hus sent Luther to the library to look at the banned works of Hus. There Luther apparently discovered for the first time that the Bible he had come to love was not only the Word of God but also the all-sufficient guide for faith and practice, overriding the authority of pope and council. Luther states the proposition well when he opines:

St. Augustine ... says, in the letter to St. Jerome, which Gratian also quotes ... “I have learned to hold the Scriptures alone inerrant; all others, I so read that, however holy or learned they may be, I do not hold what they teach to be true, unless they prove, from Scripture or reason, that it must be so.”<sup>6</sup>

The first principle of the Reformation is the conviction that God spoke by means of the Holy Spirit to holy ones who wrote the words of God and that the Bible as such is the inerrant and sufficient Word of God. As such, the Bible—not the church or the government in any of its forms—was to provide the trajectory for knowing God and serving Him.

This conviction of the authority of the Bible led to the second great principle of the Reformation—justification through faith alone. In truth, Luther discovered this truth prior to his full revelation about Scripture. This truth begins with a comprehension of the significance of the incarnation of Christ and His death on the cross:

They contemplate Christ’s passion aright who view it with a terror-stricken heart and a despairing conscience. This terror must be felt as you witness the stern wrath and the unchanging earnestness with which God looks upon sin and sinners, so much so that he was unwilling to release sinners even for his only and dearest Son without his payment of the severest penalty for them. Thus he says in Isaiah 53 [:8], “I have chastised him for the transgressions of my people.” If the dearest child is punished thus, what will be the fate of sinners? It must be an inexpressible and unbearable earnestness that forces such a great and infinite person to suffer and die to appease it. And if you seriously consider that it is God’s very own Son, the eternal wisdom of the

<sup>5</sup>Lars P. Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 329.

<sup>6</sup>Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), 15.

Father, who suffers, you will be terrified indeed. The more you think about it, the more intensely will you be frightened.<sup>7</sup>

The atonement revealed man with his desperate inadequacy and rebellion against God. Likewise, the wrath of God against sin is clearly revealed. But finally, in the cross, the love of God and His provision for sin are openly chronicled. The theme of justification by faith runs like a scarlet thread through Luther's writing:

Let everyone who is godly, therefore, learn to distinguish carefully between Law and grace, both in feeling and in practice, not only in words, as the pope and the fanatics do. So far as the words are concerned. They admit that the two are distinct things; but in fact, as I have said, they confuse them, because they do not concede that faith justifies without works. If this is true, then Christ is of no use to me. For though I may have as true a faith as possible, yet, according to their opinion, I am not justified if this faith of mine is without love; and however much of this love I may have, it is never enough. Thus the Christ whom faith grasps is not the Justifier; grace is useless; and faith cannot be true without love—or, as the Anabaptists say, without the cross, suffering, and bloodshed. But if love, works, and the cross are present, then faith is true, and it justifies.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the misrepresentation of Anabaptism, the citation from Galatians is typical of Luther's conviction. Although Luther himself is a complex figure with a multifaceted theology, to understate the theology of the Reformation will be sufficient here. These two propositions condense its essence: the authority of an inerrant Bible and justification by faith alone. This at once relieved the Roman church of its unchallenged authority and of its ability to employ "the keys of the kingdom" and thus be the dispenser of salvation.

### **The Reformation in Spain**

The Lutheran Reformation was centered at Wittenberg in the forest, the Reformed phase emanated from Geneva, the Zwinglian and Anabaptist from Zurich, and the English or Anglican from across the English Channel. Italy and Spain were more geographically difficult and more resistant with embedded Catholic strength. But both had their reformers, as the presence of Savonarola in the Worms monument so eloquently testifies. Spain may not have merited a figure on Rietschel's bronze, but in Seville a considerable reformation of its own occurred. The Cathedral of Saint Mary of the See is

<sup>7</sup>Martin Luther, "A Meditation on Christ's Passion," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 166–67.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1–4*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, volume 26 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 144.

the third largest Gothic church in the world with a tower rising to 343 feet (105 m). Construction of this church, which would ultimately be the residence of the remains of Christopher Columbus, was begun as early as 1184.

But for all the glory of the church, what happened here as a result of the work of a layman provides an exciting story of reformation. Dr. Juan Gil (latinized, *Egidio*) and Dr. Constantino Ponce de la Fuente, both graduates of the University of Alcalá, had been exposed there to the thought and writings of Erasmus. Juan de Valdés had here published his *Dialogue on Christian Doctrine* in 1529.<sup>9</sup>

Once installed as preachers in the Cathedral, the lead preacher at the Cathedral noted Constantino's remarkable gift of preaching and observed, apparently without malice, that the people loved to hear Constantino preach.<sup>10</sup> Indeed his art was widely sought throughout Spain and Portugal. Challenged by a layman in the church who confessed a conversion experience, Constantino also discovered the twin doctrines mentioned above, and his preaching and teaching became even more impassioned.

Constantino demonstrated his loyalty to the Bible by becoming a faithful expositor of the text of the Scriptures, preaching through the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and much of Job. The layman who impacted his life was Rodrigo de Valer, whose personal testimony was clearly heard and faithfully followed by Constantino.

Egidio also reflected in his own character and preaching the effects of the witness of de Valer. Thomas M'Crie's 1829 publication on *The History of the Progress and Suppression of the Reformation in Spain* tells this story:

Instead of the dry, abstruse, and unprofitable discussions which he had formerly pursued, he brought forward the great truths of the Bible; and the frigid manner in which he had been accustomed to acquit himself in public was succeeded by powerful appeals to the consciences, and affectionate addresses to the hearts of his auditors. Their attention was aroused; deep convictions of the necessity and suitableness of that salvation which the gospel reveals were made on their minds; and they were prepared for receiving those new views of divine truth which the preacher presented to them, as they were gradually unfolded to himself, and with a caution which regard to the weakness of the people, as well as to his own perilous situation, seemed to warrant and require.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For many of these insights I am indebted to Emilio Monjo Bedillo, "The Reformation in Spain in the Sixteenth Century" (Parts 1 and 2), *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 15–51.

<sup>10</sup>Roberto V. Diaz, "An Analysis of the Doctrine of Salvation in the Ministries of Juan de Valdés, Constantino Ponce de la Fuente, and Cipriano de Valera (1524–1602), and Its Missiological Implications" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 86.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas M'Crie, *History of the Progress and Suppression of the Reformation in Spain in*

Predictably, the Inquisition quickly took notice of the three preachers, and a long, tiresome confrontation began to unfold. The Reformation doctrines were clear to the Inquisitors but proved difficult to make stick, especially with the greater clarity of Constantino. As Benjamin B. Wiffen states the matter:

The Inquisition was not long before it fixed its jealous eyes on the three teachers of the new doctrines, nor were there wanting persons ready to accuse them, and especially Dr. Juan Gil, who was most obnoxious on account of his greater openness of disposition, and his appearing more frequently in the pulpit.<sup>12</sup>

While at length the Inquisition was successful in suppressing this infection of the minds of the general populace, the testimony still stands in the far more formidable form of an early translation of the Bible into Spanish and a number of books that are now being translated from Spanish into English.

### The Radical Reformation

George Hunston Williams' monumental volume, *The Radical Reformation*, first published in 1962, introduces even to the unsympathetic reader an aspect of Reformation thought that had previously been largely swept under the rug.<sup>13</sup> Williams chronicled the Radical Reformation in all of its variegated forms. However, there was a major segment of this movement that not only remained true to the discoveries of Luther but also chided Luther and the other Reformers for their failure to apply their views to the church consistently at several levels.

Among a host of names of opprobrium heaped on these freedom-loving individuals, Anabaptists (or "re-baptizers") was the most popular.<sup>14</sup> The Brethren themselves objected to this on two counts. First, they observed that they were not rebaptizing at all since the first baptism as an infant was no baptism at all. Second, this charge placed the emphasis upon baptism, hardly the emphasis that they intended.

Franklin Hamlin Littell captures the essence of the Anabaptist theology in his prescient monograph, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, "the Anabaptists proper were those in the radical Reformation who gathered and disciplined a 'true church' (*rechte Kirche*) upon the apostolic pattern as they

*the Sixteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1829; reprint, New York: AMS, 1971), 153.

<sup>12</sup>Benjamin B. Wiffen, "Biographical Notice of Dr. Constantino Ponce de la Fuente" in Constantino Ponce de la Fuente *The Confession of a Sinner*, trans. John T. Betts (London: Bell and Daldy, 1869), 7.

<sup>13</sup>George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed., Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 15 (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1992).

<sup>14</sup>Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, The Dissent and Nonconformity Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964; reprint, Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer), 11–15, 155. This volume identifies a number of the names by which the Radicals were called.

*understood it.*<sup>15</sup> Differentiating the Reformers from the Anabaptists, Littell quotes Philip Schaff, “The reformers aimed to reform the old Church by the Bible; the radicals attempted to build a new Church from the Bible.”<sup>16</sup>

Over against the Reformers’ acceptance of the *Landeskirche* or the *Volk-skirche* of those who were baptized unknown to themselves as infants and were counted as part of the church, the Anabaptists insisted that a genuine church consisted only of people who had experienced the new birth and covenanted together with other believers in baptism to serve the Lord with all the devotion of their lives. “The true church must be a voluntary association taking its spirit and discipline from those who intentionally belong to its fellowship.”<sup>17</sup>

“The Anabaptists maintained that the New Testament was clear both as to the content of the Christian faith and the organizational procedures in the true Christian community.”<sup>18</sup> As such, the Anabaptists were among the earliest champions of religious liberty. The Anabaptists insisted on two features:

The separation of church and state which the Anabaptists represented thus involved at least two positive affirmations of vital religious significance: (1) the civic right of a free man to private religious interpretation, and (2) the Christian duty of the voluntary association to enforce a strong internal discipline. How often these two points have been confused! Far from being contradictory, these are two closely linked aspects of healthy congregational life.<sup>19</sup>

In turn, this has led to the designation “Magisterial Reformers” to designate Luther, Calvin, and the English Reformers, who continued to invoke the powers of the state in religious affairs of men. As Malcolm Yarnell observes:

The Anabaptists were not naïvely and counterfactually arguing that the Roman Catholics and the Magisterial Reformers rejected biblical truth. Rather, they were aghast that their opponents would claim Scripture yet not treat it with thorough respect. Proper respect for Scripture entails allowing Scripture to provide its own form for Christian theology, standing in judgment of all human systems ... The Anabaptists were “biblicists” at one level

<sup>15</sup>Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Starr King, 1958; reprint, Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer), xvii; italics original.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., xviii.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 67.



simply because they read and thought with Scripture. The Anabaptists may also be classified as biblicists because they looked to Scripture to provide its own pattern for interpretation. This included discerning the progress of revelation both between and within the testaments, allowing its authority to apply to all areas of Christian life, and necessarily interpreting the Bible according to the light of the One who inspired its writers.<sup>20</sup>

In short, the Anabaptists confirmed the Lutheran doctrines of Scripture alone for faith and practice and of justification by faith alone, but they found incomprehensible why Luther and others did not remain faithful to that confession. Why state that the Bible is the sole authority for faith and then invoke the authority of the state? Why insist on salvation by faith alone while baptizing infants, who have no faith at all?

The way that the Anabaptists thought is clearly delineated in this classic segment of reason from Balthasar Hubmaier, leading theologian of the Anabaptists:

But do you say that there is nowhere in the Scriptures a clear word to the effect that one must not baptize infants? Answer: it is clear enough for him who has eyes to see it, but it is not expressed in so many words, literally: “do not baptize young children.” May one then baptize them? To that I answer, if so, I may baptize my dog or my donkey, or I may circumcise girls, I may say masses and hold vigils for the dead, I may make idols out of St. Paul and St. Peter, I may bring infants to the Lord’s Supper, bless palm leaves, vegetables, salt, land, water, and sell the mass for an offering. For it is nowhere said in so many words that we should not do these things. Is it not true, what a two-fold papacy we would set up again if we juggle such things concerning God and the souls of men leaving out the Word of God. You say: “It is forbidden to baptize donkeys, for Christ calls men to baptism.” Well then, let us also baptize Jews and Turks. You say: “Yes, only believing men should one baptize.” Answer: why do you then baptize infants?<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The Anabaptists and Theological Method: ‘For What They Were Concerned with Was Not Luther’s but Rather God’s Word’,” in *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists: Restoring New Testament Christianity; Essays in Honor of Paige Patterson*, ed. Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 31.

<sup>21</sup>Balthasar Hubmaier, “On the Christian Baptism of Believers,” in *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523–1533)*, ed. William R. Estep Jr., Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica 16 (Leiden: Nieuwkoop B. De Graaf, 1976), 91.

## Conclusion

At the risk of oversimplification, one may say that the Reformation was about religious authority and salvation by faith. Articulated by Luther and a host of preachers and theologians, these doctrines stand in stark contradiction to those of the Roman Church. The Anabaptists were in total agreement with Luther and all of the Magisterial Reformers but were mystified that these doctrines were articulated with such clarity only to be disavowed in actual practice.

The Anabaptist vision of freedom of faith cost them dearly. Anabaptists were hunted like animals and persecuted to the death by both Catholics and Protestants. In some cases, the witness of these courageous but gentle, freedom-loving people was obliterated. But patience has its reward. Today in Europe, in South America, in Africa, and in North America, the idea of religious liberty has taken hold. Even in Seville, where the Inquisition was so poignant, today there is a Museum of the Inquisition that focuses on the inhumanity of that persecution and honors the labor of Constantino, the magnificent preacher of the Cathedral, and many others as well.

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let us first pay homage to all who suffered for their faith—whatever the persuasion of each. May God grant the extension of religious liberty to the ends of the earth, a liberty that provides for the freedom of a church ordered on a biblical pattern and the true conversion of its members as followers of Christ.