

# Reformation 500

## **Understanding the English Reformation**

Andrea Ruddick

## **The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century**

Kirsty Birkett



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# Understanding the English Reformation

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**Andrea Ruddick examines different historical perspectives on the Reformation, and asks how Christians should respond.**

## Historians and the English Reformation

The late-medieval English church has had a bad press over the centuries. Its alleged corruption, decadence, spiritual bankruptcy and moral failure were staples of Protestant history-writing from the mid-sixteenth century until well into the twentieth century, and were identified as the main explanation for the Reformation. By contrast, the heretical movements that were condemned by the Catholic church in the middle ages have often been depicted by Protestant historians as the forerunners of the reformed church. John Wyclif, with his denial of transubstantiation, teaching on predestination, and commitment to making English translations of the Bible available to ordinary people, has been dubbed the 'morning star of the Reformation' and his followers, the Lollards, are often depicted as proto-Protestants.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was something of a backlash against this negative characterisation of late-medieval piety. A number of historians, including several committed Roman Catholics such as Eamon Duffy and J. J. Scarisbrick, drew on a vast range of evidence to argue for the dynamism, spiritual vitality and popularity of the Catholic church on the eve of the Reformation. Work by these historians convincingly rehabilitated the reputation of the late-medieval church.

Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) depicted a vibrant, united community of orthodox believers, few of whom welcomed the imposition of religious change from above in 1536. Other historians have argued that the Lollards, far from being the vanguard of Protestantism, were an insignificant, incoherent, and largely unimportant sect who had little influence on the religious culture around them.

More recently, this 'confessional' history-writing, divided along the lines of whether the historian was Protestant or Catholic, has been seen as stale and in need of revision. Some non-partisan scholars have criticised Duffy and other historians for overstating the unity and homogeneity of late-medieval religious experience. A recent textbook on medieval Christianity argued for a 'post-secular' approach to church history, and warned against 'the dangers of too literal, narrow, and theological an approach to medieval Christianity, in which confessional and historical truth-claims have previously been confused.' In many ways, this is a fair criticism. Frequently, work produced by historians on both sides of the confessional divide over the centuries has been influenced by its writers' faith commitment to the point of, if not deliberate distortion, selectivity towards certain types of evidence.

Newer methodological approaches, inspired by anthropology, cultural history, literary criticism, and social science theories, have produced fresh angles from which to examine the varied religious experiences of people in the middle ages. Yet this new work has not

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been 'value-neutral' either – an emphasis on the role of doubt, unbelief, and atheism is unsurprising from historians who identify themselves with these positions, for example. It is also unsurprising to find that historians influenced by postmodern critical theory, which emphasises plurality of meanings and expresses distrust of grand narratives, stress heterogeneity in the late-medieval Church and show a keen interest in transgressive minorities (including, ironically, the same heretics lauded as proto-Protestants in older historiography). Conversely, there is a tendency to downplay or even to demonise the 'top-down' role of the ecclesiastical authorities and their claims to represent – and attempts to enforce – a uniform version of Christian doctrine and practice. Instead, blurred lines between orthodoxy and heresy, official church teaching and local practices, are emphasised, and diversity and pluralism are the new buzzwords. It is often observed that every generation of historians reinvents the past to reflect their own purposes and preoccupations – this is certainly the case for the historiography of the English Reformation.

So how can Christians today understand the English Reformation, when such divergent views are apparent between professional historians? Should these challenges to the 'Protestant triumphalist' version of history worry Protestant Christians, who have seen in the traditional narrative a vindication of the Reformation? Should Christians feel threatened by historical research which undermines this narrative and

demonstrates, often quite convincingly, that the English Reformation was a largely top-down initiative, imposed on a mainly reluctant population by a theologically conservative king who was less interested in reformed doctrine than he was in obtaining a divorce? Put simply, the answer is no. Christianity is a religion based on historical facts; Christians believe that Jesus lived, died and rose again in history. Our faith stands or falls by those historical truth-claims. Our approach to church history should be no less rigorous. If a cherished piece of our historical mythology fails to fit with the historical evidence, it should be abandoned, however comforting the narrative or stirring the anecdote.

On the current available evidence, it does not look as if thousands of people enthusiastically embraced the new religion introduced under the auspices of Henry VIII's break from Rome out of a deep dissatisfaction with a corrupt late-medieval church. Similarly, it does not look as if John Wyclif's followers were particularly coherent or influential forerunners of reformed theology in a directly causative way, even if Wyclif's theology anticipated several key strands of reformed thought. In fact, the current consensus is that most converts to the new religion in the sixteenth century came from traditional Catholic families, not from Lollard backgrounds.

Should this stop us from commemorating and celebrating the Reformation? Again, no. The popularity of any movement is rarely a good guide to its truthfulness or value. Nor,

*To swim against the tide of generally accepted religious belief and practice has been the experience of faithful believers since the days of the Old Testament prophets.*

of course, is the novelty or unpopularity of a religious movement. However, when it comes to the Christian faith, Scripture consistently leads us to expect sound doctrine to be deeply unpopular. To swim against the tide of generally accepted religious belief and practice has been the experience of faithful believers since the days of the Old Testament prophets and the pagan world that surrounded the first New Testament believers, reinforced by the teaching and experience of the Lord Jesus himself and the apostle Paul. We have no need to insist, against the grain of evidence to the contrary, on the popularity of reformed theology on its arrival on English shores in order to establish its value to the Church in England. Wyclif's ideas were not popular; this does not mean that they were not theologically significant or irrelevant to later Protestant theology, even if we cannot draw neat, straight lines from medieval Lollards to early modern reformers.

#### **What was the medieval church like?**

It appears that many lay people were, in fact, reasonably satisfied with the state of the late-medieval English church on the eve of the Reformation. This is not to say that it was in a healthy state from the perspective of reformed Protestant theology, however. So what did this look like for ordinary church-goers in late-medieval England, and why did the reformers find it objectionable?

#### *Preaching and popes*

There is some debate about the frequency of sermons in the average medieval parish church. Preaching was considered an important duty of the parish priest in canon law. The 4th Lateran Council, a major church council held in Rome in 1215, had specified a set of minimum requirements for what even a poorly educated priest (as many were) should be capable of teaching his flock: the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins and the seven sacraments, for example. As specially produced priests' manuals produced in this period suggest, it was far from guaranteed that the average parish priest would have a firm grasp of these doctrinal basics when he took up his post. Historians disagree over the frequency of preaching in reality – as opposed to ideals set out in church legislation – and gaps in the evidence make it difficult to assess accurately the regularity and frequency of preaching in ordinary parishes outside of special occasions such as Easter and Advent. When vernacular preaching did occur, however, the exegesis was often allegorical, moralistic, and repetitive. Core set-pieces of Catholic doctrine were expounded from prooftexts from Scripture and other 'authorities' such as the Church Fathers, supported by illustrations and stories (known as exempla), usually interpreted and applied allegorically.

However, preaching rarely featured highly on a local parish congregation's wish-list of



Archbishop Arundel preaching

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requirements from their priest. Of far more concern to the average lay person in the early sixteenth century was the provision of spiritual services, primarily the saying of Mass. For all the diverse channels for spiritual expression in the late middle ages, it remained widely accepted that there was no salvation outside the Church and its core sacraments. This was emphasised by medieval popes including Innocent III, who had presided over the 4th Lateran Council. Like many of his predecessors since the mid-eleventh century, Innocent III sought to centralise ecclesiastical authority in the person of the pope in Rome. Unlike some of his predecessors, Innocent was practical as well as intellectual, a lawyer as well as a theologian. It was under his pontificate that this drive for centralisation and greater uniformity in Catholic doctrine and practice took on a more systematic level of organisation. This institutional and theological legacy endured despite the subsequent fragmentation and dilution of the papacy's political influence and prestige, as a result of internal schism and the growing power of secular monarchies in the later middle ages.

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### *The Mass and transubstantiation*

It was also at the 4th Lateran Council that the doctrine of transubstantiation was confirmed: the teaching that the bread and wine used in the Eucharist became the actual body and blood of Christ at the moment of consecration by the priest. This had a huge impact on late-medieval lay spirituality. The Mass became an increasingly important part of church services, with the consecration a high point of drama, although much of the action was hidden from the ordinary parishioners behind a rood screen in the sanctuary at the east end of the church building. Despite this physical exclusion from the priest's actions, the ritual and its symbolism was a focal point for lay devotion through prayers and participation in the liturgy.

Popular enthusiasm for Eucharistic worship also found reflection in the feast of Corpus Christi, which celebrated the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. From localised origins in northern Europe, the festival was officially adopted for the whole of Western Christendom in 1264. Corpus Christi processions parading through towns on the annual feast day were a regular feature of urban life in the late middle ages. These doctrinal changes also affected church architecture; the east end of church buildings increasingly became 'sacred space', cut off from the rest of the congregation. It also elevated the role of the priest, as the one who performed the rituals required to turn the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ – another aspect of the increased distance between laity and clergy which the papacy sought to promote.

When people complained about their priests, it was often inadequate provision of these spiritual services, believed to be essential for salvation, about which they complained, rather than a lack of preaching and pastoral care. Similarly, another strand of complaints involved immoral behaviour by the priest,

which was believed by some to invalidate the efficacy of the sacraments he provided (although this was not a doctrine approved by the Catholic church). However, even this suggests not deep anti-clericalism but rather a high standard of expected behaviour from priests. People needed their priests and wanted them to behave properly, because, according to medieval Catholic theology, it was only through their offices that salvation was possible.

### *Purgatory and penance*

Another late-medieval addition to Catholic teaching was the doctrine of purgatory, which was declared an official tenet of Catholic belief by the church in 1274. This was not a doctrine that appeared from nowhere. It reflected at least a century of theological grappling with one of the great conundrums of the medieval church: how to deal with the problem of incomplete penance for sin. Sin was a central problem for medieval Christians, especially the lay person for whom daily life brought an ever-accumulating burden of sin and guilt. It was believed that this debt of sin could be paid off through various forms of penance which would offer 'satisfaction' for sin. The wealthy dealt with this by founding monasteries to pay monks and nuns to perform meritorious acts of prayer and penance on behalf of their founders and patrons. For the less wealthy, unable to found a religious house themselves, a donation to a religious order such as the friars might suffice, while prayers, acts of charity, and pilgrimages all contributed to the attempt to offset the huge burden of sin accumulated through everyday living as a lay person.

By the thirteenth century, however, developments in penitential theology had led to a greater emphasis on the impossibility of ever truly doing adequate penance in one's lifetime to make satisfaction for sin. The solution, developed over the 12th and 13th

centuries, was the idea of a 'middle place', between heaven and hell, where outstanding sins could be atoned for and the deceased believer purified before going to heaven. In other words, purgatory. In a theological system which did not recognise the complete sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross to atone for sin once for all, a doctrine so treasured by the reformers, the invention of purgatory came as a huge relief to many medieval believers. Suddenly, their prospects of salvation appeared to be significantly improved. Now, they had a post-mortem opportunity to make up for penance left incomplete at death – and, even better, friends and relatives who were still living could speed up their exit from purgatory by praying for them.

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Purgatory was portrayed in contemporary literature, art, and sermons as a deeply unpleasant and physically torturous experience. Nonetheless, it was a somewhat better prospect to the medieval parishioner than eternal damnation. Prayers for the souls of the dead were not new in 1274, but now the chronology,



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geography, and theology of the afterlife had been clarified and institutionalised in Catholic doctrine. The impact on late-medieval spirituality was enormous. The wealthy founded chantry chapels, often attached to the local parish church, where a priest was employed specially to pray regularly for the souls of deceased family members. The less wealthy might make provision in their will for prayers for a shorter period of time. Or a person might join a 'confraternity' or guild, a local association of lay people, often grouped together by craft, whose functions included provision of post-mortem prayers for deceased members as well as social care for living members. The further development of papal indulgences, grants from the pope which conferred remission of sins to reduce time spent in purgatory, were also a by-product of these doctrinal developments. An indulgence might be offered, for example, for going on a pilgrimage to visit the shrine of

a saint or related relics. The fear of purgatory was a dominant theme in late-medieval spirituality and sparked a huge industry, as access to indulgences became increasingly commercialised by the custodians of shrines and relics; it was the selling of indulgences in Germany, of course, which famously ignited Martin Luther's protest.

### *Saints, pilgrimage and private devotion*

Penance was only one reason for making a pilgrimage to a saint's shrine, however. The cult of saints formed another important strand in late-medieval spirituality, from small-scale visits to obscure local shrines, where official church teaching mingled with folk religion, to famous shrines such as Thomas Becket at Canterbury or overseas centres such as Santiago de Compostella or Rome itself. Saints were portrayed in medieval sermons, stories, and saints' lives as friends, helpers, protectors, or even wreakers of vengeance in the vicissitudes of medieval life. Saints assisted with childbirth, offered patronage to particular trades, protected individuals, regions or whole nations, and worked miracles of healing.

By the late middle ages, the most popular saint by far was the Virgin Mary. Devotion to Mary took many and varied forms; noblewomen prayed to Mary using their personal Books of Hours in their private chapels, manuscript anthologies owned by literate gentry included hymns and prayers to Mary, and parishioners lit candles and prayed for help before images of Mary in the local parish church, often in her guise as 'Our Lady of Pity', cradling the dead body of Christ, an image designed to evoke a strong emotional response in the worshipper. Similarly emotive meditations on the sufferings of Christ on the cross were another increasingly popular subject for private devotions, reflected in the visual arts as well as in a proliferation of vernacular texts.



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As literacy spread and printing made books cheaper, devotional texts such as these became ever more accessible to the population. This is also a reminder that the vast majority of religious texts produced in the late middle ages were entirely orthodox in their Catholic doctrine, despite concerns on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities in the early fifteenth century about a direct link between lay literacy and heresy. This type of devotional piety has also prompted some historians to view the later middle ages as a period of increasingly individualistic spirituality, which is seen by some as paving the way for the Reformation; others, notably Catholic historians, continue to stress the primarily corporate nature of lay religion, which remained firmly based in the parish church.

### **A sixteenth-century man writes to his mother about a book...**

Late-medieval spirituality, therefore, was multifaceted and experienced differently by different people. It is also, as we have seen, interpreted differently by different historians. To modern-day reformed Anglican evangelicals, however, there may be much that is alien – and distressing – in the late-medieval church’s additions to Christian doctrine and practice, especially when these practices continue in some Anglican churches today. Yet there is strong evidence for their general acceptance right up to the eve of the Reformation. In the early sixteenth century, people were still enthusiastically donating money to religious orders, establishing chantries, praying to Mary and the saints, and participating in the sacraments of the Catholic church. There was criticism of the quality of clergy and their services, and levels of understanding of the theology behind the practices undoubtedly varied, but most people seem to have been satisfied to pursue their spiritual lives within the



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*For Robert Plumpton,  
the English Reformation  
represented an  
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gospel to reach new ears.*



*William Tyndale's New Testament, 1534*

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structures of the Catholic church. From a human perspective, there was little to anticipate the religious upheaval that the next few decades would bring.

The English Reformation may not have been popular, nor a direct result of widespread dissatisfaction with the late-medieval church. Nonetheless, some did embrace the new religion. In around 1536, a Yorkshire gentleman named Robert Plumpton wrote to his mother, Isabel, sending her a copy of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament with prologue. He urged her to read it, reassuring her that 'as for the understanding of it, doubt not, for God will give knowledge to whom he will give knowledge of the Scriptures, as soon to a shepherd as to a priest, if he ask knowledge of God faithfully.\*' The contrast to the medieval spirituality outlined above is clear. This sums up some key tenets of reformed theology, and of Wyclif – direct access to God through Scripture alone, without the mediation of priests.

It seems that Robert was to be disappointed in his hopes for his family's conversion. The rest of the Plumpton family remained staunch Catholics; Robert's son William faced legal action for recusancy in the 1580s and the family continued to hold to the old religion well into the eighteenth century. This seems a long way from a 'Protestant triumphalist' reading of the mid-sixteenth century as the inevitable collapse of a crumbling, corrupt, unpopular church that was failing to meet people's spiritual needs. Yet, at the same time, it gives us insight into the story of one individual who had become convinced that the reformed faith was true. In a follow-up letter, probably written a few months later, Robert pleaded with his mother to read the Bible he had sent her:

'for every man or woman that it shall please God to send knowledge in the Scriptures is bound to instruct their brethren in the loving of the Gospel...

Wherefore I desire you, most dear mother, that you will take heed to the teaching of the Gospel, for it is the thing that ... all must live by.'

He evidently anticipated some objections on her part, for he added: 'Wherefore doubt not of it, dearly beloved mother in the Lord, I write this not to bring you into any heresies, but to teach you the clear light of God's doctrine.' This was a private domestic correspondence between a son and his mother, with whom he evidently had a warm and affectionate relationship, seeking to share the gospel with her. Even so, Robert Plumpton had a sense that he was living in historic times. He added: 'Mother, you have much to thank God, that it would please him to give you licence to live until this time, for the Gospel of Christ was never so truly preached as it is now.'

For this man, the English Reformation represented an unprecedented, God-given opportunity for the true gospel to reach new ears. This is not the 'Protestant triumphalism' of a biased, teleological historiography, written from the perspective of the winners. But it is a heart-warming testimony of one man, converted to the reformed faith out of a staunchly Catholic family, who recognised the hand of God behind the religious and political changes that were being imposed on the country.

Different historians have traced the causes of the Reformation in a multitude of political, social, economic, cultural, and intellectual factors which came together in the early sixteenth century. Christians should pay attention to these accounts, weighing up the evidence and seeking to understand how, humanly speaking, the English Reformation came about. However, like Robert Plumpton, Christians may also see the sovereign hand of God at work, working out his purposes through the actions of imperfect men and



The Reformation by Unknown artist

© National Portrait Gallery, London

women like ourselves. And through the voices of Christians from that time we have the great encouragement of seeing God at work, just as he works today, by bringing individuals to the life-changing, life-giving conviction of head and heart that in the Bible we find what Robert Plumpton called 'the trewe Gospell of God, spoken by the Holy Ghoste', even in the midst of human sin and flawed political and ecclesiastical structures.



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\* Quotations from Robert Plumpton's letters have been modernised.

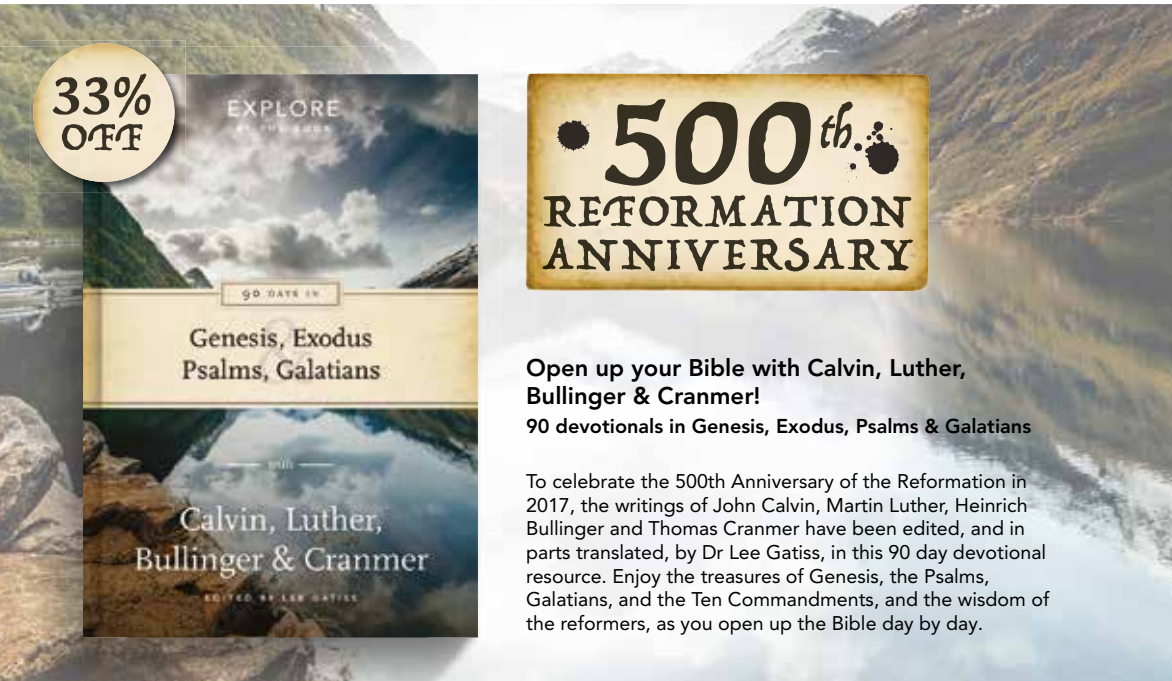
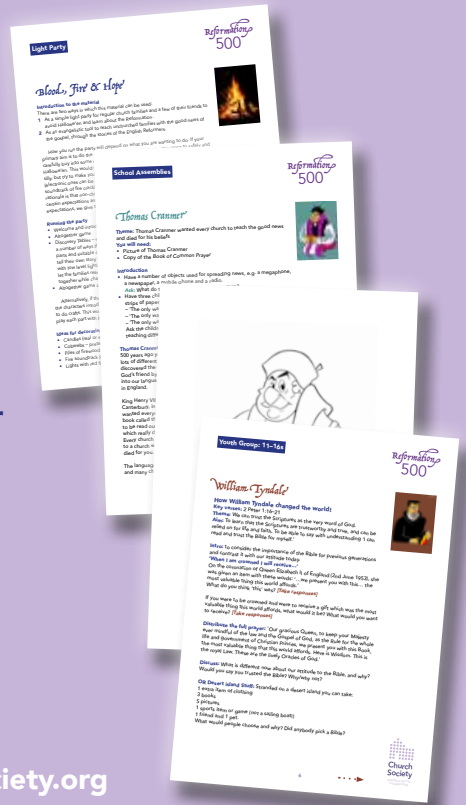
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# The Reformation of the sixteenth century

*Reformation Wall, University of Geneva © ppl / Shutterstock.com*

**Kirsty Birkett looks at how Luther, Tyndale, Cranmer and Calvin played key roles in the sixteenth-century recovery of scriptural truths.**

## **Martin Luther**

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses to the Church door at Wittenberg. It's a famous event, to the point where the 500th anniversary this year is reason for international celebration. Yet probably few of those celebrating will have read the 95 theses, or have a clear idea of what they contained.

Luther was very much an Augustinian monk. He made the most of the system available to find forgiveness of the sins of which he was only too aware. Time spent punishing his body and long hours in the confessional still left him aware that he had not done enough. For a while he was captivated by mysticism, which concentrated on the love of God; but his terror of the judgement of God still remained. Yet he was committed to the church. Even when he began lecturing on the book of Romans at the University of Wittenberg in 1515, it seems he developed new insights but there is no evidence that he considered opposing church teaching in general, nor that anyone else saw him that way. He was a lecturer who went about debating theology in the normal way. His first set of 97 theses criticised various aspects of scholastic theology but were largely unremarked.

The new set of 95 theses in 1517 were different in two ways. They were circulated in German, not just Latin, and so were far more widely read. Also, they attacked specifically the sale of indulgences.

We have already seen in the previous article how the practice of reducing time in purgatory through papal indulgences developed in the late middle ages. What Luther found particularly objectionable was the way in which they were being sold in his local German area. It was clearly a way to raise money, for the local Archbishop to recoup the money he had paid out in order to buy his post, and for the Pope to rebuild the Basilica of St Peter. Luther objected both to the doctrine and the greed for money. It was simply mad, he wrote, to think that an indulgence bought for money could forgive even the smallest sin, let alone great ones (Theses 75 and 76). Indeed, if the Pope did have the power to empty purgatory, why would he not do it simply out of love? (Thesis 82).

This was a direct attack on papal authority, and the Augustinian order was asked by the Pope to deal with Luther. The Augustinians, however, were inclined to support him; so the next step was to summon Luther to the Imperial Diet in Augsburg. Here, the Dominican cardinal Cajetan presented a papal bull that defended indulgences. Luther countered with the authority of Scripture: he denied that any human pope had the authority to oppose what Scripture clearly said. Protected by the local prince, Frederick the Wise, Luther escaped

*It was estimated that by the time of Luther's death in 1546 more than half a million copies of his Bible were circulating.*

capture and returned to Wittenberg.

The following year Luther debated Catholic Johannes von Eck. Eck immediately brought up the central issue: did the pope have final authority, or did the Bible? For Eck it was simple: the pope. Yes Scripture was important, but Scripture received its authority from the pope. On the contrary, Luther said, Scripture has authority over all popes, church fathers, even church councils. As a result of this debate Luther was officially declared a heretic; his response was to begin translating the Greek New Testament into German, finishing his first translation in 1522. He then went on to oversee the translation of the Old Testament, and in 1534 the German translation of the Bible was ready. It was estimated that by the time of his



Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder

death in 1546 more than half a million copies of his Bible were circulating.

The commitment to *Sola Scriptura* – that God's word *alone* had authority in matters of salvation and theology – was to become central to the Continental Reformation. In the meantime, here in England Scripture was also to become a key issue in the English Reformation.

### **William Tyndale**

William Tyndale went to Oxford c.1506, with scholars who were known as being eminent in the new humanist learning that was becoming popular throughout Europe. Amongst other things, this meant that scholars were studying Greek. Erasmus' Greek New Testament was published in 1516, and Tyndale soon had a copy. He may have spent time in Cambridge and, for all we know, gone to the famous White Horse Inn where Lutheran theology was debated. Certainly many famous English Reformers came out of Cambridge: Barnes, Coverdale, Bilney, Latimer, Cranmer, Frith, Ridley, and others.

In 1522 Tyndale left the university and took up a position as tutor in a Gloucestershire house, with ample time for preaching in the surrounding villages and in Bristol. He thereby made himself thoroughly unpopular with the local, more orthodox, clergy. At this stage, dismayed by the theology and lack of biblical knowledge of the incumbents he found, Tyndale decided to translate the New Testament into English. He moved to London and sought an interview with bishop Tunstall to ask for patronage for this project, which was declined. Tyndale continued in London, preaching Reformation doctrine, until in 1524 he sailed for Hamburg, realising he would be unable to accomplish the translation while in England.

On the continent Tyndale spent some time with Luther while completing his translation,

which he arranged to have published in Cologne. The work was interrupted, so Tyndale moved to Worms and there he finished the publication. Copies of the English New Testament were smuggled into England, and by 1526 it had been denounced and banned by the Bishop of London. The books continued to be distributed secretly, and Cardinal Wolsey tried to have Tyndale seized at Worms; but Tyndale escaped to Marburg.

During the next few years Tyndale published strongly Protestant writings which were distributed in England. He also began Old Testament translation, though was handicapped by losing all his papers in a shipwreck in 1529. He proceeded to Hamburg and continued to write forcefully against the Roman Church. At this time also Tyndale entered his literary debate with Sir Thomas More, who had been invited by Tunstall to defend the Church against the new heresies. In 1531 Henry VIII demanded Tyndale's surrender from the emperor Charles V, on the charge of spreading sedition in England. Charles was naturally unsympathetic to Henry (he was the nephew of Catherine of Aragon) – in any case, Tyndale was kept safe. However, he was in a dangerous position, and in 1535 was betrayed by a fellow Englishman and arrested. He was tried for heresy on the Continent in 1536 and was executed in October of that year, strangled first then burned.

Yet his legacy was to be transformational. As the English Reformation continued, the authority of Scripture and the power of Scripture was to become a key issue. In the English Reformation, there were more spectacular matters that tend to be more famous now: the dissolution of the monasteries, the iconoclasm, the burnings for denial of the Mass. However, what the Reformers actually wrote about and defended time after time came back to the authority of Scripture.

This transformed what was initially primarily a political struggle. It was evidently sometime



King Henry VIII by Unknown artist  
© National Portrait Gallery, London

*Tyndale's legacy was to be transformational. As the English Reformation continued, the authority of Scripture and the power of Scripture was to become a key issue.*

**Cranmer stated that Scripture should not be kept from people, either by prohibition or by lack of availability through being in a foreign tongue. Scripture was the means to life itself, and it must be available in the common language.**

around 1525–1527 that King Henry VIII decided to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, who had failed to provide a male heir. Most of us would be familiar with the story of his attempts to gain an annulment of the marriage and then a divorce, in order to marry Anne Boleyn. Finally in 1534, under considerable Royal pressure, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy which made the King Supreme Head of the Church in England. (When this was reinstated in 1559, the language changed to 'Supreme Governor').

### **Thomas Cranmer**

It is clear that Henry's sympathies remained fairly Catholic to the end. However, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, along with a committed group of other Protestants, made Henry's revolt against Rome the occasion for a Reformation of the church in doctrine. Cranmer is largely responsible for the *Book of Common Prayer* and what became the *Thirty-nine Articles* which are still the doctrinal basis of the Church of England. In these, Scripture is foundational. 'HOLY Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation' (Article 6).

The same view of Scripture came through when Cranmer was arguing against the Church tradition of revelation from God through the Church. There was a tradition of 'unwritten verities' – truths about God which were not

in Scripture, but which were nonetheless considered authoritative because the Church verified them. Cranmer held that nothing could be added to Scripture, nor could any knowledge of God be developed that was not in Scripture. For that reason he supported making Scripture available. By 1539 Henry VIII ordered the Great Bible, including large parts of Tyndale's translation, to be placed in and read aloud in every church. Cranmer's Prologue again emphasised the necessity of Scripture. Cranmer stated that Scripture should not be kept from people, either by prohibition or by lack of availability through being in a foreign tongue. Scripture was the means to life itself, and it must be available in the common language. It was ridiculous to argue that ordinary people were not worthy to study Scripture, for it was God's communication to mankind, not merely to an elite. Neither was it an acceptable argument that uneducated people could not understand what was in Scripture. Cranmer had a high opinion of the perspicuity of Scripture, its clarity in communicating the message.

It was under Henry's son by his third wife Jane Seymour, Edward VI, that the most radical changes of the Reformation took place. From the time of his coronation the new King was proclaimed as the new Josiah, destroying idolatry and restoring true worship. The evangelicals were firmly in control of the Privy Council that had effective rule during Edward's minority. During this time the new Prayer Book was published, Cranmer's Homilies were produced to be read aloud in church, and parishes were visited to ensure their conformity. Church furniture and decoration was to be radically changed: the altar was exchanged for a table; rood screens were taken down; statues and images were removed, and instead words of Scripture were painted on walls or put up



as posters. Yet not all were pleased. Massive change took place in a short period of time, and it is not at all surprising that many people objected. Much of the property seized from the Roman Church had simply enriched the nobility, and this angered people. There was opposition on the Privy Council to Cranmer's revised Canon Law, which was rejected by Parliament. By the end of Edward's short reign, while Reformed religion had considerable support in London, the south-east and east Anglia, many parts of the country remained quite traditional.

Despite this, Mary I's reign – after the abortive attempt to have the Protestant Lady Jane Grey made Queen – did not succeed in bringing the country back to Catholicism. In fact, it has been suggested that the very brutality of her reign caused a backlash in favour of Protestantism. Elizabeth I, a canny politician, would probably have been content with a church independent of Rome but basically Catholic in doctrine. However, her reading of her country and her Parliament led her to embrace Protestantism – certainly not in as Reformed a way as many of those who would come to be known as Puritans would have liked, but nonetheless England ended the century of turmoil a Protestant country. To a large extent, even if his and his colleagues' vision had not been fully realised, Cranmer and his reforms had won. The Church of England was officially based on the authority of Scripture, and the key doctrines of salvation by the grace of God alone, through Christ and not contributed to by human effort.

The Puritans in England largely came from the group of Reformers who escaped Mary's persecution by travelling to the continent. There they found sympathisers not only in Germany, but in other centres of Reformation such as Calvin's Geneva.



Thomas Cranmer by Gerlach Flicke  
© National Portrait Gallery, London

***Cranmer held that nothing could be added to Scripture, nor could any knowledge of God be developed that was not in Scripture.***

One of Calvin's concerns was the education of future ministers, to which end he founded both a school and a theological college.

### Calvin in Geneva

Calvin had become Protestant while studying theology in Paris in the 1530s. He escaped the Persecution of Protestants in France by travelling to Basel in Switzerland in 1535, and began the summary of the Christian faith which would become the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. His plan was to settle in Strasbourg, living the life of a scholar, but he was diverted to Geneva, where he was persuaded to stay.

Under Calvin's influence, Geneva reformed its church doctrine and structure, until in 1538 a struggle within the city council led to his being banned from the city. A short stay in Strasbourg followed, where Calvin met the Reformer Martin Bucer and continued to work on the *Institutes*. A new Genevan government invited him to return in 1541, and Calvin spent the rest of his life in authority there, as church leader and teacher.

He was also an educator. One of Calvin's concerns was the education of future ministers, to which end he founded both a school and a theological college. In 1559 the Genevan Academy opened, to educate students from Geneva as well as those who came from other parts of Europe. Calvin saw this as crucial for the evangelisation of France.

The Academy had five professors to start with. They taught in humanities, Greek and Hebrew; and Calvin and Theodore Beza shared the post of theology, teaching on alternate weeks. Their teaching in the Academy was considered part of their duties as pastors. This was a deliberate policy: it was meant to demonstrate that the scriptural exegesis they carried out in the theology lectures was

not merely an academic exercise, something different from a pastor's usual work, but actually a central part of the pastor's role.

Calvin approached leading Protestant scholars to be his professors. He was concerned to have teaching of the highest quality. Students did not specialise, but were educated in the various disciplines. It was a busy week. Lectures in Hebrew, Greek and the humanities were held twice every weekday except Friday, when in the morning the Professors were expected to attend the weekly meetings of Geneva's pastors. The Hebrew lectures were based on the Old Testament as well as Hebrew grammar, but the Greek lectures, interestingly, were to expound moral philosophy by Aristotle or Plato or Plutarch, or some Christian philosopher. It was the Professors of Theology – Calvin and Beza – who taught the Scriptures on three days per week, seeing the exposition of Scripture as central to what we would call systematic theology. As well as this, students received education in secular literature. Afternoon lectures were based upon Greek poets, orators or historiographers. The Professor of Humanities also lectured in natural philosophy (science) and Aristotle or Cicero. Calvin was evidently enthusiastic for his pastors to be well rounded and able to speak to their culture.

Reading some of Calvin's surviving correspondence, it is clear that Calvin's Geneva Academy influenced French Reformed churches and the Reformed world more widely. The Geneva Academy became a model for other training colleges elsewhere. Churches wrote to Calvin, introducing students they were sending, or requesting trained ministers, from all over

France and further abroad. Ex-students kept up a correspondence with Calvin, describing their subsequent careers and expressing their gratitude for their training. The gospel all over Europe was furthered through students who came from the Academy.

### **The five solas**

The Reformation is famous for its five *solas*, the five things that were held 'alone': Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, and the glory of God alone. These summarise the key theological truths. The authority of Scripture was held to be supreme in all matters of salvation and Christian life. Christ alone is the one who achieved salvation, his death on the cross satisfying God's wrath against sin. We come to God by faith alone, through his grace alone, knowing that we contribute nothing to our salvation. The glory goes to God alone; we have no basis on which to boast in ourselves.

These truths of the Christian faith are found in Scripture, and remain true today as they did in the early church and were so emphatically recovered in the sixteenth century.



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John Calvin, formerly attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger

***The Reformation is famous for its five solas, the five things that were held 'alone': Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, and the glory of God alone.***

### **Church Society Conference, May 2017: 'Knowing God, Making Him Known – The Reformation & the Gospel'**

All the conference talks, including Kirsty Birkett's St Antholin Lecture on Reformation Epistemology, are available to download from [churchsociety.org/resources](http://churchsociety.org/resources)

# 'After darkness, light'

500 years ago Europe seemed to be in spiritual darkness. The light of the gospel had been obscured – by human traditions, by churchly powers and authorities, and by silly superstitions.

But then the light of truth in the Bible broke through. Not just Martin Luther, but a generation of men and women rediscovered in a powerful way that we are saved solely and completely by faith in Christ's death on the cross. What poured forth was a wave of impassioned teaching, writing, and new church movements that radically altered not just the shape of the church, but the entire course of human history.

Today, this is what we call 'the Reformation'. One slogan that is often used to sum it up is *Post Tenebras Lux*: 'After darkness, light.'

Those Reformers of the 16th century are our spiritual ancestors, who read God's word, translated it into a language ordinary people could understand, and wrestled with the big issues that still face us today as followers of Christ. We serve the same Lord Jesus in our everyday lives and ministries as these great Reformers did in theirs, and continue to struggle as they did to keep his word first in our hearts and in our churches.

Reformed churches are always in need of continuing reformation by the word of God. The same truths that changed the course of history 500 years ago are still changing lives today as people turn to Christ in repentance and faith. We are thankful to God for the clarity of their testimony to the truth, often sealed with their blood, and pray that it would again be heard – loud and clear – in and through the Church of England today.



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