



## Introduction



The Reformation, which many historians regard as beginning in 1517, when a hitherto obscure German monk nailed ninety-five theological propositions, or ‘theses’, to a door of a church in Wittenberg, has continued to be one of the most controversial events in the history of the world. The fact that today we have Protestant as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches is living witness to those momentous times. Some view it as a triumph, others as a tragedy;<sup>[1]</sup> no one can be indifferent. We live in the world that the Reformation has made.

History, though, is never that simple. In order to understand the past effectively, we must first examine

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[1] Oliver R. Barclay, quoting David Watson, in *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935–1995: A Personal Sketch* (Leicester, 1997) p. 103.



the methods through which we can best comprehend what happened and why.

### Methodological Preliminary

Historians used to believe that it was possible to be completely objective, and that one could give an entirely objective, scientific picture of the past. Historians, both Reformed and Catholic, have in recent books<sup>[2]</sup> argued that this is simply impossible: *everyone* has a bias of some kind or another, and history writing, rather than being a contest between objective<sup>[3]</sup> and subjective, is really between those who are honest in revealing their personal view<sup>[4]</sup> so that you can judge their work accordingly, and those who delude themselves into thinking they have suppressed it.

Complete objectivity is, therefore, surely impossible with the vast and ever-growing number of sources open

[2] See George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York and Oxford, 1994), esp. pp. 429-44, and also Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997) p. 33. See also my article on the issue, 'Nationalism, Academia and Modernity: a Reply' in *Transformation*, vol. 14, no. 4 (October/December 1997) pp. 26-31.

[3] For those who take the increasingly old-fashioned view that their personal views can be objectively suppressed by writing in 'scientific' style, see J. McManners, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (Oxford and New York, 1990) pp. 1-18, esp. 4-5.

[4] For an honest view approach, see for example Marsden, *ibid.*, and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto and Derek Wilson in *Reformation: Christianity and the World 1500-2000* (London and New York, 1996) *passim*, henceforth abbreviated to FFA/DW.

to the historian; even the selection of what one picks to be included is frequently subjective.

However, all reputable historians do regard it as vital to be *honest*.<sup>[5]</sup> It is essential, if one discovers something inconvenient to one's own viewpoint, to include it in the text. This might mean that people reading your book will come to disagree with you – but that is a risk one has to take! For those of us who are both practising Christians and historians, honesty is especially important: indeed it is no less than a command of God!<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Providential Views of History<sup>[7]</sup>**

If I am to give my own viewpoint, or starting place, I can begin by saying that I am myself a Protestant, of a theologically conservative kind, with a world view predominantly in tune with that of the Reformers, and of John Calvin in particular. My ancestral tradition would be very sympathetic with John Knox and I attend a church in which Thomas Cranmer would have felt at home.<sup>[8]</sup>

Having said all that, I will aim in this book to be as fair as possible to all points of view. As we shall see, the great Reformers differed greatly with one another on

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[5] I give this issue full discussion in *A Crash Course on Church History* (London, 1998) pp. 2-5.

[6] Deuteronomy 5:20.

[7] Catherwood, *Crash Course*, pp. 8-9 for further discussion.

[8] For a detailed look at the issue of self-identity and the historian, see C. Catherwood, *Why the Nations Rage* (London, 1997), pp. 3-23.

several key issues, as well as with the Roman Catholic Church from which they had split.

I myself, for example, disagree with Calvin on the issue of baptism – despite being happy to call myself ‘Reformed’ in general, I would hold to a believer’s baptism theology rather than the ‘covenant baptism’ doctrine to which Calvin held. This would put me in disagreement with all five of the subjects of this book. I hope, however, that will not put you off what follows!

Like all the five subjects though, I am a strong believer in God’s present-day activity in history. Many of you may share this perspective. If you do, there are some important methodological preliminaries.

When we read the Bible, we read about the activities of God in history. Like the Reformers, many of us believe that God inspired the accounts there, so we can see his action, and sometimes his thought processes, at work.

### **Some biblical insights**

However, we are now living in post-biblical times in which things are not always so clear cut. God has laid down for us eternal rules and principles. But we don’t have the same detailed insights that the Apostles were privileged to have; for instance, Bible-believing Christians of all hues still disagree on the exact meaning of biblical teaching on church government. In the same way, we don’t know what events in more recent history are beneficial for sure, and which are not. Most Protestants would, I imagine,

hold that God was at work through the Reformers in the sixteenth century. But would those who believe deeply that we alone choose to be saved always regard Calvin as a good thing – or as a mistake? Likewise, would all Baptists hold Knox or Cranmer as heroes? Maybe – but maybe not.

Likewise, we should also remember from Scripture that God works providentially, through human beings.<sup>[9]</sup> We know that even Apostles like Peter and Paul disagreed.<sup>[10]</sup> Perhaps disagreements between Luther and Calvin, for instance, look less alarming in that light.

But this also means that in the same way that God used pagan rulers such as Pharaoh<sup>[11]</sup> or Cyrus<sup>[12]</sup> to benefit God's chosen people in Old Testament times, so too God can go on using secular things, events or peoples to his purposes. So when historians say that printing made a huge difference to the Reformation, or that economic/political/social discontent made people receptive to the Reformation message, they are not of necessity denying that God is at work behind the scenes. Non-Christian historians can give equally good insights into Reformation history and often do. Few people have understood the Puritans as well as the distinguished British historian, Christopher Hill, a Marxist non-Christian.

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[9] This should be obvious, but see Hebrews 11 for explicit confirmation.

[10] Paul withstood Peter to his face: see Galatians 2:11-21.

[11] Exodus 5:21–10:20.

[12] Ezra 1:1-4.

Whether or not, therefore, particular events are providential depends a lot on your point of view: whether or not Calvin interpreted the Bible correctly, or which view of church government or baptism is correct. Since, in this book, I am trying to be honest and open-minded between different viewpoints (despite my own declared prejudices), I deliberately therefore don't say whether or not God was behind a particular event, person, movement or doctrine. I do believe that God was powerfully at work in the extraordinary events of the sixteenth century, but in what way precisely, I leave you, the reader, to decide for yourself.

### **Protestant saints**

Lastly, one of the ironies of history is that while Protestants deny the Catholic doctrine of specially meritorious individuals, or 'saints', we often canonise our own heroes and all but turn them into Protestant saints.

This is especially true if we agree with them. We try and cover up obnoxious personality traits because we admire the writing or doctrinal insights of a particular individual or group.

Yet we forget that they were both men of their times – for example, Luther's anti-Semitism, Zwingli's resort to war with those who disagreed with him – as well as giants of the faith.

Similarly, we can act the other way around, rejecting a doctrine because we dislike the individual: many reject Calvin's interpretation of Scripture because of their strong antipathy to his personality.

My hope is that in reading this book, you will come to a more balanced view: 'I dislike X, but agree with him on Z', or 'I agree with X on A and B, but disagree with him on C and D'. Protestants may, after all, agree that the Bible is true, but it is the *Bible alone (sola scriptura)*, not individual interpreters of it.

### **Final note**

This is a work of *secondary* material, to use the language of history writing. I have not delved into the archives for *primary* material, but have read extensively the works of other historians, those who have laboured long with the original manuscripts. The primary work is therefore theirs, the distillation into one volume is mine. Likewise any mistakes are mine too. I trust therefore that you will go on to read more detailed works after reading this and, if so inspired, the original works of the subjects themselves.