

This is the text of an address given by Dr. Bruce Gordon at the conference on the Reformations of the 16th century held in November under the auspices of the Reformed Institute. Dr. Gordon was one of two featured speakers at the conference.

Thoughts on the Character of the Protestant Reformation

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It is a rather unusual for me to begin my remarks with a personal account, but I hope that it will throw some light on the arguments I wish to present this morning as we begin to think about the Protestant and Catholic Reformations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I began my academic journey far away from Luther and Calvin, although they had been somewhat familiar names in the liberal Protestant church in which I was brought up – rolled out on Reformation Sundays as founding fathers who liberated the church from its benighted state and restored the Bible. As an undergraduate, I was immersed in the Middle Ages, studying Old English, medieval theology, the church politics of late medieval England and a year-long course that followed Dante's journey. I threw myself into the study of Latin and Greek and medieval German. At the master's level the Rhineland mystics became my passion and I wrote a thesis on several of Meister Eckhart's Latin

sermons. When I decided to pursue doctoral work, it was not the Reformation that was foremost in my mind, but the late Middle Ages. I had studied in Nicholas of Cusa's library in Bernkastel-Kues on the Mosel in Germany and was deeply interested in late-medieval reform movements. My eyes alighted on conciliarism, in particular the Council of Basel in the 1430s. I went to St Andrews in Scotland to work with James K. Cameron, who had himself studied with the great Czech scholar of Hussitism, Matthew Spinka. Jim Cameron's scholarship had addressed what for me was something of an existential question: what was the relationship between my intellectual passion for the Middle Ages and my background in Reformed Protestantism?

My first year in Scotland was spent reading: I read Mansi's edition of the conciliar acts alongside Jean Gerson, Erasmus and then, eventually, Zwingli, Luther and Calvin. My advisor, in the old British manner, was relatively hands off, limiting his interventions to recommendations of editions and texts. In what now seems a rather innocent and slightly naïve manner, I began to detect notable theological, ecclesiastical, and historical themes in the sixteenth century authors that chimed with my medieval background. But had not the reformers roundly rejected the corrupt "dark ages"? The old Protestant narrative still implicitly shaped my intellectual landscape even though I knew much more about the Middle Ages than I did about the Reformation. When I began to explore these themes with my advisor, he paused and reflected, and then commented with reference to his own work on the Scottish Reformation. Scotland, he remarked,

must be viewed not from Carlton Hill (which prominent monument in Edinburgh) but from Mont Blanc. In other words, if I was even to begin to understand the roots of the Reformation I would have to return to the Continental roots.

Having been inspired by George Potter's biography of Huldrych Zwingli (Cambridge, 1976) and my reading of Heiko Oberman, I decided to take the plunge by going to Zurich, where Jim Cameron had worked on one of his major projects in the 1960s. Armed with a letter of introduction and halting spoken German, I arrived at the archives in Zurich and began looking at the material relating to the late-medieval archbishops of the sprawling diocese of Constance as a way into the Reformation. I floundered for a while until I met an archivist who gave me the best tip of my academic career. He pointed me to a vast body of material on the synod of the Zurich church under Huldrych Zwingli and his successor Heinrich Bullinger. That institution and its many parts, I believed, and ultimately (I hope) came to establish was a crucial link between late-medieval conceptions of reform and the new forms of the Reformed church. Thus began in my research in Swiss archives and libraries the slow transition to becoming a historian of the Reformation.

Almost thirty years later, my interests and convictions have remained fairly consistent. Although my knowledge has deepened exponentially, I continue to wrestle with questions of how the Reformation is both embedded in the Middle Ages and marks a radical break. The fields in which I have

concentrated include forms of historical writing and the shaping of Protestant identities, the cultures of dying and death and of the next world, institutional reform, and the nature of the Bible. That work was somewhat reshaped when I was commissioned to write a biography of John Calvin in 2005. My current project, which is a study of Huldrych Zwingli for Yale University Press, is a return to my pursuit of the lines of continuity and the ruptures that molded the Reformation in its formative years.

This intellectual vita comes by way of an approach to my challenge for this gathering: to say something about the origins and character of the Protestant Reformation. It is a subject with which I have had the good fortune to discuss regularly with my dear friend and wonderful colleague, Carlos Eire, to whom I owe a great deal. With gratitude, I also want to acknowledge the work of my partner in this discussion, Brad Gregory, whom I have known since longer than either of us will choose to remember.

Origins: *Ex tenebrae lux?*

Out of the darkness light, or at least that was what I was always taught. The reformers had defied the corrupt Roman papal church and restored the Gospel to its rightful place as the sole authority for Christians. Yet, even as a youth I used to wonder how we had moved from a restoration of the Gospel, a return to the

“pure” Christianity of the early Church, to the large building in which I sat with its clergy, rules and organization. I remember asking my mother one time after church, how do we know that the minister is right in his interpretation of the Bible. Why I wondered, when the Bible seemed to talk about a new world in which God would be worshipped in the Spirit did we speak of “religion” as a private matter, not to be discussed in public. The Bible, I was told, was a guide for being a good person and the awkward passages reflected the fact that things were different in the times of the ancient Israelites and of Jesus.

It was not until I went to university that things began to change, and they did so in a remarkable and dramatic manner. I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “Cost of Discipleship” and came across a passage in which he described a heated debate about whether a group of Protestants committed to resistance should take a certain course of action or not. At the heart of their heated discussion was the attempt to make sense of Paul’s words in a particular passage in 1 Corinthians. Really, I wondered, was the Bible that significant? Through this encounter and other experiences and contacts, not least with Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholic Anglicans, I began to see the Bible in an entirely different way. Combined with the intellectual expansion of my studies I began to become fascinated with the revolutionary nature of Protestantism and of the theological and historical questions it posed.

What would I want to say now?

The Reformation cannot be understood without investing ourselves in the changes and developments of the late-medieval Latin Church. It was both a consequence of those changes and a rebellion against them.

In many respects, this is a well-known story and I do not want to spend too much time on it, but we need to be attentive to a number of developments. The late-medieval church, as Eamon Duffy and others have amply demonstrated, was marked by intense devotional activities. The narrative of decline is simply not convincing. Donations to churches, shrines, pilgrimages, intercessions for those in purgatory, deep attachment to the Virgin Mary and the broken body of Christ, was to be found across Europe. New parish churches were built, vernacular devotional works proliferated, and the mendicants preached everywhere. Was it a golden age? No, the papacy had barely survived the Great Schism, pluralism and absenteeism was rife and much of the ecclesiastical hierarchy was populated by the sons of wealthy families and held as lucrative sinecures. Movements such as the Waldensians, Hussites, and Lollards had found a perch by decrying abuses within the church. Yet, as Tom Scott once said, if you don't believe that a flourishing belief cannot exist alongside deep criticism of the clergy and church, you have never been to Ireland.

In the highly diverse and variegated world of the late-medieval church there was a widespread and common belief that reform was both necessary and

essential, not least because many were convinced that they lived in the end times. In the north, the Council of Basel passed a huge body of reform decrees that took aim at the major issues relating to problems within the church. Clergy were to abandon their semi-official household relations with women, who bore their children – many Protestant reformers came from clerical families. Priests and bishops were to live in the parishes and dioceses and fulfill their duties to celebrate the sacraments, preach, and provide pastoral care. Bishops in particular were singled out for improvement. Pluralism was regularly denounced, as was the widespread practice of employing a person to perform episcopal duties. Financial irregularities also came under the scrutiny of reforming eyes of the council, and simony, or the sale of offices, was roundly denounced.

It is easy to see these medieval attempts at reform as a failure, a hopeless cause that had no chance against invested interests. I would argue the contrary. Although the Council of Basel collapsed in the face of papal opposition and internal squabbling, its legacy was powerful. Dioceses across northern Europe held synods that promulgated reform edicts, spreading the powerful sense that change was necessary. Within the religious orders, to take another example, the observant movements grew in strength, leading to the founding of new orders.

The fifteenth century saw the establishment of new universities across northern Europe, one of which was my former institution of St Andrews in 1413. Another example from the early sixteenth century was Wittenberg. Theological faculties grew in number drawing in an increasing sodality of scholars, most of

whom did not engage in the worthless of hair-splitting caricatured by Erasmus or in Protestant polemic, but flourished with the latest theological debates.

Both within the universities, such as in Basel, and among the wider literate sodalities we find the rise of humanism in the north from the middle of the fifteenth century. The Councils of Constance and Basel had played a major role in the spread of the new learning north of the Alps. Central figures in the development included the Christian Hebraist Johann Reuchlin and Desiderius Erasmus. Both men played an enormous role in the development of biblical scholarship. Reuchlin, great uncle of Philip Melanchthon, was involved in a bitter controversy about the role of Jewish learning in the reform of Christian teaching. Erasmus' 1516 *Novum Instrumentum* and his Paraphrases inspired a generation of scholars to the study of scripture in the original languages. Luther's 1522 "September Testament" was based on Erasmus edition of 1519.

Erasmus' New Testament deserves particular mention in tracing the lineage of Protestantism. By placing the Greek next to his own translation into Latin, Erasmus not only inspired young reform-minded churchmen and scholars to learn the ancient languages, but demonstrated that philological knowledge was essential for the reform of theology. By correcting the Vulgate, which Erasmus always maintained was his primary purpose, the Dutchman exposed the textual problems relating to such doctrines as purgatory. The ideas of Erasmus, with his teaching on the philosophy of Christ - following the medieval tradition of the imitation of Christ -, and the moral nature of the Christian life,

was deeply influential on young generation of men, such as Huldrych Zwingli and others, who were steeped in the reform language of the medieval church.

Through their writings, Erasmus and his circle of friends, were able to begin to frame an alternative way to thinking about the Christian life and the life of the church. Their position was very much from within the Church, but their criticism was harsh. It involved an attack on scholasticism, monasticism, and the all too evident abuses of authority. Their work was, for the most part, Latin and kept within a relatively small readership of the learned.

Yet, there are ways in which our reading of Erasmus can mislead us. To pick up *Praise of Folly* or to read Erasmus' *Paraclesis*, his introduction to his New Testament, it is tempting to fall into trap of thinking that scholasticism was moribund, or even worse, and that the monastic orders were little more than risible. Erasmus had a sharp eye for satire, and his pen was sharp. However, if we are to think carefully about the relationship between the Reformation and medieval culture it is precisely to the scholastic tradition and monasticism, the very objects of ridicule in much humanist and early Protestant polemic. Let me turn to the example of Zwingli, with whom I am spending a good deal of time. As Daniel Bolliger in Zurich has shown in his enormously detailed study of Zwingli's relationship to scholasticism, the Swiss reformer in his theology drew deeply from a broad range of late medieval theologians to form his arguments about God and the infinite. In his polemic, Zwingli was no less charitable about the scholastics than his contemporaries, but the true story remains partially

concealed. Martin Luther, Martin Bucer and, later John Calvin, were deeply read in the scholastic tradition, with which they had a critical relationship.

Nevertheless, Calvin's formulation of double predestination, it can be persuasively argued, owes a great deal to his reading of Aquinas, which we know he did during the 1540s.

Luther's "whore reason", as Brad rightly reminds us, can blind us to the centrality of Aristotle to the mental world of both Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century. The building of the Protestant academies, as he will tell us, in the later part of the Reformation was on the foundation of Aristotelianism in the curriculum. A good example is the work of Andrew Melville and his reform of the Universities in Scotland. Melville was a strict Calvinist.

Luther's Revolution

My argument may seem rather traditional, even old fashioned, but I am persuaded that there would have been no Reformation without Martin Luther. This is not a return to the great man view of history, but Luther changed the game through both his experiences and thought and in the way in which he conveyed his ideas to a broad public.

The roots of Luther's revolution lay in his own experience of salvation. His life as an Augustinian monk, his pursuit of holiness, and the constant *Anfechtungen* he endured. As he was to relate in considerable detail, he only

encountered an angry God whom he could not appease by even the greatest mortifications. It was the brilliant pastoral mentorship of Johann von Staupitz that rescued Luther from the abyss in which he found himself. Staupitz, the head of the Augustinian order, guided Luther to undertaking a doctorate at Wittenberg and to commence teaching Bible. At some point, Luther experienced a conversion moment, known from his 1545 autobiography as his *Turmerlebnis*, although scholars remain uncertain of the date. More importantly, I would argue, was his constant work in interpreting and lecturing on the Bible, in particular his cycles on the Psalms and Romans. For Luther, the crucial turning point came with his realization that human salvation is not in any form dependent on merit or works, but on the free justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ.

But we jump forward a bit. Luther's move from obscurity came with the Ninety Five theses of 1517 and his attack on indulgences. The matter could have been contained and remain yet another expression of discontent shared by others. Luther, however, had struck at the authorities in various ways. He had implicated Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and attacked a significant resource by which the worldly interests of prelates were financed. Above all, Luther refused to retract his positions, which spoke to the nature of God's grace and how a Christian ought rightly to repent. The Church, not unreasonably, saw the matter as one of discipline and sought to silence the monk and priest. The debate was entirely lopsided. In a way it was theology against ecclesiastical discipline.

Luther's theses went viral when printed in German and during 1518, as Andrew Pettegree has demonstrated, the protest was made known across German lands.

Luther had taken theology into the vernacular. His opponents were partially, but by no means wholly, wrong footed. Luther's widely publicized protest pulled the scab off a number of sores. German resentment against the papacy and perceived Italian corruption was a longstanding phenomenon that had found expression among the humanist supporters patronized by Maximilian I. Luther the Augustinian stirred rivalries with other religious orders, including the mendicant Dominicans and Franciscans. A variety of constituencies were quick to appropriate the Wittenberg professor and make him the face of their reform aspirations or grievances against the feudal order.

Luther did little to disabuse his new found supporters of his role as a German reformer, but his eyes were firmly fixed on what he saw as the central message: God's saving grace. Against the Augustinians at Heidelberg and Cardinal Cajetan he refused to budge, holding to his position that scripture alone would be his standard. In 1519 Luther was confronted by a man his own age and every bit as well educated and intelligent, the German Johann Eck. The encounter took place at Leipzig and Eck, to Luther's lasting chagrin, emerged victorious, even if he had failed to force a recantation. Eck's success also provided a decisive moment in Luther's self-understanding. By forcing the Wittenberg professor into the acknowledgement that his teaching was in line with the condemned heretic Jan Hus, Eck brought Luther to an understanding of

the historical lineage of his theology. From the perspective of the Roman Church, Luther was a heretic, although it would be some time before he was formally excommunicated. For his part, Luther was clear that if the hierarchical church condemned him then it must be in error, for he had absolute confidence in his position.

In many respects, the death of the old emperor Maximilian I in 1519 proved Luther's great fortune as a reformer. The politics of the imperial election both moved attention away from the Luther affair and provided, in the form of Frederick the Wise, essential protection from Rome. 1519 was a crucial year: Luther the protean reformer was heralded around German lands; his own theology was rapidly evolving in the face of Catholic opposition; and the nascent reform movement had acquired political support, which prevented Luther from becoming just another heretic.

It was during the year 1520 when the fruits of Luther's thought ripened in a series of extraordinary tracts and his theological ideas assumed an order. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was a frontal assault on the sacramental system of the Medieval church in which Luther reduced the number of sacraments to three (including penance) before ultimately two. The *Letter to the German Princes*, as Thomas Brady Jr. has remarked, radically reversed the tradition of reform within the empire and German church by placing responsibility for the restoration of the church in the hands of the princes. Luther's most measured work in this torrid year was his *On the Freedom of a Christian*, arguably his

greatest piece of writing. It was in the *Freedom of a Christian* that Luther most clearly articulated his teaching on Law and Gospel, the priesthood of all believers, and the nature of faith and good works.

The years 1519-20 had offered Luther a certain freedom to develop his theology, to flesh out the full implications of his realization that a Christian is justified by God's overwhelming grace through faith alone in Christ. Luther had completely changed the rules of the game by placing the Word of God above all other forms of authority. He had come to believe that he had unmasked antichrist in the form of the Roman papacy and was beginning to recognize that he had been granted a unique prophetic calling. This last point was to be confirmed at Worms in 1521. Luther's opponents had recovered their momentum and both pope and emperor were moving against the declared heretic. Had he died at Worms as Hus had perished at Constance the Reformation would have come to an end: Luther was the only person who gave the movement any coherence or shape. Instead, he stood before Charles V and the papal representatives and refused to retract anything that could not be proved wrong on the basis of scripture. He famously declared his conscience bound to the Word of God.

The statement at Worms, which in Luther's mind confirmed his special status, was decisive and divisive. For the rest of his life he would remind others that he alone had resisted both emperor and pope. But it did much more. It was the formation of a new type of Christianity, one that was largely unknown to the

medieval world, although theologically its roots were to be found in the scholastic doctors. Luther was demanding that all teachings of the church had to be verified by scripture, raising, naturally, the question by whose interpretation. Closely related was Luther's argument on the conscience: he would not be forced to act against his conscience, which was beholden to the Word. The individual conscience was to be placed before any form of institutional authority.

But where did authority lie?

That was the objection voiced by a range of Luther's opponents, including Johann Eck and Johann Cochlaeus, who had been present at the Diet of Worms. To explore this question a little further, I want to move to the question of the Bible, which has been at heart of my work for some years.

As mentioned, Luther placed scripture above the church and its traditions, arguing that the church should be held to the Word of God. Yet, we have good reason to ask, how was scripture to be interpreted?

To reach some sort of answer to that question we need to examine a number of different aspects. First, how did Luther view himself? Not surprisingly, with a great deal of confidence. In the years 1518-1521 he came to a self-perception that he was not simply *a* prophet of God, but *the* prophet of his age. He alone had experienced the realization of God's justification through faith alone; he had alone had defied emperor and pope. No other could stand by him. Not his erstwhile mentor and friend, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, and certainly not that Swiss rival, Huldrych Zwingli. Luther alone was Elijah, the

German Hercules of Hans Holbein's woodcut. This self-understanding is one of the most difficult aspects of the Luther story to understand, and one that in the eyes of most students renders him deeply unsympathetic. Nevertheless, it lay at the heart of Luther's relationship to the Bible. His prophetic office, he claimed, never had anything to do with his person, but was bestowed upon him by God. To depart or dissent from his interpretation of the Word was for Luther betrayal or, even worse, a rejection of God himself.

So what did sola scriptura, that term by which Luther's position on the Bible was later named, mean? Again, Luther's life was crucial. He had experienced God's justification, which he had understood through the lens of Paul, particularly in Romans. Justification by faith alone became Luther's key position, I would argue, and the heart of his reading of the Bible. In his preface to the New Testament in 1522 he revealed his position on the hierarchy of the books of the Bible. The Gospel of John, the epistles of Paul (particularly Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians) were especially valued for preaching the Gospel, or, in Luther's language, as being "Apostolic". Other books, famously the Epistle of James, but also Hebrews and Jude were deemed to be of lesser value. In the September Testament of 1522 Luther placed these books at the end of the volume. He also took the position that the books of the Apocrypha were to be separated out and placed between the Testaments as works that were edifying without containing revelation. Luther elevated a clear theological position as the basis for his reading of the Bible. For the Old Testament he advocated a clear

Christological principle. The order that Luther imposed on the books of scripture revealed a key principle that underlay his thought. The Word of God and the Bible were not for him entirely identical. The Word is Christ, the good news of God's salvific purpose for humanity. The Bible was the sole means by which that message is mediated to men and women, but it was not entirely the same, as human hands had written it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Luther advocated the application of the test of whether the books preached the saving message of Christ. It was a test that James and Hebrews failed: in the first case because of the place of good works in James, and, secondly, because Hebrews was clearly not written by one of the Apostles.

In Zwingli's Zurich a similar dilemma was faced. Flushed with enthusiasm as a disciple of Erasmus, and having been deeply formed by the writings of Luther, Zwingli had advocated a communal understanding of scripture by which the people would be able to correct the words of the preacher from their own understanding of the Word of God. Zwingli was much more willing than Luther to identify the Bible with the Word of God, but he too quickly recognized the problems posed by multiple readings of scripture. Like Luther, he turned to prophetic authority as authoritative in reading the Bible, but in a different manner. He frequently criticized Luther's claim for personal authority, arguing that such a position had destroyed the unity of the reform movement. Zwingli sought to ground prophetic authority institutionally by creating a body known as the *Prophezei*, which was a collection of scholars who would interpret the

Old Testament in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and German. The sessions of the *Prophezei* were open to all who could follow the learned discussions, but the fruits of this work of prophets was to be made available in vernacular sermons and in the translation of the Bible into German. For both Luther and Zwingli, however, the principle of interpretation had to be moved to the establishment of an educated clergy whose office was to read scripture and preach. The priesthood of all believers of which Luther had spoken in his *Freedom of the Christian* was reworked into a distinction of vocations: the Word of God needed to be expertly interpreted from the Hebrew and Greek and its message translated into the language of the people. Each person was to encounter the Word and respond in faith, but Protestantism had to address its own first principles by creating institutions and hierarchies of authority.

Church

Both Luther and Zwingli saw the church as the body of Christ at worship. Both men were musicians and poets with a sophisticated aesthetic, but one that ran in different directions. For Luther, much of the glory of late-medieval worship was to be kept intact: images, liturgy, music and altars, as Bridget Heal has shown. Zwingli and his followers, created a Reformed aesthetic by removing virtually everything and white washing the walls of the churches. Was this merely absence, a protest against idolatry? No. Zwingli envisaged a transcendent

experience in which the bread and wine on the table, which was to be placed among the community of worshipers was the focus of the eyes while the ears took in the spoken Word of God. Yes, he removed music from worship, but the significance of that act has been hugely overstated. Zwingli advocated music as part of household worship and his friend Leo Jud composed hymns. Hymnbooks were printed in Zurich for other Reformed cities, such as Basel and Constance, while by the end of the century organs and singing had returned. The removal of music was directed against the perceived mumbling of the priests; it was an act in a particular moment. Calvin believed strongly in the power of music and the metrical psalms defined the Reformed identity.

Protestant attitudes towards the church represented a range of visions. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin – in particular the latter two- essentially adopted an Augustinian position on the church embracing the whole of the community, believers and non-believers. Zwingli articulated the distinction between the visible and invisible church, with the former being a mixture of the wheat and tares and constantly in need of protection and discipline. Calvin worked with much the same model in developing the disciplinary system in Geneva and beyond. The invisible church was limited to those who were justified by faith in Christ. God alone knows their number and, again referring to Calvin, it was impossible for humans to identify the elect and the reprobate. The outward works of a person were of great concern to the visible church, but they offered no sure guide to the state of a person's soul.

Among radicals, to use a problematic term, another vision emerged, beginning with the Swiss Anabaptists. Rejecting the seeming compromises made by Zwingli and others, they believed that a separation from worldly powers was essential to the preservation of the true church. With their repudiation of adult baptism and the sword of temporal authority they broke with the central tenets of the magisterial reformers, but their influence was enduring and powerful and should not be shunted to the fringes of the narrative of Protestantism.

Yet, we must be mindful of the ways in which Protestants were in continuity with the late-medieval church. For the most part, the churches that were established during the 1520s and 30s largely appropriated the parochial structures and assumed a relationship of pastor to community modeled on the priestly office of medieval Catholicism. As mentioned, the Protestant pastors were the mediators of the Word of God and continued to exercise authority over the sacraments, which had been reduced to two. In Zurich, where I did my research, the episcopal office of the medieval church was largely retained in all but name. The head of the church after Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, was frequently addressed as “episcopus” in correspondence. Research has demonstrated the extent to which the Protestant churches adapted and adopted much of the reform legislation of the late-medieval church on such questions as moral reform, marriage, tithes, and church discipline. Medieval canon law was frequently cited by Protestant reformers as precedent for marriage cases and the settlement of church property disputes.

History and Tradition

Martin Luther famously argued that the traditions of the church held no authority over scripture. The institutional church and its traditions, he and subsequent reformers stated, had no claim on the interpretation of the Word of God. The Wittenberg professor's position was carefully laid out in his *Address to the German Nobility* in 1520. However, if we are to explore the essential character of Protestantism as it emerged in the Reformation we must turn to two issues of great importance: history and tradition. Luther, as have noted, was forced by Johann Eck in 1519 to accept that many of his teachings were in accord with the theology of Jan Hus, the Bohemian reformer burnt at the Council of Constance in 1415. What Luther came to acknowledge was that he stood in a long tradition of what he regarded as "correct doctrine". That lineage defined the existence of the true church through the ages. It would become a hallmark of Lutheran history writing that the true church had existed where doctrine had been rightly taught.

From its earliest years, the Protestant churches need to establish their historical identity, to refute their opponents' charges that they were new and therefore false. Luther's own historical consciousness was profoundly formed by his growing realization that antichrist occupied the throne of St Peter in Rome. Naturally, that led to the question of when the Western Church had been corrupted. For Luther, it was the rise of papacy in Rome in the sixth century,

while other Protestants would date the advent of the fall of the church differently, including to the age of Constantine.

What the Protestants needed to establish was their apostolic roots, that they had not abandoned the church but were seeking to renew it now that God had acted in human history to restore his Word. In declaring their fidelity to the Word of God, Protestants drew attention to closeness to the early Christian church before it had been corrupted: an age when the Word was purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered. In his account of the liturgy prepared by Huldrych Zwingli for the church in Zurich in 1525, Ludwig Lavater spoke described the intention of the reformers as recreating the worship of the early church "as far as possible."

The close affinity with early Christianity took other, darker forms. Both Protestants and Catholics believed that the heresies of the early church were being brought to life in their own day. The Anabaptists were associated with the Donatists of North Africa, while Lutherans routinely denounced Zwinglians as "Nestorians" on account of their supposed defective teaching on the nature of Christ. When Protestant writers looked into the mirror of the past they tended to see themselves.

The consuming desire to determine their historical lineage was not, by any means, an act of naivety. As followers of Erasmus, the Protestant humanists knew that their temporal distance from early Christianity meant that they could only appropriate the past, not return to it. John Calvin, perhaps the greatest of

the Protestant church reformers in terms of constructing a new order, was fully aware that the church that he sought to rebuild in Geneva after his return in 1541 sought in spirit to capture the essence of early Christianity, but would in every respect be a work of the sixteenth century. Like Zwingli in Zurich and Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, he constructed his church from an amalgam of sources: Roman law, existing ecclesiastical and civil institutions, scripture, and a canny sense of what was possible. The churches of the sixteenth century were new creations, institutions that in character, institutional character and liturgical worship that had never existed before. What they believed bound them to past was in the case of Lutherans correct doctrine. Calvin articulated the bond in terms of true preaching of the Word.

The Protestant understanding of tradition must also be understood in terms of theology and biblical interpretation. Faith alone and sola scripture have frequently been misrepresented in narratives of the Reformation. The key word is alone, not "only". Luther, Zwingli and Calvin (who was a theological autodidact) unequivocally declared the supreme authority of the Word of God as revealed in scripture. That position, however, did not mean that they regarded all that the church had done for fifteen hundred years to be in error. They were deeply influenced by the intellectual developments of the late Middle Ages, including the shift among commentators towards collapsing the traditional fourfold form (quadra) of biblical interpretation. The reformers picked upon the shift towards the literal sense in the fifteenth century. That literal sense, however,

carried more of the spiritual understanding of the Bible. Thus, in order to understand what the reformers meant when they spoke of literal or historical meaning of the Bible one needs to appreciate their indebtedness to medieval scholars. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin saw themselves as reading theology and biblical interpretation in light of the patristic and medieval traditions. What distinguished their position was their claim to have read the fathers and the medieval doctors critically. That is, the historical authorities of the church had no independent standing apart from the Word, which was the only standard. Calvin, for example, could cite Augustine with approval and then quickly move to reprehend the North African father. He treated John Chrysostom likewise.

In a similar vein, the reformers accepted the authority of the early councils of the church to Constantinople II in 553 (there was some variation within Protestantism). Again, seeing these formulations of the faith as biblical and prior to the corruption of the Church that led to the introduction of pernicious innovation, the Protestants were making a decisive theological move. They accepted without question Chalcedonian Christology and the Nicean formulation of the Trinity. Although the nature of Christ and his presence in the world would become the major theological division within Protestantism, all the reformers recognized the conciliar authority. How they interpreted it, naturally, was a different question.

It was this relationship with theological tradition that led to one of the most fascinating aspects of Protestant interpretations the faith: the need to write

confessions. In the emerging Lutheran confession Augsburg occupied a distinctive and enduring authority, but, as we know, the Reformed continued to write confessions (First and Second Helvetic, Scots, French, Belgic, Westminster, to name a few). Why did they do this? Heinrich Bullinger's position is instructive. He made the clear distinction between creeds and confessions: the former had binding authority while the latter were contemporary and contextual expressions of the faith often to address particular concerns. Confessions were to be absolutely faithful to the Word of God and the creeds of the Church, but they should be expressed in language and terms that addressed present concerns. *The Second Helvetic*, for example, was to address the fierce debates with Lutherans in the Empire in the 1560s. Other confessions took on antitrinitarianism or attacks on the doctrine of predestination.

The Character of Reformation Protestantism

Martin Luther did not intend to fracture the Latin Church in the West in the manner in which transpired from the 1520s. Nor did nascent Protestantism (to use a slightly anachronistic term) intend to fragment in the manner that it did. The criticism of the movement did not take long to become manifest. In Zurich the radical challenge to infant baptism and the disastrous dispute between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli over the words "This is my Body" cast in sharp relief the issues raised by sola scriptura and sola fide. Yet the movement

did not collapse under the weight of its internal tensions. What happened, however, as we know, was that the movement developed along distinct although related trajectories, although the degrees of overlap were considerable. The so-called magisterial reformers who had embraced temporal authority rejected and persecuted those labeled radicals. Lutherans and Reformed cultivated distinct theologies, liturgies, ecclesiologies and forms of devotion. Although it was once tempting to think of “international Calvinism”, for example, the Protestant polities were highly local or regional in character.

The nature of Protestantism, I would argue, remained distinctly oppositional, ever suspicious of institutions and temporal authority. The constant desire to return to the sole authority of the Word of God rendered Protestantism with institutions, although much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were devoted to the establishment of institutional order. No sooner was a Protestant order established than reform movements such as Puritanism and Pietism. The tension within Protestantism’s balance between spiritual and institutional authority shapes the history of Presbyterianism, to name one case.

Yet, I would want to conclude by arguing that this energy for reform and reinvigoration remained the hallmark of Protestantism in its numerous forms. Controversies, internal quarrels and schisms went hand in hand with enormous creativity and spiritual renewals. At the heart, I would argue was the enduring message that men and women stand in immediate relationship to God and are justified by faith alone. The story is incredibly messy and at times quite ugly, but

if we are to begin to understand the extraordinary growth of divergent forms of Protestantism today in the majority world we cannot draw a direct line from the Reformation to today's developments. We need, I conclude, to understand the complex formation of a movement, attend to its complexities, tensions, and strengths, and chart its often perplexing legacy for Western and global Christianity. The right place to start is a better-informed and more balanced assessment of the Reformation in its Catholic and Protestant forms.