Church History in Plain Language is just plain good. No, make that great —accessible, reader friendly, and interesting. A superb overview of the church's story. Especially with the addition of recent historical developments, it's the first book I recommend to those newly curious about the history of our faith.

—***Mark Galli,*** former editor in chief, *Christianity Today*; author of biographies on Francis of Assisi and Karl Barth

Church history is a dynamic drama that we find ourselves participating in. Faced with new challenges today, we discover ancient wisdom in those who have gone before. By focusing on overlooked storylines and highlighting forgotten figures, Marshall Shelley updates and enriches this already classic text, making it particularly poignant for our age. We gain a vision of the remarkable global rise of Christianity and the revolutionary way it elevated and integrated women and men from every nation, tribe, and tongue into God's redemptive story.

—***The Rev. Dr. Glenn Packiam,*** associate senior pastor, New Life Church, Colorado Springs

Nearly four decades ago Bruce Shelley penned his magnum opus, *Church History in Plain Language*. It quickly acquired popular acclaim for how accessible and enjoyable it was to read. Along the way it became a personal favorite of mine as well as of the innumerable students I've had in class over the years. Now we are blessed to have this new edition that records the ongoing development, influence, and expansion of the church over two millennia. If you want a stimulating journey through the rich history of Christianity, this is the one book you must read.

—***Scott Wenig,*** professor of applied theology, Denver Seminary

Detailed and thorough while also sweeping and comprehensive, this fifth edition preserves the simple and accessible style of its predecessors while introducing new and updated materials that truly make this a *world* Christian history. Ample illustrations bring history to life, brief profiles introduce readers to their brothers and sisters in faith, and suggested reading lists point out avenues for further research. Christian history needs to belong to everybody. This book will help it do just that.

—***The Rev. Dr. Jennifer Woodruff Tait,*** editor, *Christian History* magazine

CHURCH HISTORY
IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

CHURCH HISTORY
IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

5th EDITION

BRUCE L. SHELLEY

Marshall Shelley, Revision Editor

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

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Church History in Plain Language

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To my students in church history classes who pressed the question of significance

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LIST OF PROFILES OF FAITH

PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

Often in casual conversation, when people learn where I work, they ask, "So how long have you been at Denver Seminary?" I respond, "Well, there are two answers to that question. I joined the faculty in 2016. But I first arrived at Denver Seminary in 1957 when I was three years old—because that's when my dad joined the faculty."

You see, I was able to observe the entirety of Bruce Shelley's teaching career, from his arrival as a newly minted PhD from the University of Iowa until his death in 2010. Granted, in those early years, I was too young to grasp the content of his church history classes, but I knew that his students respected him, and many have told me that my dad was their favorite professor. That makes an impression on a kid! At home at our dinner table, conversations usually melded our two worlds: history and sports—Martin Luther and Mickey Mantle, Menno Simons and Roger Maris. Yes, Dad was a historian and a Yankees fan. Family vacations inevitably included historic sites: Jamestown, Williamsburg, Cumberland Gap, Boston's Freedom Trail, Lexington Green, Cane Ridge, the courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee. Later my wife, Susan, and I hosted a tour of sites of the Reformation with Dad as guide: Wittenberg, Wartburg, Leipzig, Constance, Geneva. You couldn't travel with Dad without getting a sense that you were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who had walked this very ground centuries earlier, and we are still experiencing the effects of their lives. As a teacher and a preacher, he brought that immediacy to his students, to his congregations, and yes, to readers of this book.

Dad was energetic and people centered. History for him wasn't dull. It was not just a string of dates and "isms." It wasn't merely an academic subject; it was people, in different times and places, passionately trying to express what was true and good and right. How that was lived out and opposed and fought for over the centuries is an epic drama that has affected everyone on earth. For Dad, church history is the ongoing story of people and a cause. That cause is the *ecclesia*, the gathering and scattering of

God's people that we call the church. It is a story that is still being written more than two thousand years after it began.

I was a student at Denver Seminary from 1979 to 1982, when the first edition of this book was being written. When I was a student in two of Dad's church history classes, one of our texts was the initial draft of this book, distributed chapter by chapter on photocopied pages.

After graduating from the seminary, I became an editor at *Christianity Today*, where I worked for thirty-four years, mostly on *Leadership Journal*, documenting the state of the art in Christian ministry, and I also edited, for a time, *Christian History* magazine, a surprise and delight for my dad. The history I learned from Bruce Shelley served me well. At CT we sometimes reminded ourselves that we were writing the first rough draft of church history. It's a tumultuous and ongoing story of innovation, conflict, drift, repentance, renewal, victory, failure, and ultimately, an imperfect but ultimately prevailing demonstration of faith and hope and love.

Church History in Plain Language continues to serve as an excellent introduction to that story of the ever-developing Christian movement. Since 1982 it has remained perhaps the best onramp for those wanting an overview of church history. Readers find it accessible, educational, and enjoyable, three words that capture what every student hopes a text will be.

This fifth edition brings *Church History in Plain Language* a bit more up-to-date by focusing on the globalization of the Christian faith throughout its history, especially in the twenty-first century. Not many one-volume surveys of church history get to a second edition, let alone a fifth! This edition also features more than fifty Profiles of Faith, brief introductions to some of the women and men, especially non-Europeans, who made important contributions to church history but are often overlooked in other surveys of the Christian story.

Like the first four editions, this edition maintains a strong emphasis on clarity, scholarship, and storytelling while bringing readers into the rapidly changing era of the twenty-first century. As general editor, I could not have pulled together this refreshed and updated fifth edition without the contributions of many colleagues. Professors Scott Klingsmith and Scott Wenig have taught many semesters of church history using this text, and they helpfully pointed out areas omitted in earlier editions. Randy Hatchett did an excellent job editing the fourth edition of *Church History in Plain Language* to engage new students. Ryan Tafilowski and Brandon O'Brien and Kathleen Mulhern all contributed strong new chapters to the fifth edition. Profiles were researched and written not only by Ryan

and Kathleen but also by David Shelley and Stacey Shelley Lingle. I'm indebted to Stan Gundry, who had a vision for the value of a fifth edition and brought it into the Zondervan Academic fold. Katya Covrett and Brian Phipps have been gracious and helpful editors shepherding this project through its many phases. And there are so many others who contributed maps and timelines, indexing, proofreading, production work, and more. I'm so grateful to each and all.

As the son, former student, occasional coauthor, and ongoing devotee of Bruce Shelley, I admit my biases when it comes to my admiration for him as a teacher, scholar, writer, and guide. He would be delighted with this edition of the book. He knew that the story of church history goes on and on. So I encourage you, dear reader, to embrace the story of where we've come from and to contribute your part to where the church is going.

—Marshall Shelley, Director, Doctor of Ministry Program, Denver Seminary

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE FIFTH EDITION

Marshall Shelley holds MDiv and DD degrees from Denver Seminary. After thirty-four years as an editor and a vice president at Christianity Today International, including several years as executive editor of *Christian History* magazine, he now serves as director of the doctor of ministry program at Denver Seminary, where his father, Bruce Shelley, taught church history for fifty years until his death in 2010.

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Ryan Tafilowski holds a BA in biblical studies from Colorado Christian University, a ThM in ecclesiastical history, and a PhD in theology from the University of Edinburgh. He is an instructor at Denver Seminary, where he teaches theology and the history of Christianity, and is pastor of Foothills Fellowship Church in Littleton, Colorado. In addition, Ryan serves as theologian-in-residence for the Denver Institute for Faith and Work.

PROLOGUE

For years I kept a cartoon on my study door. Students who stopped to read it often stepped into my office smiling. It encouraged easy conversation. It was a *Peanuts* strip. Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, is writing a theme for school titled "Church History." Charlie, who is at her side, notices her introduction: "When writing about church history, we have to go back to the very beginning. Our pastor was born in 1930." Charlie can only roll his eyes toward the ceiling.

Many Christians today suffer from historical amnesia. The time between the apostles and our own day is one giant blank. That is hardly what God had in mind. The Old Testament is sprinkled with reminders of God's interest in time. When he established the Passover for the children of Israel, he said, "Tell your son . . . it will be like a sign . . . that the LORD brought us out of Egypt" (Ex. 13:8, 16). And when he provided the manna in the wilderness, he commanded Moses to keep a jar of it "for the generations to come" (Ex. 16:33).

As a consequence of our ignorance concerning Christian history, we find believers vulnerable to the appeals of cultists. Some distortion of Christianity is often taken for the real thing. At the same time, other Christians reveal a shocking capacity for spiritual pride, hubris. Without an adequate base for comparison, they spring to the defense of their way as the best way, their party as the superior party. Finally, many Christians engage in some form of ministry without the advantage of having a broader context for their labor. When they want to make the best use of their time and efforts, they have no basis for sound judgment.

I am not suggesting that one book surveying our Christian past will refute all error, make the reader a humble saint, or plot a strategy for effective ministry. But any introduction to Christian history tends to separate the transient from the permanent, fads from essentials. That is my hope for this book among my readers.

The book is designed for laypeople. We all know that term is made

of wax; we can twist it to suit our tastes. After four decades of teaching first-year seminarians, I have concluded that college graduates entering the ministry and an engineer or a salesperson who reads five books a year are members of the same reading public. For my purposes here, both are laypeople.

In preparation for classes, a professor digests hundreds of books and accumulates thousands of quotations. In this survey volume, I have borrowed freely from the ideas and descriptions of others, while working with a simple aim: keep the story moving. I have tried to corral all of these resources and list the most helpful books at the end of each chapter and cite my major quotations in the notes at the end of the book.

From years of teaching, I have also concluded that clarity is the first law of learning. So the divisions of the subject are all here. We call them *ages* because the conditions of the church's life change. Great eras, I know, do not suddenly appear like some unknown comet in the skies. In every age, we find residue of the past and germs of the future. But if the reader wants to get the plot of the story, all he or she has to do is to read the paragraphs on the title pages of the major divisions. This device is important for unity, I feel, because each chapter is arranged in a certain way. Only one issue appears in each. The reader can find it, in the form of a question, after an introduction to the chapter. The introduction is usually some anecdote from the time. This means that each chapter is almost self-contained and could be read in isolation, almost like an encyclopedia article on the subject.

Taking this "issues" approach admittedly leaves plenty of gaps in the story. Some readers will wonder why certain important people or events are not included. But this approach has the advantage of showing to the layperson the contemporary significance of church history. Many of today's issues are not unique. They have a link with the past.

Finally, some readers may wonder about the amount of biographical material. Why so many personal stories? Again, the answer is communication. Without ignoring ideas, I have tried to wrap thoughts in personalities because I assume most readers are interested in meeting other people.

Church historians often ask, "Is the church a movement or an institution?" These pages will show that I think it is both. So I talk about missionary expansion as well as papal politics. Professionals in the field may not be happy with my failure to set limits by a strict definition of the term church. But that fuzziness is because I believe the people of God in history live in a tension between an ideal—the universal communion of

saints—and the particular—the actual people in a specific time and place. The church's mission in time calls for institutions: special rules, special leaders, special places. But when institutions obstruct the spread of the gospel rather than advance it, then movements of renewal arise to return to the church's basic mission in the world. These pages will illustrate how often that has happened.

—Bruce L. Shelley

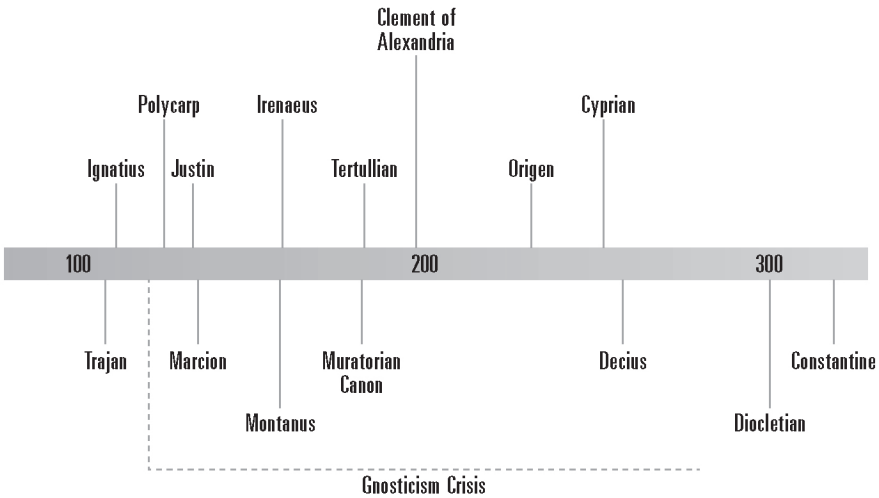
2

THE AGE OF CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

70–312

In this period Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and east to India, Persia, and eventually China, and south into Africa. Christians realized that they were a part of a rapidly expanding movement. They called it catholic. This suggested that it was universal, in spite of pagan ridicule and Roman persecution, and it was the true faith, in opposition to all perversions of Jesus' teachings. To face the challenges of their times, Christians turned increasingly to their bishops for spiritual leadership. Catholic Christianity, therefore, was marked by a universal vision, by orthodox beliefs, and by episcopal (bishop/overseer) church government.

THE AGE OF CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY



CHAPTER 3

ONLY "WORTHLESS" PEOPLE

Catholic Christianity

Eusebius, the early Christian historian (AD 265–339), records a charming story from the first days of Christianity. Apparently it came from Edessa, a town northeast of Antioch, beyond the border of the Roman Empire. At the time it was the capital of the tiny kingdom of Osrhoene, and, so the story goes, the ruler of the kingdom, Abgar the Black (c. AD 9–46), sent a letter to Jesus inviting him to come to Edessa. He had heard of Jesus' power to heal, and since he was himself sick, he entreated Jesus "to come to me and heal the affliction that I have."

The Lord Jesus answered the king, explaining that he had to fulfill his destiny in Palestine, but after his ascension he would send one of his disciples to heal the king "and give life to you and to those who are with you."[5]

The story is a fascinating bit of legend but an important reminder that early Christians, in their efforts to carry the gospel to all men, did not stop at the borders of the Roman Empire. Osrhoene became the first Christian kingdom and an important link with countries farther east.

First-century Christianity was a spiritual explosion. Ignited by the Event, the presence of Jesus Christ, the church extended in all directions, geographic as well as social. The second and third centuries provided the channel for this power.

This period was an important age for the church; it allowed Christianity to come to terms with time. It laid plans for the long haul and in the process shaped the character of the Christian faith for generations to come.

Today, with the Apostles' Creed, we confess faith in "the holy catholic church." That is what this period gave us: "catholic" (meaning "universal") Christianity. It was more than an organization. It was a spiritual vision, a conviction that all Christians should be in one body.

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into all the world, and Paul laid down his life opening the door of the church for the gentiles. In a sense catholic Christianity was simply a development of Jesus' plans and Paul's efforts.

We call the years between AD 70 and 312 the Age of Catholic (universal) Christianity because this thought dominates Christian history between the death of the apostles and the rise of the Christian emperors.

Though the universality of Christianity was a common idea in the New Testament, the term catholic never appears. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in the early second century, was apparently the first to use the word. He spoke of this concept when he said, "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church." By the end of the second century the term catholic was widely used of the church in the sense that the catholic church was both universal, in contrast to local congregations, and orthodox, in contrast to heretical groups.

The Walters Art Museum, CC0

Byzantine tile from Istanbul, Turkey, of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch holding a gospel book, dated to the tenth century

In a later chapter we take a close look at the orthodox character of early Christianity, but at this point we must ask, How did the scattered congregations of apostolic times become catholic Christianity?

Any fair answer to that question calls for an overview of the spread of Christianity geographically and some picture of its success socially. It might be helpful to consider one a flying tour of the world of early Christians and the other a glance at a recently discovered family album.

Christianity, as we have seen, began as a tiny offshoot of Judaism. Three centuries later it became the favored and eventually the official religion of the entire Roman Empire. Despite widespread and determined efforts to eliminate the new faith, it survived and grew. By the reign of Constantine (312–337), the first Christian emperor, there were churches in every large town in the empire and in places as distant from each other as Britain, Carthage, and Persia.

How did that happen? Where, specifically, did Christianity spread, and why did it expand so rapidly?

THE SPREAD OF THE FAITH

The apostle Paul told the Roman Christians, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16). The best place to launch a tour of early Christian expansion, it seems, is with the Jew.

The descendants of Abraham were present in large numbers in every part of the Roman Empire. Some authorities tell us that they may have numbered as high as 7 percent of the total population. Their distinctive religious beliefs made them a constant source of attraction and repulsion to their gentile neighbors. In uncertain times many gentiles (Greeks and Romans) found the teaching of the synagogues a profound and compelling wisdom. At other times they were not so sure.

Some gentiles submitted to the rite of circumcision and thereby became a part of the Jewish people. However, the majority of these interested gentiles remained in the category of God-fearers, interested spectators of the synagogue service.

The preaching of the gospel found its most fruitful response from this group. When Christian preachers made it plain to these folk that, without submitting to the rite of circumcision—which both Greeks and Romans considered degrading and repulsive—they could receive all that Judaism offered and more, it was not difficult for them to take one further step and accept Jesus as the Christ.

PROFILES *of Faith*

Thecla (first century), according to the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a second-century text, was engaged to be married when she heard Paul's teaching on chastity. She renounced her engagement and pledged to follow Paul. Her mother and fiance dragged her to the governor, who charged Paul with wizardry and sentenced Thecla to death by burning. The execution was foiled when a violent hailstorm quenched the fire. Released from her sentence, Thecla pursued Paul, who was staying in a cave near Iconium. He warned her of the temptations of youth and advised her to wait for baptism. When Paul and company arrived at Antioch, Thecla was assaulted by a prince, and while rebuffing him, she knocked his crown from his head and tore

his cloak. Humiliated, the prince demanded her execution, this time by wild beasts. Once again, the execution was unsuccessful as a lioness defended Thecla from the other predators. When the land beasts were defeated, Thecla was plunged into a pool of killer seals but emerged unharmed and rejoicing in her water baptism. "I am the handmaid of the living God," she told the crowd. When she recounted this to Paul, he commissioned her, "Go and teach the word of God." She then preached in Seleucia until her peaceful death. Thecla's story affirms the virtues of self-control and denial, while rejecting the patriarchal systems of Rome. Her fervor and sacrifice served as an example to many early Christians. Archaeologists have unearthed shrines built over her tomb dating into the fifth century.

Photo: OeAW-OeAI / Niki Gail

Fresco of a scene from *Acts of Paul and Thecla* in the Grotto of Saint Paul near Ephesus. Thecla is on the left, and her mother is on the right.

The presence of this prepared elite makes comparisons of evangelism in the age of the apostles and any later age almost impossible. Most of the God-fearers knew the Old Testament well; they understood its theological ideas; they accepted its moral values. Few, if any, other missionary movements in Christian history could look upon such a prepared field for harvesting.

This preparation for the gospel also helps to explain why Christians

thought in catholic terms. Like the Jews and their synagogues, Christians had their local assemblies. But from the start they saw themselves as a kind of new and faithful Israel, a fellowship of believers throughout the world.

The world, in ancient Rome, meant cities. The apostle Paul set the pattern for evangelism in the early centuries of Christianity by settling for a time in one of the great cities of the empire and, through his younger helpers, reaching out from this center to smaller towns of the region. We may trace the major steps of progress in the spread of the gospel in this way.

After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, the center of the Christian movement moved north and eventually west. The second home of the church was Antioch of Syria. Under a succession of notable bishops, the church in this third largest city of the empire took root and exerted widespread influence throughout Syria. By the end of the fourth century, Antioch was a city of half a million people, and half of these were Christians.

Edessa lay beyond the border of the empire, but its ties with Antioch were apparently close. It was later claimed that the founder of the church there had been one of the seventy disciples of Jesus, a man named Addai. We know that Serapion, bishop of Antioch in about 200, consecrated an Edessene Christian named Palut to be bishop of the capital.

There is good reason to suppose that from Edessa some unknown Christian continued east until he came to India. So-called Thomas Christians in India today believe that the Christian was the apostle Thomas. That may be true. A voyage by Thomas to south India in the first century would have been well within the realm of possibility. It will probably never be settled beyond historical doubt, but we can say with some certainty that the church in India has existed from very early times. More on this in chapter 9.

THE MOVE WEST

The mainstream of early Christian missionary work, however, did not move east of Antioch but west. The apostle Paul had set a course for Italy and Spain, and his work proved to be the path of the future.

Moving west from Antioch, the next city of note was Ephesus. This seaport and the surrounding regions of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) proved another fruitful field for Christian labor. From the days of Paul, the Greek-speaking city dwellers in this area responded eagerly to the appeals of the gospel.

We also know that the remote and rather rural province of Bithynia in northwest Asia Minor was for a time in the early second century a center of unusual growth. Pliny, the governor of the region, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan in the year 112. In it he expressed his dismay over the rapid spread of the Christian faith. He spoke of "many in every period of life, on every level of society, of both sexes . . . in towns and villages and scattered throughout the countryside."[6] What was he to do with them? Pliny was afraid that the shrines of the pagan gods would soon be deserted.

We may have here the first mass movement in Christian history. It was certainly unusual for rural areas in the ancient world. The picture suggests that areas inhabited by people who preferred to keep their barbarian speech were usually more resistant to the introduction of the gospel. We know that as late as the sixth century, Emperor Justinian was still rallying Christian forces to overcome paganism in the interior of Asia Minor.

Farther west, Rome, the heart of the vast empire, drew to itself peoples from all regions. Once planted by some unknown believers in the first century, the church grew rapidly. The highly respected German scholar Adolf von Harnack calculated that by AD 250 no fewer than thirty thousand Christians lived in Rome! Most of these came from the poorer classes. We know this because for more than a century Christians in Rome spoke Greek, the language of slaves and poor men. True Romans of the upper classes used Latin.

From its beginnings this church in the capital, with its claim to the ministry of the apostles Peter and Paul, gained the respect and admiration of Christians throughout the empire. Once a church took root in the capital, it naturally assumed leadership in Christian affairs, even as large churches in metropolitan areas do in our own time.

Beyond Rome to the west and north, progress of the gospel seems to have been slow. In the southern area of Gaul (now called France), a church existed in Lyons in the middle of the second century, for the bishop Irenaeus left us a number of his writings.

By the end of the third century we also hear of churches and bishops in Spain. But the evidence suggests that the western regions of the empire trailed the eastern in the strength of the Christian witness.

We have no firm idea how Christianity first entered Britain. It may have been through some Roman soldier or merchant. All we know for certain is that three bishops from Britain attended a church council at Arles in southern France in AD 314. Beyond this we have only imagination and hearsay.

NORTH AFRICA

Moving south across the Mediterranean, we come to North Africa. Again the witness focuses upon a city, Carthage, which dominated the area we know as Tunisia and Algeria. Christianity in this region was led by bishops. Every town and almost every village had its bishop. It also had its tensions. The writers, martyrs, and bishops we know are nearly all from the Romanized section of the community. In point of fact, North African Christianity produced the first Latin-speaking churches in the world. This means they tended to be of the upper class. Not surprisingly, problems of race and language arose in this area, for the Punic language, brought by the early Phoenician settlers, and the Berber language, spoken by the village and desert dwellers, could also be found in and around Carthage. In the great persecutions of the third century, these cultural differences spelled trouble for the churches.

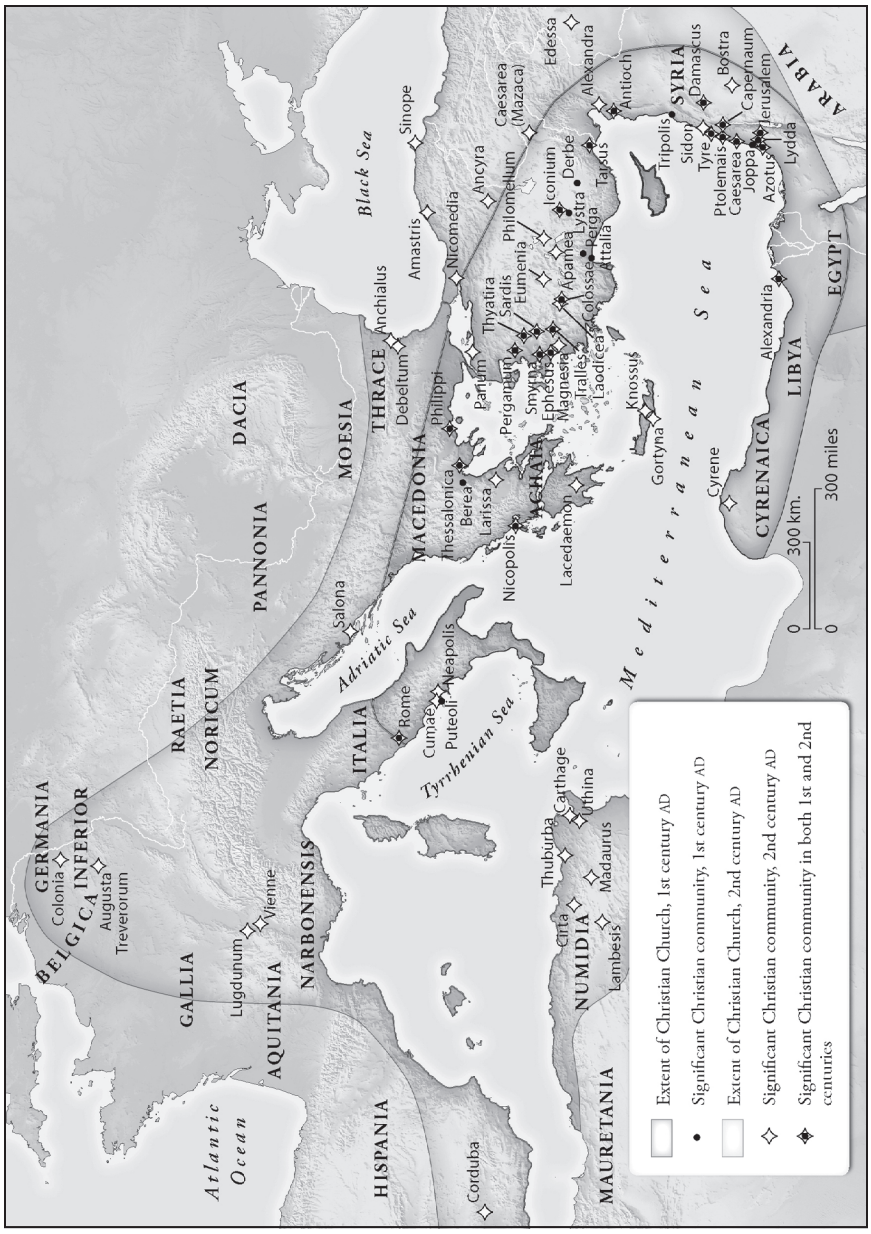
Moving east across North Africa we come to Cyrene, just west of Egypt. This territory is mentioned four times in the New Testament. Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus on the way to Golgotha (Mark 15:21). It is almost certain that Simon became a believer, since we later meet his son Rufus in the circle of Christians (Rom. 16:13). Cyrenians were also present on the day of Pentecost when Peter delivered his rousing message to the throng in Jerusalem (Acts 2:10). Some of them later disputed with Stephen (Acts 6:9). And finally we learn that Cyrenians took part in that decisive step that carried the gospel beyond Israel to the gentile world (Acts 11:20).

Almost certainly such zeal led to the planting of churches in Cyrene itself. We know that by the fifth century a half dozen bishops labored in the area.

Our circle around the Mediterranean brings us at last to Alexandria. The name itself is a reminder of Alexander the Great who founded the city in 332 BC and made it a cultural capital and a center for trade with East and West. As the second-largest city in the empire, it had a sizable Jewish population. Led by the well-known philosopher Philo, a contemporary of the apostle Paul, Jews in Alexandria tried to interpret Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy.

Christians in the city wrestled with the same problem. We know that a famous catechetical school there concentrated on making the gospel intelligible to people immersed in Greek culture.

Early Christians in Alexandria liked to claim John Mark as the founder of their church. How it was established we do not know, but during the third and fourth centuries few churches exerted more influence.



Christianity in the first and second centuries

To sum up this flying tour of the early expansion of the church, we may say that by the end of the third century, no area of the empire was without some testimony to the gospel. The strength of this witness, however, was uneven. The strongest areas were Syria, Asia Minor, North Africa, and

Egypt, with a few other noteworthy cities such as Rome and Lyons. Less is known about the scope of Christianity in rural regions.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE GOSPEL

The catholic vision of early Christians, however, was as evident in the social impact of the gospel as in its geographical expansion. Throughout the first three centuries the majority of believers were simple, humble people—slaves, women, traders, and soldiers. Perhaps this is simply because most in the population were in this class. At any rate, Celsus, the outspoken critic of Christianity, took note of it: "Far from us, say the Christians, be any man possessed of any culture or wisdom or judgment; their aim is to convince only worthless and contemptible people, idiots, slaves, poor women, and children. . . . These are the only ones whom they manage to turn into believers."[7]

Celsus was right to observe that many poor and disadvantaged embraced the message of Jesus' victory. It is to the church's credit that it did not neglect the poor and despised. But by the end of the second century, the new faith was on its way to becoming the most forceful and compelling movement within the empire. Many people with the keenest minds of the day were becoming followers of Christ.

To answer critics like Celsus, a number of Christian writers arose to defend the Christian faith against the rumors and railings of the pagans. We call these writers apologists. Not because they were sorry for anything: the word comes from the Greek word *apologia* and means "defense"—such as a lawyer gives at a trial.

As Professor Ward Gasque says, although most of the writings of these apologists were dedicated to the emperors, their real audience was the educated public of the day. If they could answer the accusations of the enemies of Christianity and point out the weaknesses of paganism, they hoped this would help to change public opinion about Christianity and lead to conversions. Men such as Aristides, Justin Martyr, his disciple Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, the unknown author of the *Letter to Diognetus*, and Melito, bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor, all directed their intellectual and spiritual gifts to this cause.

"Toward the end of the second century," says Gasque, "Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul, wrote five monumental books against the gnostic heresies of his area, together with a book titled *Proof of the Apostolic*

Preaching. . . . His theology was grounded in the Bible and the church's doctrines and helped provide a steadying, positive influence in the church. He wrote of the cosmic implications of the work of Christ and God's plan in history, and paved the way for the later Christian interpretations of history by writers such as Augustine."[8]

The real intellectual giants, however, were still to come.

Tertullian, the "father of Latin theology," was born in Carthage around AD 150. After his conversion to Christianity, he began writing books to promote the Christian faith. The large number he wrote in Greek are now lost, but thirty-one surviving in Latin are highly significant.

"Tertullian's *Apology*," writes Gasque, "underlined the legal and moral absurdity of the persecution directed against Christians. Some of his other books offered encouragement to those facing martyrdom. He attacked the heretics, explained the Lord's Prayer and the meaning of baptism, and helped develop the orthodox understanding of the Trinity. He was the first person to use the Latin word *trinitas* (trinity). . . . His intellectual brilliance and literary versatility made him one of the most powerful writers of the time."

While Tertullian was at work in Carthage, to the east Alexandria was becoming another key intellectual center for the Christian faith. By about AD 185 a converted Stoic philosopher named Pantaenus was teaching Christians in Alexandria. He probably also traveled to India and was an able thinker. His pupil Clement carried his work to even greater heights in the closing days of the second century. In spite of periods of intense persecution, the school gained great importance, strengthening the faith of Christians and attracting new converts to the faith.

By the third century the Christian church was beginning to assume the proportions of an empire within the empire. The constant travel between different churches, the synods of bishops, the letters carried by messengers back and forth across the empire, and the loyalty that the Christians showed to their leaders and to one another impressed even the emperors.

REASONS FOR THE GOSPEL'S SPREAD

Why did the Christian faith spread in this extraordinary way? The devout Christian will want to stress the power of the gospel. By ordinary standards nothing could have been less likely to succeed. But believers

have always insisted that God was at work in this movement. He went with those early witnesses. There was a divine side to the expansion of the church. But God usually works through human hearts and hands, and there is some value in asking what human factors contributed to the spread of the gospel.[9]

Several prominent factors appear to have contributed to the growth of Christianity. First, and rather obvious, early Christians were moved by a burning conviction. The Event had happened. God had invaded time, and Christians were captivated by the creative power of that grand news. They knew that human beings had been redeemed, and they could not keep to themselves the tidings of salvation. That unshakable assurance, in the face of every obstacle including martyrdom itself, helps explain the growth of the church.

Second, the Christian gospel met a widely felt need in the hearts of people. Ancient Stoicism, for example, taught that people achieve tranquility by the suppression of desire for everything that they cannot get and keep. "Before the external disorder of the world and bodily illness, retreat into yourself and find God there." Thus the Stoic soul stood firm in the storms of life by practicing "apathy." If a person was not emotionally attached to people or things, Stoicism taught, he could not be victimized and thus could live in tranquility. While Christians were committed to the personal God revealed in Jesus, they could still admire some Stoic convictions, once those convictions were refitted for Christian teaching. For example, Stoics called for courage in the face of suffering, independence from the things of this world, and a trust in a greater providence. Many people came to see that what the Stoics aimed for, the Christians actually experienced.

Third, the practical expression of Christian love was probably among the most powerful causes of Christian success. Tertullian tells us the pagans remarked, "See how these Christians love one another." The pagans' words were sincere. Christian love found expression in the care of the poor and of widows and orphans, in visits to those in prisons or condemned to a living death in the mines, and in acts of compassion during famine, earthquake, or war.

One expression of Christian love had a particularly far-reaching effect. The church often provided burial service for the poor. Christians felt that to deprive a person of an honorable burial was a terrible thing. Lactantius, the North African scholar (c. 240–320), wrote, "We will not allow the image and creation of God to be thrown out to the wild beasts

and the birds as their prey; it must be given back to the earth from which it was taken."

In the second half of the second century, at least in Rome and Carthage, churches began to acquire burial grounds for their members. One of the oldest of these is south of Rome on the Appian Way at a place named Catacumbas. Thus Christian compassion for bodies of the dead explains how Christians became associated with the catacombs—the underground corridors used for cemeteries in and around Rome.

The impact of this ministry of mercy upon pagans is revealed in the observation of one of Christianity's worst enemies, the apostate emperor Julian (332–63). In his day Julian was finding it more difficult than he had expected to put new life into the traditional Roman religion. He wanted to set aside Christianity and bring back the ancient pagan faith, but he saw clearly the drawing power of Christian love in practice: "Atheism [i.e., Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."[10]

Finally, persecution in many instances helped to publicize the Christian faith. Martyrdoms were often witnessed by thousands in the amphitheater. The term martyr meant "witness," and that is what many Christians were at the moment of death.

The Roman public was hard and cruel, but it was not altogether without compassion, and there is no doubt that the attitude of the martyrs, and particularly of the young women who suffered along with the men, made a deep impression. In instance after instance what we find is cool courage in the face of torment, courtesy toward enemies, and a joyful acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord to lead to his heavenly kingdom. There are a number of cases of conversion of pagans in the moment of witnessing the condemnation and death of Christians.

For these and other reasons the Christian churches multiplied until Rome could neither ignore nor suppress the faith. It finally had to come to terms with it.

This period, however—the age of extraordinary expansion before Christianity moved from the catacombs to the imperial courts—serves to remind us that the church is truly catholic only when it is compelled by the gospel to bring all people to living faith in Jesus Christ.

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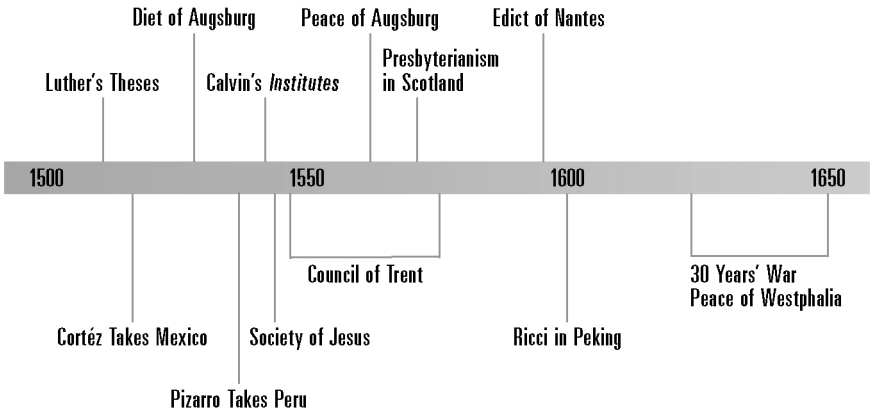
5

THE AGE OF THE REFORMATION

1517–1648

The spirit of reform broke out with surprising intensity in the sixteenth century, giving birth to Protestantism and shattering the papal leadership of Western Christendom. Four major traditions marked early Protestantism: Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican. After a generation, the Church of Rome itself, led by the Jesuits, recovered its moral fervor. Bloody struggles between Catholics and Protestants followed, and Europe was ravaged by war before it became obvious that Western Christendom was permanently divided and a few pioneers pointed toward a new way: the denominational concept of the church.

THE AGE OF THE REFORMATION



CHAPTER 25

A WILD BOAR IN THE VINEYARD

Martin Luther and Protestantism

In the summer of 1520, a document bearing an impressive seal circulated throughout Germany in search of a remote figure. "Arise, O Lord," the writing began, "and judge Thy cause. A wild boar has invaded Thy vineyard."

The document, a papal bull—named after the seal, or bulla—took three months to reach Martin Luther, the wild boar. Long before it arrived in Wittenberg, where Luther was teaching, he knew its contents. Forty-one of his beliefs were condemned as "heretical, or scandalous, or false, or offensive to pious ears, or seductive of simple minds, or repugnant to Catholic truth." The bull called on Luther to repent and repudiate his errors or face the dreadful consequences.

Luther received his copy on October 10. At the end of his sixty-day period of grace, he led a throng of eager students outside Wittenberg and burned copies of the canon law and the works of some medieval theologians. Then Luther added a copy of the bull condemning him. That was his answer. "They have burned my books," he said; "I burn theirs." Those flames in early December 1520 were a fit symbol of the defiance of the pope raging throughout Germany.

The church of the popes no longer hurls anathemas at Protestants, and Lutherans no longer burn Catholic books, but the divisions of Christians in Western Christianity remain. Behind today's differences between Catholics and Protestants lie the events of the age of Luther, a period of church history we call the Reformation (1517–1648).

THE MEANING OF PROTESTANTISM

What is Protestantism? The best description is still that of Ernst Troeltsch, who early in the twentieth century called Protestantism a "modification of

Catholicism" in which Catholic problems remain, but different solutions are given. The four questions that Protestantism answered in a new way are (1) How is a person saved? (2) Where does religious authority lie? (3) What is the church? and (4) What is the essence of Christian living?

Protestant reformers throughout sixteenth-century Europe came to hold similar convictions about these questions, but fresh answers emerged first in Martin Luther's personal conflict with Rome. Other men and women felt deeply the need for reform, but none matched the bold struggle of soul within the burly German.

Born in 1483, the son of a Saxon miner, Luther had every intention of becoming a lawyer until one day in 1505 he was caught in a thunderstorm while walking toward the village of Stotternheim. A bolt of lightning knocked him to the ground, and Luther, terrified, called out to Catholicism's patroness of miners, "Save me, St. Anne! And I'll become a monk."

Much to his parents' dismay, Luther kept the vow. Two weeks later, obsessed with guilt, he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt and proved to be a dedicated monk. "I kept the rule so strictly," he recalled years later, "that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer monkery, it was I. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."[66]

Luther pushed his body to health-threatening rigors of austerity. He sometimes fasted for three days and slept without a blanket in freezing winter. He was driven by a profound sense of his own sinfulness and of God's unutterable majesty and holiness. In the midst of saying his first mass, said Luther, "I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'Who am I that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God.'" No amount of penance, no soothing advice from his superiors could still Luther's conviction that he was a miserable, doomed sinner. Although his confessor counseled him to love God, Luther one day burst out, "I do not love God! I hate him!"

The troubled monk eventually found the love he sought through the study of Scripture. Assigned to the chair of biblical studies at the recently established Wittenberg University, he became fascinated with the words of Christ from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Christ forsaken! How could our Lord be forsaken? Luther felt forsaken, but he was a sinner. Christ was not. The answer had to lie in Christ's identity with sinful humanity. Did he share humanity's estrangement from God in order to assume the punishment required of sin?

A new and revolutionary picture of God began to develop in Luther's restless soul. Finally, in 1515 while pondering St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Luther came upon the words, "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). Here was his key to spiritual certainty. "Night and day I pondered," Luther later recalled, "until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise."

Luther saw it clearly now. People are saved only by faith in the merit of Christ's sacrifice. The cross alone can remove one's sin and save him from the grasp of the devil. Luther had come to his famous doctrine of justification by faith alone. He saw how sharply it clashed with the Roman church's doctrine of justification by faith and good works—the demonstration of faith through virtuous acts, acceptance of church dogma, and participation in church ritual. Later, in a hymn that reflects his vigorous style, Luther described his spiritual journey from anxiety to conviction:

> In devil's dungeon chained I lay
> The pangs of death swept o'er me.
> My sin devoured me night and day
> In which my mother bore me.
> My anguish ever grew more rife,
> I took no pleasure in my life
> And sin had made me crazy.
>
> Thus spoke the Son, "Hold thou to me,
> From now on thou wilt make it.
> I gave my very life for thee
> And for thee I will stake it.
> For I am thine and thou art mine,
> And where I am our lives entwine
> The Old Fiend cannot shake it."

The implications of Luther's discovery were enormous. If salvation comes through faith in Christ alone, the intercession of priests is superfluous. Faith formed and nurtured by the Word of God, written and preached,

requires no monks, no masses, and no prayers to the saints. The mediation of the Church of Rome crumbles into insignificance.

LUTHER'S ATTACK ON PAPAL AUTHORITY

Luther had no idea where his spiritual discovery was leading him. It took a flagrant abuse of finances by church officials to propel Luther into the center of religious rebellion in Germany and into another revolutionary position regarding papal authority.

The sale of indulgences, introduced during the Crusades, remained a favored source of papal income. In exchange for a meritorious work—frequently, a contribution to a worthy cause or a pilgrimage to a shrine—the church offered the sinner an exemption from his acts of penance by drawing on its "treasury of merits." This consisted of the grace accumulated by Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the meritorious deeds of the saints.

All too often zealous preachers of indulgences made them appear to be a sort of magic—as though a contribution to the church automatically got the donor forgiveness, regardless of the condition of the donor's soul. Sincerity and sorrow for sin were completely and conveniently overlooked. Absolution of sin became an economic transaction. That troubled Luther deeply.

Armed with his newfound understanding of faith, Luther began to criticize the theology of indulgences in his sermons. His displeasure increased noticeably during 1517, when Dominican John Tetzel was preaching throughout much of Germany on behalf of a papal fundraising campaign to complete the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In exchange for a contribution, Tetzel boasted, he would provide donors with an indulgence that would apply even beyond the grave and free souls from purgatory. "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings," went his jingle, "the soul from purgatory springs."

To Luther, Tetzel's preaching was bad theology, if not worse. He promptly drew up ninety-five propositions (or theses) for theological debate regarding this practice, and on October 31, 1517, following university custom, he posted them on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. Among other things, they argued that indulgences cannot remove guilt, do not apply to purgatory, and are harmful because they induce a false sense of security in the donor. That was the spark that ignited the Reformation.

Within a short time, Tetzel denounced Luther to Rome as a man guilty of preaching "dangerous doctrines." A Vatican theologian issued a

series of counter-theses, arguing that anyone who criticized indulgences was guilty of heresy. Initially willing to accept a final verdict from Rome, Luther began to insist on scriptural proof that he was wrong—and even questioned papal authority over purgatory. During an eighteen-day debate in 1519 with theologian John Eck at Leipzig, Luther blurted out, "A council may sometimes err. Neither the church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture."

Thus Luther had moved from his first conviction—that salvation was by faith in Christ alone—to a second: that the Scriptures, not popes or councils, are the standard for Christian faith and behavior.

John Eck did not miss Luther's likeness to John Hus. After the Leipzig debate he moved to have Rome declare Luther a heretic. Luther in turn decided to put his case before the German people by publishing a series of pamphlets. In his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, the reformer called on the princes to correct abuses within the church, to strip bishops and abbots of their wealth and worldly power, and to create, in effect, a national German church.

In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther made clear how justification by faith reshaped his doctrine of the church. He argued that Rome's sacramental system held Christians "captive." He attacked the papacy for depriving the individual Christian of his freedom to approach God directly by faith, without the mediation of priests, and he set forth his own views of the sacraments. To be valid, he said, a sacrament had to be instituted by Christ and be exclusively Christian. By these tests Luther could find no justification for five of the Roman Catholic sacraments. He retained only baptism and the Lord's Supper, and he placed even these within a community of believing Christians, rather than in the hands of an exclusive priesthood.

Thus Luther brushed aside the traditional view of the church as a sacred hierarchy headed by the pope and returned to the early Christian view of a community of believers in which all believers are priests called to offer spiritual sacrifices to God.

In his third pamphlet, published in 1520, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther set forth in conciliatory but firm tones his views on Christian behavior and salvation. This is probably the best introduction available to his central ideas. He did not discourage good works but argued that the inner spiritual freedom that comes from the certainty found in faith leads to the performance of good works—by all true Christians. "Good works do not make a man good," he said, "but a good man does good works."

Thus, on the threshold of his excommunication from the Roman church, Luther removed the necessity of monasticism by stressing that the essence of Christian living lies in serving God in one's calling, whether secular or ecclesiastical. All useful callings, he said, are equally sacred in God's eyes.

HERETIC, OUTLAW, AND HERO

In June 1520 Pope Leo X issued his bull condemning Luther and giving him sixty days to turn from his heretical course. The bonfire at Wittenberg made clear Luther's intent, so his excommunication followed. In January 1521 the pope declared him a heretic and expelled him from the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

The German problem now fell into the hands of the young emperor, Charles V, who was under oath to defend the church and remove heresy from the empire. He summoned Luther to the imperial Diet (assembly) meeting at Worms to give an account of his writings. Before the assembly Luther once again insisted that only biblical authority would sway him. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he told the court. "I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Charles V was not impressed. He declared Luther an outlaw. "This devil in the habit of a monk," his pronouncement said, "has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle, and has invented new ones." Luther had twenty-one days for safe passage to Saxony before the sentence fell. It never came. On the way home from Worms, Luther was saved from arrest and death by the prince of Saxony, Duke Frederick the Wise, whose domains included Wittenberg. The duke took Luther into custody and gave him sanctuary at his lonely Wartburg Castle. Disguised as a minor nobleman, Junker George, the reformer stayed for nearly a year, during which he translated the New Testament into German, an important first step toward reshaping public and private worship in Germany.

Meanwhile the revolt against Rome spread; in town after town, priests and town councils removed statues from the churches and abandoned the mass. New reformers, many of them far more radical than Luther, appeared on the scene. Most important, princes, dukes, and electors defied the condemnation of Luther by giving support to the new movement.

PROFILES *of Faith*

Argula von Grumbach (1492–1568), a German noblewoman and pen pal to reformers like Martin Luther and Andreas Osiander, was a passionate supporter of the Reformation, an accomplished scholar of Scripture, and perhaps Protestantism's first female theologian. Something of a celebrity during the sixteenth century, she wrote open letters directly to the Catholic establishment—for example, John Eck and the Catholic faculty of Ingolstadt and the Dukes of Bavaria—challenging them to debate matters of theology and politics. Argula was a prolific writer of letters and tracts, many of which were widely circulated. Her writings were particularly influential for the development of Lutheran pietism some one hundred years after her death.

In 1522 Luther returned to Wittenberg to put into effect a spiritual reform that became the model for much of Germany. He abolished the office of bishop, since he found no warrant for it in Scripture. The churches needed pastors, not dignitaries. Most of the ministers in Saxony and surrounding territories abandoned celibacy. Monks and nuns also married. After exhorting others to marry, Luther himself finally agreed to take a former nun, Katherine Von Bora, as his wife. A new image of the ministry appeared in Western Christianity—the married pastor living like anyone else with his own family. "There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage," Luther said later. "One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtails on the pillow which were not there before."

Luther also revised the Latin liturgy and translated it into German. He abandoned the Catholic practice of partaking only of the bread. The laity received the Communion in bread *and* wine, as the Hussites had demanded a century earlier. And the whole emphasis in worship changed from the celebration of the sacrificial mass to the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

Not all, however, was well in Germany. During 1524 Luther revealed how much he had surrendered in gaining the support of the German princes. Encouraged by the reformer's concept of the freedom of a Christian, which they applied to economic and social spheres, the German peasants revolted against their lords. Long ground down by the nobles, the peasants included in their twelve demands abolition of serfdom—unless it

could be justified from the gospel—and relief from the excessive services demanded of them.

At first Luther recognized the justice of the peasants' complaints, but when they turned to violence against established authority, he lashed out against them. In a virulent pamphlet, *Against the Thievish and Murderous Hordes of Peasants*, Luther called on the princes to "knock down, strangle, and stab . . . and think nothing so venomous, pernicious, or Satanic as an insurgent."

Public Domain

Martin Luther (1483–1546), father of the Reformation, transformed not only Christianity but all of Western civilization.

In 1525 the princes and nobles crushed the revolt at a cost of an estimated one hundred thousand peasant lives. The surviving peasants considered Luther a false prophet. Many of them returned to Catholicism or turned to more radical forms of the Reformation.

Luther's conservative political and economic views arose from his belief that the equality of all people before God applied to spiritual not secular matters. While alienating the peasants, such views were a boon to alliances with the princes, many of whom became Lutheran in part because Luther's views allowed them to control the church in their territories, thereby strengthening their power and wealth.

LUTHER'S LASTING INFLUENCE

By 1530, when a summit conference of Reformation leaders convened in Augsburg to draw up a common statement of faith, leadership of the movement had begun to pass out of Luther's hands. The reformer was still an outlaw and unable to attend. The task of presenting Lutheranism fell to a young professor of Greek at Wittenberg—Philip Melanchthon. The young scholar drafted the Augsburg Confession, which was signed by Lutheran princes and theologians, but the emperor was no more inclined to conciliation than he had been at Worms.

After Augsburg, Luther continued to preach and teach the Bible in Wittenberg, but even sympathetic biographers have found it hard to justify some of the actions of his declining years. As *Time* magazine once put it, "He endorsed the bigamous marriage of his supporter, Prince Philip of Hesse. He denounced reformers who disagreed with him in terms that he had once reserved for the papacy. His statements about the Jews would sound excessive on the tongue of a Hitler." By the time of his death in 1546, writes biographer Roland Bainton, Luther was "an irascible old man, petulant, peevish, unrestrained, and at times positively coarse."

Fortunately, the personal defects of an aging rebel do not detract from the grandeur of his achievement, which transformed not only Christianity but all of Western civilization.

After 1530 the emperor, Charles V, made clear his intention to crush the growing heresy. In defense, the Lutheran princes banded together in 1531 in the Schmalkaldic League, and between 1546 and 1555 a sporadic civil war raged. The combatants reached a compromise in the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which allowed each prince to decide the religion of his subjects, forbade all sects of Protestantism other than Lutheranism, and ordered all Catholic bishops to give up their property if they turned Lutheran.

The effects of these provisions on Germany were profound. Lutheranism became a state religion in large portions of the empire. From Germany it spread to Scandinavia. Religious opinions became the private property of the princes, and the individual had to believe what his prince wanted him to believe, be it Lutheran or Catholic.

Luther's greatest contribution to history, however, was not political. It was religious. He took four basic Catholic concerns and offered invigorating new answers. To the question, How is a person saved? Luther replied, "Not by works but by faith alone." To the question, Where does religious authority lie? Luther answered, "Not in the visible institution called the Roman church but in the Word of God found in the Bible." To the question, What is the church? Luther responded, "The whole community of Christian believers, since all are priests before God." And to the question, What is the essence of Christian living? Luther replied, "Serving God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay." To this day any classical description of Protestantism echoes those central truths.

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CHAPTER 26

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

The Anabaptists

Under the cover of darkness, a dozen or so men trudged slowly through the snow falling in Zurich on January 21, 1525. Quietly but resolutely they made their way through the narrow streets. The wintry chill blowing off the lake seemed to match their mood as they approached the Manz house near the Great Minster, the largest church in town.

The city council of Zurich had that day ordered their leaders, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, to stop holding Bible classes. Opposition was mounting! Only four days before, the council had warned all parents to have their babies baptized within eight days of birth or face banishment from the territory. What were the brethren going to do? They agreed to meet at the Manz house to decide.

Once inside they shared their rumors and reports, and then they called on God to enable them to do his will. They arose from prayer to take one of the most decisive actions in Christian history.

George Blaurock, a former priest, stepped over to Conrad Grebel and asked him for baptism in the apostolic fashion—upon confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Grebel baptized him on the spot and Blaurock proceeded to baptize the others. Thus Anabaptism (literally, "rebaptism"), another important expression of the Protestant Reformation, was born.

Today the direct descendants of the Anabaptists are the Mennonites and the Hutterites. Americans probably think of them as bearded farmers and their bonnet-covered wives driving their horses and buggies across some Pennsylvania or Indiana countryside. No automobiles; no buttons; no zippers.

In fact only one section of the Mennonites, the Old Order Amish, holds tenaciously to the old ways. Most Mennonites look like any other Americans and consume their share of energy like the rest of us.

What unites the various types of Mennonites is not a style of dress or

a mode of transportation but a shared set of beliefs and values. Many of these beliefs are now accepted by other Christians. So the distant relatives of the Anabaptists today include the Baptists, the Quakers, and, in one sense, the Congregationalists. In their belief in the separation of church and state, the Anabaptists proved to be forerunners of practically all modern Protestants.

Why is that? How could a people so intent on restoring New Testament Christianity come to be so far ahead of their time? Like the Benedictine monks of an earlier day, the Anabaptists demonstrate that those who live most devoutly for the world to come are often in the best position to change the present.

BASIC BELIEFS OF ANABAPTISTS

In a sense the rise of Anabaptism was no surprise. Most revolutionary movements produce a wing of radicals who feel called to reform the reformation. And that is what Anabaptism was, a voice calling the moderate reformers to strike even more deeply at the foundations of the old order.

Like most countercultural movements, the Anabaptists lacked cohesiveness. No single body of doctrine and no unifying organization held them together. Even the name Anabaptist was pinned on them by their enemies. It meant "rebaptizer" and was intended to associate the radicals with heretics in the early church and subject them to severe persecution. The move succeeded famously.

Actually, the Anabaptists rejected all thoughts of rebaptism because they never considered the ceremonial sprinkling they received in infancy as valid baptism. They much preferred *Baptists* as a designation. To most of them, however, the fundamental issue was not baptism. It was the nature of the church and its relation to civil governments.

They had come to their convictions like most other Protestants—through Scripture. Luther had taught that common people have a right to search the Bible for themselves. It had been his guide to salvation—why not theirs?

As a result, little groups of Anabaptist believers gathered about their Bibles. They discovered a different world in the pages of the New Testament. They found no state-church alliance, no Christendom. Instead they discovered that the apostolic churches were companies of committed believers, communities of men and women who had freely and personally chosen to follow Jesus. And for the sixteenth century, that was a revolutionary idea.

In spite of Luther's stress on personal religion, Lutheran churches were "established" churches. They retained an ordained clergy who considered the whole population of a given territory, whether devout or totally uninterested, as members of their church. The churches looked to the state for salary and support. Official Protestantism seemed to differ little from official Catholicism. Doctrinally they were different; structurally they were very similar.

Anabaptists wanted to change all that. Their goal was the restitution of apostolic Christianity, a return to churches of true believers. In the early church, they said, men and women who had experienced personal spiritual regeneration were the only fit subjects for baptism. The apostolic churches knew nothing of the practice of baptizing infants. That tradition was simply a convenient device for perpetuating Christendom, a nominal but spiritually impotent society, Christian in name only.

The true church, the radicals insisted, is always a community of saints, dedicated disciples living in, but distinct from, the wicked world around them. Like the missionary monks of the Middle Ages, the Anabaptists wanted to shape society by their example of radical discipleship—if necessary, even by death. They steadfastly refused to be a part of worldly power, including bearing arms, holding political office, or taking oaths. In the sixteenth century that sort of talk was inflammatory, revolutionary, and even treasonous.

The radicals found their best opportunities to preach in Switzerland, the Rhineland, and Holland. By midcentury three groups appeared in German-speaking Europe: (1) the Swiss Brethren, led by Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz at Zurich, (2) the Hutterite brethren in Moravia, and (3) the Mennonites in the Netherlands and North Germany.

RADICALS IN THE SWISS ALPS

Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz were at first supporters of the fledgling reformation in Zurich led by Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531). In 1519, the year Luther debated John Eck at Leipzig, Zwingli became the people's priest at the Great Minster Church in Zurich. He launched the reformation not by posting theses on the church door but by preaching Bible-centered sermons from the pulpit. Under the influence of the famous scholar Erasmus, Zwingli had come to revere the language and message of the New Testament. So his messages created quite a stir in Zurich. One of his

listeners, a young man named Thomas Platter, said when he heard the long-neglected Bible explained, he felt as if Zwingli were lifting him by the hair of his head.

In one important respect Zwingli followed the Bible even more stringently than did Luther. The Wittenberger would allow whatever the Bible did not prohibit; Zwingli rejected whatever the Bible did not prescribe. For this reason the Reformation in Zurich tended to strip away more traditional symbols of the Roman church: candles, statues, organ and choir music, and pictures. Later, in England, this spirit was called Puritanism.

Public Domain

In 1519, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) became the people's priest at Great Minster Church in Zurich.

Grebel and Manz, both well-educated men of standing in Zurich, supported Zwingli's initial reforms. But following the reformer's lead in studying the Bible, they came to see the obvious differences in the apostolic churches and those of their own day.

In Zurich's city-state, as in the rest of the Christian world, every newborn child was baptized and considered a member of the church. As a result, church and society were identical or interchangeable. The church was simply everybody's church. In the New Testament, however, the church was a fellowship of the few, a company of true believers committed to live and die for their Lord.

That is the kind of church Grebel and Manz wanted in Zurich, a church free from the state, composed of true disciples. The baptism of believers was merely the most striking feature of this new kind of church. Zwingli, however, would have no part of this revolution. He needed the support of the city fathers.

In the fall of 1524, when Grebel's wife gave birth to a son, all the theories faced the test of action. Would the baby be baptized? The Grebels refused, and other parents followed their example.

To deal with the crisis, the city council of Zurich arranged a public debate on the question for January 17, 1525. After hearing arguments on

both sides of the issue, representatives of the people declared Zwingli and his disciples the winners. As a result, the council warned all parents who had neglected to have their children baptized to do so within a week or face banishment from Zurich.

That was the background for the historic baptism at the Manz house on January 21. It was clearly an act of defiance. But it was much more. Grebel, Manz, and their followers had counted the cost. That is why shortly after the baptism the little company withdrew from Zurich to the nearby village of Zollikon. There, late in January, the first Anabaptist congregation, the first free church (free of state ties) in modern times, was born.

The authorities in Zurich would not overlook the rebellion. They sent police to Zollikon and arrested the newly baptized men and imprisoned them for a time. But as soon as they were released, the Anabaptists went to neighboring towns in search of converts.

Finally the Zurich council lost all patience. On March 7, 1526, it decided that anyone found rebaptizing would be put to death by drowning. Apparently their thought was, "If the heretics want water, let them have it." Within a year, on January 5, 1527, Felix Manz became the first Anabaptist martyr. The Zurich authorities drowned him in the Limmat, which flows through the city. Within four years the radical movement in and around Zurich was practically eradicated.

Many of the persecuted fled to Germany and Austria, but their prospects were no brighter there. In 1529 the imperial Diet of Speyer proclaimed Anabaptism a heresy, and every court in Christendom was obliged to condemn the heretics to death. During the Reformation years, between four and five thousand Anabaptists were executed by fire, water, and sword.

By today's standards the Anabaptists seem to have made a simple demand: a person's right to his own beliefs. But in the sixteenth century, the heretics seemed to be destroying the very fabric of society. That is why the voice of conscience was so often silenced by martyrdom.

We hear that voice in a moving letter written by a young mother in 1573 to her daughter only a few days old. The father had already been executed as an Anabaptist. The mother, in an Antwerp jail, had been reprieved only long enough to give birth to her child. She writes to urge her daughter not to grow up ashamed of her parents: "My dearest child, the true love of God strengthen you in virtue, you who are yet so young, and whom I must leave in this wicked, evil, perverse world.

"Oh, that it had pleased the Lord that I might have brought you up,

but it seems that it is not the Lord's will. . . . Be not ashamed of us; it is the way which the prophets and the apostles went. Your dear father demonstrated with his blood that it is the genuine faith, and I also hope to attest the same with my blood, though flesh and blood must remain on the posts and on the stake, well knowing that we shall meet hereafter."[67]

Among the early Anabaptist missionaries who carried their message east along the Alps to the region called Tyrol was George Blaurock. Catholic authorities there persecuted the Anabaptists intensely. On September 6, 1529, Blaurock himself was burned at the stake.

The persecution forced the Anabaptists north. Many of them found refuge on the lands of some exceptionally tolerant princes in Moravia. There they founded a long-lasting form of economic community called the Bruderhof, a Christian commune. In part they aimed to follow the pattern of the early apostolic community. But they sought community for practical reasons too—as a means of group survival under persecution. Their communities attempted to show that in the kingdom of God, brotherhood comes before self. Consolidated under the leadership of Jakob Hutter, who died in 1536, these groups came to be known as Hutterites.

KINGDOM BUILDING GONE MAD

Catholic and Lutheran fears of the Anabaptist radicals deepened suddenly in the mid-1530s with the bizarre Munster rebellion. Munster was a city in Westphalia near the Netherlands. In 1532 the Reformation spread rapidly throughout the city. A conservative Lutheran group was at first strong there. But then new immigrants, who were followers of a strange figure called Jan Matthijs, persuaded some of the city's key leaders to their extreme beliefs. Many looked for the appearing of the Lord's earthly kingdom in Munster. Church historians call such views chiliasm, meaning belief in a thousand-year earthly kingdom of Christ, a particular interpretation of Revelation 20.

When the bishop of the region massed his troops to besiege the city, these Anabaptists uncharacteristically defended themselves by arms. As the siege progressed, the more extreme leaders gained control of the city. In the summer of 1534 a former innkeeper, Jan of Leiden, seized the powers of government and ruled as an absolute despot. Claiming new revelations from God, Jan introduced the Old Testament practice of polygamy and by September took the title King David.

With his harem "King David" lived in splendor, yet by a strange cunning he maintained morale in the city despite widespread hunger. He was able to keep the bishop's army at bay until June 24, 1535. The fall of the city brought an end to David's reign and his life. But for centuries thereafter Europeans associated *Anabaptist* with the Munster rebellion. It stood for wild-eyed religious fanaticism.

In the aftermath of Munster, the dispirited Anabaptists of the Lower Rhine area gained new heart through the ministry of Menno Simons (c. 1496–1561). Although always in great personal danger, Menno, a former priest, traveled widely to visit the scattered Anabaptist groups of northern Europe. He inspired them with his nighttime preaching. Menno was unswerving in commanding pacifism. As a result, his name came to stand for the movement's repudiation of violence. Although Menno was not the founder of the movement, most of the descendants of the Anabaptists are to this day called Mennonite.

Surviving only as bands of outlaws in Switzerland, Moravia, and the Netherlands, these Anabaptist groups had little opportunity to coordinate their evangelistic efforts or to give united expression to their beliefs. On one important occasion, however, they did attempt to agree on a common basis of fellowship.

PIONEERS OF MODERN CHRISTIANITY

John H. Yoder and Alan Kreider look to this early conference for a summary of Anabaptist beliefs. In 1527 at Schleitheim (on today's Swiss-German border, near Schaffhausen) the Anabaptists met in the first synod of the Protestant Reformation. The leading figure at this meeting was a former Benedictine monk, Michael Sattler, who, four months later, was burned at the stake in nearby Rottenburg am Neckar. The "Brotherly Union" adopted at Schleitheim proved to be a highly significant document. We call it the Schleitheim Confession. During the next decade most Anabaptists in all parts of Europe came to agree with the beliefs it laid down.[68]

First among these convictions was what the Anabaptists called discipleship. The Christian's relationship with Jesus Christ must go beyond inner assent to doctrines; it must involve a daily walk with God in which Christ's teaching and example shape a transformed way of life. As one Anabaptist put it, "No one can truly know Christ except he follow him in

life." This meant resolutely obeying the "bright and clear words of the Son of God, whose word is truth and whose commandment is eternal life." Usually Christians think one must understand, then obey; Anabaptist instinct is the opposite: only obedience yields understanding.

The consequences of being a disciple, as the Anabaptists realized, were wide-ranging. For one, the Anabaptists rejected the swearing of oaths because of Jesus' clear commandment in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven . . . or by the earth . . . or by Jerusalem" (Matt. 5:34–35). For the Anabaptist there could be no gradation or levels of truth telling.

A second Anabaptist principle, love, grew logically out of the first. In their dealings with non-Anabaptists, they acted as peacemakers and pacifists. They would not go to war, defend themselves against their persecutors, or take part in coercion by the state.

The love ethic, however, was also expressed within the Anabaptist communities, in mutual aid and the redistribution of wealth. Among Moravian Anabaptists, as we have seen, it even led to Christian communal living.

The third Anabaptist principle is what we have come to call the congregational view of church authority, toward which Luther and Zwingli inclined in their earliest reforming years. In the Anabaptist assemblies, all members were to be believers baptized voluntarily upon confession of personal faith in Christ. Each believer, then, was both a priest to his fellow believers and a missionary to unbelievers.

Decision making rested with the entire membership. In deciding matters of doctrine, the authority of Scripture was interpreted not by a dogmatic tradition or by an ecclesiastical leader but by the consensus of the local gathering in which all could speak and listen critically. In matters of church discipline, the believers also acted corporately. They were expected to assist each other in living out faithfully the meaning of their baptismal commitments.

A fourth major Anabaptist conviction was the insistence on the separation of church and state. Christians, they claimed, were a "free, unforced, uncompelled people." Faith is a free gift of God, and civil authorities exceed their competence when they "champion the Word of God with a fist." The church, said the Anabaptist, is distinct from society, even if society claims to be Christian. Christ's true followers are a pilgrim people; and his church is a community of perpetual aliens.

PROFILES *of Faith*

Jan Łaski (1499–1560) represents just how diverse and transnational the Reformation was. A theologian from Poland, Łaski studied for the Catholic priesthood in Basel, where he became acquainted with Erasmus and Zwingli, before converting to Protestantism and pastoring a Lutheran congregation in Emden and then collaborating with the English Reformation from London as superintendent of the so-called Stranger Church for religious exiles. He endured exile himself in Copenhagen after the ascension of Queen (Bloody) Mary, before ending his career as a leader of the Reformation in his native Poland. Although his contributions to Reformation theology were many, his most enduring impact is in the domain of church government through his radical vision for the priesthood of all believers, which would influence the emergence of congregationalist forms of church government in generations to come, particularly in England and America.

By separating church and state, the Anabaptists became the first Christians in modern times to preach a thorough religious liberty: the right to join in worship with others of like faith without state support and without state persecution.

Over the centuries the descendants of Anabaptism lost many of the characteristics of their founders. In their search for a pure church, they often became legalistic. In the interests of sheer survival, they lost their evangelistic zeal and became known simply as excellent farmers, good people, and the Quiet in the Land. Not until the late nineteenth century did they experience revival and fresh growth. By the late twentieth century their worldwide membership had reached more than a half million. Far beyond the boundaries of the Mennonite and Hutterite communities, however, Christians have embraced one or more of those principles for which the first generation of radicals was willing to die.

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