

1 The dynamics of conversion

Why did people choose the Reformation? What was it in the evangelical teaching that excited, moved or persuaded them? How, and by what process, did people arrive at the new understandings that prompted a change of allegiance, and embedded them in their new faith? These are questions central to an understanding of the Reformation movement, but they are far more often approached obliquely than answered directly. We know that Luther and other evangelicals preached a powerful doctrine of redemption and salvation; we know that they conjured a sense that the Reformation would address long-standing discontents about the relationship between clergy and people; and we know that large parts of Europe would ultimately accept the new Protestant churches. But precisely what moved people – either as individuals, or as part of a community – to abandon one allegiance and embrace another is a complex and difficult question.

What we can be certain is that, in the first generation of evangelical agitation, the decision to adhere to the Reformation was often a very painful one. It involved difficult choices and life-changing decisions. It involved exchanging the familiar round of traditional observance for a new order which was untested and largely unknown. It involved accepting the good faith and charismatic authority of preachers who had often emerged from a comparatively lowly position in the local clerical hierarchy, ignoring the counter-charges of those who denounced them as false prophets. It involved embracing novelty in an era that despised and distrusted innovation, and validated all change by its compatibility with the inherited wisdom, custom and teaching of the ages. This was a particular problem of which the reformers were all too aware, as we can witness in their frequent attempts to validate the renovation of religion as a return to the pure Gospel principles of the early church: restoration not innovation.¹ Theirs, they urged, was

¹ Bruce Gordon, 'The Changing Face of Protestant History and Identity in the Sixteenth Century', in his *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (2 vols., Aldershot, St Andrews Studies in Reformation History, 1996), pp. 1–23.

2 Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion

the true church, which they had rescued from the perversions of papal tyranny and the accretion of false tradition. But this was a justification articulated by Protestant theologians and historians largely after the event. In any case, new adherents could hardly avoid being struck by the large element of unfamiliarity in the new churches – in their experience of worship, their public festivities, and their relationship with the much-changed clerical order. Change, for all that it was so widely distrusted, was a universal and very obvious consequence of the Protestant revolution: in dress, in the working round (cleansed of extraneous festivals), most of all in the experience of religion.

Many were drawn to embrace the new vision of the evangelical ministers by particular elements of a complex programme; their choice may sometimes have been whimsical or ill considered. Yet ultimately the renovation of religion involved the loss of much of the old structure of worship that had given comfort and pleasure. Some could only accommodate this transformation by putting psychological distance between the religious lives they had lived and that they were choosing. They turned on aspects of this now rejected religious system with a savagery that would have been unthinkable only a few years before.² Others simply incorporated loved elements of their old religious lives within the fabric of the new, often incongruously and to the frustration of their new preachers.³

This recognition, that the process of conversion was an extended and evolving process, brings us up against the first, and very substantial, interpretative question. Are we right to assume that adherence to the Reformation was a conscious choice for more than a very small number of articulate, educated individuals? Are we guilty of using a single word – conversion – to mask a complex process of psychological adjustment that requires far more careful analysis?

Here it may be helpful to distinguish the experience of the first generation from the extended process of reorientation that followed, once new churches were in existence. For the first years of the Reformation we have plentiful evidence that the decision to adhere to it involved conscious choice. This evidence comes from very many contemporary testimonies: the reformers themselves, all important converts; correspondence, chronicles, martyrologies; the records of the state authorities struggling to contain the consequences of these religious perturbations. These diverse records make clear that for many, even from

² Carlos Eire, *The War Against the Idols* (Cambridge, 1986).

³ Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual. An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* (London, 1997).

comparatively humble stations in life, the religious alteration was one pregnant with consequences. For many in the first generation the choice was a lonely one, made individually or with a small group of fellows who thus excluded themselves from the fellowship of societies not yet ready to accept the evangelical message. For these men and women, to embrace the Gospel was to court calamity. Religious divisions ended friendship, caused division between neighbours and kin, damaged relations with parents beyond repair, sometimes even caused rejection by a spouse or children. Some paid the ultimate price for their decision to embrace the new teaching. During the course of the Reformation century several thousands were put to death for the crime of heresy.⁴ Many others died as a consequence of the religious wars that engulfed Europe in the second half of the century.

Later, as the churches of the Reformation became institutionalized, it became possible to adhere to Protestantism with little real choice, and without any real mental engagement. Even here, however, there is reason to doubt whether such utter passivity would have been the normative experience. The practice of worship was now so thoroughly different that the peoples of these new churches were in very real ways changed. And through a course of years many came to value these new practices and invest in them a real sense of loyalty and affection. This process, too, forms part of our study – if only because it is so vital to an understanding of how Protestantism could become, in a real sense, a popular religion.

What did people choose when they adhered to the evangelical teaching? This is a question with which the reformers were themselves obviously greatly concerned, and to which they offered contrasting answers. To Luther and others, adherence to the Gospel message was, in the first instance, an acceptance of a call to repentance. The church must be cleansed, and this would only be possible if Christians embraced the obligation – perhaps even a last opportunity – to witness to their faith and accept the assurance of their salvation. It was a message that was from the beginning freighted with complex implications. It addressed both the individual Christian, called to accept a personal assurance of salvation, and the church community, directed to restore a vision of apostolic service. Within this complex of competing messages the

⁴ William Monter, 'Heresy Executions in Reformation Europe, 1520–1565', in Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner (eds.), *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 48–64. William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation. Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), pp. 28–54. Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

4 Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion

reformers envisaged a real process of conversion, a choice that became more stark and urgent once it became clear that the call for reform would lead to divided, competing churches. At this point the process of evangelical awakening became not just an acceptance of salvation, but also a choice of loyalties. It was in this context, of churches drifting into separation, that the reformers began to articulate individual religious choice in terms of conversion. Each offered the inspiration of his own conversion narrative. Luther in fact offered two: the moment when, caught in a storm, he first accepted his religious vocation, and the moment when he recognized his great theological breakthrough, the so called ‘*Turmerlebnis*’.⁵ These recollections are relevant, not because we wish to rejoin the extended historical debate about where in his career Luther’s new understanding of justification should be placed, but because they show the importance the reformers placed on the classic conversion models in framing a discussion of their own experience of spiritual enlightenment. For Luther knew that conversion was both a sudden life-changing moment and a marvellous example of God’s intervention in the lives of men: thus the Lord had called Paul, Saul the persecutor, on the road to Damascus; thus had Augustine described his own life-changing repudiation of early frivolity. The strength of this model is evident in the careful, rather oblique account offered by Jean Calvin of his adherence to the evangelical movement, which seems, in truth, to have occurred rather gradually over a period of years while Calvin was living in Paris in the 1530s.⁶ This quite understandable human experience of gradual awakening to compromising and ultimately unorthodox beliefs was clearly not acceptable, recalled twenty years later in the very different atmosphere of reformed Geneva. Rather, Calvin chose to relate how, having been mired in papist superstition, God had by a sudden conversion (*subita conversio*) recalled his mind to a more teachable frame.⁷

Such framing, while demonstrating the very powerful strength of the conversion paradigm, should also warn us of the pitfalls of too credulous a use of contemporary documentation. For generations of Protestants would similarly come to frame their own experience of spiritual awakening in such terms. Such narratives inevitably lay great

⁵ W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, ‘The Problem of Luther’s “Tower Experience” and its Place in his Intellectual Development’, in his *Studies in the Reformation. Luther to Hooker* (London, 1980), pp. 60–81.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 21–50.

⁷ The autobiographical reflections come in the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* (1557). McGrath, *Calvin*, pp. 69–78.

stress on the motivating power of theology, particularly Luther's teaching of justification, in building support for the Reformation, an explanatory framework also eagerly embraced by many generations of historians. It is fair to say that such an approach to writing the history of the Reformation, placing the primary emphasis on the appeal of Luther's Reformation teaching, was largely unchallenged until the middle part of the last century. The boom in social history in the three decades from the 1960s has to some extent called this into question, though most recent work, which stresses the strengths of the old church and downplays the importance of anticlerical feeling as a motive force for change, has gone some way towards restoring the value of the older tradition. This synthesis finds eloquent expression in a formula recently proposed by Diarmaid MacCulloch: 'The old church was immensely strong, and that strength could only have been overcome by the explosive power of an idea'.⁸ That idea was justification.

In their own day the reformers were very aware that the reform of the church was a task of great complexity that required the active engagement of many classes of people. Luther was every bit as fine a polemicist as he was a theologian. They also had a complex and refined sense of the process of Christian conversion. On the one hand, there was the dramatic moment of acceptance; then again, the creation of a Christian people required a process of long, hard unrelenting struggle. The Luther whose early published works had included a torrent of apocalyptic invective against a corrupt church hierarchy, had within a very few years turned to the process of Christian education. A people had to be led to right understanding and right living: to this process he contributed sermons, psalms, his Long and Short Catechisms (1529), and his translation of the Bible. Other of his colleagues contributed church orders, one of the great, and thus far much understudied, innovations of Protestant church life. It is this part of the conversion process, the slow, painstaking creation of active Christian citizens, that has engaged the attention of scholars particularly in the last thirty years. This engagement has, it must be said, been very often from a perspective of profound scepticism. Ever since in 1978 Gerald Strauss published his *Luther's House of Learning*, a highly critical analysis of the Lutheran attempt to create a reformed society, the terms of debate have been radically revised.⁹ Whether or

⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch. *Reformations. Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700* (London, 2003), p. 110.

⁹ Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning. Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore, Md., 1978). The subsequent debate on this question is reviewed by Strauss in his 'The Reformation and its public in an age of orthodoxy', in R. Po-Chia Hsia (ed.), *The German People and the Reformation* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), pp. 194–214.

6 Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion

not we accept Strauss's largely negative appraisal, there is now a widespread acceptance of a chronology of evangelical renewal that encompasses the generations necessary to embed new beliefs and new religious practice. The process of building a new church required much more than conversion. Education, assimilation, familiarity and the creation of new enemies – a new dialectic of belonging and rejection – all played their part.

This present study seeks to explore the process of persuasion by recognizing this as a layered and complex process, proceeding in different ways, and at different points in the political process by which states or cities made a choice of confessional allegiance. It might be helpful to our discussion here to postulate a tiered hierarchy of commitment, all parts of which played a role in the process of commitment.

This schematic representation may shape our discussion, though it is not suggested that this represents a necessary chronology in the process of conversion. But it may offer some useful pointers to the way in which people reacted to the new evangelical teachings, before ultimately committing themselves to Protestantism. Obviously, in order to adhere to the

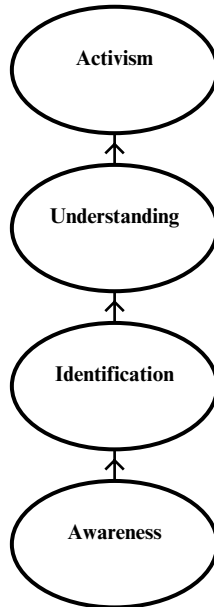


Figure 1.1. The Protestant conversion process.

new Gospel teaching, one had first to be aware of it. This would not necessarily lead to commitment – for some, knowledge of Luther’s teaching led ultimately to rejection and a confirmed loyalty to familiar beliefs. But for those who would ultimately join the Protestant churches awareness led to some form of personal identification: as witnesses to Christ, or as members of Protestant churches. A more controversial question is whether membership of the church involved any real degree of understanding of the core doctrines of the faith. If historians have been sceptical on this question, then they have been able to draw on many gloomy contemporary assessments, often by disenchanted evangelists lamenting that their ceaseless activism had made so little impact on the ignorance of their flock.¹⁰ Ultimately, however, and in whatever ways, Protestantism did succeed in engaging the loyalties of large numbers of Europe’s citizens. This is reflected in a tradition of activism that represents here the last stage of our pyramid of engagement and commitment. This activism might take many forms: in the first generation acts of iconoclasm, in later days a determination to defend a Protestant culture against enemies within and without. But it was very real, even if those that professed this loyalty might not have satisfied the most demanding catechists, or the most persistently inquisitive compilers of the German visitation reports.

The investigation of this tiered anatomy of commitment proceeds through the examination in turn of different media by which the Reformation message was communicated and imbibed. This too reflects different patterns of investigation and scholarship in the last decades. The classic formulation of the Reformation process gives pride of place to the printed book. Ever since Elizabeth Eisenstein published her study of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, scholars have built their interpretations on two apparently solid pillars: the identification of the technology of the book with an optimistic progress-orientated agenda of change; and an association of the book with Protestantism, the new religion.¹¹ Protestantism was the religion of the book; the book was a Protestant instrument.

This is an attractive and influential vision, though it should be recognized that it involves layers of assumptions that have not always been accurately tested. That Protestantism dominated the world of the printed book is certainly true for Germany in the 1520s, but it would

¹⁰ Christopher Haigh, ‘Puritan Evangelism in the Reign of Elizabeth I’, *English Historical Review*, 92 (1977), pp. 30–58.

¹¹ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1979).

8 Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion

not always be so. The book had been an effective servant of traditional religion before the evangelical controversies broke out in Germany, and it would be again. Once Catholic authors found their voice, the printed book would be a cornerstone of the Catholic counter-attack against Protestantism; in some parts of Europe, such as France, Catholics comfortably out-published their evangelical opponents almost from the first days of the Reformation movement.¹²

Our perception of the book is also shaped by certain much deeper assumptions about the role of print in intellectual culture. It is always assumed, for instance, that books are purchased for the words they contain, by people anxious, and able, to understand their contents. Put another way, it is accepted that analysis of the contents of books is an acceptable means of analysing the understanding of those for whom they were written. This is a gigantic, if perfectly understandable, assumption, but it really needs to be tested if we are to place the book correctly in the culture of persuasion. Perhaps unconsciously, by elevating the book in this way as a primary instrument of change, we are promoting a view of reading that is essentially modern (and academic). We conceive a world of private reading and private, largely individual decision making. But this essentially modernistic reconstruction of the process of religious choice goes very much against the grain of sixteenth-century society. In the early modern world most information was conveyed in public, communal settings: the market place, the church, a proclamation from the town hall steps. And it was conveyed by word of mouth, sometimes subsequently reinforced in print.

Religious choice may still be personal – as it often was – without being private. Decisions were often arrived at in a communal context. Much of the culture of persuasion in the sixteenth century was based on an assumption that decisions would be arrived at collectively. If the Reformation were to succeed, the culture of persuasion would have to work with the grain of this society. Reformers recognized a necessary double process of engagement: with the individual Christian, and with a collective religious consciousness that also had to be nurtured and reinforced. Hence in this study an attempt is made to relocate the role of the book as part of a broader range of modes of persuasion that used every medium of discourse and communication familiar to pre-industrial society. Preaching, singing and drama would all play their part, alongside the careful private tutelage of the new Protestant family in catechism class and Bible reading. But, in the first decades of evangelical agitation, that

¹² Andrew Pettegree and Matthew Hall, 'The Reformation and the Book: A Reconsideration', *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 1–24.

lay very much in the future. The first explosive impact of the challenge to traditional religion was felt in public places: in the market place where news was exchanged and the first pamphlets were passed around, in the taverns, and, of course, in the churches. For it was here, through the traditional and time-honoured practice of preaching – always an event of special significance in every era of church history – that many of Europe's Christian people would first have been aware of the explosive ideas that would wreak such havoc on the comfortable practices of their forebears.

2 Preaching

Luther and his colleagues would make much play with the concept of the new evangelical sermon. We should certainly not underestimate the element of novelty, and the surprise of the new. The priest who commandeered the pulpit – often his own pulpit – to launch a bold attack on time-honoured practices and the doctrine of the community he served was bound to cause a sensation. The impact on his congregation, moved, excited, troubled or appalled, was clearly profound. But it was so precisely because the sermon was so fundamental a part of church life. It also played an important role in the wider information culture of pre-modern society. In a world where most information continued to be conveyed by word of mouth, few could doubt that preaching represented one of the primary means of communication with a wider public.

This was a world the reformers instinctively understood. Few doubted that, if they were to reach their audience, it would be through the medium of the word: and that meant in the first instance the word preached, as much as their published works. Many of those who would make up the first generation of the leaders of the Reformation had made their reputation first as preachers; they owed both their local reputation and the opportunity to contribute to the new evangelical movement to their skill in the pulpit. All, without exception, regarded preaching as fundamental to their duty as pastors, and to their evangelical mission.

The evidence, if any were necessary, lies in their conduct of their public careers. All the major reformers preached incessantly; in most cases almost to the last days of their life. From early in his career in Wittenberg, Luther preached both to his Augustinian order and (from 1514) in the town church, a torrent of sermons that came to form the cornerstone of his pastoral publications. Mark Edwards estimates that of 1,800 editions of Luther's works printed before 1526, some 40 per cent were published sermons.¹ Between 1519 and 1522 Ulrich Zwingli

¹ Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda and Martin Luther* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), p. 27.