

Introduction

In the Name of the
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
The First Book
From the Arrival of Christ,
our savior and a fundament of the one true and
original
faith.

As I have undertaken to describe the history and the working of miracles in this present time, so shall I report the same in truth, and foremost what God the Almighty has done out of abundant grace and mercy for the proclamation of his healing Gospel, against the arrogant papacy whose power is solely human, and which many in our time call the Antichrist.

Johannes Kessler, *Sabbata*¹

Thus begins one of the earliest efforts to tell the story of the Reformation. Johannes Kessler was born in 1502. The events he described occurred in his lifetime; many he witnessed himself. But he did not seek to narrate “what happened”; he did not see his task as to set some kind of pattern, some order, some meaning, to change that reached into every corner of human life in the sixteenth century. Kessler numbered among those who called themselves *evangelicals*: those who found in the printed and spoken text of the Bible the definitive authority for human life. For them,

¹ *Johannes Kesslers Sabbata*, edited by Emil Egli & Rudolf Schoch [Historischen Verein des Kantons St. Gallen] (St. Gall: Fehr'sche Buchhandlung, 1902), p. 18.



MAP I.1. Christian Europe in 1500.



the enterprise of writing history was to tell the story of God's revelation. For them, the story was one of not human choices or human acts, but divine design and divine agency.

Following his specific understanding of revelation, Kessler began his chronicle not with Adam or Moses, the Torah or Old Testament, but with Jesus Christ and the New Testament. He opened with a brief account of the person whose teachings and life had been the wellspring for any definition of "Christianity." Broadly, those who sought to "follow" Christ – the way he conducted his life, his parables and sermons, his commands – called themselves *Christians*. It was an ancient name, encompassing many different sorts of persons. By 1500, the overwhelming majority of Europeans called themselves Christians: Jews were a persecuted minority; Muslims an even smaller minority; no other religion had a discernible presence in Europe from the Atlantic coast to the expanding border of the Ottoman Empire.

For Kessler, the sixteenth century had its origins in the person of Christ, but there was no continuum from Christ's life to his own. From the life of Christ he turned to a brief "epitome" of Christianity in Europe from the first century to his own. He summarized the proliferation of offices, incomes, benefices, and practices such as fasting and pilgrimage – all of which he attributed to papal initiative. For Kessler, as for other early evangelical chroniclers, between the life of Christ and his own adulthood was a period of a turning away from Christ. In all those years, evangelicals held, Europeans who obeyed the Pope failed to conform their lives to the teachings of Christ as they were set down in the text of the Bible. For evangelicals such as Kessler, the Bible was the written record of God's will, now ever more accessible in the form a new technology made possible: the printed codex. Medieval Europeans, in failing to orient their lives to that text, were deviant – so Kessler and others constructed the story.

When Kessler turned to his own time, he framed it in terms of the revelation of God's will and design for humankind. The frame of revelation shaped the story that he and other evangelical chroniclers told. It defined their choices: which acts were meaningful, which not; which persons were significant, which not. This is how Kessler introduced Martin Luther:

The landlord said, 'You are not [Hutten], but Martin Luther'. Then he laughed with such pleasure: 'They take me for Hutten, you, for Luther. I shall soon become Marcolf.' After such a speech, he raised a glass of beer and, speaking in the local idiom, said, 'You Swiss, let us share a friendly drink, in blessing.' And as I was to receive the glass from him, he changed the glass

and ordered a measure of wine for it, saying, 'This beer is strange to you and unfamiliar; drink the wine.' Then he stood up, threw his soldier's cloak over his shoulder, and took his leave, gave us his hand and said, 'When you get to Wittenberg, give my greetings to Dr. Hieronymus Schürpf.' We said, 'We will do it willingly, but what should we call you, that he will understand your greeting?' He said, 'Say no more than, "He that should come sends his greeting." He will understand you immediately.' Then he took his leave and went to bed.

Johannes Kessler, *Sabbata*²

So Kessler introduced a man he held to be an instrument of God's design, evoking Gospel accounts of Jesus. Luther shared that sense of himself, as a tool God had taken up in order to realize divine purposes, divine providence. Evangelicals shared a sense of human agency: Whatever change human beings effected, they effected not through any ability on their own part, but because God had chosen them as crude instruments of his will – no different from hammers or hoes. And those who were not God's instruments did not figure in the story: Their choices were unimportant, their actions no expression of divine design.

The frame of revelation also shaped evangelical conceptualizations of time itself. They divided their own time from that immediately preceding it, their own childhoods from what they witnessed as adults, sorting all of human history into four segments defined in terms of their relationship to revelation: the oldest, from Genesis to Anne, the mother of Mary, herself the mother of Christ, encompassing all time before Christ, as it was recorded in the Christian Old Testament; the second period, the time of Christ's life, of which the New Testament was the testimony; the third period, a time of deviance; and their own time, the last period. Those segments, moreover, divided into pairs that paralleled one another. The time before Christ was, like the millennium and a half after Christ, a time of laws and a plethora of practices. At two moments in human history, 1,500 years apart, God had chosen to make manifest his purposes for humankind: at the moment when God chose to become human; and Kessler's own lifetime, when God's Word – the Bible – once again circulated in material form, this time, not a physical person, but the object, the printed codex.

Not all sixteenth-century Christians construed the events of their lives in these terms. Those whom we now call Catholics quite consciously rejected such a sense of time, and, equally consciously, placed themselves in a tradition they saw as reaching in a continuum all the way back

² *Johannes Kesslers Sabbata*, p. 79.

to the life of Christ. For them, the time between Christ's life and their own was one not of a single note or of a rigidly enforced orthodoxy – both caricatures evangelicals circulated – but of multiple voices who formed a consensus over time. More importantly, for us, Catholics imagined a very different geography for the events of their lives. Whereas evangelicals focused geographically on those places where God's chosen instrument was to be seen and heard – Wittenberg, Zurich, Strasbourg, Geneva, London, Leiden – Catholics encompassed the globe in their thinking. For them, the “discovery” of “the New World” – themselves European perspectives – meant theaters in which God's glory might be demonstrated through the missionary work of their most devout.

Polemics and Reformation History

Sixteenth-century polemics abide to this day. Many still divide sixteenth-century Christians into two groups, Protestants and Catholics, using two terms that acquired their modern definition in the sixteenth century – the first did not exist before 1529; the second was an adjective, not a noun, prior to the sixteenth-century. Sixteenth-century characterizations have shaped how generations since have told the history of the Reformation. One of the most influential books of the twentieth century, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1922), took as one of its fundamentals sixteenth-century Catholics' claim to traditional Christianity, a Christianity that reached all the way back to the life of Christ and his disciples – though sixteenth-century Catholics thought that a positive attribute and Weber, concerned with “modernity,” found it a negative one, one of the key reasons why, he argued, capitalism could only arise from Protestantism.

Sixteenth-century evangelical chroniclers have shaped in more ways and more deeply how the history of the Reformation is told. If their Catholic contemporaries saw themselves in a continuum and evangelicals as breaking with the past, evangelicals severed their age structurally from its immediate past, a structure that abides in both textbooks and the organization of university courses on European history. There are good reasons, as I hope this book will show, why the division makes sense: The sixteenth century witnessed change that reached from the most intimate of relations to the most public, that redrew the map of Europe in a number of different ways, that altered the relationship between religious and civic authority, that changed what it meant to be “a Christian” – for evangelicals and Catholics. But their own sense, that their age was

the antithesis of the age of their own childhoods, at once deforms the Christianity of their childhoods and distorts the Christianity of their own day.

Sixteenth-century evangelicals posited a single authority, the text of the Bible, for the definition of Christianity: If a *doctrine* – that which was taught – or a *praxis* – that which was rhythmically done – was not to be found in Scripture, then, for them, it was “not Christian.” That definition of Christianity, as derived from a text and as defined by the canonical Bible, led them to cast their ancestors as biblically illiterate. And yet, as medievalists have shown, while the majority of medieval Christians probably could not read, that did not mean they were biblically illiterate: The walls, columns, chapels, and altars of their churches were filled with visualizations of Christ’s life; sermons might take a moment in Christ’s life or one of his sermons or parables as their focus; plays enacted moments in Christ’s life. The Bible’s relationship to medieval Christianity was complex, rich, and multiform.

Evangelicals’ emphasis on the biblical text also distorts the Christianity of their own day. It shaped their story at many levels. For them, the text’s internal conflicts, its mysteries, its puzzles resided not in the text, which was unified, but in the reader. For them, the text was not vulnerable to multiple readings.³ For them, there was no diversity of readers – of different experiences, expectations, understandings brought to bear on the words of the Bible. For them, there was God’s Word, which was understood or not – an insistent bipolarity running through their debates on so many questions. So many evangelicals, including Luther, claimed that the Bible was self-evident, its meaning, in his word, “clear,” and yet, individual evangelicals read that text in ways that divided them not only from Catholics, but from each other. Their sense of the Bible, as a coherent unity of self-evident meaning, continues to shape the history of the Reformation. It led them and later historians to characterize different understandings as “misunderstandings” – though the century is replete with testimonies of the text’s multivalencies, ambiguities, elusiveness, and evocative power. It led them to deny the sheer protean power of the text to inspire diverse visions of true Christianity and the multiplicity of positions each of which is rooted in the text. And it obscured the different understandings of the person of Christ evangelicals brought to bear on that text.

³Thomas M. Green, *The Vulnerable Text: Essays on Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Sixteenth-century evangelicals' emphasis on the printed codex of the Bible as the physical location where humankind should look to find God drew attention away from one of the bitterest battles of the sixteenth century: the nature, import, and implications of the *Incarnation*. The Incarnation is what sets Christianity apart from Judaism and Islam. For Christians, the Incarnation is when the monotheistic God of Judaism who had been such a jealous God chose to become human, Jesus Christ, in the words of the Apostles' Creed – a text that both evangelicals and Catholics trusted:

conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell. On the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.⁴

As we shall see, for medieval Christians the Incarnation invited both representation and *mimesis*: the conscious effort on the part of many different Christians to bring the living of their lives into an enactment of something they saw in Christ's – his poverty, his suffering, his humility, his itinerancy. In the sixteenth century, European Christians divided on what it meant for God to be born, to suffer, to die, and to be resurrected. Perhaps the most difficult concept of all, God-become-man, the Incarnation called into question, powerfully in the sixteenth century, what exactly was it, to be "divine"? What exactly was it, to be "human"?

Sixteenth-century Christians had grown up in a world filled with representations of Christ, the Son of God: as infant in his mother's arms or lap; as child in a temple; as young man preaching; as teacher surrounded by his disciples; most often, as a body broken and bleeding on a cross, executed in the Roman practice of crucifixion – literally executed on a cross. As evangelicals turned to that text they held to be the materialization of God's will, as we shall see in their debates, their understanding of Christ's person was not restricted to what the text said. It could not be: The text itself was filled with mysteries and puzzles that, in turn, eluded consensus or a single unifying reading.

Sixteenth-century evangelicals' emphasis upon the biblical text also obscures the importance evangelicals themselves accorded *praxis* – the regular and consistent enactments, using their own bodies, of their faith.

⁴ *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, vol. I: Early, Eastern, & Medieval (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 669.

The emphasis on the biblical text called attention away from the physicality of the Reformation and the many different ways that Reformation implicated human bodies: All bodies in the institutionalization of the Ten Commandments; women's and children's bodies in the formation of Christian families; the body of each faithful Christian in the moment of communion, when he or she took a piece of bread, a sip of wine, and, in that moment, came closest to God – physically as well as spiritually. It silences the preaching from street corners as well as pulpits, the singing in workshops as well as churches. And it obscures the violence.

According to the testimonies and memoirs of those who lived through it, violence of many different forms ran through the sixteenth century. For many, it felt a time of extraordinary and exceptionally volatile violence. Indeed, it could be argued that the sixteenth century and the twentieth had far more in common than not – something of that thinking informs the chapters that follow. Mothers reported daughters to authorities who in turn executed those daughters for *heresy* – a word whose violence may be harder to hear today than then. Heresy, from an ancient Greek word, means a kind of stepping away from a path; formally, in relationship to the doctrine of a Church, it means a stepping away from orthodoxy – that which is the straight path. In the sixteenth century, for thousands of European Christians, the word heresy had as its consequence their arrest, their torture, their execution or exile. It was a word of corporeal consequences. Rulers executed subjects for the crimes of heresy and blasphemy – the assault on God or Christian practices or doctrine; Catholic rulers, their subjects for iconoclasm, the destruction of images. Neighbors stabbed, bludgeoned, burned in their houses, neighbors. The concept of “heretic,” that person who deviated from the true path, led not simply to legal violence, but to the most personal and intimate: mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, neighbors and co-workers. “Heretic” is a question of perspective: For Catholics, all evangelicals were heretics; for evangelicals, not only all Catholics, but other kinds of evangelicals were heretics. And for each, that perspective authorized violence, whether the violence of legally constituted authority or the violence of person against person.

Towards a New History of the Reformation

Even as sixteenth-century polemics continue to shape narratives, an extraordinary flowering of archival research in the years since the Second World War has increasingly revealed the distortions of the polemics.

Studies of lived Christianity, social relations, forms of political authority, and its jurisdictions have brought new voices, new perspectives into the story. Close studies of a number of evangelicals have revealed their interconnections and dialogues with one another, as well as defining more precisely where they divided. George Hunston Williams, in seeking to document the many different “sects” of what he called “The Radical Reformation,” delineated dozens of different understandings of Christianity that were all evangelical.⁵ John O’Malley has argued for a notion of early modern Catholicism, which, in turn, another body of scholarship has shown to have been vibrant and multiform.⁶ Interdisciplinary work on devotional images has revealed their complex role in late medieval Christian life – different models of human cognition, different conceptualizations of representation, a deeply different sense of the image than we have today. Utterly different worlds have come to light.

This book, then, seeks to do two things. It seeks to craft a new narrative of the Reformation that integrates what we have learned. And it seeks to narrate a history in which no one position defines the positions of others – free of polemics and its conceptual consequences. As such, it is a history neither Catholic nor Protestant. So, too, readers will find no traces of divine design – this history is firmly and exclusively a human history of the Reformation. It narrates human choices and human actions, intended and unintended consequences.

This is a history of Christianity as European Christians redefined it in the sixteenth century and the consequences of that redefinition for all aspects of their lives. In 1500, Christianity was not a “belief.” We have no evidence of what the great majority of European Christians thought: Their voices are largely mute. But that evangelical sense of Christianity as defined by a text denies the Christianity that surrounded them – the architecture, the temporal rhythms, the enactments of many different kinds, the objects, and all the different ways that persons might manifest Christianity: in the dress of monks and nuns, in the acts of flagellants and pilgrims, in plays and gestures that sought to imitate the person of Christ. Christianity was not a statement in 1500; it was a world.

In holding Scripture the sole authority to define what Christianity was, evangelicals called that world into question. No aspect of human

⁵ George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), Third Edition (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2000).

⁶ John O’Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).