

Introduction



The purpose of this book is to introduce students, both undergraduate and graduate, to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. My view is that this is best done through guided reading in the primary sources. The texts I have chosen vary greatly. Some are short and relatively transparent. Others are longer and place great demands on the reader. Some are well known to specialists while others are not. All, in my opinion, will reward patient and careful reading. Each one can be thought of as a window, with its own angle of vision, through which one can glimpse a significant aspect of this tumultuous period. Together, I hope, they will enable the student to form a reasonably comprehensive picture of the whole.

The choice of texts for this reader is heavily theological. This reflects my view that the Reformation was not, in the first instance, an economic or political or even social movement. Important as these dimensions were, it was rather precisely religion that was the bone of contention. And the leaders of this movement, despite all their differences, had this one thing in common: they understood themselves as theologians, and what they wrote was to a large extent theology. Reading this material is the only way I know of to enter into their self-understandings.

For the sake of convenience, this book adopts several conventions about which the reader should be forewarned. First, the very term “Reformation” already carries with it an implicit value judgment. For “to reform” means to improve; it means that what went before was deficient in some way. Not all would agree that the various “reforms” of the sixteenth century, or even that the movement as a whole, marked such advancement. Second, to use the term “Reformation” in the singular may be to attribute a kind of unity to these events that they did not in fact have. Some today see the various religious currents of the time as being so diverse as to require that we use the plural “Reformations.” While this is a point worth making, I continue to use “Reformation” in the singular, understanding it of course as a collective noun. Third, the documents collected here are neatly organized under seven rubrics: the late medieval background, Martin Luther, Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants’ War, Zwingli and the Anabaptists, John Calvin, the Reformation in England, and the Counter/Catholic Reformation. Readers should realize that the reality was considerably messier. Especially in the early stages of the movement, it was not always clear who belonged to which group. And at times, all dissident voices were simply lumped together under the label “Lutheran.”

In my zeal to let the reformers speak for themselves, I have kept the introductions in this book to a minimum. Professors will undoubtedly want to supplement and further contextualize the texts with lectures. Then, too, the texts in this anthology can easily be aligned with readings in standard surveys such as Steven Ozment’s *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Euan Cameron’s *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Carter Lindberg’s *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Alister McGrath’s *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988); Lewis Spitz’s *The Protestant Reformation, 1517–1559* (New

York: Harper and Row, 1985); Diarmaid MacCulloch's *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2004); and so forth. Or these documents can read alongside the splendid articles in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

On the issue of language, my first concern has been not to distort the thought of the writers of these texts. The fact is that, despite all necessary qualifications, the world of the Reformation was undeniably sexist from top to bottom. Thus I have not modified the gender-exclusive language of its writers. Nor have I modified the gender-exclusive language of the translations, even when a case could be made for translating a term such as “Mensch” or “homo” as “human” or “person,” rather than as “man.” The gender-exclusive language of these texts is a constant reminder to us of the difference between our consciousness and that of the reformers—a difference that should not be minimized.

For those of us who teach using primary texts, the search for the perfect anthology is eternal, until of course we assemble our own! The first edition of this one was the result of twenty years of experimentation in teaching the Reformation. The second edition comes nine years later. My hope is that others may find it, if not ideal, then at least an improvement over what is currently available.