To Rod, Tina, and Gary
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Preface to the Third Edition

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

James Baldwin (1924–1987)

The only Luther Baldwin knew was Luther’s namesake Martin Luther King, Jr., though Baldwin did have an appreciation for another Luther heir, the “Northern Protestant” film-maker Ingmar Bergman (cf. Bateza 2019). Baldwin’s “frame of reference” was, of course, being black in a white culture, but his perceptive take on history is just as true for white folks. Insofar as we struggle to understand or “stand under” Baldwin’s insight, we may find in it some clues to both the present and the past. Similarly, the Reformation scholar Carlos M. N. Eire recently stated: “To understand the world we live in, to fully know how the West came to be what it is, one must understand how it was shaped by the Reformations of the early modern age.” The legacy of that era, Eire argues, is still “most certainly” with us (Eire 2016: 757).

Since the last revision of this text we have been inundated by a tsunami of Reformation kitsch and scholarship that still shows no sign of abating. The seismic origin of all this was the commemoration of the Reformation on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 1517 “95 Theses.” Not content with just a few parties and events in 2017, the German government and churches launched a ten-year series of commemorative Reformation events (2008–2017) that quickly morphed into “The Luther Decade.” In spite of Luther’s vehement critiques of capitalism, the celebration was an economic bonanza. Besides the tourist trade, historic sites were rehabbed and souvenirs abounded. The most famous of the latter was the Playmobil Luther that has sold more than any other Playmobil figure. We may term all this “Reformation-lite.” It was, as Ulrika Jureit wrote, “a commercial spectacle with an emotional feel good guarantee” (Jureit 2017: 195–197).

On the other hand, concerts and exhibitions abounded, including three major exhibitions in the United States subsidized by the German government and German and
American foundations. The substantive catalogues of these exhibitions in New York City, Atlanta, and Minneapolis are excellent presentations of the persons, ideas, art, and impact of the Reformation movements.

The Luther Decade was also the occasion for innumerable scholarly studies of the Reformation and various reformers as well as a number of encyclopedias. Such scholarly work also contributed to the continuing globalization of Reformation studies. Translations of Reformation studies and the writings of major reformers now include not only all the European languages but also Asian, Arabic, and Turkish languages. The globalization of Reformation studies is exciting news to those of us who began such studies “way back when” in a narrower “Eurocentric” context, but it is also exceedingly daunting to try to keep up with, let alone distill, these contributions into a textbook. In a recent nearly 50 page review essay, “New Publications for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation” (LQ 32/3, 2018: 307–355), Hartmut Lehmann states “I have attempted to present, out of the multitude of extremely disparate publications, a selection as representative as possible.” My reference to Merry Wiesner-Hanks in the “Preface” to the second edition of this text is even more pertinent now, ten years later. She wrote in 2008 regarding studies of women in the Reformation: “It is now nearly impossible to even know about all the new scholarship, to say nothing of reading it.”

Requests for a revised edition of the present text included an addition of a chapter on the Reformation in East-Central Europe, increased attention to reforms in England, and to the participation of women in the European Reformations. I attempted to expand attention to the latter subject in the revised edition of my The European Reformations Sourcebook (2014) and will try to weave more material on women’s contributions into this revised narrative. Many insights and much material from studies I am aware of, not to mention the studies I am not aware of or was unable to obtain before the deadline for this revision, are more than I can squeeze into the allotted expansion. For example, a recent study of theological texts by women reformers covers some of the tracts and thoughts of some thirty women in over 600 pages (cf. Rademacher-Braick 2017). The rising tide of recent studies and textbooks has increased the breadth and depth of coverage of what were once fairly marginal studies.

I do want to at least sketch the various efforts to reform received expressions of faith and their political and social effects, then and now. The narrative line of earlier editions of this text remains the same. Deadlines and limits on the number of words and illustrations can be frustrating when you think of all you want to add. On the other hand, such limits are liberating from the sense of having to cover everything, not to mention alleviating (perhaps) readership fatigue.

I am grateful to many more people than I can possibly list here. The superb inter-library loan staff of our town library in Northborough, MA, quickly and efficiently gathered materials from all over the U.S. I am especially grateful to my family who cheered me up and on during the “dark days” of various eye surgeries. Likewise, friends in our “Forgotten Luther” working group – Conrad Braaten, Ryan Cumming, Connie Miller, and Paul Wee – have been incredibly supportive. Roderick Martin, Adjunct Professor of History at Virginia’s Piedmont Community College read through my East-Central Europe chapter and provided valuable feedback.
Suggestions for Further Reading: Exhibition Volumes


Preface to the Second Edition

It is both a privilege and a great challenge to revise this textbook. It is a privilege to thank all who have contributed to keeping the text in print far longer than I ever expected – all you students and colleagues who by choice or assignment bought the book. The revision, however, has turned out to be a great challenge. With Robin Leaver (2007: ix), I now more fully appreciate Luther’s comment: “He who does not know writing thinks it requires no effort. Three fingers write, but the entire body is at work” (WA TR No. 6438). When I wrote the preface to the first edition, I cited A. G. Dickens’ words to the effect that writing synthetic texts “must form challenges to write better ones.” I had no idea at the time that so many “better ones” would appear! In English alone, we now have a range of perspectives from such scholars as Scott Hendrix (2004a), Hans J. Hillerbrand (2007), R. Po-chia Hsia (2004), Diarmaid MacCulloch (2003), Peter Matheson (2007), Andrew Pettegree (2000, 2002a), Alec Ryrie (2006a), and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (2006). Obviously, Reformation studies are alive and well! It will be obvious that I do not have enough space, let alone time and expertise, to carry on an extended conversation with these many fine scholars, not to mention the explosion of scholarly studies on the sixteenth century.

Revision is perhaps too strong a word for what follows, because I am not “re-visioning” the narrative of my text. I remain convinced of the “truism” expressed so succinctly by Heiko Oberman (1994b: 8): “[W]ithout the reformers, no Reformation. Social and political factors guided, accelerated and likewise hindered the spread and public effects of Protestant preaching. However, in a survey of the age as a whole they must not be overestimated and seen as causes of the Reformation, nor as its fundamental preconditions.” So, while my rewrite begins with the original preface, my narrative remains basically the same. What I have done is more supplementary in the sense of expanding the narrative to include more material on the British Isles, Roman Catholic reforms, and women. The following expansion is very modest, for the field of Reformation studies has exploded in the decade and a half since the first edition. Merry Wiesner-Hanks (2008: 397) notes that just in the field of women and the Reformation: “It is now nearly impossible to even know about all the new scholarship, to say nothing of reading it.” Add in the resources available on the World Wide Web and there is more than enough material for a lifetime let alone a semester course! The massive growth in scholarship on the Reformations is a cause for excitement, but at the same time the growing concentration on microstudies threatens to replace the forest with detailed studies of every tree in it. “How is one to teach a subject that finds itself in that
condition? If Reformation Studies are to enjoy any continuing vitality, there must be more to them than the ever-closer scrutiny of the religious entrails and financial dealings of the weighty parishioners of Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh” (Collinson 1997: 354). Yet, as noted above, there are a number of texts to guide us through this forest of new growth, as well as summaries of the state of the field such as the splendid volume edited by David M. Whitford, *Reformation and Early Modern Europe: A Guide to Research* (2008) that includes web resources along with bibliography. Additional material that follows and supplements the narrative of my text is available in my edited volumes *The European Reformations Sourcebook* (primary sources, 2000a) and *The Reformation Theologians* (chapters on Humanist, Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and “Radical” theologians, 2002).

The title of this text again speaks of “Reformations.” As far as I know, my use of the plural “Reformations” was unique when my text first appeared. Some recent texts continue this usage (Ryrie, 2006a; Matheson, 2007: 7 (subtitle: “Reformations, Not Reformation”)) while others take sharp issue with it. Hillerbrand (2003: 547) judges it “quite wrong;” but in his later volume (2007: 407) states: “Neither historically nor theologically was there ever a single Reformation movement; rather, there were several, prompting recent scholars to speak pointedly of plural “Reformations.”” Hendrix (2000: 558; 2004a: xv, xviii, 1) also thinks my title is less than helpful for it obscures the coherent Reformation movement “to Christianize Europe.” While this discussion may seem like so much antics with semantics, it has occupied a number of historians in recent years. For example, in the mid-1990s, the leading church historians, Berndt Hamm, Bernd Moeller, and Dorothea Wendebourg debated the issue. Wendebourg (Hamm, et al., 1995: 31–2; Lindberg 2002: 4–9) referred to an early seventeenth-century engraving titled “The Light of the Gospel Rekindled by the Reformers” (see Figure 15.4). She commented that while it is a beautiful image of unity and harmony, the reality was conflict, especially in light of the so-called “Left Wing” reformers who are not included in the engraving. Wendebourg’s point is echoed more recently by Brian Cummings. His summary of Reformation scholarship (2002: 13) merits extensive quotation: “[I]t is significant that one of the main efforts in such scholarship in recent years has been to argue the ‘Reformation’ out of existence. Some historians have attempted to avoid historical determinism by emphasizing continuities in a longer sequence. Others have deflected it by distinguishing a plurality of reformations, catholic as much as protestant, in a larger process of religious culture. As in other areas of academic study, an artful use of the plural form has been used to settle the case. Yet whatever revision of historiography is thought necessary, it must respect the fundamental dissentiousness of sixteenth-century religion. The religious culture of this period, catholic as well as protestant, identified itself through division.” While the debate is ongoing, I continue to view the Reformation era as a period encompassing plural reform movements.

As always, I am grateful for the support given by the editors at Blackwell, not least Rebecca Harkin, who encouraged me to undertake this revision. On a personal note, I am delighted to add that the original dedicatees have given us five grandchildren – Emma, Caleb, Nathan, Teddy, and Claudia. Their parents are thankful that their gestation was far briefer than that of this revision.
Preface to the First Edition

*Human life without knowledge of history is nothing other than a perpetual childhood, nay, a permanent obscurity and darkness.*

Philip Melanchthon

I hope that this textbook will contribute to the perennial discovery of who we are and how we got this way. The “we” here is meant globally. Such a goal of course smacks of delusions of grandeur or at least an overestimation of the influence of the Reformations of the sixteenth century. But no historian of whatever persuasion thinks he or she is an antiquarian studying the past “for its own sake” as if understanding it did not contribute to understanding ourselves. This is illustrated by citing just two major Reformation historians. Steven Ozment (1992: 217) concludes one of his books on the Reformation: “To people of all nationalities the first Protestants bequeathed in spite of themselves a heritage of spiritual freedom and equality, the consequences of which are still working themselves out in the world today.” And William Bouwsma (1988: 1) begins his study of Calvin with a litany of his influences: “Calvinism has been widely credited – or blamed – for much that is thought to characterize the modern world: for capitalism and modern science, for the discipline and rationalization of the complex societies of the West, for the revolutionary spirit and democracy, for secularization and social activism, for individualism, utilitarianism, and empiricism.” If Ozment and Bouwsma are anywhere near the mark, it behooves us to reflect on our roots.

The influence of the Reformations has extended beyond Euro-American cultures to the wider world. Scholars have pursued the influences of Calvinism on social conditions in the Republic of South Africa and of Lutheranism on modern developments in Germany and the course of Judaism; the once Eurocentric International Congress for Luther Research now includes participants from the so-called “Third World” who are concerned not only about the ecclesial applicability of Luther’s theology but its relevance to liberation and human rights. The global nature of Reformation research is evident in the translation of writings of the Reformers into various Asian languages and the existence of scholarly endeavors everywhere, including the People’s Republic of China; not to mention the impact on ecumenical dialogues among Christians and with disciples of other world religions. The Reformations continue to be seen as too important to contemporary life to be left to antiquarians and those whom Carlyle termed “dryasdust” historians.

Why one more textbook on the Reformations? There is of course the personal factor: I suspect that nearly every teacher wishes to tell the story his or her own way. I am no
different; and have been stimulated in this endeavor by the occasional student question, “Why don’t you write your own text?” Such obviously brilliant and insightful students wise to the utilitarian value of such a question should not however be blamed for this project. Rather, the rationale for sacrificing more trees to the textbook trade is to incorporate aspects of the burgeoning field of Reformation studies into a text that interprets these contributions from a historical—theological perspective. Hence major attention will be directed to what the Reformers and those who received their messages believed to be at stake – literally as well as figuratively – for their salvation. The thread – with all its kinks and knots – running throughout this story is their struggle to understand and to apply to society the freedom and authority of the gospel.

What will this orientation bring to this text? I have already suggested the global impact of the Reformations on contemporary identities. Scholarly fascination with the influences of the Reformations has grown to the point where major historiographical studies are devoted to it. The initial chapter on history and historiography will illustrate that it is not only church historians and theologians who have commitments. All historians are also interpreters; thus any and all suggestions that if you can only shed theological (or political, or Marxist, et al.) convictions you will be scientifically “objective” or “value free” are suspect.

I view the Reformation era as a time of plural reform movements. This approach has significance for interpretation and definition that will be explored throughout the text. For now, the use of the plural reminds us that even commonly used terms such as “Reformation” carry within them subtle or not so subtle value judgments.

I will also attempt to incorporate into this text the research that has mushroomed so recently under the general rubric of social history. Here there is specific attention to the marginalized (the poor, women), minorities, popular culture in terms of context and reception, the development of modern traits (individualism, rationality, the secular), and the modern state-building process called confessionalization. Every work of synthesis inevitably carries within it seeds (and sometimes full-grown weeds!) of misunderstandings and all too many omissions. I hope the chronology, maps, genealogical tables, bibliography, and suggestions for further reading will ameliorate to some extent the disjointedness of this synthetic narrative and its lack of discussion of the Reformations in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. Textbook authors have the temerity angels eschew. This being the case, I take heart from Luther’s dictum to “sin boldly” as well as from the words of a great English Reformation scholar, A. G. Dickens (1974: 210): “In short, synthesis must involve writing books which form challenges to write better ones, books which will inevitably be replaced, attacked and patronized by others which climb upon their shoulders.”

I am pleased to dedicate these efforts to our new sons and daughter who, even after marrying our children, still listen patiently to dinner discourses on the Reformations and provide wry comments. I wish to thank the many students of my “Reformations” course whose lively questions and arguments over the years have frequently redeemed what began as “dryasdust” lectures. My “thorn-in-the-flesh” colleague, J. Paul Sampley, has rendered a similar service in and out of the classroom. Finally, my thanks to Alison Mudditt, Senior Commissioning Editor of Blackwell Publishers, who initiated and shepherded this project to conclusion, to Gillian Bromley, Desk Editor, whose sharp eye caught many an error, and to Sarah McKean, Picture Researcher at Blackwell, for obtaining the illustrations.
**List of Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<td>ARG</td>
<td>Archive for Reformation History/Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte</td>
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<tr>
<td>CH</td>
<td>Church History</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHR</td>
<td>Catholic Historical Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>Corpus Reformatorum. Berlin/Leipzig, 1811–911</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTJ</td>
<td>Calvin Theological Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTQ</td>
<td>Concordia Theological Quarterly</td>
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<td>HJ</td>
<td>Historical Journal</td>
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<td>LQ</td>
<td>Lutheran Quarterly</td>
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<td>MQR</td>
<td>Mennonite Quarterly Review</td>
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<td>PP</td>
<td>Past and Present</td>
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<td>SCJ</td>
<td>Sixteenth Century Journal</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZKG</td>
<td><em>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</em></td>
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<td>ZRG</td>
<td><em>Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Kanonische Abteilung</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ZThK</td>
<td><em>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</em></td>
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1

History, Historiography, and Interpretations of the Reformations

We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see farther than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts, buried by age and human neglect, and we raise them, as it were from death to renewed life.

Peter of Blois (d. 1212)

History and Historiography

Peter of Blois penned this famous aphorism almost exactly three centuries before Luther’s “Ninety-Five Theses” rocked Europe. A major study of the historiography of the Reformation (Dickens and Tonkin 1985: 323) concludes that it is “a window on the West, a major point of access to the developing Western mind through the last five centuries. ... By any reckoning, the Reformation has proved a giant among the great international movements of modern times.” On its shoulders we can look farther and deeper in both directions; that is, we can peer into both the medieval and contemporary worlds.

History provides a horizon for viewing not only the past but also the present and the future. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975: 269, 272) argued that a person without a horizon will overvalue what is immediately present, whereas the horizon enables us to sense the relative significance of what is near or far, great or small. “A horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion.” In other words, “far away facts – in history as in navigation – are more effective than near ones in giving us true bearings” (Murray 1974: 285). Even novice sailors know it is foolish to navigate by sighting your prow rather than by sighting the stars or land.

Historical distance, by providing a focus beyond what we take for granted, can be a surprising component of contemporary comprehension. The analogy of living in a foreign city illustrates this. If you live in a foreign city for a year, you will not learn a great deal about that city. However, when you return home you will be surprised by your increasing comprehension of some of the most profound and individual characteristics of your homeland. You did not previously “see” these characteristics because you were too close to them; you
knew them too well. Likewise, a visit to the past provides distance and a vantage point from which to comprehend the present (Nygren 1948; Braudel 1972). L. P. Hartley began his novel *The Go-Between* with the memorable sentence: “The past is another country; they do things differently there.”

Memory also illustrates perspective. “Memory is the thread of personal identity, history of public identity” (Hofstadter 1968: 3; Leff 1971: 115). Memory and historical identity are inseparable. Have you ever been asked to introduce someone and suddenly forgotten his or her name? At worst this common human experience is a temporary embarrassment. However, think what life would be like if you had no memory at all. We all have heard how terribly difficult life is for amnesiacs, and about the tragic effects of Alzheimer’s disease upon its victims and their families. The loss of memory is not just the absence of “facts”; it is the loss of personal identity, family, friends, and, indeed, the whole complex of life’s meaning. It is very difficult if not impossible to function in society if we do not know who we are and how we got this way. Our memory is the thread of our personal identity; our memory liberates us from what Melanchthon, Luther’s colleague, called perpetual childhood. Without our past we have no present and no future.

What about our national and religious community identities? Are we amnesiacs, are we children, when it comes to identifying who we are in relation to our communities? What if we had to identify ourselves as an American or a Christian? Suppose someone asked why we are Protestant or Roman Catholic. Beyond referring to our parents or a move to a new neighborhood, could we explain why we belong to Grace Lutheran by the gas station instead of St Mary’s by the grocery store?

I once asked a French friend to explain German–French relations. He began by referring to the ninth-century division of Charlemagne’s empire! Most of us do not go that far back to answer contemporary questions, but his response illustrates that if memory is the thread of personal identity, history is the thread of community identity. These tenacious threads of community identity also have a dark side when they are not critically examined. This is painfully evident in the eruption of historical ethnic conflicts such as those in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union as well as in the Middle East. If we do not know our personal and community histories we are like children who are easily manipulated by those who would use the past for their own purposes.

Memory and history are crucial to our identity, but they are not easily conceptualized in relation to their origins and goals. Here I take comfort in the comment of the great African theologian, St Augustine (354–430), who when discussing time wrote: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asks, I know not” (*Confessions*, Book XI). This most influential Western theologian was struggling to relate to his Hellenistic–Roman culture the Christian conviction that the identity of the community is rooted in history rather than in philosophy and ethics. This conviction had already been clearly stated in the historical shorthand of the Christian creeds, which confess faith in the historical person of Jesus who was born, suffered, and died. Christians put a unique spin on history when they also confess that this Jesus was raised from the dead and will return to bring history to completion. Thus, from an insider’s perspective, the Christian community’s identity is formed by both the historical past and the historical future. Without sensitivity to this theological claim, it would be difficult for us to fully realize the power in the
Reformations of apocalyptic views of history or such works as John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. This sense of the historical past, present, and future identity of the church, expressed in the third article of the creeds by the phrase “communion of saints,” was so palpable to the medieval that the English Roman Catholic historian John Bossy (1985) makes it the theme of his study of the Reformation. As we shall see, the historical identity of the communion of saints became a central controversial issue in the Reformation era.

Sociologists of knowledge make a similar point about historical identity rooted in community. Historical identity is passed on to us through our conversations with the mothers and fathers who have gone before us. In this sense, church historians take seriously the fourth commandment of the Decalogue: “Honor your father and mother.” We know, of course, from even limited family experience that when we no longer talk to our parents and children we begin to forget who we are. This is not to say that conversation between generations is always pleasant, but to say that it is important for learning how we got this way. Without such conversation we are condemned to “presentism,” a fancy term to describe the solipsism of a continuous “me generation.” Thus the postwar German phrase *Welt ohne Vater* is shorthand for the loss of roots and the authority crises suffered by the generation whose fathers fell in the war. Lord Acton stated this elegantly: “History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own, from the tyranny of environment and the pressure of the air we breathe. It requires all historic forces to produce their record and submit it to judgment, and it promotes the faculty of resistance to contemporary surroundings by familiarity with other ages and orbits of thought” (Pelikan 1971: 150).

Until recently the collectors and tellers of the family conversations of Christianity were nearly all insiders. Thus the subject matter and the discipline of its telling fell under the rubric of “church history.” For a variety of reasons today, persons outside the Christian churches are also interested in presenting the history of Christianity. There is, to paraphrase an old maxim, the sense that the telling of the story of Christian contributions to contemporary identity is too important to be left to the Christians. The field of Reformation studies is a marked example of this recent development.

Awareness of the distinct perspectives of church historians and historians of Christianity will be useful in terms of reading both contemporary textbooks and the historical sources. We shall get to other perspectives later, but for now we may remind ourselves that interpretations of the past are not value free. Indeed, Heisenberg’s “indeterminacy principle” applies as much to historical studies as it does to subatomic physics: what is observed is influenced by the observer. “It is paradoxical, in fact, that nature seems more unambiguously susceptible to human understanding and control than is history which man makes and in which he is personally and intimately involved” (Spitz 1962: vii). In the words of the late English historian, G. R. Elton (1967: 13): “In truth, historians, like other people, tend to judge their world from their own experiences and practice, and it is disturbing to see how narrow in their sympathies even eminent men can be.”

Some of the presuppositions that govern an author’s collection and interpretation of events leap right off the page at us; others are more subtle. This is exemplified by the work of Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340), the “Father of Church History.” In the introduction to his *The History of the Church*, Eusebius begins with a “truth in advertising”
statement, the candor of which is all too rare in modern historical works. “From the scattered hints dropped by my predecessors I have picked out whatever seems relevant to the task I have undertaken, plucking like flowers in literary pastures the helpful contributions of earlier writers to be embodied in the continuous narrative I have in mind.”

Historians are selective in choosing data. Until very recently this selection has been governed by religious and theological commitments. This is not surprising since church historians traditionally work with a double perspective: the history of the church and the contemporizing of the past as a critical measure of the church’s faithfulness. The latter critical point means that the focus of the church historian’s work is a community that is already existing but not yet completed. In theological terms, there is an eschatological dimension to church historical work because the community being studied believes it lives between the “now” of the historical activity and promise of Jesus, and the “not yet” of the full realization of the Jesus movement. The problem this poses for modern historical method is how to write a history of that which claims to occur in history but also claims to be the end to history. Such metahistorical claims to privileged insight into the course and goal of history are of course not limited to theologians; they may be seen in such disparate modern expressions as Hegel’s idealist conviction of the self-realization of the absolute world spirit, Marx’s materialist conviction of the realization of the classless society, and the American belief in the triumph of democracy, to name but a few.

The hegemony of theological and church historical studies of the Reformations of the sixteenth century has only recently been critically questioned, and the implications of this questioning are beginning to find their way into textbooks. How radical this change is may be seen by a review of the long predominance of the Eusebian model of historical writing, which normed the “true” church by the community of the first centuries of the Christian era. The norm of the first centuries led to the rationalization of historical change and development as expressions of the unchanging essence of early Christianity, and idealized the apostolic age, the time of origins. This norm was operative in all parties of the Reformation era, and is easily seen in the various Reformers’ appeals to Scripture and the apostolic faith to support their respective claims to be the continuation of the early church. Thus in the Leipzig debate (1519) over papal authority, Luther stated that papal claims to superiority are relatively recent. “Against them stand the history of eleven hundred years, the text of divine Scripture, and the decree of the Council of Nicea [325], the most sacred of all councils” (LW 31: 318).

Even though the Reformations of the sixteenth century split the church, all parties continued to hold to the Eusebian model of church history by claiming to be the faithful recovery or continuation of the early church, and by accusing other churches of innovation (i.e. heresy). The Reformers urged people to judge all doctrines by Scripture, so all the churches turned to history to legitimate and bolster their individual claims to be the faithful community. Those convinced that the medieval church was a total corruption of the early church developed martyrologies to support their view that in spite of corruption there continued to be faithful witnesses to the Jesus movement in history.

The ground for the Reformers’ critique of the recent past as degenerate was prepared by the prior generation of humanists. The term “Middle Ages” (media aetas, medium tempus, medium aevum) is first encountered in scattered references by fifteenth-century humanists.
They considered this segment of time an intermediate period between what they perceived as the ideal and glorified classical period (à la Eusebius) and their own time, which they termed “modern.” The humanists aspired and strove for a rebirth (Renaissance) of ancient and classical language, education, science, art, and the church. Humanists regarded the Middle Ages as barbaric, so, for example, its art was called “gothic.” This humanist characterization was driven not just by aesthetic and philological criteria but by theological and religious criteria as well. The men and women of the Renaissance projected back into history their own reactions to what they regarded as the superstitious and narrow-minded orthodoxy and authoritarianism of the church of their day. The influence of this humanist perspective continues to be evident in our use of pejorative labels such as “Dark Ages” and “scholastic.”

While it is sometimes said that contemporary culture is fascinated with innovation and the new, the motto of Renaissance culture was ad fontes, back to the sources. The Reformers, most of whom were strongly influenced by humanism, echoed this with regard to Scripture and the early church. Melanchthon characterized the Reformation as the age “in which God recalled the church to its origins” (in qua Deus Ecclesiam iterum ad fontes revocavit: Ferguson 1948: 52). The sense that “older is better” characterized histories of the church stemming from the Reformations. Under the leadership of the Lutheran Matthew Flacius Illyricus (1520–75), a group of scholars developed a history of the church from its beginning down to 1400, titled Historia Ecclesiae Christi. Since this work divided the history of the church into centuries and was begun in the city of Magdeburg, it is also known as the “Magdeburg Centuries.” The Eusebian model remains effective in the “Centuries,” for Flacius argued that the Reformation was the restoration of the original purity of the early church. Not surprisingly for a Lutheran apologist, the key to the faithfulness of the church was seen to be the doctrine of justification by grace alone. The original purity of the church lasted to about 300, and with some reservations even up to 600, but then there was a fall away from the faith due to the expansion of the papacy. In terms of periodization, the “Magdeburg Centuries” present the three periods now familiar to us: the ancient church or time of origins up to the fourth century, the medieval period of decay up to the fifteenth century, and the new period of recovery of the gospel. The historical reality of this tripartite division into ancient, medieval, and modern was little questioned and passed into the schema of universal history by the end of the seventeenth century, as exemplified by the title of Christoph Cellarius’s work, Historia tripartita (1685).

Not to be outdone, the Roman Catholic church responded to the “Magdeburg Centuries” with the Herculean efforts of Caesar Baronius (1538–1607). After years of work in the Vatican archives, Baronius began publishing his study of the history of the church. Baronius proceeded year by year, and hence the title of his work is Annales Ecclesiastici. By the time of his death it had reached the year 1198. No less partisan than Flacius, and equally subject to the Eusebian model, Baronius focused his study on the institution of the papacy rather than the doctrine of justification. These two works illustrate the different understandings of Reformation by the Lutheran and Roman Catholic reform movements. The former focused on the reformation of dogma; the latter focused on renewal of the church as institution.

The dissident movements of the Reformation era were more interested in personal renewal than in either dogma or institution. In terms of church historical writing this tendency came
to the fore in the so-called “impartial” history by Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714): *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* (the full title translates as “The Impartial History of the Church and of Heretics from the Beginnings of the New Testament to the Year of Christ 1688”). To Arnold, the essence of the Christian faith was not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, juridical, or cultic, but rather the personal piety of individuals. From this point of view those whom the churches (Protestant and Catholic) had persecuted as heretics were now seen as the true Christians who had faithfully followed Jesus in opposing the “Babel” of both the established church and the world. The key to the critical reading of the history of the church was seen to be the “rebirth” of individuals. While Arnold’s concept of a “nonpartisan” or “impartial” reading of history should not be equated with more modern attempts at “objectivity,” it is sometimes seen as foreshadowing this effort. Furthermore, the concern with individuals and their conversion experiences foreshadows later interest in biographical and psychological studies of historical figures, such as Erik H. Erikson’s *Young Man Luther* (1958).

However, even with these contributions, Arnold and the dissident reform movements before him, remained in debt to the Eusebian model of church history. For them the consummate epoch of the church was the first three centuries, which they saw as filled with the spirit of freedom, living faith, and holy living. The corruption and decay of the early church began under the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great (d. 337), with the legitimizing of the church in the Roman empire and its consequent participation in Roman power and wealth. Here, too, the Middle Ages were seen as a long period of decline.

The Eusebian model of church history set the stage for the various Reformers’ understandings of their own contexts, and it also illustrates that reflections on history are colored by value judgments. It is all too easy for us today as we stand upon the shoulders of those who went before us to criticize them for being unaware of what now appears self-evident to us. However, every age is marked by what it takes to be self-evident, and hence uncritically taken for granted. This is equally true of us. Thus a recent study of twentieth-century medievalists is titled *Inventing the Middle Ages*. The author writes that our own anxieties, hopes, loves, and disappointments interact with our reading and writing of history. “The ideas of the Middle Ages articulated by the master medievalists vary substantially one from another. The libretto and score they are working from – the data of historical fact – are the same. The truth, therefore, is ultimately not in the textual details but in the interpretations” (Cantor 1991: 45).

**Interpretations of the Reformations**

To cite Cantor (1991: 367) again: “We tend to discover the past we set out to find. This is not because the past is a willfully imagined fiction but because it is such a complicated and multifaceted reality.” Without a perspective, without a horizon, the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of historical data would be helter-skelter. The multiplicity of interpretations may contribute to our understanding as well as to our confusion. Given the existence of varying horizons among historians, it is helpful to both the historian and his or her audience when the horizon is indicated. Mine is that religion and theology are central to understanding the Reformations. I hasten to add that they must be seen in their cultural contexts.
An initial move to control the complicated and multifaceted reality of the Reformation is to define the terms used for it and the era it covers. Until recently that was briefly and simply done. The widely used textbook for undergraduate “Renaissance–Reformation” history courses of the prior generation in America, Harold J. Grimm’s The Reformation Era 1500–1650, quickly disposed of the temporal parameters and the problem of definition: “In these pages the word Reformation is used in its conventional sense, that is, involving the rise of an evangelical Christianity, called Protestantism, that could not accommodate itself to the old theology and ecclesiastical institutions” (Grimm 1973: 2; cf. Cameron 1991: 2).

In more recent scholarship this “conventional sense” of the Reformation has given way to recognition that there was a plurality of Reformations that interacted with each other: Lutheran, Catholic, Reformed, and dissident movements. These multiple reforming movements are not fully understood if explained only in terms of religious reform without account being taken of their historical, political, social, and economic contexts and influences. If we lose sight of the Reformations’ complex network of historical relationships we may oversimplify our conception and evaluation of Reformation theology itself. “After all, this theology had such a great impact in history precisely because it was intricately interwoven into history” (Moeller 1982: 7).

The word “Reformation” has a long, involved history that on the one hand goes back to classical times (cf. Strauss 1995: 1–28) and on the other hand in contemporary undergraduate curricula is almost always associated with the “Renaissance,” as in “Ren–Ref” courses. The medieval use of reformatio may generally be understood in terms of the Eusebian rubric that older is better. Technically, the term was used in relation to the re-establishing of universities in their original condition (e.g. reformatio in pristinum statum. The fourteenth-century conciliar movement used the phrase “reformation of the church in head and members” (reformatio ecclesiae in capite et in membris), meaning by this an ethical appeal to self-reform by individuals. Thus ethical renewal appeared more important than the reform of the church as an institution. This theme is continued in the widely circulated The Reformation of the Emperor Sigismund (ca. 1438), which calls for the restoration of the lost proper order of things through ethical renewal and the re-establishment of God’s order. Similarly, the “Prophecy of Johann Lichtenberger” (1488) spoke of a new reformation, a new law, a new kingdom, and a change among the clergy and the common people. The observance of the law of Christ and of the natural law were to return church and society to their original God-willed condition. In the sixteenth century, “reformation” developed further meanings of improvement and renewal in both ecclesiastical and profane usage.

It is of interest that Luther himself seldom used the term “reformation” apart from his successful effort to create a new curriculum at his own university. The English translation of his significant outline for reform, Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520), suggests Luther’s use of the term, but the title in German denotes “improvement” (Besserung). When Luther does use the term “reformation,” he gives it a new sense: he ties it to doctrine rather than ethical renewal. The crux of genuine reform, he said in an early sermon, is the proclamation of the gospel of grace alone. This requires the reform of theology and preaching but is ultimately the work of God alone. Here Luther differs from all the so-called “forerunners” of the Reformation.