THE OTHER REFORMERS: HIDDEN LIGHTS
IN GOD’S KINGDOM

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When we think of the Protestant Reformation, the names of Luther, Calvin, and Knox immediately come to mind. These men lived exciting lives, filled with drama and danger. Their names were on everyone’s tongues. They were the leaders people all over Europe looked to. They faced the power of the Roman Catholic establishment with courage and perseverance, and established new churches, true to biblical teaching. They rightfully are honored by all succeeding generations of Protestants.

We might ask, “Why were these men so influential and successful in bringing reformation to the church?” Of course, we recognize that God had ordained to use them to bring this Reformation, but he does employ means. God prepared these men, just as he prepared the circumstances in which they lived. I believe there are several factors which came together in their lives; here are some of them: First, they were highly spiritual men, filled with a burning awareness of God’s sovereignty, holiness, and grace; they by faith saw the face of God, and thus feared no man. Second, they were Christian men, that is, they knew the saving grace of Jesus Christ in their own lives; they had accepted him as their Savior and Lord, and were profoundly aware of and grateful for their salvation from sin and God’s wrath. Third, they were gifted men; they possessed extraordinary abilities in scholarship, speaking, and writing. Fourth, they were diligent men; they worked tirelessly, persevering through many years, providing determined leadership to the Reformation. Fifth, they were courageous men; all of them faced the threat of persecution and death for their beliefs and work, yet they did not flinch or soften their stand. Sixth, by God's providence they were right for their times; the circumstances of their own spiritual understanding and growth matched their culture—they rode the crest of the wave of reformation.

This last point causes us to consider “the other reformers.” Luther, Calvin, and Knox did not act alone. They appeared in history at the apex of a great spiritual and social movement that was sweeping Europe. Underneath them surged powerful forces of change, the lives and labors of thousands of other people. In American football you may see a running back make a spectacular run down the field. The announcers and all the crowd will cheer him wildly. Yet that great run was possible only because of the coordinated effort and sacrifice of the entire team; players on the front line strove valiantly and even painfully to open the gap for the runner, while others blocked or distracted the opposing team members. Truly the glory for that exciting run should be shared, although usually the other players are ignored. In the same way, while we thank God for the leaders of the Reformation, let us remember and praise God for the countless “other reformers” who, under God, enabled those leaders to succeed.

It is good for us to consider these other reformers. Many of them made particular contributions to the Reformation which we need to think about. God is always reforming his...
church; and he may use us in a particular way that we have not considered before. By studying these other reformers, possibilities for our own service to God will spring into our minds. Studying these reformers also leads us to humility. “Seek not great things for yourself,” the Lord told Baruch of old. We need not be famous to help the Lord's cause. There are many more in the second and lower ranks than in the first rank, yet the same effort and sacrifice are required, and the same reward will be given by Christ.

**Those Who Took Their Stand**

At the base of the Reformation were the countless thousands of people who trusted in Christ alone for salvation, and who broke with Rome to follow biblical teaching. The Lord alone knows the names of these saints. Each of them had to come to grips with his personal sin, his false faith in works or the church of Rome, his need to trust in the righteousness of Christ alone. The true gospel does not appeal to the flesh, to the pride of man. Man cannot earn his salvation, no matter how holy or zealous his life may appear to be. Each of us must confess his total sinfulness and unworthiness, and cling to Christ alone by faith. This is God’s work in the heart.

For many, the break with Rome must have caused anguish of spirit, fear of reprisal, loss of family and friends, and the hostility of society. They would find no comfort with their priest. The new Protestant ministers were outcasts also, despised by the official church; who could feel safety and comfort with them?

Yet God took them up. “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me” (Ps. 27:10; quotes in this article from the NIV). “Therefore come out from them and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty’” (2 Cor. 6:17-18). God gave tremendous grace to these Reformation believers. They filled the Protestant churches, supported and encouraged their faithful preachers, defended their families and churches in the religious wars, reared youngsters who loved the Bible and the cause of Reformation. Their testimonies, more than those of the leaders, brought thousands of more converts into the Protestant churches.

While most of these converts are not known personally to us, many have become well-known. The course of history was changed by them. For example, after the John Huss was burned at the stake, his followers in Bohemia became so numerous and influential that the pope was unable immediately to crush the young reformation there, as he had hoped. In the same way, the number of converts in Germany kept the pope and the emperor from seizing Luther and putting him to death.

In addition to the church members at large, many fine Christians during those years followed God’s call into the gospel ministry or into writing or teaching in support of the gospel. To the sermons of Luther, Calvin, and Knox, we can add those of hundreds of other learned and dedicated ministers, who faithfully labored in their congregations. Many took pen in hand and wrote fine defenses of the Protestant doctrines and expositions of the Bible. Protestant universities and schools were filled with eager scholars and professors, who systematized and
refined the doctrines of the Reformation.

*Those Who Studied and Taught the Scriptures*

The Reformation found its power primarily in the Bible. In the previous century Gutenberg had developed printing with movable type. This enabled the public at large for the first time to obtain Bibles and other Christian literature at reasonable cost. Suddenly people could compare the church’s preaching and practice with God's Word. Some, such as Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340-1400), the English writer, and Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), the fiery reformer of Florence in Italy, had already attacked the wickedness of the church; but now it was apparent for all to see.

For lasting results, though, it was necessary for people to have the Bible in their hands, in their own language. In giving the Bible to the people, God used several sorts of men. Some were scholars, interested in language and culture, in the works of antiquity. Such scholars were called humanists, since they glorified the works of men of the past, and saw great potential in mankind’s future development. Some humanist scholars unwittingly gave strength to the Reformation by exposing falsehoods from the Roman hierarchy, and by making biblical study more available to the public. Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), himself a secretary to the pope, debunked Rome’s claim to have received the Vatican as a perpetual donation from the emperor Constantine; he also showed that the official Latin Vulgate translation of the New Testament had errors when compared with the Greek. Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), who followed Savonarola in Florence, was an excellent scholar of languages. Fluent in Latin and Greek by age sixteen, he also studied Hebrew, and influenced Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) to study Hebrew; Reuchlin became a great Hebrew scholar and opened the way for the Protestant study of the Old Testament in the original language. Of course, the most famous Christian humanist was Erasmus (1466-1536). While Erasmus remained a Catholic and fought the Reformation, his work aided the Reformation. He wrote scathing satires against the worldliness and wickedness of the popes, clergy, and monks. He edited many Greek and Latin classics and church fathers. Most importantly, he produced four editions of the Greek New Testament, which were widely distributed and formed the basis for many translations into the languages of Europe. It commonly was said, “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.”

The theological underpinnings of the medieval church had to be evaluated and corrected. Martin Luther gave great credit to William of Occam (ca. 1280-1349), calling him “Occam, my dear master.” Occam, the English Franciscan schoolman, powerfully opposed the tyranny of the popes, clergy, and monks. He taught the doctrine that faith must be bestowed by God as a gift. His influence reached not only Luther, but Wycliffe and Huss before him.

For many Reformers, the study and teaching of the Bible was their primary weapon in the fight for truth. John Wycliffe (1320-1384), the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” was the greatest reformer of the fourteenth century. By emphasizing the Bible, he attacked the false doctrines at the foundation of the Roman system. Wycliffe produced the first major translation of the Bible (from Latin) into English. He then sent out his students, the “Lollards,” as poor preachers, traveling from town to town, reading the Bible and preaching to the people. This
produced great fruit throughout England. Wycliffe’s biblical studies led him to abandon the false doctrine of transubstantiation. Wycliffe suffered for his faith and learning, yet he shed a great light which never has been put out.

Wycliffe’s writings led the young Czech student John Huss (1368-1415) to the knowledge of the truth. While a student in England, Huss himself copied by hand many of Wycliffe’s works; some of these copied manuscripts still exist! Back in his own city of Prague, Huss studied and taught, preached and wrote. Huss led many into the knowledge of the truths of Scripture. He remained faithful even though excommunicated, and sealed his testimony with his life, being treacherously imprisoned and burned at the stake.

Even the greatest Reformers had someone to teach them and lead them in biblical study. Martin Luther found such a spiritual father and guide in Johannes von Staupitz (ca. 1460-1524). Himself a biblical and theological scholar who was to become a fellow-professor at Wittenberg with Luther, Staupitz led and encouraged his bright young protégé to study the Bible in order to find his “peace in Christ.” Staupitz, while never leaving the Roman church, did guide Luther to salvation and the root of all Christian truth. Luther called him “my reverend father in Christ.” John Calvin, likewise, did not stand alone. Jaques Lefèvre (1455-1536), the celebrated French scholar, professor, and Reformer, was producing “Protestant” commentaries years before Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses. He produced the French New Testament and other important works, and had to flee his native France for several years. One of Lefèvre’s students was Guillaume Farel (1489-1565), the fiery French Reformer who brought John Calvin to Geneva and worked with him there. The Swiss Reformation itself was begin largely through another biblical scholar, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531); he was a well-trained scholar, especially strong in the classical languages. He once wrote to a friend, “Nothing but God shall prevent me from acquiring Greek, not for fame, but for the sake of the Holy Scriptures.” He even copied out Paul’s epistles in Greek by hand, and learned them by heart. Zwingli’s learning and preaching established the strongly Reformed tradition of the Swiss Reformation and provided the background for the success of Calvin.

Biblical scholars continued throughout the Reformation, making tremendous contributions as they studied the Scriptures and translated and taught them to the preachers and people of their various countries. We have mentioned Jaques Lefèvre's translating the New Testament into French. Of course, Luther himself translated the Bible into German, ably assisted by the scholarly Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560). In England William Tyndale (1494-1536) continued the vital work of John Wycliffe. Being convinced that “it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue,” Tyndale translated the Bible from the original languages into English, and had it published and shipped into England by the thousands. He gave his life as a martyr for this great reforming work. In Scandinavia, what was to become a great Protestant stronghold, Laurentius Petri (1499-1573) led in the translation of the Bible into Swedish; it was joined soon the translation of the New Testament into Danish.

The number of biblical scholars multiplied with the progress of the Reformation. Many of them, such as Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609), the French Huguenot language and textual scholar, lived under constant threat of persecution, being forced to flee for their lives. Yet their
work, often unremarked, laid the foundation for the powerful and confident preaching of the Reformers.

**Those Who Risked Their Lives and Kingdoms**

No study of the Reformation would be complete without reference to the brave secular rulers who supported the biblical teaching against the pope and the emperor. In the early years of the German Reformation, several rulers were the only protection for the infant movement. Frederick the Wise, duke of Saxony (1463-1525), stands out as a striking example. Although he remained a pious Catholic, Frederick was a just and fair ruler who took seriously his responsibilities. He refused to allow his subject Martin Luther to be taken away to Rome without a fair trial. He insisted on Luther’s being given a hearing at the Diet of Worms; and then, when the emperor declared Luther an outlaw, he arranged for Luther’s “kidnapping” and safe refuge at the Wartburg castle. Frederick did receive both the bread and the cup before his death from Spalatin, Luther’s friend; both Luther and Melanchthon preached at his funeral. Frederick’s brother John the Constant openly declared himself a follower of Luther, and continued to promote the Reformation in his territory.

The Diet of Augsburg in 1530 provided a dramatic moment for the Protestant rulers. Luther was not able to attend; the emperor Charles V demanded all the princes to return to the Roman church, under dire threat of invasion and a new inquisition. Nevertheless, the outnumbered princes stood firm. They signed the Augsburg Confession, drafted by Melanchthon, and openly defied the emperor. Their names have long been remembered with respect: John, duke of Saxony, elector; George, margrave of Brandenburg, elector; Philip, Landgrave of Hesse; Francis and Ernest, dukes of Lüneburg; and representatives from the free cities of Nuremberg and Reutlingen. It is said that the public reading of this German document at the diet took two hours. After it was read, these rulers, even though they were not preachers or theologians, publicly assented to this Protestant confession, at risk of their lives and kingdoms. God used them to protect the Reformation and its adherents in that critical time.

These and other rulers fought to defend the Reformation. Philip of Hesse led in the formation of the Protestant Smalcald League, which stood against the aggression of the Catholic princes of Europe. Later, in the Thirty Years War, wave after wave of Catholic persecution and aggression was resisted by brave Protestant princes and their armies. Frederick V in Bohemia was one ruler who fought and lost the battle, losing his crown. King Christian IV of Denmark fought bravely, with English help. King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden was a greatly gifted general who swooped through much of Europe, liberating large areas captured by the Catholic rulers; he was later killed in battle. The young King Edward VI of England and later his sister Queen Elizabeth I struggled against the Catholic rulers of the Continent and conspiracies in their own country in order to maintain and protect the Protestant heritage. While some princes fought for carnal motives, others truly believed the truths of the Reformation, and were willing to sacrifice their lives and kingdoms for Christ. They protected their people and gave a shelter for those teaching the truths of the Bible.
Those Who Suffered for the Reformation

Savonarola and Huss both suffered martyrdom because they opposed the Roman hierarchy, long before Luther's Reformation. Luther, Calvin, and Knox all lived as hunted men, yet they were able to complete their lives and die of natural causes. This was not the case with many of the other Reformers. Historical records are full of accounts in which brave Protestants sealed their faith with their blood. Without these martyrs, the influence of the Reformation may well have died out. The victims of the papal aggression died by the thousands. Some died on the battlefield. Others were tortured and put to death in dreary dungeons of the Inquisition, or publicly burned at the stake.

It is true that there were martyrs on both sides, but during the Reformation years the Protestant martyrs far outnumbered the Roman Catholics. Much publicity has surrounded the martyrdom of the English Catholic Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More, who was beheaded by Henry VIII; there even is a popular movie about him, *A Man for All Seasons*, in which he is played sympathetically by Richard Burton. Yet, under Queen Mary many English leaders in state and church were not only executed, but painfully burned at the stake. I do not know of any popular movie made about these martyrs. These English martyrs were well known and respected throughout the country. They included the aged Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury; Bishop John Hooper, who was a well known scholar and Reformer, having studied all over Europe, and a devoted preacher and pastor; Bishop Nicholas Ridley, a biblical scholar who had learned much of the Bible by heart; and Bishop Hugh Latimer, the famous popular preacher. As they were burning together, Latimer called out to his friend Ridley, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out!” Their faithfulness in death left an indelible impression on their countrymen.

This article could not possibly do justice to note all the martyrs who suffered for the Reformation. In Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, England—all over Europe and the world—hundreds of thousands willingly suffered pain and death to be faithful to their consciences and the Word of God. John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (later popularly known as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*), written in 1563, details some of these accounts. That book greatly influenced his own time and the centuries after him. Just as in the early days of the church, in the words of the church father Tertullian, “The blood of the martyrs is seed,” so in the Reformation their blood was indeed “the seed of the church.”

God used many people to bring reformation to his church. All are important and precious to him. Therefore, while we rightly honor Luther, Calvin, and Knox, let us also remember and be grateful for the “Other Reformers,” those “hidden lights in God’s kingdom.”