

How to Bring About a Reformation

A critical re-consideration about most recent theories in Historiography


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by

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1 Einleitung

Almost 10 years ago a book entitled „Reformation theories – a dispute on unity and pluriformity of the Reformation“ was published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in Goettingen. Three well-known protestant Church Historians – Berndt Hamm from Erlangen, Bernd Moeller from Göttingen, and Dorothea Wendebourg, at that time in Erlangen, now Berlin – discussed the phenomenon of „ormation“ with regard to its unity or diversity. Even though an effort had been made to develop a unified method of understanding the Reformation, this dispute showed that even in the beginning, deeper frictions dominated the research.

To start with – the proposed use of the singular “Reformation“ was anything but evident. Reformation history, as it was liberated or loosened – depending on which side you are on – from the methods and doctrinal presuppositions of theology, came to reside more and more under the heuristic methods of social history. Historiography now tried to work out models to interpret the general relation of religious-theological development and ecclesiastical settings with  social, economical, political, cultural context. This process of a developing historiographical reflection was accompanied by a shift in interest from the history of ideas, especially theological ideas, to Church History, specifically, the history of institutions, structures and processes of transformation. The former systematically focused on confessionally driven inquiries into the life and work of Martin Luther, while the latter emphasized a more general view of leading motifs

and structures using a comparative approach. Initially, research concentrated on reformers and their opponents next to Luther. The interdisciplinary initiated dialog focused next on the structures of Luther's Reformation and its interpretation. Finally the focus changed from a merely systematic interest within the context of ecumenical dialogue after World War II to the historiographical paradigm of confessionalization.

I will not be able to sketch this shift and related processes of thought in total. Nevertheless, I would like to summarize research approaches and their results, and I will do that in three steps. The first section briefly sums up most recent theories. The second section focuses on an historical proof with regard to a brief sketch of reformations in Europe. The final section articulates some critique and an outlook with regard to further research (including some attractive subjects for dissertations in church history).

2 Most recent theories in Church history: What is a reformation?


Gerhard Müller, one of the „big wigs“ of Reformation historiography scetches in his article for the – catholic (sic!) - Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche his understanding of „reformation“:

Reformation describes an episode in the time between the 16th und 17th centuries, that since Leopold von Ranke is defined as „Zeitalter der Reformation“ (time of the Reformation). What this implies and how its timely limitations can be understood in detail is highly disputed.

Some years later the Tübingen chair for Church History, Ulrich Köpf, gave a more focused theological definition. In his article for the fourth edition of the – protestant (sic!) - Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart he writes:

We understand Reformation (coming from the Latin: reformatio) as developments exclusively initiated by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and others which in the 16th century caused the separation of Churches lasting until to contemporary times.

Both authors continue with a longer excursion into the history of the term „reformation“. Obviously we can distinguish two alternative concepts: Müller looks to reformation with in the larger developments of the empire and its legal settings. Köpf focuses on the important role of the reformers and their theological initiatives in general. Reformation thus is, according to Koepf, a more or less theological development. These are the focal points at which further dispute took place.

Anglo-Saxon research denied for a long time the need for theoretical debate. For example, in Carter Lindbergh's article on the Reformation in „ Encyclopedia of Protestantism,“ of 2004, we read the following:

The Reformation of the sixteenth century with deep medieval roots and variegated fruits affected every aspect of early modern life. Its evangelical sprouts not only hardened into many of the contemporary branches of Protestantism, but also intertwined with the growth of early modern Catholicism. The taxonomy of the Reformation focuses on the reformers with the supposition that without them there would have been no Reformation. At the same time, to carry our garden image a bit further, it is clear that any analysis of growth must take into account the soil and environment.

Lindbergh then sketches some of the classical interpretations of the Wittenberg Reformation as well as the reformations in Germany, Switzerland, England, and Northern and Eastern Europe. His article ends with Trent to give a short mention of what was provoked by the Reformation „on the other side.“ What “reformation” is, how it was caused, carried out, etc., seems not to need further explanation; such information is assumed.

2.1 Continuity and Concurrence –Reformation as change of epochs


Traditionally the theological interpretation of Luther and the Reformation saw Luther's programmatic writings of 1520 combined with the effects of the Edict of Worms 1521 as resting on the borderline between the medieval and early


modern periods. Luther's address to the nobles in Germany, his tract on the Babylonian captivity of the church, and finally his German Latin book on the freedom of a Christian formulated a program which was initially carried out in Wittenberg and electoral Saxony. These locations served as a model for the later, more widespread "Lutheran Reformation," copies of his literature being found even in reformed areas like Upper Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe.

However, more recent research has exposed the deep roots of the theology of Luther and other reformers as lying within the late medieval setting. It was the highly influential Heiko Augustinus Oberman and several of his doctoral students, among others, who investigated the relationships between Luther and various aspects of the theological tradition, such as Augustinianism, scholasticism, mysticism, monasticism, and humanism, in order to discern their influence upon the later development of Luther and his heirs.

The strong focus on intellectual history and the relation of ideas addressed the more historical question concerning the reception of Luther and his reform attempts, especially in secular, non-ecclesiastical dimensions. This aspects were the spring board for Bernd Moeller.

2.2 Bernd Moeller - Die Rezeption Luthers in der frühen Reformation

Moeller is certainly one of the most prolific theological church historians y to overcome a certain personalized interpretation of the Reformation as a result of Luther's theological writings. He looked instead at the relationships and networks through which reformation could take place. He developed this interdisciplinary endeavor during his younger years within the larger research field of City (and) Reformation and was able to initiate a broad and still ongoing discussion.

While the direction of his research provoked some concern that questions of theological relevance might be pushed to the margins, Moeller's efforts actually contributed to theological research, too. In his work, he distinguishes between Luther and the Reformation, wherein the latter is to be understood as eption


of Luther's theological, critical, and pious reform ideas. Information starts with receiving Luther's writings and communicates them. Moeller shows the incredible success of Luther's books and tracts which virtually flooded the book market. That said, we might then ask of what did this overwhelming reception consist. It seems, as it turns out, that the people were less influenced by Luther's message with regard to its "rebellious" nature and reform ideas, and more influenced by its comforting and consoling content. In short, Luther was seen as a Pastor.

After 1524 the common understanding of the Wittenberg Reformation began to diminish as a process of particularization and differentiation took place. Some groups – Muentzer, spiritualists, Anabaptists, dissenters and nonconformists – separated – or got separated – from Wittenberg mainstream theology. The one Reformation became a „variety of reformation movements.“ Nevertheless, Moeller states that a common awareness of Luther's initiation of an ongoing process of reform survived. People knew about the "Reformation" which probably had not ended late medieval times but certainly made late medieval theology and piety impossible.

It is that Moeller criticizes a certain superficial understanding of a new epoch started with Luther. He also rejects any interpretation that understands the Reformation as a radical breaking away from, or religious awakening out of, a dark, gloomy, and backward period of ecclesiological crisis at the turn of the sixteenth century. One major reason for Luther's' success was his groundbreaking reform of late medieval meritum-doctrine, which he overcame with his singular re-interpretation of essential Christian thought. Again, Moeller emphasizes that Luther did not break away from ecclesiastical tradition, but rather kept certain predispositions of late medieval theology.


Luther's main grammatic claims or demands secured certain homogeneity of the Reformation even after the Peasant's War, although the process of diversification was irreversible. Moeller is able to combine the junction of late


medieval piety with its roots in traditional theology in Luther's thought by simultaneously looking for Luther's cracking of the system from within.


This interpretation allows a merger of historical research, especially concerning the impact of printing and publishing in early 16th century, with methods coming from the history of ideas or historical theology. But we have to admit the question of how se developments were performed remains to be answered.

2.3 Berndt Hamm – cracking the late medieval system of “theology of piety”



Berndt Hamm – like Moeller – claims a strong linkage between late medieval and reformation theology. Hamm accentuates more than Moeller, though, the inner multiversity of late medieval theology and its pious manifestations. With respect to this diversity he denies an inner unity of the Reformation movement(s). Even then, however, Hamm does not want to give up a general, inner common sense about those things which secure life and its orientation in times of greatest affliction and temptation. He characterizes this awareness of community as a well-known and conscious consensus and common attitude.

Against this backdrop, Hamm looks for the point of no return, the breakthrough when Luther cracks the medieval system of ecclesiastically/sacramentally guaranteed grace and salvation. Where is the ? Where is the system spoiled? What is the potential of Luther's critique and renewal? For Hamm, everything that not only distorts but cracks the system in the form of an irreversible change, thereby making a continuation from within the late medieval framework impossible, constitutes “Reformation theology.” He is not looking merely for dissent or marginalized piety. To his understanding “reformation theology” implies – without oversimplifying – any theological approach, which in coming from within, turns everything, or at least the major and essential issues, upside down.



Continuing this reasoning, Hamm looks for the nmon sense of the Reformation divided into 33 issues, which derive from the leading principle „sola

scripturae“. It is not so much these issues in concert which defines the unity of the Reformation, he argues, but rather the movement’s presence in various aspects of sixteenth century life (Lebenswelten). Although Hamm finds a lot of affinities and related  in late medieval theology and piety, the „Reformation“ was a development uniquely initiated and maintained by Luther and his followers as a result of his challenge to the late medieval system of sacramental mediation through that groundbreaking insight, „sola gratia, sola scriptura, and solus Christus.“

2.4 *Dorothea Wendebourg*


The last and youngest of the three competing Church Historians is Dorothea Wendebourg from Erlangen, Berlin. She claims, contrary to the previously mentioned theories, that the unity of the Reformation was created by the Roman counteraction to it, i.e., the judgments of the Council of Trent. As she argues, a fundamental unity did not exist in the early years of the Reformation; rather, there appears to be a great variety of personal opinion among the Reformers, including some major differences, regarding how to advance the movement. They are united in ing the system of sacramental distributed grace with its meritorious elements, but this is all. Thus, Wendebourg uses the plural instead of the singular: reformations versus *the* Reformation. Finally, she rejects  consequence and argues that in the end we have two larger blocs: Catholic and Protestant, the Reformation being the context in which these two great Christian communions were formed. Indeed, the separation of the two occidental churches is the *result* of the Reformation. Any variety in its later development can be traced back to the very beginnings of the Wittenberg movement.


However you look to the individual theory. The dispute showed an even greater variety about the Reformation(s) than we have historical evidence for.

Nevertheless, the questions of at constitutes a “reformation” and exactly how one might be put forward remain unanswered. cause the dispute was initiated and performed by theologians only the interdisciplinary dimension lacks respect.



2.5 Volker Leppin – How “reformation” was the Reformation?



A young colleague of mine, Volker Leppin from Jena, picked up the dispute and made the secular historical challenge to theology the subject of his introductory lecture in 2001. Contradicting Heinz Schilling’s provocative thesis that theologians lost the Reformation, Leppin claims that even though the question of an interpretation of the Reformation as lying on the borderline of the epochs can no longer be discussed, the subject of “Reformation” is still one of intensive research for theologians.

Leppin takes issue with Schilling’s mighty statement in his analysis of the relation between the word, ormation,“ as an adjective and „Reformation“ as a noun. On the background of his subtle investigation into the understanding of Luther in the 20th century in comparison to his Zurich antagonist Huldreich Zwingli, he comes to the result that Reformation was not reformation in the way that we could easily relate the adjective to the noun. What reformation means is less rooted in historical processes related to the Reformation *per se*, and is much more the result of a post-Reformation interpretation of its main actors, and even more the result of an identifying process which has been discussed over the last year under the label, “confessionalization.”

The appearance of unity in the Reformation is, according to Leppin, the result of a theologically intended re-construction: the one hand the next generation of confessional legitimated theologians needs a certain identity; on the other hand controversy arises between the new established confessions and their defining, which also means limiting confessions like the Augsburg Confession and later the Formula of Concord or the decrees and canons of Trent. Less accentuated than Wendebourg, Leppin refers to the Protestant, Pauline-Augustine, radically anti-pelagian understanding of justification and grace. He focuses on ecclesiology and interprets of the removal of boundaries between lay and clergy a the greatest blow to strike and destroy the traditional ‘system’ of institutionalized distribution of grace.

2.6 Thomas Kaufmann – „Theology of the Reformers“ versus „Reformation“

While Leppin's approach demands a stronger interdisciplinary engagement in order to find a more unified understanding of Reformation on the one hand, and on the other to describe more precisely the variety of Reformation processes and structures poses another young colleague from Goettingen, Thomas Kaufmann, vehemently. He inquires as to the function of "Reformation" within the dispute about its epoch-making character. Kaufmann argues that most interpretations of Reformation are by certain theological contents which are not reflected in detail. He pleads for strict separation of the study into two categories: (1) a more historical, secular if not worldly understanding of Reformation as "syndrome" with all its implication for society, culture, economy etc., and (2) Reformation as the particular process of transformation occurring around 1520ff, with its manifestations of theological programs and its mediation of theology becoming a groundbreaking new piety in the sixteenth century. He proposes this in order to keep the term open for an interdisciplinary dialogue, especially with social history, sociology and other sciences.

Kaufmann's argument is directed against deducing only one cause of the historical processes called Reformation, namely the theological writings of Luther. This argument is made with less concern for certain hermeneutical reflections as it is to keep the historiographic term "Reformation" open for a potentially wide and broad definition that allows one to speak of an "epoch of Reformation." According to Kaufmann we have to separate the theology of the reformation from the Reformation itself , to separate them permanently, but heuristically, in spite of a various and interfering complex theory of Reformation in which they get re-related again.

2.7 Critique

Even after ten years of debate, the results are far from satisfying. In short, the theological claim of secular historiography has not worked out. Theological

historiography has too many irons in the fire and wastes time and resources in a very detailed discussion about the inner unity of the Reformation not realizing that the train of research has left the station days, if not weeks ago.


Nevertheless, the discussion that is not performed by second and third generation researchers leads back to the very essence of Church History and its function for Theology: does Church History, provoked either by certain expectations of potential consumers or by some kind of self-demanding performance of confessional apologetics, serve simply as a legitimizing science for the confessional churches?

This is a heavy burden for the representatives within interdisciplinary dialogue. As long as church history, due to a certain lack of self-reflection, does not find its place within the *orbis litterarum*, the circle of disciplines, it has no right to complain about the fact that many subjects of its research, theses or theories are taken up by other disciplines that compete in the race for a valid, universal interpretation of reality and truth.


3 European Reformations – a Typology

From the historical point of view there was not *one* Reformation in the beginning of the sixteenth century, but a multiform, highly complex series of phenomena that varied from town to town and territory to territory. Usually, the process began with some years of intensive theological work, creating an awareness of the need for reform, eventually in all levels of society. This awareness was necessary, but not sufficient. Rather, reformation required in society both a capacity for and openness toward certain acts of reform. Such openness was demonstrated by demands for reform from pressure groups in the last decades of the late medieval period. Even then, it seems to me that this is not enough. The theological initiatives of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were successful not because of their unique character within theology, but because of their profound linkage with a complex network of reform ideas as well as political, social, and economic pressure toward change. These circumstances allowed the implementation of theological ideas through concrete action. In short, reformation theology,

especially its popular transmission through sermons and other Mass-orientated communication media like hymns, songs, poetry, short tracts and broadsheets, required a set of political and sociological circumstances in order to come to fruition.

One major issue certainly was the situation in the empire. The emperor's authority depended very much on the electoral princes and was at least in some aspects even controlled by them. This balanced system was then impacted by international forces like the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the rivalry with France, and the highly complicated relationship to Rome. Finally we should not neglect the various effects of the transatlantic expansion into middle and South America. h these in mind, then, I would like to sketch out some different types of reformation in Europe.

3.1 Nobles Reformation from above

Research has always given much attention to the great importance of territorial noble authority, thereby developing the model of a Reformation by the Princes. With regard to the majority of territories within the German Empire, it is true that the potential for a reformation re ruled by the noble leaders. Due to the long-lasting, Middle Age-based property church system (Eigenkirchenwesen) and its consequences for the balanced system of authorities within the Reich, territorial nobles reformed their churches and monasteries in their realms. Although it may have seemed difficult to do, accepting the final proposals of the Reformers in Wittenberg such as Frederic III, electoral prince of Saxony, who protected Luther with respect to his own imperial interests. In fact the elector did not really support the university's agenda for reform. A much stronger support took place when his successor, Johann, took over the throne. On the other hand, Philipp, the young prince of Hessen, enforced very early on the reform-oriented groups in his territory, probably because of his personal relation to Melanchthon, whom he met at the diet in Frankfurt. Under the influence of theologians like Martin Bucer and Lambert of Avignon, Philipp merged the Wittenberg model with elements of the reforms in Zurich and Upper Germany.

One of the most important events leading to the success of evangelical reform in Germany was the conversion of Albrecht von Hohenzollern, Hochmeister (???) of the German Order to the evangelical movement in 1525, and with it the opening of the German Order's estate (Preussen) toward the Empire. This led to the opening of territories in the North East of the Empire - Hochstifte Brandenburg (1539), Halberstadt (1541) and Merseburg (1544) and finally Magdeburg (since 1524 – ultimately 1566) – which took over the structure of the Wittenberg Reformation.

Fairly early on, the Wittenberg Reformation was accepted by larger groups within the lower nobility. The imperial knights especially were in a difficult situation. Impacted by economic decline, they were losing more and more of their social function. No new duties were in sight. It is no wonder, then, that they connected their pursuit of social and political survival with religious reform ideas. Like later developments in the cities or within the peasant's war, many reform ideas of the Wittenberger's seem to match with demands of the nobility. Later, probably because of certain disappointment with the progress of political emancipation this clear reformation preference began to shift toward catholic reform, but in 1521 the Reformation was accepted in the Habsburg estates in Austria to the last educated noble. In the Steiermark a flourishing evangelical church was established, likewise in the Northwest of Germany where the nobility enforced evangelical reforms.





Looking upon the wider horizon of Europe we will find the kings and princes responsible for the implementation of Wittenberg reform ideas as it happened in Denmark and Sweden, the monarchs ruling territories in Norway, Finland and Iceland. This model of a "Reformation from above" can also be applied to Lithuania, which at that point was in a close connection with Poland. Finally we should speak of a nobles reformation in England, although the English developments are in many ways unique to reformation history.

3.2 *How secular authorities dealt with the demand for Reformation*

While we cannot neglect the effects of the differences in state authority between territories, it is enough to say that a common set of measures among secular authorities seems to characterize the implementation of the Wittenberg Reformation. Next to some kind of popular propaganda for reform the most essential medium for transmitting theological ideas into a broader context was, according to Moeller, the evangelical sermon. It transformed academic issues into a mere elementary reformation ideology and with that opened the situation for a wider discourse on reform. Simultaneously it created an awareness of the situation of the church and of the need for reform. Of undoubted importance was Luther's writing to the German nobility – probably connected to other of his most programmatic writings of 1520. In the focus of many of these writings we will find the need for liturgical reform, i.e. the search for a biblical understanding of liturgy and an evangelical worship. This desire was closely connected to the request for the abolition of unbiblical or non related rites and practices: prohibition of silent masses, a more biblical and clear language during mass and worship, the question of appropriate vestments, how and when to attend Eucharist, pictures and sculptures in church, relics etc., up to the clearance of popular habits and the abolition of pilgrimages, processions, veneration of pictures and sculptures in the public, and much more. An essential field of reform was social engagements: introduction of public budgets administrated by the magistrate or special officers, health care and poor relief, abolition of loitering and begging, etc.


On January 24, 1522 the magistrate of Wittenberg passed a new ordinance for the city which became the model for many other church, school or hospital ordinances in Germany. special importance was the creation of commissions to put forward the regulations of the local authorities through visitations and regular meetings. Specifically, the consistory replaced the traditional Episcopal supervision and withdrew the reformed territories and estates from ecclesiastical rules and administration. Consequently, this pushed forward the establishment of evangelical territorial churches (Landeskirchen) which unfortunately undermined

the awareness of evangelical catholicity, i.e. the knowledge of a certain community which is not limited by local or territorial borders. With that the natural consciousness of unity of the church faded. Indeed, the „Instruction for the Visitors“ of 1527-28 became an electoral Saxon model for how to bring about a reformation. Its copies are countless, and several subsequent modifications made this ordinance applicable to specific features of local or territorial environments elsewhere.

The conviction of the priesthood of all believers and, consequently, the denial of an ontological difference between laity and clergy became the most essential theological basis for these reforms. One very important consequence of Luther's initiative was the change of the social role and function of clergy: they became citizens with a certain place in society. s place had to be legalized in a permanent struggle for secular acceptance. Luther's critical view of religious vows and thus of the religious lifestyle destroyed the traditional monastic orders and challenged many munities and religious assemblies, not at least his own order of the Augustinian Hermits. As a result, Luther and others necessarily felt the need for a common evangelical ordination formula for evangelical ministers  other ministries in the new establishing evangelical church.  still a lack of critical ecclesiological reflection with regard to these questions and their consequences for the understanding of Eucharistic practices that complicates ecumenical talks even today.


In addition to these political developments, several reformation attempts took place in parallel to humanistically influenced reform attempts regarding education. A considerable number of schools were newly founded, others underwent a thorough process of reform. At some places universities and institutions for higher education were profoundly influenced by the evangelical reformation. „Scholastic“ became the term associated with the backward, reform-resisting propensity characteristic of the ecclesiastically dominated, inflexible, conservative system. A rather unreflective, anti-scholastic, anti-roman, anti-clergy movement then took over this critique and turned it also against the evangelical

reformers; education became understood in a utilitarian sense with regard to essential features for a later career in business or public administration. In some aspects it merged with a general radicalism against everything and everybody.

 profound decline in matriculation during the third decade of the sixteenth century was certainly not caused by this development – e.g., as Erasmus critically noted that wherever reformation takes place education declines – but we cannot deny that certain radical reformers or evangelical dissenters provoked a climate which manifested a certain hostility to academic education and its representatives.

We have to bear in mind that, however, that the majority of these attempts were made for the purpose of reform in the Western Church and not to prompt a separation or founding of a new evangelical church. Nevertheless, certain ecclesiastical initiatives, like the ordination of priests or bishops (e.g., the ordination of Georg Roerer 1524 in Wittenberg as first evangelical minister, and later, that of Nicholas of Amsdorf in Naumburg as first evangelical bishop), in fact repudiated traditional practices along with their theological presuppositions regarding the Church as the unique institution for the distribution of God's saving grace.

3.3 Reformation from below

Looking over reformation history, we have to admit the ndant of these reformation attempts initiated and put forward by noble authorities, a reformation from below coming from lower layers of society. Marxist research especially has focused on these developments, interpreting reformation – especially the Peasants' War and its prominent representative, Thomas Muentzer – as an “early bourgeois revolution,” an important step forward within the Marxist pattern of history. With the destruction of the “iron curtain” (manifested in the Berlin Wall) and the reorganization of the former Eastern Bloc this work ended and only some hard-headed, ignorant people continue to publish in some marginal contributions this completely defeated view. Therefore we can skip this chapter of yesterday's research.

Other research, independent of the previously mentioned work,

has established a concept that tries to respect the variety of reform movements within the general phenomenon called „Reformation“. As Hans Juergen Goertz, the Mennonite historian from Hamburg writes: „In the early years of the Reformation, we witness the sudden arrival of various reform oriented movements: anticlerical, humanist, reformation, radical-reformation, imperial knights, peasants, and citizens.“ These movements are united at two focal points: a) the gospel with its radical normation of spiritual as much as secular life style, and b) a strong manifestation of anticlericalism. Again, this is rooted deeply in medieval developments. Medieval reform movements became stronger because of the energetic focus on the Gospel. The traditional anticlericalism is deepened and bolstered by the new doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. However, Goertz sees the anticlericalism as a stronger force for reformation than other theological issues. Anticlericalism became the core of a socio-religious movement. For Goertz, the revolt against clergy was the beginning of the Reformation.

This approach has provoked a lot of criticism. A number of researchers seem unhappy with the use of the sociological term „movement.“ Also, Goertz does not clearly differentiate between the scope and effect of these movements. He looks at each movement equally, which distorts the historical picture. Obviously, one cannot compare the ongoing demand for reform in the cities with the relatively shorter term revolts of ,say, the imperial knights or other marginal groups.

I would follow this up with another challenge. I do not trust the claim that anticlericalism initiated the total of the Reformation. It certainly functioned as some kind of catalyst. But was it powerful enough to develop the visionary power of reformation theology and its transformation into concrete developments in evangelical society? This said, Goertz’s interpretation has to be respected as an essential clue to discerning the unique nature of the starting point of the Reformation.

3.4 City Reformation

A.G. Dickens once characterized the German Reformation as „an urban event,” by which he referred to the potential of the German cities to advance reformation theology along with its political, social, cultural etc. manifestations. Since 1918, when Alfred Schultze published a thesis along the same lines. Finally, in 1962, Bernd Moeller made a breakthrough with his well known book, „Imperial City and Reformation.“ This work detailed a large amount of research showing how a certain common sense of responsibility developed in the cities, that then merged with bourgeois self-esteem, demand for better education, and participation in ecclesiastical discussions. The German City during late medieval times had a tendency to understand itself as the miniature version of a “corpus christianum.” Magistrates were already trying to gain more and more influence the presentation of clergy and ministers long before Reformation took place. Thus, there already existed a number of reform-oriented clergy installed when reformation ideas emerged. In addition, a certain shared identity of political and ecclesiastical community emerged. Political decisions were no longer just secular but received religious dignity. Especially in the upper German territories, cities as centers of reformation mushroomed and spread reformation ideas into the rural vicinity. Not only this, but recent research pointed out that the Hanse Cities in the North had a specific development which also should not be underestimated with regard to the growth of the Reformation in Germany.

Along with the issue of identity, it is important to note the infrastructure of cities that allowed the establishment of reformation ideas and measurements, not to mention a higher standard of education and the formation of institutions of (higher) education. The printing press became the instrument of communication. Intellectuals of all kind were able to print their ideas and establish communication on the most relevant issues of reform. The cities provided different markets in which to sell these books and find jobs for living. Such opportunities were used to advance both various reform ideas and a strong anticlerical sentiment. The common self-confidence of citizens was a particularly ideal breeding ground for

anticlerical ideas, for these merged with the citizens' search for greater political autonomy. Even sermons had provided for centuries a certain critique of the church and its manifest dominance in all dimensions of life. Further developments in cities during the centuries preceding Luther, such as demands for free election of public officials combined demands for reform of church management, also helped pave the way for reformation

Furthermore, a certain resistance to imperial politics became linked to religious resistance against Rome. In the case of the Netherlands, evangelical reform became merged with a strong opposition against Hapsburg hegemony. The religious cry for freedom became an even stronger echo in the demand for political autonomy. Because the Spanish military had eliminated most of the traditional ruling elites (nobility), the city authorities stepped in and became leaders in the lower countries' fight for freedom. Thus, in the Netherlands, Reformation was manifested more as a City Reformation than a Nobles' Reformation, displaying the same features of reformation found in Geneva or even Zurich: public disputations, an oligarchic regime and consensus about the evangelical measures to be advanced.

We should not overlook that citizens, in addition to magistrates and elders, demanded reform and put the reformation ideas into practice. They started to expel unwilling clergy and forced the magistrates to act. In order to determine whether this phenomenon has parallels in rural developments, we turn to Peter Blicke, the Bern researcher on communalism and peasant reform.


3.5 Reformation in the countryside

Recent research has demonstrated that rural-based reform movements were initiated, not merely as products of city reform, but as simultaneous and more independent developments. Some movements merged into urban ones, while others remained independent, yet still affecting developments in towns and cities. Peter Blicke focuses on these movements and summarizes them in the term „communal reformation.“ He argues that since the medieval period the rural


society had been organized after the model of communities/parishes. The prototype/model was the small village or hamlet which was functionally related to all other performances of rural government. The principle of community is manifested in the election of all administrative or governing representatives, financial supervision, local ordinances, and resistance against territorial authorities. Even though this provided a certain autonomy, it was limited by overarching territorial authorities, both ecclesiastical and secular. Although Blicke reminds us that these authorities still influenced local decision-making, the general tendency toward greater institutional autonomy cannot be overlooked. Of course, the principles of political community corresponded to ecclesiastical structures. According to Blicke, the theologies of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, inflamed the debate for communal autonomy enforced by theological insights and foundations.




Blicke extends his interpretation to point out that the convergence of theological claims and communal demands shows also corresponds to urban calls for reform. Cities are structures and administrated analogously to villages. Cities try to protect and develop their autonomy not following the model of villages and hamlets but parallel. Cities likewise villages turn toward more autonomy especially with regard to political questions and changes within the law in the cities. According to his research he seem to be able showing that in cities the principle of communalism pushes much more toward exclusivity than in rural areas ever. From this point of view Blicke concludes that reformation theology legitimized communal principles with an even higher dignity than just functional or rational logic. Thus, anticlericalism, social revolt, and communalism converged and provided fertile soil for the Reformation *particula exclusiva - sola scriptura, sola gratia, solus christus*.

Blicke's concept encountered considerable criticism. Some researchers, such as Goertz, argue that his theoretical approach abstracts too much, inadequately describing the individual and unique features of rural or peasant reform, or of communalism and its parallels with city reformation. Blicke's interpretation is too


superficial and general to understand the phenomenon – or phenomena – of Reformation. However, Blickle's critics do credit him with being one of the first to analyze Reformation within the wider horizon of European developments. h that he was able to find more parallels that detail focused research had explored previously, And to demonstrate the notion that the high compatibility of reformation message with the demand for more autonomy within rural and urban societies constitutes a major aspect of Reformations within Europe.

3.6 Reformations and Reform



Two more dimensions of reformation research should be mentioned. We have already pointed to the complaints of the German nations (i.e., ates) about reform announced to many diets since 1454. Ecclesiastical finances, privileges for clergy, their inappropriate lifestyle and the general demand for reform where particularly important. More and more, the demands focused on a general reform in church and the holy Roman Empire of German nations.

For a long time Luther's tract to the German Nobles ... of 1520 was interpreted in this context. His „Babylonian captivity of the church' was also connected to the vamina movement. wever, I opt for a subtler and more careful interpretation. neither there is a monocausal connection evident, nor a relation especially to the later Babylonian captivity has ever been proven. Rather, it is clear that the stronger growing demand for reform fueled Reformation theology and vice versa. parallel we have to admit that certain sympathies for Luther were developed on the basis of an extremely superficial and not theological rooted parallel thinking which was on the long run evidently not to trust. The more that the Wittenberg Reformers had to transform their general views into concrete political, social, cultural, or economic action, the more that sympathy faded and competing views arose. Indeed, some movements may have emerged out of disappointment with their actions.

In the wider context of Europe, the Reformation merged extensively with national, ethnic and cultural emancipation movements. Such was true the northern parts of

the Netherlands, Lithuania, England, and France. Intentionally religious dialogue mutated into political discussions. The theological roots were cut and substituted with political ideas. Finally, religious ideas became instrumentalized for inter-state conflict, resulting often in military action. 


3.7 Reform of Clergy and Reformation

A second topic was raised by a Berlin colleague of mine, Kaspar Elm. His research concentrated on religious orders and their reform ideas. In his recent publications he provoked Protestant readers in particular with the thesis that Luther's reformation cut off the Catholic reform movements of the fifteenth century. Thus, Trent's challenge was how to resume those reforms after Luther. Due to the traumatizing effects of the separation of churches, any further reform attempt was ciplined and forced into the Tridentine frame. According to Elm, such limitation hindered the late medieval reform and its focus on unity and the visible manifestation of the true Church of Christ. Especially within religious orders, any critique or attempt at change came under suspicion of sympathy with Luther and his ideas. This was even more true with regard to actual demands for reform, because in most, if not all, of his reform attempts, her rooted deeply in medieval reform movements even a more moderate continuation within the orders were no longer possible. This greatly endangered even Luther's own order, the observant branch of the Augustinian Hermits. Since 1518, and especially after the Worms' edict, the order nearly dried out, losing more than ninety percent of its members.




Elm's arguments are not completely without confessional bias. Obviously, he is looking to apologize for, if not explain, the absolute inability of Roman theologians, if not Roman theology, to deal with Luther's challenges. His research results point to a problem of structure, namely, of how the Church could, in its various manifestations, be reestablished under the threat of separation. Unfortunately, Elm's interpretation cannot explain the evident lack of flexibility and attention to the problems already mentioned. The need for reform existed much earlier than Luther's demand.

4 Summary and Outlook

Let us sum up and conclude. I would like to start with a definition:

The Reformation was a general process of change incorporating all dimensions of society, politics, economy, culture. It was initiated by the theological reform attempts of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others. My definition concentrates on the developments of the sixteenth century, but prolonged effects may be found continuing even into the seventeenth century.  theological intention can be described as a strong re-evaluation of church, theology, and piety rooted in a self-evident interpretative approach to Scripture, legitimized by the tradition of the Early church within the very first centuries (consensus quinque saecularis).

This theological initiative has so many dimensions, I would like to concentrate on its most essential aspects:

Sola scriptura: Scripture alone takes up a  medieval proverbial conviction polemically. Luther excludes any other authority than Scripture, while the medieval understanding included any  other authority in Scripture and with that legitimized other authorities.  other authority than Scripture solves radically the starting conflict about alternatives. The clarity of Scripture is demonstrated in Luther's doctrine of the self-evidence of Scripture (claritas scripturae) and the center of scripture as the revelation of the love and mercy of God.

Sola gratia: Every move of human existence depends on the mercy of God; human activity counts for nothing. This was not rejected throughout medieval times but it was unsuccessfully communicated and therefore caused manifold problems in the orientation of the Christian life.

Solus Christus: The starting point, center, and final goal of evangelical preaching is the revelation of God's mercy in Jesus Christ. His life, works, his death and resurrection are without question the heart of evangelical doctrine and mediation. Thus Christ is the ultimate measurement of any further development and critique.

As a consequence any differences occur in regard to ecclesiology, the understanding of the exclusive function of church to communicate the gospel and distribute grace, the Church's hierarchy, understanding of the ministry, and the substantial difference between laity and clergy.

The individual manifestation of these fundamental insights creates a great variety of orientations and individual performances of evangelical faith and charity; sometimes with regard to its founders Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others. This may not impact my try of a definition of Reformation.



A theological initiative does by itself not make a Reformation. It requires an historical setting, a social, economical, political and cultural breeding ground. With that in mind, what elements does a Reformation need for its successful development?

- A broad awareness for the need of Reform within the church to improve its ultimate function of distributing the grace of God.
- An educated and accepted elite who transforms and communicates theological theory and hand formation for reform.
- A close cooperation between this intellectual elite and secular authorities as the bearer of political influence and responsibility. They may be recruited within the nobility of the territorial estates, but also in oligarchic organized magistrates of the cities.

- A working communication system or network which is able to transmit theology into all sectors of society. This implies two observations: a) no reformation without printing press (to use the phrase of Dickens differently: The Reformation was a printing or book event); and b) a common and well accepted system of signs/communication – in Luther's case the new established German language (printing in the language of the printers in south west Germany)
- A political framework that, for whatever reason, is able to tolerate the peer group of reformers at the margins and to allow their way into the center of society and political action. For Luther this was provided by the balanced system between the Emperor and the electoral princes, the highly complex relations between hegemonial competing partners, Rome, and last but not least the osmanic Empire and the Sultan.
- As a consequence, the Reformation may evoke structures and processes as describe within the concept of confessionalization.

I opt for the use of the term Reformation in its singular sense to describe the complex developments within the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There might be parallels in other times and locations, but I would not like to extend the meaning of Reformation to these contexts, for it weakens the limiting structure of the definition and with that its effective use.

Likewise I want to stress the essential importance of the theological initiation. Without Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, there is no Reformation. On the other hand we have to admit that Reformation is not limited to Luther's activities between 1517 and 1521!

„How to bring about a reformation?“ Well – I don’t think that is an option. We are not going to make a reformation. Reformation belongs to the past. As a church historian I have the challenging duty to reconstruct developments of the past to make their processes, structures, elements, active players, and ruling ideas understandable without the demand for its repetition in our times. The job of a historian sometimes is quite frustrating – no evident contemporary relevance. But this, on the other hand, liberates us to find roots back to the past which could eventually d the future. at true also in theological dimension.