

GOD'S PREVAILING WORK



Themes in Church History, AD 1517 to Present

By C.J. Harris

The logo for PositiveAction FOR CHRIST. It features a circular icon with a stylized 'P' and 'A' inside, followed by the text 'PositiveAction' in a bold, sans-serif font, and 'FOR CHRIST' in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font below it.

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About the Cover

The church in the foreground is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanko, completed in 1892 and renovated in 1953 after suffering damage during World War II. Hanko is Finland's southernmost town, and its official languages are Finnish and Swedish. This local congregation reminds us that the universal church is made up of Christians from every corner of the globe. In the background lies the Baltic Sea, a fitting symbol of how missionaries have set sail to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

God's Prevailing Work · Volume 2

Themes in Church History, AD 1517 to Present

By C. J. Harris, PhD

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Introduction

You hold in your hands a Bible study that illustrates God's superintendence of Church history over the past five centuries. Of necessity, it provides only a cursory overview of the people and events described. What I have chosen to include in no way lessens the importance of those left out. It's very likely that a godly parent or faithful Sunday school teacher who did not make it into this book has had a greater impact on your life than anyone mentioned in this book.

My hope in writing this book is that by meeting a few new Christians of the past and hearing highlights of their stories, you might glimpse the God who works faithfully through all generations. He uses all kinds of people from all parts of the globe and many facets of the Church to accomplish His plans. Actors come and go from the world stage as one leader replaces another. The sovereign God is the one constant through all the changes of history.

You may forget some of the names, movements, and dates from the following pages, but don't overlook the variety of people God used in the past. Like them, you have the privilege of participating in God's prevailing work, whatever gifts you have been given. We need not be remembered to be faithful and beloved sons and daughters of the King of kings. We simply need to show the love of God and proclaim the gospel. We are valuable servants in the work of an omnipotent God—a God who uses imperfect people to accomplish His perfect plans.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "C. J. Hamer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "C" and "H".

In This Book

As you work through this student manual, you'll encounter a variety of Scriptures and historical writings that you may discuss with your teacher and fellow students. The more thought you put into this study, the more your group will benefit from the discussion.

Timelines & Maps

Every chapter begins with a timeline showing a handful of important dates. You do not need to memorize these names or events—they simply help you put the chapter's themes in context. Likewise, maps serve only to show you important locations mentioned in this study.

Reading Exercises

Scattered throughout each chapter are a number of questions that encourage you to think about what you've read. References and verse numbers will show you where to look for answers. Some questions are simple, while others challenge you to carefully meditate on Scripture and form an opinion.

Quotations and Endnotes

This book includes many quotations taken from a variety of authors. In some cases, the text is adapted from a translation, with vocabulary and grammar modernized for readability. Brackets mark significant words that have been changed for the sake of clarity. At the back of this book, you can find endnotes that list the original sources.

Scripture Memory

Chapter	Scripture	Signature
1	Romans 1:16–17	
2	2 Timothy 3:16–17	
3	Proverbs 21:1	
4	Matthew 23:25–26	
5	Ephesians 4:15–16	
6	Acts 1:8	
7	Revelation 3:2–3	
8	Isaiah 57:15	
9	Colossians 3:16	
10	Acts 13:48–49	
11	Luke 14:23	
12	Jude 4	
13	Revelation 7:9–10	

1415

John Hus burned as a heretic

c. 1450

Johannes Gutenberg's movable type press invented

1483

Martin Luther born

1508

Luther moves to Wittenberg

1517

The Ninety-five Theses

1522

German New Testament completed

1521

The Diet of Worms

1525

Luther marries Katherine von Bora, a former nun

1546

Luther's death

CHAPTER 1

These Things Alone

Northern Europe left behind the cold winter of 1520 and moved into the more temperate days of 1521; however, the political and religious climate was anything but mild. For over three years, debate had raged over the teachings of an upstart German monk named Martin Luther. He claimed that the Bible was the supreme authority for all believers, higher even than the pope in Rome. The debate was about to boil over.

On January 3, 1521, Pope Leo X passed the most severe judgment available to him as leader of the Roman Catholic Church—excommunication. His decision to excommunicate Luther came after many of his Catholic representatives had debated and urged Luther to change his position, to no effect. Rome made a final attempt by sending a papal decree, called a “papal bull,” to Luther at his home in Wittenberg. The bull, carrying the Latin title *Decet Romanum Ponticem*, insisted that Luther recant all his writings and cease all preaching. In his brash style, Luther responded by publicly burning the document. The breach between Luther and the Roman Church was irreparable.

Martin himself—and it gives us grievous sorrow and perplexity to say this—the slave of a depraved mind, has scorned to revoke his errors within the prescribed interval and to send us word of such revocation, or to come to us himself; nay, like a stone of stumbling, he has feared not to write and preach worse things than before against us and this Holy See and the Catholic faith, and to lead others on to do the same.

He has now been declared a heretic; and so also others, whatever their authority and rank, who have cared nought of their own salvation but publicly and in all men’s eyes become followers of Martin’s pernicious and heretical sect, and given him openly and publicly their help, counsel and favour, encouraging him in their midst in his disobedience and obstinacy, or hindering the publication of our said missive: such men have incurred the punishments set out in that missive, and are to be treated rightfully as heretics and avoided by all faithful Christians . . .

—*Decet Romanum Pontificem*¹

Luther's prince-elect, Frederick the Wise, refused to arrest Luther without a trial. The next convenient opportunity for such a trial was a meeting hosted by the Holy Roman Emperor. This meeting, called an *imperial diet*, was held in the city of Worms (pronounced *Verms*). Here, the emperor, the princes, and the papal representatives would gather to address problems and conflicts in the Holy Roman Empire. On March 11, Emperor Charles V called for Luther to attend the Diet of Worms and answer the charges against his teachings. A promise of safe-conduct accompanied the invitation, guaranteeing that Luther would not be arrested or accosted on the way to the hearing or on his return to Wittenberg.

To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching.

—Martin Luther,
*On the Freedom of a Christian*²

Upon receiving the invitation and promise of safe-conduct, Luther and several of his supporters prepared for the journey, and they safely arrived on April 16. The German people loved Luther and supported his call for reform. The religious and political leaders at the diet, in contrast, wanted his head. What teachings had caused such a stir in Europe? What would be the trial's outcome for Luther and for the gospel?

What Is the Gospel

The gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—rests at the heart of true Christianity. Fifteen centuries before the Diet of Worms, the Apostle Paul had written a letter to the young church in Rome detailing the gospel. Studying this letter, among other key portions of Scripture, Luther was slowly driven to break with the Roman Church.

Read **Romans 1:1–7** and answer the following questions.

- Paul saw himself as a servant of Jesus Christ set apart for what purpose? (v. 1)

- Paul viewed the gospel as a promise from God. Where was the promise recorded? (v. 2)

Verses 3–4 summarize the basic points of the gospel message:

- Jesus was born in a body of flesh and blood as the promised Son of David (v. 3).
- Jesus, at the same time, was the Son of God—of the same essence as God (v. 4a).
- Jesus lived in perfect holiness, died, and rose again (v. 4b).

Verses 5–7 introduce us to two major concepts in Scripture that were at the heart of Luther’s debate with Rome—grace and faith. Before continuing, write a short definition of what you understand these words to mean.

Grace	
Faith	

Grace and Faith

Luther took issue with how the Church of Rome defined *grace* in relation to salvation. Rome taught that justification—being right with God—consisted of a lifelong struggle of personal merit mixed with grace. This earned grace came from multiple sources: God, the Church, the saints, and the sacraments. Thus, Rome taught that salvation, or justification, resulted from one’s works supplemented by God and the Church.

Luther and other Reformers argued that personal works could have no part in salvation. If the gospel requires work on our part, it ceases to be good news. People are unable to earn salvation; God must give salvation through Jesus Christ. Luther pointed to Scripture as the basis for his position.

Sacrament—Symbolic religious observances. The Roman Catholic church recognizes seven: baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and marriage. Most Protestant churches recognize two: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

If anyone saith that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified; let him be anathema.

—Council of Trent, Canon XII on Justification

... glory and praise forever be to his unspeakable grace, that he has snatched me out of his abomination, and still continues to uphold and strengthen me daily in the true faith, although I am altogether ungrateful.

—Martin Luther³

Read **Romans 1:16–17**.

- Who or what empowers the gospel? _____
- What phrases in these verses indicate that salvation is by faith alone and not our works?

Paul continues this argument through the first half of Romans. Look at the following verses and record in your own words what they say about our salvation or justification.

- Romans 3:20 _____

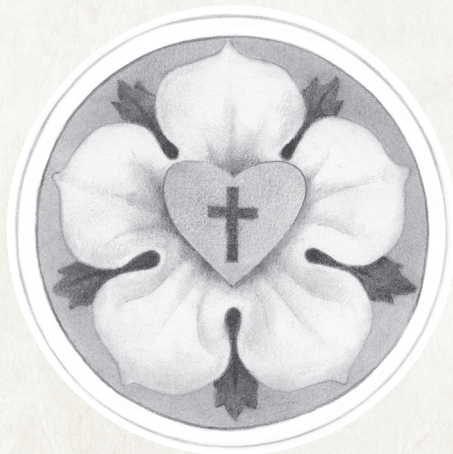
- Romans 3:27–28 _____

- Romans 4:5 _____
- Romans 5:1–2 _____

The Five Solas

Historians commonly summarize the teachings of the Reformation with five points beginning with the Latin word *sola*, meaning “only” or “alone.” We’ve already explored two of the five points—grace alone (*sola gratia*) and faith alone (*sola fide*). We will cover the other three in the next two chapters. For now, here is a brief explanation of the five solas.

- *Sola Gratia*—We are saved by grace alone.
- *Sola Fide*—This salvation comes through faith alone.
- *Solus Christus*—Faith is in Christ alone.
- *Sola Scriptura*—Faith and practice are revealed in Scripture alone.
- *Sola Deo Gloria*—We live as Christians for the glory of God alone.



*The Luther Rose,
an early symbol of Lutheranism*

These five truths appeared through all branches of the Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist. As we discuss these branches, we will see different emphases, but they all share these foundational truths.

Indulgences: The Corruption of Grace

While many teachings and events contributed to the Reformation, a corruption of grace fanned the initial sparks into an inextinguishable blaze. Pope Leo X wanted to replace St. Peter's Basilica in Rome with a grander, updated structure. Lacking funds, Leo initiated a fundraising campaign selling indulgences.

In simplest terms, an indulgence offered grace and remission of sins in exchange for a donation to the Catholic Church; in this case, donations were for Leo's building project in Rome. If a person gave money, the papal representative would give them a slip of paper with the papal seal removing all or some of the penalty for past—or even future—sins. You could also buy indulgences for people who had already died. Johann Tetzel, one of the most effective peddlers of indulgences, was dispatched to Germany.

In 1517, four years before the Diet of Worms, Tetzel arrived in the vicinity of Wittenberg. Tetzel's offers of false grace deeply frustrated Martin Luther, who was a professor at the University of Wittenberg. Luther vented his frustration by preparing 95 points for debate arguing against the contemporary practice of indulgences. Luther reputedly posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church with an offer to debate the points. Though no debate took place at that time, the Ninety-five Theses were widely distributed through the relatively new movable-type printing press. The Ninety-five Theses did not represent the full-blown reform that was to come, but the seeds of reformation had been planted.

Consider that a person does himself much more good in purchasing the indulgence he needs, than in giving alms to a poor person who is not in a state of utmost need. For the alms or the good work with which someone is earning the indulgence functions just as meritoriously toward eternal life, since it is done for the love of God, as do the alms given to a poor person.

—Johann Tetzel⁴



Below are some examples of Luther's theses.

#54 Injury is done to the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or larger amount of time is devoted to indulgences than on it [the Word of God].

#62 The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.

#66 The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the riches of men.

#82 Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reason would be most just; the latter is most trivial.⁵

- Would you have been convinced to reject indulgences by these arguments? Why or why not?

- What do you think of Luther's argument in thesis #82 that, if the pope had power to remove sin for money, he should instead do it merely out of love? What does Luther imply about the motives of Rome in issuing indulgences?



Conclusion

If grace comes from God alone through faith alone, then the Church exists for other reasons, such as to teach believers and to declare God's grace to unbelievers. The Church doesn't dispense grace. Salvation is God's work in those who believe. It cannot be earned or purchased.

Further Reading

The Ninety-Five Theses set Luther on a path that ultimately placed him before the Diet of Worms in April 1521. The following excerpts come from Luther's account of the proceedings of the trial.

Most serene emperor! Illustrious princes, gracious lords! . . . Two things were required of me yesterday on the part of his imperial majesty: First, whether I was the author of the books whose titles were read; secondly, whether I would revoke or defend the doctrine therein taught. I answered to the former of these questions and now abide by that answer. . . .

Therefore do I conjure you by the mercies of God, thou most serene emperor, and ye most illustrious princes, and every man, be he who he may, whether he belong to a higher or a lower rank, to prove to me by the writings of the prophets and apostles that I am mistaken. From the moment that I shall have been convinced of this I will forthwith retract all my errors, and will be the first to seize my writings and to cast them into the flames. . . .

As soon as he had ended, the chancellor of Treves, who acted as spokesman to the Diet, said to him with indignation: "You have not answered the question that was addressed to you. You do not stand here to throw doubts on the decisions of councils. You are required to give a clear and precise answer. Do you, or do you not, choose to retract?"

Upon this Luther answered without flinching: "Since your most serene Majesty and your high mightiness, require me to give a simple, clear, and precise reply, such will I give: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope, or to councils, inasmuch as it is clear as daylight that these have often fallen into error, and even into gross contradictions with themselves. If, then, I be not convinced by testimonies from Scripture, or by evident reasons, if people cannot persuade me by the very passages that I have quoted, and if they fail thus to render my conscience a captive of the Word of God, I neither

can nor will retract anything, for it is unsafe for the Christian to say anything against his conscience.” Then, steadily contemplating the assembly before which he stood, and which held his life in their hands: “Here I stand,” said he, “I can do no otherwise; God help me! Amen.”⁶

The Diet of Worms ultimately condemned Luther to death as a heretic, but his friends had already whisked the Reformer away to safety. For the next 10 months, Luther lived in hiding at Wartburg Castle, using his time to write books and translate the New Testament into German. This translation, more than any other work, propelled the growth of the Reformation throughout Germany.

After being condemned to death by the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church, Luther lived another 25 more years before he died of natural causes. In addition to leading the German Reformation, he continued to teach and pastor in Wittenberg. In 1525, Luther married a former nun, Katherine von Bora, who served as his constant companion and helper. They had six children, one of whom died in infancy.

- In the second paragraph of his statement, what did Luther specify should be the measure for determining if his claims about the gospel were correct?

- Why do you think that it is unsafe, as Luther stated, for a Christian to go against their conscience?

1484

Ulrich Zwingli is born

1509

John Calvin is born

1518

Zwingli becomes pastor of the
Grossmünster in Zurich

1519–1521

Heinrich Bullinger attends the University
of Cologne

1521

The Diet of Worms

1529

Luther and Zwingli meet at Marburg

1531

Zwingli dies in the Battle of Kappel

1536

Calvin publishes the *Institutes of the
Christian Religion*

1536

Farel prevails upon Calvin to settle
in Geneva

1540

Calvin marries Idelette de Bure

1564

Calvin dies

CHAPTER 2

The Word Has Power

While Luther was declaring his stand on *sola scriptura* at the Diet of Worms, another branch of the Reformation was growing in Switzerland. A year earlier, a pastor in Zurich—Ulrich Zwingli—had supported the city council’s law that only Scripture could be preached in the city’s churches. Zwingli cast off the old Catholic liturgy and began teaching through the New Testament chapter by chapter.

The battle between Scripture and tradition in Zurich climaxed over a dinner of sausage. During Lent—the six weeks leading up to Easter—Catholic tradition forbade the eating of meat or poultry, limiting diets to fish and vegetables. The church leaders in Zurich couldn’t find any Scripture to support this partial fast. During the Lenten season of 1522, Christopher Froschauer, a local printer, celebrated the publication of a new edition of Paul’s epistles by throwing a feast featuring a local favorite—sausage. Zwingli may have attended, and his next sermon left no doubt of his support of Christopher and the ideal of *sola scriptura* over tradition. His sermon was titled “Of Freedom of Choice in the Selection of Foods.”

In short, if you want to fast, do so; if you do not wish to eat meat, eat it not; but leave Christians a free choice in the matter.

—Ulrich Zwingli,
“Of Freedom of Choice in the Selection of Foods”⁷

Zwingli died nine years later in 1531. His successor, Heinrich Bullinger, continued the Reformation work in Zurich. Five years later, a future leader of the Reformed branch of the Reformation arrived in Geneva, another Swiss city. This young student, John Calvin, was instrumental in establishing Geneva as a center for training pastors and promoting Protestant theology. How would this training in God’s Word transform Switzerland, Europe, and the world?

Sola Scriptura

For the Lord in the Word of Truth has delivered to his church all that is requisite to true godliness and salvation. Whatsoever things are necessary to know concerning God, the works, judgments, will and commandments of God, concerning Christ, our faith in Christ, and the duties of a holy life; all those things, I say are fully taught in the Word of God. Nor does the church need to crave of any other, or else with men's supplies to patch up that which seems to be lacking in the Word of the Lord.

—Heinrich Bullinger⁸

Scripture alone must be the basis for all true knowledge of Christ. God's Word alone forms the basis of all we believe and all we do. This hallmark of Reformation teaching dictated that all true believers be students of the Word.

- What benefits come from studying God's Word?

The Reformers' emphasis on the Word of God mirrored that of the Apostle Paul. Read **2 Timothy 3:10–15**.

- What does Paul encourage Timothy to continue pursuing (v. 14)?
- What has the power to make a person wise for salvation through faith in Christ (v. 15)?
- Paul also warns that people who pursue life according to God's Word will face what (v. 12)?

We must pursue wisdom and power in the Scriptures alone because nothing else has God's power—not tradition, not natural logic, not ritual. We must continue in God's Word.

The Power of Scripture

The Bible produces growth in those who read its words because its words are breathed out—or inspired—by God. When God produced the Word, He filled it with the power necessary to change the one reading it.

Inspiration—God guiding the human authors of Scripture to be sure that what they wrote was the Word of God

Read **2 Timothy 3:16–17**. Verse 16 gives four basic ways the Scriptures work in believers. These functions are summarized in the table below. Supply an example of how the Word can be used in the way described. Examples may be personal or hypothetical.

Teaching us truth	
Showing us false teaching	
Correcting sin in us	
Guiding us in righteous living	

- How would these four benefits of the Bible help us become mature and prepare us to do good works?

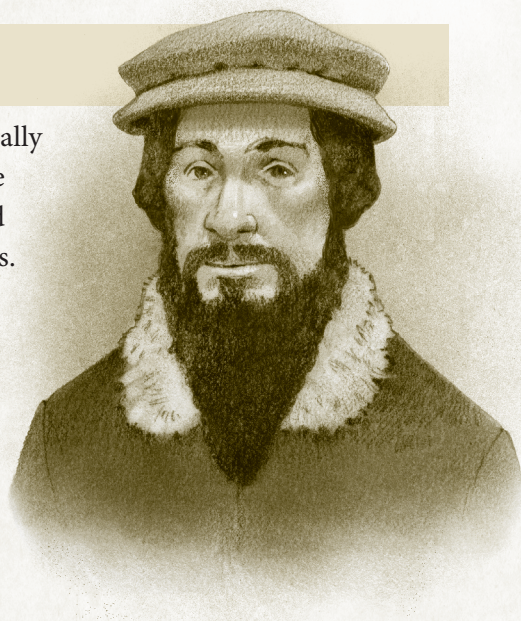


The Path to Geneva

The Reformed branch of the Reformation eventually centered in the Swiss city Geneva. Located at the southwest corner of Lake Geneva, the city enjoyed the beauty and protection of the Alpine Mountains. The city abounded in trade because of the nearby border with France and the proximity to Italy. This made Geneva a natural launching point for the new Reformation teaching. This city provided the base for the reforming work of John Calvin.

Ironically, John Calvin never intended to be a pastor in Geneva. He first came to Reformation beliefs as a law student in Orléans, France. Because such beliefs were illegal in France, Calvin chose to continue his studies in Basel, Switzerland. In 1536, he published the first edition of *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, an early systematic theological work and an instant bestseller. Later that year, he accepted a teaching position in Strasbourg, Germany (today in France). Because of ongoing battles between Francis I and Charles V, Calvin and his companions were forced to take a southern detour, stopping the first night in Geneva.

William Farel, a preacher who had promoted the Reformation in Geneva, heard of Calvin's presence. He sought out the young theologian and asked Calvin to remain in Geneva to help promote the Reformation there. Calvin declined. Farel then became more forceful in his request, accusing Calvin of caring more for studying the Word than sharing it.



He even warned that God would punish Calvin for refusing to help. Intimidated, Calvin agreed to stay. Thus, Calvin began nearly three decades of ministry in Geneva with only a few interruptions.

Knowing Is Not Enough

William Farel may have been overly zealous in harassing Calvin to stay in Geneva. Yet under his abrasive approach, he made a valid point. Too often, we hide behind a study of God’s Word to avoid the necessary effort of putting what we have read into practice. Read **2 Timothy 4:1–2**.

- Having encouraged Timothy to study the Word (2 Tim. 3:14–17), Paul now gives Timothy a charge. What does he encourage Timothy to do (2 Tim. 4:1–2)?

God uses His Word in our lives, but He doesn’t intend it to stop there. We receive the Word to minister it to others—our family, friends, church, and especially the lost. How can you share what God has taught you?

Things I’ve Learned	Ways I Can Share
Example: <i>the gospel</i>	

Be Prepared for Some Rejection

Not everyone will want to hear God's Word, especially if it reveals sin in their lives. People usually prefer comforting lies over hard truths. Read **2 Timothy 4:3–5**.

- What does Paul say many people want to hear (vv. 3–4)?

- How should we respond to rejection of God's message (v. 5)?

Calvin himself experienced rejection. Two years after his arrival in Geneva, the city's leaders forced him to leave. For three years, Calvin lived and preached in Strasbourg. Eventually, the people of Geneva invited him to return, and he did. Even after his return, Calvin repeatedly clashed with Geneva's ruling classes. Outside the city, ongoing religious conflicts between the Catholics and Protestants threatened Calvin's work in Geneva.

Broadcasting the Word

We believe the Holy Scripture to be given by God, to have no other author but the Holy Ghost. . . . We believe the authority of the Holy Scripture to be above the authority of the Church. To be taught by the Holy Ghost is a far different thing from being taught by a man; for man may through ignorance err, deceive and be deceived, but the Word of God neither deceiveth nor is deceived, nor can err, and is infallible and has eternal authority.

—Cyril Lucaris⁹

Despite opposition both within Geneva and outside, the city became a training school for preachers in exile from France, England, and beyond. The French ministers that trained here returned to France and French colonies as far away as Brazil. Others returned to England after the reign of Mary Tudor and refueled the Reformation there.

The teachings and writings from Geneva reached eastward as well. Cyril Lucaris, a Greek minister in the Eastern Orthodox Church, read many of the Reformation works and became convinced of their truth. When he became the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople—head of the Eastern Orthodox Church—he sought to reform his church along Protestant lines. He had only moderate success, however, before he was demoted and later murdered, mostly for political reasons.

Conclusion

Though most known for his writings and teachings, Calvin was above all the pastor of his church in Geneva. He preached methodically through large portions of the Bible. For instance, he spent one winter and spring preaching 43 sermons—Sunday morning and evening—through the six chapters of Galatians. During the week, he would preach in rotation with other pastors and give a lecture at the church. Calvin and the other Reformation ministers in Geneva held the Word of God as the chief pursuit of all true believers.

God promises that His Word preached will powerfully accomplish His work (Isa. 55:11; Rom. 9:6; 1 Cor. 1:18; Col. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:23). It has true power, unlike human philosophy and tradition that provide only weak imitations. The Scriptures alone guide us in God's ways and teach us His truth.

Hence it is easy to understand that we must give diligent heed both to the reading and hearing of Scripture, if we would obtain any benefit from the Spirit of God . . .

—John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹⁰

Further Reading

The following excerpt is taken from book 1, chapter 6, of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In the first five chapters, Calvin establishes the importance of knowing God and our basic ability to do so through creation. In chapter 6, Calvin turns to the necessity of Scripture for us to know God more fully and in a way that leads to salvation.

“Now just as the Lord reveals to all without exception the brightness of his majesty represented by his creation, thus stripping man's impiety of any defense, so too he provides a surer remedy to aid the weakness of those to whom he chooses to disclose himself in salvation. For in order to instruct them he uses more than mute creatures: he opens his holy lips, not just to declare that they should worship some kind of god, but to reveal himself as the God who must be worshipped. Not only does he teach them to acknowledge one God, he also presents himself to them as the one beyond whom they must not go. . . .”

“If we think of how inclined the human mind is to forget God, how easily it is led into error, by what flights of fancy it dreams up, hour by hour, new and counterfeit religions, we may readily understand how necessary it was for the heavenly doctrine to be couched in written form, lest it perish through forgetfulness, or be lost through error, or be corrupted by the impudence of men. . . .”

“Many people commit the fatal error of believing that Scripture has only such value as the church agrees to accord it, as if God’s eternal and inviolable truth depended on men’s good pleasure! . . . These liars, however, are easily refuted by Paul’s single statement that the church ‘is established on the foundation of the prophets and apostles’ (Eph. 2:20). If the teaching of the prophets and apostles is the church’s foundation, it must have had assured authority before ever the church began to appear.”¹¹

- Based on Calvin’s statement in the second paragraph, what are some of the reasons we should be thankful that God chose to give us the Bible?

- Summarize Calvin’s explanation, found in the third paragraph, for why the church does not grant Scripture its authority.

1509

Henry VIII crowned King of England

1533

Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled

1547

Edward VI crowned King of England

1553

Mary Tudor crowned Queen of England

1555

Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley burned at the stake

1559

John Knox returns to Scotland

1559

Elizabeth I crowned Queen of England

1561

Queen Mary I of Scotland returns to Scotland

CHAPTER 3

Despite Earthly Powers

If you lived in the 1500s and were looking for fertile ground for the Reformation, you would not choose Tudor England—especially under King Henry VIII. Early in his reign, Henry had written a book attacking the teachings of Martin Luther. As a thank you, the pope named Henry “Defender of the Faith.” Henry appeared to be the pope’s man, but in truth, he happily switched allegiances whenever it best served his interests.

Henry turned against Rome when the pope refused to sanction Henry’s divorce of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, to marry one of his mistresses. Henry wanted the divorce, and if the head of the Roman Church wouldn’t give it to him, he would create a new church. This situation gave birth to the Church of England—which was moderately Protestant—with the king as its head. Henry then divorced Catherine, imprisoning the former queen and their 11-year-old daughter, Mary.

Henry cycled through six wives during his life. Two he divorced. Two he beheaded. One died from complications in childbirth. And the last one outlived him. With these six women, Henry fathered two daughters and a son. The father and his three children are intertwined with the story of the Reformation in England.

By the end of Henry’s life, the people of England had increasingly turned to Protestant teaching, primarily through the work of the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of Henry’s advisors—Thomas Cranmer. Although Cranmer overlooked much of Henry’s most objectionable acts, he was able to steer religious reform along the lines of the continental Reformation. Henry’s son, Edward VI, succeeded



him to the throne and strongly promoted religious reform, guided by his advisors. Edward was nine when he became king; however, prone to illness, he died at age 15.

After Edward died, his eldest sister, Mary Tudor was next in line for the throne. A devout Catholic, she wanted to restore Catholic worship in England. In her first year as queen, she horrified her Protestant subjects by marrying Philip II, the king of Spain. She executed Thomas Cranmer and several other Protestant leaders. Could the Reformation survive a queen bent on its destruction?

In the Face of Opposition

The English Reformers were not the first believers to face opposition for their faith. From the beginning of the Church, rulers and other authorities have actively opposed God's work. In Acts 3, Peter healed a man who had been lame for over 40 years. He performed the miracle in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:6) and preached the gospel to the amazed crowd. This act drew the attention of both the religious and political leaders.

- Read **Acts 4:1–4**. How did the leaders react to Peter and the apostles' proclamation of Jesus Christ?

- How did God work despite this opposition?

The next morning, Peter spoke on behalf of all the apostles before their accusers. When asked what authority they claimed for their preaching, Peter claimed Jesus Christ alone as their authority.

- Read **Acts 4:5–12**. How would you describe Peter's response to the religious leaders?

- Verses 11–12 capture the Reformation doctrine of *solus Christus*. How would you summarize these two verses?

- Read **Acts 4:13–22**. As the trial concluded, the council faced a dilemma. They couldn't deny the miracle, but they wanted the apostles silenced. They commanded the apostles to stop preaching in Jesus' name. How did Peter and John respond? (vv. 19–20) _____

- While the Bible teaches us to obey authorities, we must obey God foremost. Give an example of a law where a Christian may have to disobey a human authority to obey God.

In July 1553, Mary Tudor became Mary I, queen of England. Within months of her ascension to the throne, she began arresting Protestant churchmen and reversing the anti-Catholic laws of her predecessors—Edward VI and Henry VIII. She reinstated celibacy requirements for bishops and required those who had married under the earlier reforms to divorce their wives. A year after taking the throne, she enacted the Heresy Laws. Because of these laws, several Protestant prisoners were executed and hundreds more fled the country. The executions were public spectacles and won the queen the title “Bloody Mary.”

Two of the best-known Marian martyrs were the Protestant bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. Imprisoned for their teachings, both were granted the opportunity to recant. If they would swear allegiance to the queen and the Catholic Church, they were offered hope of release. Both bishops refused, swearing instead to follow Christ and His Word alone. As they were burning at the stake, Latimer reportedly encouraged his companion with the famous words, “Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out.”

What though our troubles here be painful for the time, and the sting of death bitter and unpleasant? Yet we know that they shall not last in comparison of eternity, no not the twinkling of an eye; and that they, patiently taken in Christ’s cause, shall procure and get us unmeasurable heaps of heavenly glory, unto the which these temporal pains of death and troubles compared, are not to be esteemed, but to be rejoiced upon.

—Nicholas Ridley, in a letter of farewell written shortly before his death¹²

God Is Sovereign Over Rulers

Because of this royal opposition in England, many people sought refuge in more sympathetic parts of Europe. However, the persecution did not stop the ongoing work of God in England. People continued to preach the gospel in secret. Those in exile wrote extensively, including a new English Bible translation—the Geneva Bible completed in 1560. These books trickled into England despite Mary’s repeated efforts to stop them. God was working even through human opposition.

Returning to Acts 4, the early church also recognized that the rulers of the world could not hope to stand against the will and plan of God. Read **Acts 4:23–28**.

Early English Translations of the Bible

- *Wycliff (1382)*
- *Tyndale New Testament (1526)*
- *Coverdale (1535)*
- *Matthew’s Bible (1537)*
- *The Great Bible (1539)*
- *The Geneva Bible (1560)*
- *The Bishop’s Bible (1568)*
- *The King James Bible (1611)*

- You may have expected the apostles’ arrests to instill fear in the early Christians. Instead, how did they respond to the news? (v. 24)

- After quoting Psalm 2:1–2, the believers stated that plotting against God is pointless and vain. What example of a failed plot do they point to in verses 27–28?

- Despite all the plans against Jesus by His enemies, whose will ultimately triumphed? (v. 28) _____
- How do you think this understanding affected the early believers?

Mary’s attempt to restore Catholic obedience by royal decree won a few victories during her brief five-year reign. However, the people had little love for her, especially after her marriage to the Spanish prince. If she would have produced an heir with the Catholic Philip,

England would have begun a new Catholic dynasty. However, that was not the case. Twice, Mary believed she was pregnant, but no child came. She never fully recovered from the illness associated with her second false pregnancy. She died in November of 1558, leaving the throne to her sister Elizabeth I.

Elizabeth chose a middle path in both religion and politics. While she rolled back many of Mary's Catholic reforms, she arrested and executed only those who publicly opposed her reign. The charge that led to the executions was treason rather than religious heresy. The country became officially Protestant, but many of the outward trappings of Catholicism were allowed to continue. This compromise—The Elizabethan Settlement—produced the Anglican Church, a unique branch of Protestantism distinct to England and her colonies. Elizabeth's long 45-year reign brought a period of relative peace and stability to England.

Proclaiming the Sovereign God

The fifth *sola* of those five summarizing statements of the Reformation is *sola Deo gloria*—the Christian life is for the glory of God alone. God rightly deserves the glory for all things (Isa. 42:8). For God to receive the glory He is due, His people must worship, reverence, and serve Him above any earthly authority. Christians live as a people of one Lord, and He alone is worthy of glory. Look again at the apostles' prayer in Acts 4:29–30. This prayer concludes with two petitions:

1. Lord, give us boldness to speak Your Word (v. 29).
2. Lord, continue to do Your mighty work (v. 30).

The passage also provides a response from both God and the believers. Read **Acts 4:31**.

- What was God's immediate response to this prayer?

- What was the ongoing response of the believers?

- According to the verse, what was the source for this boldness?

A great example of this bold proclaiming of the Word shines in the ministry of the Scottish Reformer John Knox. Knox had preached in England during the reign of Edward VI, but Mary's accession forced him to flee to Geneva. In 1559, he returned to Scotland with ideas of major reform.

Of one thing I must put you in mind and I pray God that you may fruitfully remember it, That the word of God preached by the mouth of man, is not a vain sound, and words spoken without a purpose; but is the summoning of God himself, forewarning men before the judgment come.

—John Knox, “A Letter to the People of Edinburgh”¹³

Regent—A person appointed to rule when the monarch is a minor

While many of the Scottish nobility and common people supported the Reformation, the monarchy in Scotland remained staunchly Catholic. Knox first faced opposition from Mary Guise—the queen’s mother and regent while the young queen (also named Mary) was in France. Knox’s fiery preaching galvanized reform but also sparked riots. Within a few months, Mary Guise was deposed as regent, and she died a year later. The mostly Protestant Scottish Parliament took up the religious reform. With help from Knox and other ministers, the parliament published the Scottish Confession in August of 1560.

Mary I of Scotland—not to be confused with Mary I of England—grew up in France from the age of five. She married the French prince Francis in 1558. A year later, Francis became Francis II, king of France. He reigned only a year and a half before his deteriorated health led to an early death. Now widowed, the 19-year-old Mary returned to Scotland to assume her throne.



By this time, Mary was more French than Scottish, including her adoption of the Catholic religion. She attempted to restore some Catholic practices upon her return to Scotland, but Knox opposed all attempts from the pulpit. He also met privately with the queen on several occasions to discuss the religious situation. Ultimately, Scotland remained Protestant and became a launching point for mission work around the world.

Conclusion

The number of names and events connected with the Protestant Reformation can be overwhelming. However, the details are not critical. What is important to remember is that God worked through all these situations and people to exalt His name and spread His Word. Each historical detail reinforces the same message: Human powers, no matter how mighty, cannot stop the work of God.

Further Reading

Thomas Cranmer summarized Protestant doctrine for the English people in the Thirty-Nine Articles. Below are a few of these articles (in somewhat archaic English) that show some of the main points of the theological shift from Catholicism.

Article 6. Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

Article 11. Of the Justification of Man

We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only, is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort, as more largely is expressed in the Homily of Justification.

Article 19. Of the Church

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith.

Article 22. Of Purgatory

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

Article 30. Of both Kinds

The Cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the Lay-people: for both the parts of the Lord's Sacrament, by Christ's ordinance and commandment, ought to be ministered to all Christian men alike.

Article 32. Of the Marriage of Priests

Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, are not commanded by God's Law, either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage: therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other Christian men, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve better to godliness.

- According to the first article in this list, what contains everything necessary for our salvation? _____

- Choose one article and summarize it in your own words.
