The Reformation and the Irrepressible Word of God

Interpretation, Theology, and Practice

Edited by Scott M. Manetsch

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<td>CTS</td>
<td>Calvin Translation Society edition of Calvin’s commentaries. 46 vols. Edinburgh, 1843–1855. Several reprints, but variously bound; volume numbers (when cited) are relative to specific commentaries and not to the entire set.</td>
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<td>HAB</td>
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Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887–1894. Several reprints; also available online.


WATR Tischreden [Table Talk]. 6 vols.
The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had many different faces and many surprising features. It was a constellation of social events that changed how people related to their families and communities, ushering in wide-ranging reforms in education, poverty relief, marriage and divorce, the clerical office, and social discipline. The Reformation was also a collection of political events that empowered rulers to extend authority over their subjects, while at the same time fragmenting the German-speaking world into rival confessional groups that delayed the unification of Germany for more than 300 years. In addition, the Reformation was a cluster of revolutionary events that crystalized and intensified widespread discontent against the received feudal agrarian system, a social protest that exploded in the German Peasants War of 1525. And, certainly, the Reformation was a mass media event as Martin Luther and other Protestant leaders harnessed new print technologies to articulate their evangelical message and dismantle traditional religious institutions and customs.

While each of these features is important, they fail to capture what the Protestant reformers themselves understood to be the substance and essential core of the sixteenth-century Reformation. For early Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Nicholas Ridley, John
Knox, and John Calvin, the Reformation was a religious renewal movement that called the church back to the Scriptures and the centrality of the Christian gospel. The Reformation was not first and foremost about changing the social or political order, but rather about recovering from Scripture the central message of Christianity—that God extends grace to sinners who trust in Jesus Christ alone—and applying that theological insight to the spiritual needs of men and women, as well as the practical concerns of church and community. In their view, the Protestant Reformation was a divinely orchestrated religious or spiritual event that found its origin in the recovery, reading, and faithful application of the Bible.

Both the literature and lived experience of early Protestants provide ample testimony to these primary religious concerns. One striking example is seen in Martin Luther’s “Exhortation to the Clergy Assembled at the Diet at Augsburg,” written by the Reformer in May of 1530 from the safety of Coburg Castle as he anxiously awaited updates from the imperial diet.\(^1\) In this largely-forgotten treatise—which has been called Luther’s own Augsburg Confession—the Saxon Reformer offered a general assessment of the progress of evangelical teaching, showing “what great and glorious fruit the word of God has produced” and “what the world would be like if our gospel had not come.”\(^2\) Luther described in graphic detail the state of medieval Catholic religion without the Reformation: the “unspeakable thievery” of indulgences; the “hellish” sacrament of penance; the travesty of clerical celibacy; the “scandalous huckstering” of endowed masses; the “false and shameful” devotion shown Mary and the saints; the patent failure of episcopal leadership; the shocking ignorance of the parish clergy.\(^3\) Through these abuses the medieval Church had detracted from Christ’s unique sacrifice for sins, tortured the consciences of God’s people, encouraged blatant idolatry, championed

\(^1\) The “Exhortation” is found in the WA 30/2:268-356. An English translation is available at bookofconcord.org/exhortation.php. Accessed November 21, 2017. I am thankful to my colleague John Woodbridge for calling my attention to this fascinating document.

\(^2\) WA 30/2:281.

\(^3\) WA 30/2:284-85, 288, 293.
works-righteousness, and condemned faithful Christians to death as heretics. All these errors and abuses, Luther believed, had resulted from the fact that the traditional church had elevated its theologians and traditions above God’s holy Word. Luther commented:

Their best work, however, was in despising the Holy Scriptures, and letting them lie under the bench! “Bible, Bible?” said they. “The Bible is a heretics’ book! You must read the doctors! There you find what is what!” I know that I am not lying about this, for I grew up among them and have heard and seen all this from them.⁴

From Luther’s perspective, then, the central contribution of the Protestant Reformation was to restore to their rightful place in Christ’s church the Scriptures and the “free and pure gospel” (what later Protestants called the formal and material principles of the Reformation).⁵ This was what set the Lutherans apart from their Catholic opponents, the Reformer believed: “You and we know that you live without God’s word, but we have God’s word. . . . We ask nothing more, and never have asked anything more, than that the gospel shall be free.”⁶ Armed with God’s Word and God’s gospel, Lutheran preachers now served as agents for spiritual renewal as they dismantled the numerous Catholic errors and superstitions and provided true Christian consolation to the souls of those in despair. Previously, Luther noted,

No one knew how to preach the gospel otherwise than to teach out of it examples of good works, and no one of us ever heard a gospel that aimed to give comfort to the conscience and to lead to faith and trust in Christ. That is how it ought to be preached, and, praise God! it is now preached that way again.⁷

In the final paragraphs of his “Exhortation,” Luther identified 114 additional unbiblical customs and doctrines taught by the Roman Church—ranging from Lenten fasts to kissing and adoring the cross—and he

⁴WA 30/2:300.
⁵WA 30/2:355.
⁶WA 30/2:339, 341.
⁷WA 30/2:291.
urged the clergy at the Diet of Augsburg to reform the church in light of the message of Scripture. "The true Church," he insisted, "must be the one that holds to God's Word and suffers for it, as, praise God! we do, and murders no one and leads no one away from God's Word. . . . God help you to a reformation on this point!"8

While Martin Luther anxiously awaited reports from the Diet of Augsburg during the late spring and summer of 1530, he entertained a steady stream of friends and curious visitors to Coburg Castle who sought his audience and advice. One of these visitors was a remarkable woman named Argula (von Stauff) von Grumbach, whose life experience reflected the deep religious convictions that motivated many early Protestants. Born around 1492 into a distinguished German noble family near Beratzhausen in Bavaria, Argula was raised by pious parents who taught her to pray and to read the German Bible, a copy of which her father gave her as a gift on her tenth birthday. As a young woman of fifteen or sixteen, she was sent to the imperial court in Munich, where she served as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Kunigunde (daughter of Emperor Frederick III).9 Around 1516, she married Friedrich von Grumbach, and the couple soon settled in the town of Dietfort, near Ingolstadt. Though it is uncertain when or how Argula von Grumbach first came into contact with Luther's ideas, it is clear that by the early 1520s she had become a supporter of the Wittenberg theology and was avidly studying Luther's writings in light of Scripture—much to her husband Friedrich's displeasure. What began as private religious conviction, erupted into public controversy in 1523 when Argula defied cultural norms and her husband's wishes by writing a blistering letter to the University of Ingolstadt, protesting the harsh treatment shown to a young student named Arsatius Seehofer, who had been forced by the theological faculty to recant his evangelical beliefs.10 Among the doctrines that Seehofer had

8WA 30/2:321-22.
10Matheson, ed., Argula von Grumbach, 14-16.
disavowed under duress were Luther's teachings on justification by grace alone through faith alone and Scripture's supreme authority over the church.\textsuperscript{11}

Argula von Grumbach's letter to the University of Ingolstadt, which subsequently appeared in sixteen printed editions, was courageous, passionate, and brutally frank, reflecting her confident command of Scripture and deep spiritual conviction. In this long letter, Argula quoted no fewer than seventy biblical texts, many, it seems, from memory. In the opening lines of her letter, Argula addressed the obvious question that would have troubled most of her readers: what gave her license, as a woman with no university training, to confront and correct learned theologians of the church? She argued that it was Scripture itself that gave her this right, for Christ's statement in Matthew 10:32 ("So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven") and the prophetic command in Ezekiel 33 ("If you see your brother sin, reprove him") applied to all Christians regardless of gender or educational background.\textsuperscript{12} Hence, in obedience to these divine commands, Argula felt compelled to set forth her confession of faith and, at the same time, reprove the Catholic theologians at Ingolstadt for their gross neglect of God's Word. Argula presented herself as well-studied in the religious controversies of her day. Several years earlier, she had disregarded the warnings of Franciscan monks and begun reading the German Bible for herself, a practice that provided rich spiritual illumination and soon reshaped her theological convictions. "Ah, but what joy it is when the Spirit of God teaches and gives us understanding, flitting from one text to the next—God be praised—so that I came to see the true, genuine light shining out."\textsuperscript{13}

At the same time, as she read Luther's writings and compared them with his German New Testament, she became convinced that the

\textsuperscript{11}For the seventeen articles that were deemed heretical by Ingolstadt's faculty, see Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 91-93.
\textsuperscript{12}Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 75. Argula here is paraphrasing Ezekiel 33:6-8.
\textsuperscript{13}Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 86-87.
Wittenberg theology accorded with the teachings of the Bible. “For my part,” she wrote, “I have to confess, in the name of God and by my soul’s salvation, that if I were to deny Luther and Melanchthon’s writing I would be denying God and his word, which may God forfend forever.”

The theologians of Ingolstadt, by contrast, had condemned Luther’s teaching and declared him a heretic without even consulting Scripture. Indeed, these reputed doctors of the church were completely ignorant of the teachings of the Bible, and thus had to resort to threats and coercion rather than godly persuasion. “I beseech you for the sake of God,” Argula demanded, “tell me in writing which of the articles written by Martin or Melanchthon you consider heretical. In German not a single one seems heretical to me.” Argula’s belief that Scripture should have supreme authority for defining Christian doctrine and practice echoed the conviction of Luther and other evangelical Reformers. As she put it, “no one has a right to exercise sovereignty over the word of God. . . . For the word of God alone—without which nothing was made—should and must rule.” At the conclusion of her letter, Argula von Grumbach struck the pose of a modern-day prophet as she confidently announced God’s Word to the Catholic theologians at Ingolstadt. “What I have written to you is no woman’s chit-chat, but the word of God; and (I write) as a member of the Christian Church, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. . . . God give us his grace that we all may be saved.”

Both Martin Luther’s “Exhortation” to the clergy at the Diet of Augsburg and Argula von Grumbach’s letter to the faculty at the University of Ingolstadt illustrate particularly well the significant impact that Scripture had in shaping the theological convictions and spiritual experiences of

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16Matheson, ed., Argula von Grumbach, 76-77.
17Elsewhere, Argula states that the Ingolstadt theologians were “as well informed about the Bible as a cow is about chess.” See Argula von Grumbach to Adam von Theringe, in Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 146.
18Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 86.
19Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 82.
20Matheson, Argula von Grumbach, 90.
men and women in the sixteenth century. The eminent Reformation scholar G. R. Elton in the early 1960s lent support to this view, noting that "if there is a single thread running through the whole story of the Reformation, it is the explosive and renovating and often disintegrating effect of the Bible."\(^9\) In the past half-century, however, this perspective has fallen out of favor with many social and cultural historians, who, being suspicious of traditional confessional narratives of the Reformation, have focused instead on (what they see as) the primary political, economic, and social factors underlying and effecting religious change. Though these lines of scholarship have proven fruitful in many ways—not least in that they have given voice to previously marginalized groups, prioritized institutional histories, and recognized the social and political impact of religious ideas—they have too often understated or completely ignored the Bible's central role in the "story" of the Reformation.\(^20\) Fortunately, recent developments in the field of Reformation studies indicate that attention to the Bible and its impact in the sixteenth century might be making a comeback. Among the most fruitful of these research trajectories are studies of the Bible that focus on its production and reception,\(^21\) studies of early-modern preaching,\(^22\) studies of the doctrine


\(^20\) To give one example, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation* (ed. Peter Marshall [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015]), whose stated goal is to help orient readers to the most important approaches, discoveries, and compelling questions of contemporary Reformation research, devotes one sentence to Luther's work as a translator of the German Bible, says little about Protestant ministries of preaching and commentary writing, and completely ignores recent scholarship on the history of Reformation exegesis. For an evaluation of this volume, see Scott Manetsch, "Reassessing the Reformation: Contemporary Themes and Approaches," *Fides et Historia* 48 (2016): 131-40.


of Scripture espoused by individual Reformers,\textsuperscript{23} and studies in the history of biblical interpretation in the Reformation era.\textsuperscript{24}

The present volume seeks to contribute to this growing scholarly literature devoted to the Bible, its reception, interpretation, and impact, during the sixteenth-century Reformation. The nine chapters that follow originated as papers delivered at a conference entitled "The Reformation and the Ministry of the Word," held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois) in the fall of 2017 to commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the \textit{Ninety-Five Theses} to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Because all of the contributors to this volume are both active scholars and church leaders, their chapters explore the Bible's decisive role in shaping early Protestant doctrine and practice in such a way as to encourage contemporary Protestants to celebrate their theological heritage and appropriate its riches.

\textit{The Reformation and the Irrepressible Word of God} is divided into four sections plus a concluding afterword. Section one explores the interpretation of the Bible in the Reformation. In chapter one, Scott M. Manetsch describes the important contribution of early Protestant biblical scholarship and interpretation, and then shows the pervasive—and skillful—use of Scripture among ordinary Protestants whose histories are reported in Jean Crespin's famous \textit{History of the Martyrs} (1570). In chapter two, David S. Dockery describes the development and substance of Luther's distinctive Christological interpretation of Scripture and then


\textsuperscript{24}See, for example, Richard Muller and John Thompson, eds., \textit{Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Timothy George, \textit{Reading the Scripture with the Reformers} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); Donald McKim, ed., \textit{Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007); David Steinmetz, \textit{Luther in Context}, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); G. Sujin Pak, \textit{The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also individual volumes published in the \textit{Reformation Commentary on Scripture} series of InterVarsity Press.
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recommends its use to modern exegetes as a valuable canonical/theological principle in conjunction with the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.

In section two, attention is devoted to preaching and pastoral care in the Reformation. Michael A. G. Haykin's chapter on Hugh Latimer demonstrates the strategic importance that preaching played in Latimer's ministry as Bishop of Worcester and chaplain to Edward VI, as well as in the religious renewal of the English church. Next, in chapter four, Ronald K. Rittgers offers a fascinating study of how early Protestants in their pastoral and devotional writings treated Scripture as a kind of sacrament or conduit of God's grace that conveyed divine comfort, help, and wisdom to those who were afflicted of conscience or body. What this shows, Rittgers believes, is that early modern Protestants did not altogether "disenchant" the world, as some scholars have argued, but adopted forms of sacramality that were different from those popular in the medieval church. Hence, while the topic of the Protestant sacraments will not be addressed in detail in this volume, the sacramental nature of the Word is not entirely absent from the essays that follow.

Section three explores the doctrine of justification in the Reformation. In chapter five, Michael S. Horton demonstrates conclusively that Protestant reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Peter Martyr Vermigli were not innovators in their interpretation of 'justification passages' in Romans, but instead, followed an exegetical tradition derived from John Chrysostom (and other early Greek fathers), who recognized Paul's antithesis between works of the law and faith, distinguished between justification and sanctification, and understood justification as a 'great exchange' of the sinner's guilt for Christ's righteousness. If the Protestant doctrine of justification has deep historical roots, it also has continued relevance for people living in the contemporary world. Thus, in chapter six, Kevin DeYoung shows how the Pauline doctrine that sinners are both pardoned and accepted as righteous through faith in Christ is truly "good news" for modern men and women, weighed down by the burden
of guilt imposed by the Western secular world, with all its legalistic demands, intense suffering, and psychological angst.

The two chapters that comprise section four address the Christian life in the Reformation. Thomas H. McCall's chapter on Christian sanctification provides a timely reminder that, even as Luther and his Protestant colleagues affirmed that Christ, through his death, achieved the gracious justification of sinners, so they also emphasized that Christ bestowed upon believers the gift of the Holy Spirit whose indwelling presence empowers them to grow in righteousness and holiness. Justification does not obviate the need for Christian holiness, but makes it possible. Finally, in chapter eight, David J. Luy argues persuasively that Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood was not intended to displace ecclesial institutions or church hierarchies, but was rather a constructive vision whereby Christians, as beneficiaries of God’s grace, become conduits of Christ and his life-giving benefits to the Church. Thus, the universal ministry of God’s people is never divorced from Word and sacrament.

*The Reformation and the Irrepressible Word of God* concludes with an afterword, written by Timothy S. George, that addresses the timely question “What can Evangelicals learn from the Reformation?” Dr. George argues that the distinctive qualities of modern evangelicalism—conversion, the Bible, the cross, Christian activism—all find articulation and significant expression in the sixteenth-century Reformation. Evangelicalism will not endure as a religious movement if it does not remain firmly rooted in the Protestant heritage of the Reformation, with its commitment to God’s authoritative Word, its celebration of God’s gracious salvation through Jesus Christ, and its vision of the Christian church, renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I would like express my heartfelt gratitude to a number of different people who have made this book possible. First, I would like thank the administration of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, especially President David S. Dockery and Dean Graham Cole, for their consistent encouragement and financial support of the Reformation and the
Ministry of the Word Conference that was held on our campus in September 2017. I am also deeply grateful to my dear colleagues who so capably organized and implemented the Reformation conference, including Doug Sweeney, David Luy, Martin Klauber, Felix Theonugrapha, Mark Kahler, Mary Guthrie, Chuck King, and Taylor Worley. Thank you to each one of you. A special word of appreciation is also in order to my research assistants, Taylor Sexton and Viktor Palenyy, who improved the quality of this book by their careful editing work and by compiling the bibliography and index. In a similar fashion, I am also grateful to my friends at InterVarsity Press, especially associate editor David McNutt, for their support of this project and their meticulous labors bringing it to publication. Finally, I wish to thank the outstanding group of scholars who participated in the conference and contributed their essays to this volume. I am most grateful for your warm collegiality and friendship. May this book, in some small way, expand readers’ love for God and his Word, intensify their longing for renewal of Christ’s church, and permit them to exclaim (with Luther) “what great and glorious fruit the Word of God has produced!”

Soli deo gloria

WA 30/2:281.
SECTION ONE

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION in the REFORMATION

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Chapter One

“I HAVE the WORD of GOD”

Scripture, Interpretation, and Crespin’s History of the Martyrs

Scott M. Manetsch

One of the most memorable examples of Protestant iconography in the sixteenth century was a map printed in 1566 by Jean-Baptiste Trento and François Pierre Esrich, bearing the title Mappe Monde Nouvelle Papistique (New Papal World Map). This enormously creative piece of Protestant cartography depicts the monstrous world of Catholic Rome—located within the yawning jaws of the Devil. Here the Protestant reformers are depicted as Christian commandos or freedom fighters, wielding the Word of God to destroy false religion and rescue the Christian church.

In the Province of Pilgrimages, the Reformers Jan Hus, Martin Luther, and Philipp Melanchthon—all armed with Holy Scripture as arrows and spears—battle wily Jesuits and depraved Catholic bishops. In the Province of the Catholic Saints, the French Reformers Pierre Viret and Guillaume Farel—with Bibles raised above their heads—attack the idolatry and seduction of Lady Superstition. At the same time, the Swiss Reformers Huldrych Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger mount an assault against the seemingly impregnable Province of Scholasticism, with the Word of
God flaming like torches in their hands. And finally, it is left to John Calvin and Theodore Beza to battle the papal curia in the province nearest to hell. The pope is seated between his two nefarious captains, identified as Beelzebub and Lucifer. As with the other Protestant commandos, Calvin and Beza wield the sacred weapon of Holy Scripture as they storm the very gates of hell.26

As a choice sample of Protestant propaganda, the New Papal World Map illustrates well the fierce confessional conflict that divided Christian churches during the age of the Reformation. At the same time, the Map suggests the central place that the Bible, the written Word of God, had in Protestant theology and practice. For Protestants, the Bible constituted the supreme source of religious authority for doctrine and daily life. It was an infallible guide for Christian living; a source of hope and comfort for the afflicted; a call-to-arms for those committed to religious reform. For Protestant reformers such as Luther, Zwingli, Calvin or Martin Bucer, the study of Holy Scripture offered readers not simply a collection of devotional insights, but the very essence of the Christian gospel.27 It was through the Bible that God himself spoke to his people. As Luther once commented: “This book, the holy Scripture, is the Holy Spirit’s book.”28

This chapter will highlight the central role that the Bible played in Protestant church life during the sixteenth century. The first part of this essay surveys terrain that is well-known to most students of the Reformation as it describes the strategic contribution of Protestant humanist scholarship in the recovery of the biblical languages, the translation of the Scriptures, the generation of Bible study resources, and the advent of new approaches to Scripture interpretation. The second part of this chap-

26 See [Jean-Baptiste Trento and Pierre Eskrich], Mappe-Monde Nouvelle Papistique, histoire de la Mappe Monde papistique, en laquelle est déclaré tout ce qui est contenu et pourtraict en la grande Table, ou Carte de la Mappe-Monde (Genève, 1566), ed. Frank Lestringant and Alessandra Preda (Geneva: Droz, 2009).
ter covers territory that is largely unchartered as I examine Jean Crespin’s classic book History of the Martyrs, unveiling ways that the Bible shaped the convictions and spirituality of ordinary Protestant clergy and laity during the age of the Reformation.

The Bible in the Reformation

Protestant biblical scholarship in the sixteenth century owed a significant debt to the cultural and educational program known as northern humanism, which was committed to the pursuit of the humane letters (studia humanitatis), the cultivation of eloquence, the retrieval and mastery of classical texts, and the sustained study of the Christian Scriptures in their original languages of Hebrew and Greek. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Catholic humanists such as Lorenzo Valla, John Colet, Johannes Reuchlin, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, and Desiderius Erasmus made major advances in biblical philology and exegesis by producing grammars and lexicons, commentaries on Scripture, and superior Latin translations of the Greek and Hebrew texts. Of all these contributions, none was of greater importance than Desiderius Erasmus’s famous Novum Instrumentum, first published in 1516, which provided scholars a complete Greek text of the New Testament, an elegant Latin translation from the Greek, along with extensive exegetical notes or annotations. In the years that followed, Erasmus expanded these textual notes and published them in four separate editions under the title Annotationes—a theological and exegetical commentary that served as a baseline for Protestant biblical interpretation thereafter.

The impact of northern humanism on Protestant pedagogy and biblical scholarship was both profound and extensive. Magisterial Reformers such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin were shaped significantly by the values and com-

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29See my more extensive treatment in Scott W. Manetsch, ed., Reformation Commentary on Scripture: 1 Corinthians (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), xliii-lxii.

30Erasmus’s Greek New Testament drew from four Greek texts, the earliest of which was dated from the twelfth century.
mitments of the humanist educational program and became enthusiastic proponents of its vision for cultural and religious renewal. Here we will highlight four important ways that the humanist program of biblical scholarship shaped the ministry of the Reformers and changed the face of early modern Protestantism.

**The languages of the Bible.** The Protestant reformers recognized that the careful study of the Christian Scriptures, in the original Greek and Hebrew languages, was necessary for recovering the Christian gospel and achieving the reformation of the church. Martin Luther and his colleagues believed that the recovery of the knowledge of the biblical languages was not merely an isolated cultural achievement, but God's providential design for the renewal of biblical Christianity. The health of the church—indeed, the integrity of the gospel—depended on the knowledge of the Christian Scriptures in the language of their original composition. As Luther stated:

> In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New [Testament] in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his Word, then we too ought to honor them above all others. . . . And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages.\(^{31}\)

Accordingly, nearly all of the major Protestant reformers were *homines trilinguarum*—men of three languages: conversant in classical Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Moreover, their commitment to the biblical languages found expression in the academic programs of their universities and academies. At the University of Wittenberg, for example, Luther and his colleagues pushed for curricular reforms that led to the creation of professorships in Greek and Hebrew in 1518.\(^{32}\) The first professor to occupy the Greek chair was a brilliant young humanist named Philipp

\(^{31}\) LW 45:359-360.

Melanchthon, who would soon become Luther’s disciple and chief confidant. Similarly, when Calvin established his academy in Geneva in 1559, a liberal arts curriculum, including instruction in Greek and Hebrew, took pride of place. The first rector of Calvin’s Academy was an accomplished French humanist, expert Hellenist, and poet named Theodore Beza. The city of Zurich, by contrast, could boast neither a university nor an academy. To fill this lacuna, the Reformed minister Huldrych Zwingli established in 1525 a pastoral assembly called the Prophetzei (The Prophecy), where the city’s ministers and theological students met five days a week to study the Bible in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek. For the Reformers, the recovery of the biblical languages was an essential step closely tied to guarding right doctrine in the church.

Translators of the Bible. Equipped with a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, Protestant scholars began to question the authority of the Latin Vulgate Bible and soon produced new and improved translations of the sacred text. Even before Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, northern humanists such as Valla, Lefèvre d’Étaples, and Erasmus were already raising serious doubts about the reliability of the traditional Latin Vulgate. These concerns grew exponentially as early Protestant leaders compared the old Latin translation to recently published versions of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament. The acuteness of the

33See Martin Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 276-77. In his treatise “To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany” (1524) Luther also urged that secondary schools be established that taught children the liberal arts and the biblical languages. See LW 45:356-64.
36A number of different versions of the Hebrew Bible were available to the Protestant reformers. Martin Luther appears to have used the Hebrew Bible of Gershom Soncino (1494) in his translation of the Bible into German. Later generations of Protestants usually consulted Bomberg’s Biblia Rabbínica (1517–1518, 1525–1526), or the Hebrew Bibles of Sebastian Münster (1534–1535) and Robert Estienne (1539–1544). See Hans Hillerbrand, ed., Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1:58-59. Hereafter abbreviated as OER.
37Erasmus’s Novum Instrumentum (eds. 1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1537) was surpassed by successive editions of the Stephanus Bibles (1546, 1549, 1550, 1551), which employed a number of supe-
problem was impressed upon Luther as early as 1517 when he discovered that the Vulgate’s translation of the Greek word *metanoia* as “do penance” badly missed the biblical authors’ call for heart-felt repentance.\(^{38}\) The obvious deficiencies of the Latin Vulgate invited Protestant scholars such as Konrad Pelikan, Robert Estienne and Theodore Beza to generate new Latin versions of the Bible. In so doing, they decisively broke the monopoly of the Latin Vulgate in the Christian West.

During these decades, Protestant scholars also engaged in a massive program of Bible translation and publication that made available the sacred Scriptures in most of Europe’s vernacular tongues. The Protestants, of course, were not the first Christians in the West to produce vernacular Bibles. John Wyclif’s English translation of the Bible, which first appeared between 1380 and 1384, predated William Tyndale’s “Protestant” Bible by almost one hundred and fifty years.\(^{39}\) Similarly, the first printed German Bible was published in 1466, nearly sixty years (and at least eighteen versions) before Luther completed his famous September New Testament in 1522.\(^{40}\) Nevertheless, the Protestant program of Bible translation broke new ground in several important ways. For one, the vast majority of Protestant vernacular Bibles were translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek, assuring that they would avoid the most egregious textual errors found in the Latin Vulgate.\(^{41}\) Equally important, Protestant translators like Luther and Tyndale employed all their skill and artistry to render the language and message of the Bible in an idiom familiar to ordinary lay people. The Bible was to be the people’s book.\(^{42}\)

\(^{38}\)Thus, Luther’s first thesis in his *Ninety-Five Theses* stated: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence." See also Luther’s letter to Johann von Staupitz, 30 May 1518, in LW 48:63.


\(^{40}\)The first printed German Bible was the *Biblia Germanica*, published in Strasbourg by Johann Mentelin in 1466. See Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible*, 49-51.

\(^{41}\)Thus, for example, Luther’s German New Testament (1522) was the first German edition translated directly from the Greek. See Karl Krueger, “Bible Translation,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 90-91.

\(^{42}\)For more on the popular reception of the Bible, see McNutt and Lauber, *The People’s Book*. 
As Luther once commented: “I endeavored to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew.”

Finally, Protestant church leaders recognized the breathtaking opportunities offered by the printing press and harnessed this technological revolution to produce an unprecedented number of vernacular Bibles for Europe's reading public. The figures are staggering: Luther's September New Testament of 1522 was followed by more than 443 complete or partial editions of the German Bible during the next quarter-century. Similarly, between 1550 and 1600, Genevan printers produced more than eighty editions of the French New Testament and another eighty editions of the entire French Bible. By the end of the century, humanist scholars had completed new versions of the Bible in Arabic, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. The fact that many of these Bibles were printed in a relatively inexpensive, pocket-sized format is further testimony to the Protestants' commitment to make the written Word of God available to all people, no matter their social status or economic station.

*The Study of the Bible.* The Protestant reformers believed that the fruitful reading and faithful proclamation of the Bible was essential for the spiritual health of God's people and the true reformation of the Christian Church. As Melanchthon stated in his *Loci Communis* (1543):

"Thus, we should understand that it is a great blessing of God that He has given to His church a certain Book, and He preserves it for us and gathers His church around it. . . . [T]he church is the people who embrace this Book, hear, learn, and retain as their own its teachings in their worship life and in the

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45Chambers, *Bibliography of French Bibles*.
governing of their morals. . . . Therefore we should love and cultivate the study of this divinely given book.\textsuperscript{47}

The problem, of course, was that the majority of men and women during this period were unable to read the Scriptures for themselves. Recent scholarship estimates that only around 12\% of Western Europeans were literate in 1500, a figure that increased to around 18\% a century later.\textsuperscript{48} As a general rule, literacy rates were significantly higher in the cities than in the countryside, and men were far more likely to be literate than women. Given this stark reality, how could one meaningfully describe the Bible as the people’s book?

Early Protestant leaders were aware of this problem, and they created a variety of ministry programs and resources to promote biblical literacy. Nearly all of the magisterial Reformers wrote catechisms to instruct boys and girls, as well as ignorant adults, in the central tenets of the Christian religion, including the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. The Reformers established multiple dozens of Latin schools and academies in which children (mostly boys) learned to read and write, memorized the catechism, and studied Bible doctrine. In Protestant cities such as Wittenberg and Geneva, worship services were conducted seven days a week in which the congregation recited liturgies, pregnant with the language of Scripture, and sang Psalms and Christian hymns. Most important of all was the Protestant sermon. In Wittenberg, Luther and his colleagues preached nine vernacular sermons each week; in Geneva, the Reformed ministers preached as many as thirty-three sermons each week in the city’s three parish churches. The sermon was the primary way in which Protestants imparted evangelical doctrine.


promoted Christian sanctification, and cultivated biblical literacy. As Calvin stated: “For God there is nothing higher than preaching the gospel, because it is the means to lead people to salvation.”

In addition to ministries that promoted biblical literacy, the Protestant reformers also published an almost countless number of books and pamphlets to help clergy and educated laypeople study and interpret the Bible. This vast literature included printed sermons; hermeneutical guides; paraphrases of Scripture; Hebrew and Greek grammars; Bible concordances and dictionaries; Gospel harmonies, and biblical commentaries. It is with good reason, then, that scholars have sometimes called the sixteenth century the golden age of biblical interpretation. Something more needs to be said regarding Protestant commentaries. During the Reformation, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed church leaders applied their knowledge of sacred philology and the biblical languages to compose a vast library of exegetical and theological commentaries on every book of the Bible. Scholars have identified, for example, seventy different commentaries on the book of Romans and nearly one hundred commentaries on the Psalms written during the sixteenth century alone. The roll call of Protestant commentators included Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, to be sure, but also a battalion of lesser-known humanist biblical scholars such as Melanchthon, Johannes Brenz, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Wolfgang Musculus, Theodore Beza, and Peter Martyr Vermigli, whose erudition and mature exegetical judgments were on display in their penetrating (and often massive) commentaries. Although Reformation commentaries appeared in a variety


50] See Timothy George’s “General Introduction” to the Reformed Commentary on Scripture series, in Manetsch, 1 Corinthians, xxvii.

51] See OER 1:167-71. Most, though not all, of these commentaries were written by Protestant scholars. Today, the most complete collection of sixteenth-century Protestant commentaries can be found in the Post-Reformation Digital Library, which lists around 950 discrete biblical commentaries published during the period. See the rubric “Biblical Commentary” at www.prdl.org /genre.php.
of literary genres and adopted different interpretive strategies, all were intended to make clear the Bible’s message for the benefit of the church. Protestant commentators would thus have agreed with the early church scholar Jerome, who stated that the task of exegesis is “to explain what has been said by others and make clear in plain language what has been written obscurely.”

It is important to recognize, finally, that Reformation commentaries had a number of different intended audiences. Undoubtedly, many pastors and lay people read these commentaries for their personal instruction and edification. But biblical commentaries also had a public life, serving as indispensable resources for preachers as they proclaimed God’s Word in sermons or for professors as they lectured on the sacred text at universities. Through the media of pulpit and lectern, therefore, humanist biblical scholarship reached a broader lay audience and shaped Protestant belief and moral behavior during the age of the Reformation.

The Interpretation of the Bible. Finally, we need to make a few brief comments about the way in which early Protestants interpreted their Bibles. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan once credited Luther and the Protestant reformers with achieving a Copernican revolution in hermeneutics. And that is partially true. As noted earlier, Protestant leaders championed the humanist program of biblical scholarship that accented philology, challenged the monopoly of the Vulgate Bible, and stimulated a veritable flood of exegetical tools and vernacular Bible translations. Equally important, the magisterial Reformers defended the literal interpretation of Scripture, while at the same time launching blistering attacks on the medieval exegetical tradition, which they believed had too often disregarded or distorted the literal meaning of Scripture in search of “deeper” spiritual meanings found in the allegorical, tropological, and analogical senses of the text. Calvin compared such figurative exegesis

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to children "playing games with the sacred Word of God, like tossing a ball back and forth."\textsuperscript{54} Bucer repudiated allegorical interpretation as a "blatant insult to the Holy Spirit" contrived by Satan.\textsuperscript{55} Luther routinely denounced the fanciful allegories of patristic and medieval interpreters, calling them "silly," "senseless," "foolish," "absurd," "disastrous," "nonsensical"—they were "empty dreams" and "amazing twaddle" that desecrated the sacred writings.\textsuperscript{56} Instead, the Protestant reformers insisted that Christian exegetes should interpret the Bible according to its natural or literal sense, governed by the grammar, genre, history, and literary context of a passage. Luther summarized the Protestant approach this way: "[W]e must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man."\textsuperscript{57} Although this literal hermeneutic of Scripture was not entirely new with the Reformers (medieval exegetes such as Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra had also given priority to the letter of the text), nevertheless, the Protestants popularized this approach and defended it as the only faithful manner of handling the Word of God.

But with that said, early Protestant interpreters were to a significant degree traditional in their approach to Scripture.\textsuperscript{58} Along with their patristic and medieval forebears, they believed that Holy Scripture was the divinely inspired Word of God, infallible in its content and message; authoritative in its commands; relevant for their present day. Likewise, in agreement with the Christian tradition, the Reformers recognized the

\textsuperscript{54}John Calvin, Commentary on 2 Corinthians 3:6-7, CTS 40:175 (cf. CO 50:40-41).
\textsuperscript{55}Cited in David Wright, "Martin Bucer," in Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters, Donald McKim, ed., (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 249. Similarly, Luther commented: "I urge students of theology to shun this kind of interpretation in the Holy Scriptures. For allegory is pernicious when it does not agree with history, but especially when it takes the place of the history, from which the church is more correctly instructed about the wonderful administration of God . . . " (LW 5:345). For more on Luther's attitude toward figurative exegesis, see Kolb, Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God, 92-93.
\textsuperscript{56}See Luther's Lectures on Genesis, LW 1:90, 93, 98, 99, 122, 184, 185, 188, 231, 232, 233.
\textsuperscript{57}LW 36:30.
\textsuperscript{58}See Muller and Thompson, "The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect," in Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation, 335-45.
unity of the biblical canon and believed that passages of Scripture must be interpreted within this larger canonical frame. At the same time, the majority of Protestant exegesis recognized that faithful interpretation of Scripture must occur in conversation with biblical scholars throughout the ages. Hence, while the Reformers believed in the authority and clarity of the Bible and affirmed that Scripture should interpret Scripture (the so-called analogous scripturae), they also “recognized the value of consulting the scholarship of patristic and medieval exegesis—not only as apologetic foils, but also as faithful guides to interpreting God’s Word.”

Finally, although Protestant leaders regularly excoriated the allegorical excesses of the medieval church, they did not endorse a bare literalism that ignored the spiritual message of Scripture. Reformation commentators like Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, and Calvin recognized that the literal or natural sense of Scripture frequently contained various layers of spiritual meaning or typological significance that spoke of Christ, Christian morality, and Christian hope to believers in their own day. The task of the faithful interpreter, then, was to excavate these rich spiritual deposits while remaining true to the plain, historical meaning of the biblical author. Spiritual exegesis must always be subject to the letter of the text. Some magisterial Reformers (like Luther and Zwingli) displayed a fair degree of freedom in drawing spiritual and mystical meaning from Scripture; others (like Calvin and Bucer) were more restrained in their uses of spiritual or typological exegesis. All agreed, however, that allegories were never to be used to establish points of doctrine; they functioned only to elucidate or illustrate Christian truth.

So too, they agreed that all interpretations—literal as well as spiritual readings—must accord with the analogy of faith (analogia fidei), that is the broader message of scriptural teaching. Luther explained this herm-

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60 For an excellent description of Calvin’s restrained use of typological exegesis, see Pak, The Judaising Calvin.
neutrical approach to his students in this fashion: "I do not try to find [allegories] unless they in some way enhance the historical meaning that is comprehended from the simple story itself. There they are like flowers strewn about, but they prove nothing."  

For these reasons, therefore, most scholars today rightly reject the idea that Luther, Calvin, and other early Protestant exegetes were progenitors of modern historical critical approaches to Scripture interpretation. To be sure, they did break new ground in their use of humanistic biblical scholarship and in the priority they gave to the simple or literal meaning of the text. However, their general attitude regarding the divine nature and authority of Scripture as God's written Word was in overall continuity with the Christian tradition that preceded them.

The Bible in Jean Crespin's History of the Martyrs

As we have seen, the Bible occupied a central place in Protestant scholarship, pedagogy, and public worship in the sixteenth century. But what role did the Bible play in the everyday lives of ordinary people during the Reformation? How did village pastors, common laborers, university students, tailors, and dressmakers view the Bible? How did they interpret it? What importance did it play in their daily lives? Jean Crespin's monumental work History of the Martyrs is one of only a handful of written sources from the Reformation period that sheds light on this largely forgotten world of popular perception and belief. In the second part of this chapter, I will briefly introduce Crespin and his martyrology and then examine this important source for clues as to how the Bible shaped the convictions and spirituality of ordinary Protestants during the age of the Reformation.  

61IW 5:88. For an insightful treatment of Luther’s attitude toward allegories and his development as an exegete, see Kolb, Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God, 158–67.

62The term “ordinary Protestant” is not intended to assume illiteracy. Though Crespin's martyrs included men and women from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, most of those who interacted with Scripture appear to have had some level of literacy. Other martyrs probably gained knowledge of the Bible’s message through oral conversations, memorized catechesis, and sermons.
First, a few words about Crespin himself. Jean Crespin was one of the most prolific printers of French Protestant literature in the sixteenth century. Born around 1520, Crespin received a humanist education at the University of Louvain before returning to his hometown of Arras in the Spanish Netherlands to pursue a career in law. In November of 1541, he witnessed the public execution of a goldsmith named Claude le Painctre, who was burned at the stake for his evangelical convictions. Four years later, Crespin himself was accused of being a secret “Lutheran” and was thereafter stripped of his family’s inheritance and banished from the city, leading to his eventual relocation to Reformed Geneva in 1548. With Calvin’s support, Crespin soon established a successful print shop in Geneva that employed four presses and around sixteen employees, a business that produced a vast quantity of religious books, including Bibles, commentaries, catechisms, liturgical manuals, and polemical writings.

One of the most popular books that issued from Crespin’s press was the martyrology that he penned and first published in 1554 under the title *Le Livre des Martyrs* (*The Book of Martyrs*). This work, which consisted of 687 pages (in octavo), recorded the bold confessions and described the courageous deaths of around 90 named evangelical martyrs, beginning with Jan Hus’s execution in 1415 and concluding with the death of Pierre de la Vau who was burned at the stake in Nîmes in 1554. Crespin continued to supplement and revise his martyrology until a thirteenth and final edition appeared in 1570 under the title *The History*

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64 Olson, “Jean Crespin,” 322–24.

of True Witnesses to the Truth of the Gospel (which thereafter became known as History of the Martyrs). By that time the work had grown into a hefty volume of 1,450 pages (in folio) that memorialized the deaths of nearly 600 Protestant martyrs.\textsuperscript{66} It would be difficult to overstate the impact that History of the Martyrs had among French Protestants in the centuries that followed. The martyrology became an essential part of Huguenot memory and spirituality, read alongside the French Bible and the Genevan Psalter. The Catholic poet and propagandist Agrippa d'Aubigné once commented, “After the Bible, I have found no book more dangerous than this one, and none more powerful to make one a heretic.”\textsuperscript{67}

Jean Crespin’s stated purpose in writing the History of the Martyrs was to present his readers with a faithful narrative of historical events cast within the frame of God’s broader providential plan for his church.\textsuperscript{68} The martyrology was to serve as a kind of “mirror” through which Reformed Protestants might observe “the power, wisdom, justice and goodness of God.”\textsuperscript{69} Crespin constructed his narrative around a patchwork of historical sources, including published documents, private letters, eye-witness accounts, oral testimonies, trial records, and personal confessions, stitched together with his own historical and theological commentary. Crespin’s reliability as a historian has sometimes been questioned due to his confessional bias, his uncritical use of sources, his providential view of history, and occasional embellishments that he introduces to the


\textsuperscript{67}Cited by Benoit and Lelièvre in the introduction to their edition of the Histoire des Martyrs, xix.

\textsuperscript{68}See especially David Watson, “Jean Crespin and the Writing of History,” 39-58.

\textsuperscript{69}Crespin states in the 1561 edition of the work that he will “proposer aux lecteurs, comme en un miroir, la puissance, la sagesse, la justice et la bonté de Dieu.” Cited in Gilmont, Jean Crespin, 188.
historical record. But, even if Crespin’s method does not meet the critical standards of modern historical scholarship, his martyrology transcends mere Protestant hagiography as it provides the reader with a vast collection of primary source materials that shed precious light on Protestant religious belief and behavior in the sixteenth century. In particular, these historical traces give a rich and detailed description of how early Protestants viewed Scripture and how the Bible shaped the spirituality and religious identity of ordinary men and women in the age of the Reformation. Crespin’s martyrology makes clear that, for sixteenth-century Protestants, the Bible was the people’s book.

References to the Christian Scriptures saturate Crespin’s work. His narrative employs a variety of words and phrases to refer to holy writ, including the Bible (la Bible), the Holy Scripture (la sainte Escriture), the Old and New Testament (le veiil & nouveau Testament), and the Word of God (la parole de Dieu). This latter term has a wide semantic range for Crespin; he uses it variously to describe the message of the gospel, Christian preaching, and Christian doctrine in general; he also uses the term more narrowly to describe God’s written revelation. Thus, for example, a member of the parlement of Paris and Protestant martyr Anne du Bourg identifies Christian Scripture as “the true Word of God, dictated by the Holy Spirit, written by the Prophets and Apostles” who were “true secretaries of our good God.”

Because they understood Scripture to be God’s written word, Crespin’s martyrs revered it and ascribed divine qualities to it. They recognized the Bible as “celestial teaching” and “infallible truth.” Its message therefore was “firm and eternal,” “completely true,” and “certain and perfect.” Charles Favre, a student from Lausanne who was executed in Lyons in

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70For a largely critical assessment of Crespin’s reliability as a historian, see William Monter, Judging the French Reformation. Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), and Watson, “Jean Crespin and the Writing of History,” 39-58. For Brad Gregory’s more positive assessment, see Salvation at Stake, 18-22.
71Crespin, Histoire de vrai Temoins (1570), 531.
72Crespin, Histoire de vrai Temoins (1570), 148, 240v, 348, 690, 240v.
1554, captured these convictions in his written confession: “I believe and confess that the Scripture alone is the rule of religion and the Christian faith, which is contained in the Old and New Testament, and that it is firm, certain and true, infallible and perfect.”\textsuperscript{73} As they faced opponents who challenged their religious beliefs and threatened them with physical harm, Protestant martyrs found particular confidence and comfort from the fact that the Bible’s message of salvation was true, did not change, and remained eternal. The martyr Pierre Brully, for example, informed his accusers that “I have no fear of error when I speak according to the Word of God.”\textsuperscript{74} Similarly, Richard Le Fevre confidently asserted that the Christian’s faith should be founded “on the word of Jesus Christ alone, which cannot fail and does not lie.”\textsuperscript{75} Several decades later, a Flemish martyr named Christophe Smith wrote from prison: “Let them burn; let them strangle; let them kill and murder, by fire, nooses, the sword, and water as much as they want, the Word of God still remains and will remain eternally.”\textsuperscript{76}

In their judicial hearings and confessions, many of Crespin’s martyrs articulated the Protestant doctrine of \textit{sola Scriptura}, that Scripture alone is the Christian’s highest authority in matters of faith and practice. For Englishman John Philpot, God had established and ordained Scripture “as the judge of all human wisdom and all the words and works of all the people in the world.” Thus, he continued, “I hold no doctrine which is contrary to the indubitable authority of holy Scripture.”\textsuperscript{77} In a similar fashion, when interrogated by Catholic authorities in 1552, Denis Pelouquin stated that Scripture was “infallible truth, certain and perfect...the only rule of the Christian religion.”\textsuperscript{78} Seven years later, Anne du Bourg concluded his defense by affirming that “all the laws made by the

\textsuperscript{73}Crespin, \textit{Histoire de vray Tesmoins} (1570), 226.
\textsuperscript{74}Crespin, \textit{Histoire de vray Tesmoins} (1570), 135v.
\textsuperscript{75}Crespin, \textit{Histoire de vray Tesmoins} (1570), 278v.
\textsuperscript{76}Crespin, \textit{Histoire de vray Tesmoins} (1570), 642.
\textsuperscript{77}Crespin, \textit{Histoire de vray Tesmoins} (1570), 401.
\textsuperscript{78}Crespin, \textit{Histoire de vray Tesmoins} (1570), 240v.
popes or others concerning the Christian religion cannot force Christians to follow any other rule or doctrine than what is contained in the book of the Bible." Several of Crespin's martyrs acknowledged the theological contribution made by early church fathers, such as Ambrose, Augustine, and Chrysostom, but insisted that their judgments must always be tested by Scripture. One French martyr put the matter this way: "I in no way reject the writings of the doctors that are conformed to the holy Scripture, inasmuch as they are drawn from it as the true source and fountain of all pure doctrine; but those that are not conformed to the holy Scripture, I hold them as a fable and lie." Evidently, the question of authority stood at the center of the confessional divide that separated the evangelical churches from Rome. Thus, when a Catholic judge ordered Richard Le Fevre to explain the difference between the Roman Church and the Reformed churches in Geneva, Lausanne, and Bern, the defendant responded: "The difference is that the Church of Rome is governed by human traditions and the other, by contrast, is governed by the Word alone and the ordinance of God." The trial of Jean Rabec provides a good example of how Protestant martyrs appealed to Scripture's authority against their Catholic opponents. Rabec had once been a Franciscan monk who, having tasted evangelical teaching, renounced his monastic vows and relocated to Lausanne to study theology at the city's Reformed academy. After completing his studies, he returned to the city of Angers as a missionary to share with his fellow countrymen "the inestimable treasure of the Lord's grace" and, if possible, to "rescue from the abyss of hell those who were perishing." In August of 1555, Rabec was arrested and imprisoned when he was caught reading aloud the first edition of Crespin's martyrology to a group of onlookers. During the long trial that followed, Rabec was rigorously questioned by episcopal judges as to his views regarding the intercession.

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79 Crespin, *Histoire de vrais Témoins* (1570), 531.
82 Crespin, *Histoire de vrais Témoins* (1570), 408v.
of the saints, the Virgin Mary, purgatory, the pope, auricular confession, the Mass, transubstantiation, baptism, Catholic traditions, and monastic vows. From his prison cell, Rabec wrote a precious letter describing his responses to his interrogation. When asked about praying to the saints, he responded that the practice “was not acceptable, inasmuch as it cannot be proven from Scripture.” When asked about papal authority, he answered: “I do not believe that there is any other head of the Church than Jesus Christ, inasmuch as Scripture proposes no other.” Regarding the doctrine of Mary’s immaculate conception, Rabec was even more direct: “You have as the foundation of your [belief] an explanation based in the human brain; as for me, I have the Word of God. Judge who is the most wise, God or you; and what is most certain, his judgment or yours!” At one point in the trial, Rabec paraphrased the famous statement by Luther: “I would place more value in the words of a child who has the Word of God than the rest of the whole world who does not have it.”

After months of intense interrogations and cruel treatment, Rabec was finally excommunicated as a heretic, defrocked, and sentenced to death by burning. On April 24, 1556, the executioner came to Rabec’s prison cell, cut out his tongue, and then led him to the place of execution, where he was suspended above the ground by his wrists for half-an-hour before being burned alive at the stake. Remarkably, according to Crespin’s account, the courageous martyr Jean Rabec—without a tongue and with blood streaming out of his mouth—was heard praying and reciting Psalm 79 minutes before his body was burned to ashes.

Of course, bold assertions like that of Jean Rabec—“I have the Word of God”—were contested by Catholic opponents at every turn. In Crespin’s account, Catholic judges and inquisitors regularly rejected the mar-
tyrs’ private interpretations of the Bible, asserting that the Catholic Church alone defined canonical Scripture and thus had the sole right to interpret it. In a letter to friends back in Geneva, the martyr Jean Vernon from Poitiers offered a typical Protestant response to these epistemological concerns. The monk interrogating him had asked how he knew that the Old and New Testaments were the Word of God except for the fact that the Church defined them as such. Vernon answered that “he believed that Scripture was the Word of God because the style and language of Scripture is the language of God dictated by the Holy Spirit.” Moreover, those who have experienced the new birth “are taught by God and have the Holy Spirit in them, who gives testimony to their spirit that they are from God.” Vernon proceeded to quote from Isaiah 54, Jeremiah 31, John 18, and Romans 8 in support of his viewpoint. In a similar fashion, the martyr Jean Trigalet also appealed to the Holy Spirit’s role as witness to Scripture’s divine origin and authority. “We have a sure witness of this fact in our conscience by the Spirit of Adoption, who works in our hearts, and gives us complete confidence in the promises of God, causing us to cry Abba Father, as Saint Paul says in Romans 8.”

But what of the hermeneutical problem? How could Protestants have confidence that they rightly interpreted Scripture without appealing to the teaching authority of Church and tradition? Crespin's martyrs addressed this hermeneutical concern in various ways, although the overall message was that ordinary Christians could understand the central teachings of God’s Word if they studied the Bible carefully, allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture, and depended upon the Holy Spirit for illumination. Thus, for example, two English martyrs, Thomas Hygby and Thomas Causson, challenged the Catholic interpretation of Jesus’s words, “This is my body broken for you,” in this fashion: “We do not at all deny these words, but we determine the true sense of these words by comparing other passages of Scripture to this passage, which easily

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88 Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 341v.
89 Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 345.
provides the true interpretation of this particular passage.”90 Similarly, when a theological professor from the Sorbonne in Paris rebuked a poor teenager named Jean Morel for interpreting the Scripture for himself, Morel responded: “My faith is founded on the doctrine of the prophets and apostles. And, although I may not be well trained in sacred letters . . . I can learn from [the Scriptures] what is necessary for my salvation; and the passages that I find difficult, I pass over them until such a time when it pleases God to give me the ability to understand them. And thus I drink the milk that I find in the Word of God.” Morel supported his statement by quoting from St. Chrysostom, who once wrote: “The Holy Spirit wished that the sacred Scripture should be written in such a way that all might read it, both great and small, even servants and chambermaids.”91

The role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation was an especially important theme in Crespin’s martyrology. When Geoffroy Guerin was asked in 1558 how one could adjudicate between rival interpretations of Catholics and Protestants, he answered simply, “This will be the Holy Spirit.”92 In the same year, a Catholic judge demanded of a sixty-year-old vinedresser named Pierre Chevet how it was that he knew so much Scripture and how he could be so confident of its meaning. Chevet quoted from Isaiah 54:13 (“All your children shall be taught by the Lord”), and then replied: “Why should I not know what pertains to my salvation, when I have such a good teacher (docteur), the Spirit of God?”93 When asked how he dared to assert that he possessed the Holy Spirit, Chevet answered confidently: “I am a child of God, and the Spirit of God was given to me as a deposit of my adoption” (alluding to Romans 8:15).94 François Varlut, a poor drapemaker and lay preacher from Tournay, also described the Holy Spirit as the chief doctor of Scripture. Arrested in

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90Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 316.
91Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 508.
92Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 498.
93Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 517.
94Crespin, Histoire de vrais Témoins (1570), 517.
1562, Varlut was brought before the city’s magistrates, who asked how he, an ignorant tradesman, could claim to be wiser than the learned doctors of the church who had studied theology most of their lives. Varlut answered:

Monsieur, as for me, I know and confess that by nature I am so ignorant that I am not able even to think a good thought, as Saint Paul says, and that before God had changed my perverse and hard heart into a submissive heart, I knew nothing of the good nor of God. But when it pleased God by his grace to touch my heart, and when he had made me aware of my ignorance, then . . . I asked him for wisdom [and] to be instructed by his Holy Spirit in the knowledge of the truth. He granted my request and instructed me in the true knowledge of his Word, so that I am certain that what I believe is the true word of God and not an opinion.  

The magistrates ridiculed Varlut’s response, pointing out that the hated Anabaptists also boasted of the Spirit’s inspiration. Varlut remained unmoved, however: he would continue to trust Jesus and the apostles who promised that Christians who asked for the Spirit’s wisdom would certainly receive it.

The Protestant martyrs in Crespine’s martyrology were people of the Bible. They not only defended its authority and debated its message, they also bought and sold it; they read it; they memorized it; they sang it; they talked about it; they found comfort from it; some even died for it. For many of these martyrs, the message of sacred Scripture profoundly shaped the way they viewed God, his nature and purposes, and the way they conducted their daily lives. An English noblewoman named Anne Askew stated before her accusers that she would “prefer to read five verses in the holy Bible of God than to hear the same number of Masses,” for she “felt great edification in reading the Bible but none when listening to the Mass.”  

Estienne Brun, a peasant farmer from Dauphiné, devoted the majority of his time to ploughing his fields and reading his French

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95Crespine, Histoire de vrais témoins (1570), 603.
96Crespine, Histoire de vrais témoins (1570), 164v.
New Testament—the first activity was “for the nourishment of his family,” and the second was “for the instruction of himself in all fear of God.”

The two sons of Robert Ouguier of Lille warned their father against handling a wooden crucifix, pointing instead to the spiritual illumination that came from the Word of God: “We do not at all want a Jesus Christ made of wood, because we bear Jesus Christ, the living Son of God, in our hearts and we feel his holy Word written in letters of gold in the deep recesses of our hearts.”

Likewise, shortly before his execution in 1546, the Spanish martyr Jean Diaze urged fellow believers to embrace the message of God’s Word which “illuminates the eyes of our understanding with all celestial light so that it burns in all of our hearts as a divine fire, inciting us to good works, worthy of a Christian man.”

In addition to spiritual illumination and moral guidance, many of Crespin’s martyrs experienced comfort from Scripture in the darkest moments of their lives. When the French martyr Pierre Gabart found himself in a filthy prison cell, teeming with rats, he “did not stop singing the Psalms and crying out in a loud voice the consolations of the Word of God so that others might hear.”

Many other Protestant martyrs, including the German pastor Wolfgang Schuch, sang Psalms and recited Scripture as they were led to the scaffold or bound to the stake. A couple of martyrs even died with Bibles in hand. Thus, for example, an unnamed bookseller was burned at the stake in Avignon in 1543 with copies of the Scripture strapped to his chest and back as punishment for selling illegal vernacular Bibles in the city. According to Crespin, the poor book merchant “had the Word of God in his heart and mouth, and did not cease along the road to his execution exhorting and admonishing the people to read the holy Scripture.”

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97 Crespin, Histoire de vraî Tesmoins (1570), 95.
98 Crespin, Histoire de vraî Tesmoins (1570), 426v.
99 Crespin, Histoire de vraî Tesmoins (1570), 160v.
100 Crespin, Histoire de vraî Tesmoins (1570), 484v.
101 Crespin, Histoire de vraî Tesmoins (1570), 67.
102 Crespin, Histoire de vraî Tesmoins (1570), 118v.
played in shaping Protestant spirituality and practice is also illustrated in the final letter that the martyr Jean Le Grain wrote to his wife shortly before his death by sword in June of 1568: “I urge you to remain in peace and harmony among yourselves, meditate constantly on the holy Scripture of the Lord. Do not forget to give to each of my children a Bible, which I leave them for a last will and testament. My very dear wife, I ask you to continue to teach our children in the fear of God, being always content with what he gives to you. To conclude, I bid you adieu, my very dear wife, if it happens that I should not see you again.”

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the important place that the Bible occupied among Protestants in the sixteenth century. As we have seen, early reformers such as Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Calvin believed that the recovery of the Christian gospel and the reformation of the Church was in large part dependent upon a renewed commitment to the careful study, right interpretation, and faithful proclamation of the Christian Scripture. Accordingly, the reformers worked tirelessly not only in teaching and preaching the Scriptures, but also in producing study resources such as improved vernacular translations of the Bible, catechisms, and commentaries to help God’s people mature in Christian understanding and sanctification. The Bible was never intended to be the preoccupation or property of scholars alone; it must be the people’s book. The martyr accounts that we have consulted in Crespin’s History of the Martyrs illustrate this conviction particularly well. As we have seen, Protestant martyrs from various social backgrounds and occupations professed their commitment to God’s written Word and cherished its message. In the face of extraordinary difficulties, Crespin’s martyrs turned to Scripture again and again. They studied it; they defended it; they recited it; they memorized it; they sang it; they found comfort from

103Crespin, Histoire de vrais Testimens (1570), 702r-v.
it. The trial and execution of a twenty-three-year-old widow named Philippe de Luns from Perigueux provides one final example of the formative role that Scripture played in shaping Protestant identity and spirituality in the Reformation. Philippe was arrested in 1557 for hosting a Protestant conventicle in her home, at which the believers were frequently heard by neighbors singing the Psalms. Moreover, her husband had recently died without receiving last rites from the Roman Catholic Church. From her prison cell, Philippe wrote the lieutenant: “Monsieur . . . I see clearly that my death approaches and yet, if I have ever needed consolation, it is now. Please allow me to have a Bible or a New Testament to comfort me.”104 Throughout her trial, Philippe remained resolute in her commitment to the Scripture and the Protestant faith. When asked from whom she had learned her doctrine, she replied that “she had no other instructor than the text of the New Testament.”105 When asked whether or not she wanted to believe in the Catholic Mass, she replied that “she only wanted to believe that which was in the Old and New Testament.”106 As the time of her execution approached, Crespin reports, Philippe laid aside the grief-clothes of her widowhood and clothed herself instead with a velvet cape and other bright accessories in joyful preparation for her triumphal martyrdom and union with her spouse, Jesus Christ. On September 27, 1558, Philippe de Lune was brought to the Place Maubert in Paris and tortured; she then mounted the gallows and died with a radiant courage befitting a true martyr.107

104 Crespin, Histoire de vrai Tesmoins (1570), 482.
105 Crespin, Histoire de vrai Tesmoins (1570), 482v.
106 Crespin, Histoire de vrai Tesmoins (1570), 482v.
107 Crespin, Histoire de vrai Tesmoins (1570), 484.