

Theology of the Reformers:

A Conversation with Timothy George

By Trevin Wax

Dr. Timothy George's *Theology of the Reformers* was a required text for me in seminary. It is one of the most memorable academic books I came across during my studies—concise, accessible, with a good mix of biographical information and theological exposition for four pioneers of the Reformation Era. Now, Dr. George has released a revised and expanded edition of the book in honor of the 25th anniversary of the publication of the first edition.

Wax: What led you to write *Theology of the Reformers* in 1988?

George: Nineteen eighty-eight was an important year of transition in my life. In that year, I completed 10 years of teaching on the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville and moved to Birmingham to begin the work of Beeson Divinity School.

That being said, *Theology of the Reformers* was actually begun several years earlier. It was largely written during the only yearlong sabbatical leave that I have ever had, which took place in 1985–86. My family and I lived in Switzerland near Zurich for much of that time. I also studied in Geneva and Basel, and traveled extensively throughout Germany and Eastern Europe. During this time, I was living and breathing the Reformation, so to speak, and I was impressed by the abiding validity of the reformers' message for Christians today. I wanted to rescue the reformers from "affectionate obscurity" and allow them to speak again in their own distinctive tonality and gravitas.

Wax: What was it that made you interested in the Reformation?

George: When I first went to Harvard Divinity School to pursue graduate studies in theology, I did so with the idea of pursuing doctoral studies in New Testament and early Christian origins. In the course of my studies in both historical and modern theology, though, I came to see that one could not really leapfrog over the Reformation to recover an unmediated, primitivist kind of Christianity.

One must come to grips with what happened theologically as well as historically during the great seismic divide of Western Christianity in the great sixteenth century. Thus, my interest in the Reformation was always in service to a wider concern, namely, to understand the reformers as they saw themselves: faithful servants of Jesus Christ in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Wax: For the first edition, you chose to focus on Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin and Menno Simons. Some scholars

might question your inclusion of a nonmagisterial Reformer, namely the Anabaptist Simons, within a book on Reformation theology. Why do you feel that Simons should be considered one of the most important Reformation theologians?

George: I have been both criticized and praised for including Menno Simons in my original quartet of reformers. Having been a student of the great George Huntston Williams at Harvard, I could not well leave out the entire Radical Reformation. Also, as a confessional Baptist, I had to come to grips with the Anabaptist movement. I resonate with the Anabaptist vision in some respects, especially their ethics and ecclesiology, though I find unconvincing the case for the Anabaptist origins of the modern Baptist tradition.

I admit that in some ways Balthasar Hubmaier would have been a more obvious choice to represent the Radical Reformation. Both he and his wife, Elizabeth, were martyred for

their faith. But I chose Menno Simons because I wanted to write about a person who stood at the vanguard of a living, continuing church tradition. Menno's writings also have a pastoral quality about them that make them useful in today's church.

Wax: *In the revised edition, you have added the biography and theology of William Tyndale. What is it about Tyndale that led you to write a new chapter for the book?*

George: Because of space and time constraints, a major figure representing the English Reformation was omitted from the first edition. I wanted to correct this lacuna in the new twenty-fifth anniversary edition. But whom to choose?

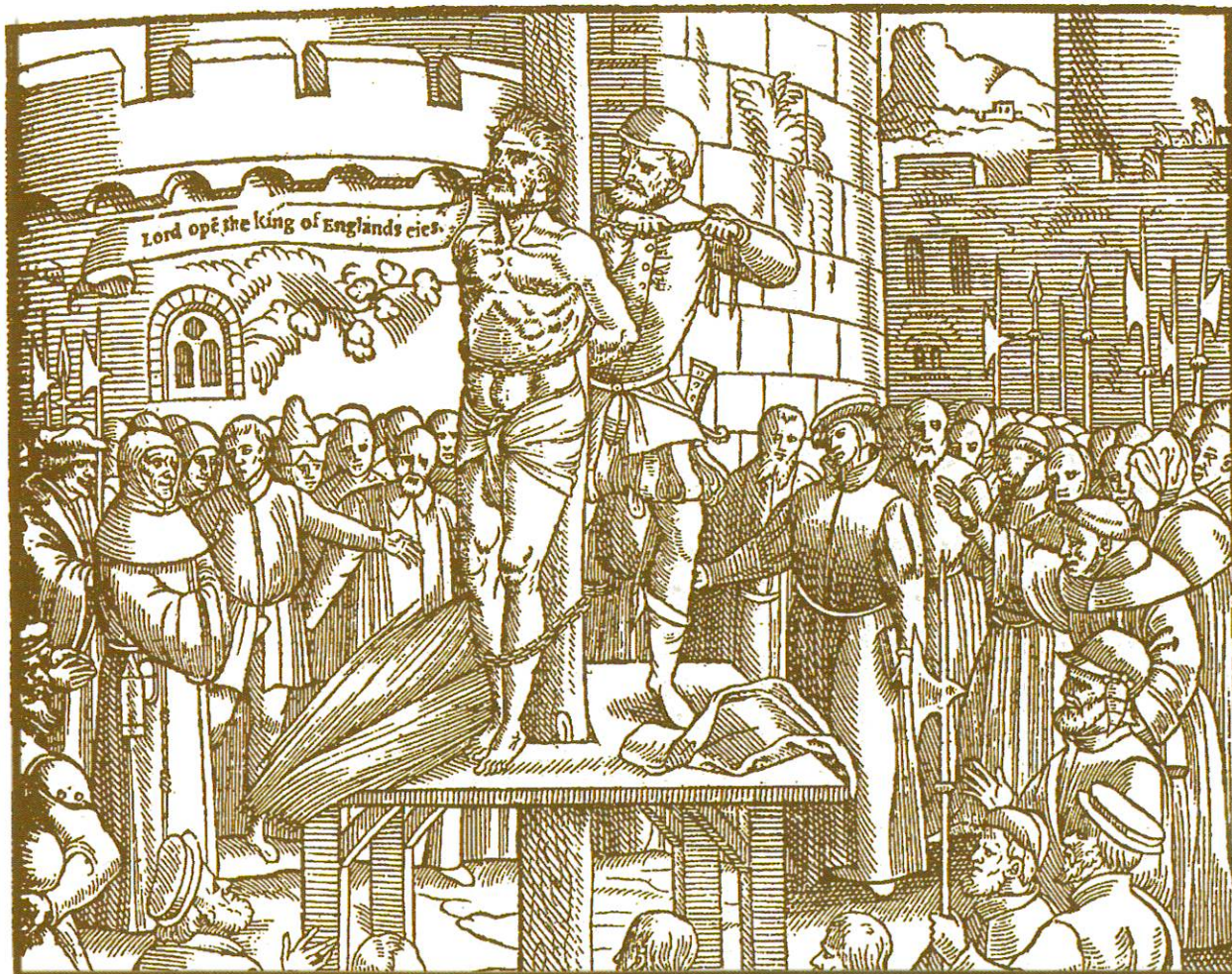
Thomas Cranmer would have been an obvious choice. Not only was he the archbishop of Canterbury during a crucial phase of the English Reformation, but he gave the entire church a great devotional and liturgical classic in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The selection of later figures, such as Richard Hooker and William Perkins, could also be justified.

I chose William Tyndale because he stood at the headwaters of the entire English Reformation. His pioneering work as

the first person to translate into English the New Testament and much of the Old from original biblical tongues can hardly be exaggerated. His life story reads like an evangelical James Bond novel—exile from his native land, living in the shadows, near escapes, shipwreck on the open sea, and eventually betrayal and execution for his relentless efforts to give the world an English Bible.

But Tyndale was more than a translator of genius and a martyr with a cause. He forged a distinctive Reformation theology, drawing on Wycliffe and the tradition of native English dissent, influenced by Erasmus and Luther, and anticipating later Reformed and Puritan thought. Tyndale's unique covenantal theology and Augustinian view of grace, together with his emphasis on the proper place of good works in the Christian life, are lines of thought that come together in later English Reformed thought, especially among the Puritans. I wanted to bring Tyndale the theologian out of the shadows and give him the exposure he widely deserves.

Wax: *One of the things I find so helpful in this book is that you do not separate theology from history but instead show how each theologian was affected by and then impacted their historical context. Why is it important to consider the context when studying the theology of these men?*



◀ The Martyrdom of William Tyndale, woodcut from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 1563

Theology of the Reformers

25th
ANNIVERSARY

Timothy George

REVISED EDITION

George: During my teaching assignment at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I was a member of both the church history and theology departments. I was trained in this approach by my great mentor at Harvard, George Huntston Williams. He taught us to seek connections and discern patterns—theological and historical—in every event or person or period we studied.

Several years ago at Beeson Divinity School, we undertook a major revision of our curriculum, bringing together church history and systematic theology into an organic whole, a new integrated discipline that we call History and Doctrine. This approach has

shaped everything I have written, including *Theology of the Reformers*. There is no such thing as a disembodied theology divorced from the mess and muck of real life. This is clearly stated in the central affirmation of the Christian faith: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Wax: *Recent Reformation scholars have questioned whether it's appropriate to speak of Reformation “theology,” choosing instead to focus on “theologies” of the Reformers. The title of your book indicates that you see enough commonality in the reformers to maintain the singular “theology.” Why?*

George: That is a great question. Indeed, it is quite popular these days to speak not only of Reformation “theologies” but also of “Reformations.” I understand the emphasis behind such pluralizing trends. No one can read my book, I think, without being confronted with the great diversity within the Reformation itself. Luther and Zwingli agreed on so much, and yet their failure to reach accord on the Eucharist resulted in the splitting apart of the nascent Protestant movement, an event reflected in the fact that we still have separate Lutheran and Presbyterian churches today!

A good historian will allow the sources to speak in all of their stubborn particularity. Homogenized history is falsified history. And yet it is true, as your question suggests, that, while acknowledging the rich diversity within the many heterogeneous movements of reform (including Catholic) in the early modern period, I nonetheless recognize an essential cohesiveness in the period itself and in the underlying theological questions its protagonists pursued.

Thus, I stand with other scholars, such as Hans J. Hildebrand, Patrick Collinson and David Steinmetz, in continuing to

speak of the Reformation and Reformation theology. As an episode within the history of doctrine, the Reformation represented an acute Augustinianization of Christianity. Augustine’s concerns were also those of the reformers: the character and reality of the triune God of holiness and love, the bestowal of salvation as a free unmerited gift, divine predestination and human responsibility in the economy of grace, and the journey of the church through time toward that eternal city with foundations. These were all major concerns for the five figures treated in first edition as well as the revised edition of *Theology of the Reformers*.

Wax: *Some Christians might look askance at a book about theologians from a period of history so different from our own. What is it about Reformation personalities and their theology that you believe is still vital for Christians today?*

George: Through what is called “The New Perspective on Paul” and other revisionist theologies today, the entire Reformation paradigm has been described as essentially misdirected and wrongheaded. It needs to be said that none of the reformers, including the five I deal with here, are perfect specimens of pristine Christianity. None of them is above criticism. I am certainly not interested in a kind of re-creation that would only be of antiquarian interest and would not serve the reformers’ own overriding concern that the living voice of the gospel—*viva vox evangelii*—be heard afresh in each generation.

Still, when the writings of the reformers are compared with the attenuated, transcendence-starved theologies which dominate the current scene, they yet speak with surprising vitality and spiritual depth. Karl Barth once said of Martin Luther that we can hardly celebrate this legacy in any better way than to listen to what he has to say. The same is true for the other reformers I have written about in this book as well.

My hope for this new edition is that it will introduce to a new generation this remarkable (now) quintet of Reformation pioneers whose unswerving commitment to Jesus Christ and his church should inform our own. As I say in the new preface I have written for this volume, “No minister of the gospel and no theological student should be without a good working knowledge of Martin, Huldrych, John, Menno, and William.” ✝



Trevin Wax is managing editor of The Gospel Project at LifeWay Christian Resources. This interview first appeared on his blog, Kingdom People, at thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax.