

Kenneth G. Appold, *The Reformation: A Brief History*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford/Malden MA 2011, 203 pp., \$29.95

Renowned German historian of Princeton Theological Seminary, Kenneth G. Appold, offers a well-written perspective concerning the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in his book, *The Reformation: A Brief History*. This book seeks to provide a representative narrative with the presupposition that the Reformation was not an event that “divided” Christianity. Instead, Appold maintains that Christianity was in the process of trying to unify even before the Reformation began. In his account, it is evident that Appold holds a Lutheran perspective on the Reformation. This is primarily due to his Lutheran background and having received his Dr.theol.habil. from Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg in Germany. Some of his other works include “Orthodoxie als Konsensbildung” and “Abraham Calov’s Doctrine of Vocatio in Its Systematic Context.” While the book’s method is wide-ranging and draws “on several disciplines and approaches,” the author consciously pays little attention to academic theology (8); Appold politely tells this to readers before the start of the book. Appold saw the Reformation as having a both an “institutional” dimension as well as an “ethical” one (9). The institutional dimension relates to the organization and administration of the church and the ethical dimension to the spiritual and moral transformation of the individual communities and lives of the people (9). This caused great tension and a unique character to the Reformation. Appold emphasizes that the 16<sup>th</sup> century had a rural culture making the movement a “Rural” Reformation; therefore, he includes the experiences of the common man, rather than only those of the reformers, magistrates and the princes.

*The Reformation* is divided into four long chapters: The Different Paths of Medieval Christianization, The Luther Phenomenon, Reformation Reforms, and The Reformation’s Establishment. In the first chapter, Appold’s main observation is that Medieval Christianity offered a number of alternate paths to Christianization--the papal, the royalist, and the conciliar. This was the aftermath of a fallen Roman Empire, and the absences of a unifying political power. One key section of the book is one in which Appold talks about village life. He explains the apparent division between the clergy, the local lords, and the common village man. He provides a number of examples. For instance: on one hand, the villagers were not interested in organized worship and saw church as a social gathering; however, on the other hand, priests neglected many of their duties and merely devoted themselves to the collection of rent and taxes (6). Appold also states that “many common people sought forms of religious expression that bypassed clerical control” (6) which supports and gives reason to his hypothesis of a preexistent un-unified and strained Church. Appold later highlights the extravagant lifestyle of the clergy members in contrast to the mendicant orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans. He concludes the chapter by stating that by 1500, Christianity was only superficially “united,” and the “church” was still premature an un-united (42).

In the next chapter, Appold gives a very clear and concise description of the controversy over indulgences. He explains that the selling of indulgences was not a late-medieval corruption, but a practice as old as the practice of penance itself. Appold writes that the selling of indulgences was one way that the pope could somehow be relevant to the common people. However, what once started out as being a positive deliverance from punishment, turned out to be church corruption, and it painted a negative image of the pope as evidenced by this statement: “Gone was the image of a benevolent *papa*” (57). He goes on to explain how Pope Urban II was issuing indulgences 500 years before the Reformation. He states that “Pope Urban II, for

example, promised far-reaching indulgences in 1095 to anyone who participated in the first crusade” (44). Thus, he corrects a common misunderstanding that the Reformation was already unified before the schism. Appold also takes the reader through Luther’s early theological development and his conflict with the Papal authorities. Here Appold presents Luther as a “phenomenon,” characterized by his actions, religious beliefs, and his theology.

Appold describes the German Peasant’s War, the movement of Zwinglians and the Anabaptists, and the political establishment of Lutheranism within the Holy Roman Empire in the third chapter. He does a great job of presenting the issues and explaining the stories in a manner which captures the reader’s attention. For example, he describes the feud that was taking place between Karlstadt and Luther and how Karlstadt “identified with the common people much more intentionally than did Luther” (86). To illustrate this point, Appold describes a scene where Karlstadt supposedly defiles the Eucharist, but “[t]o others though, he had made an important statement, giving Christ back to “the people” (83) by making it so readily available. Later he briefly mentions how “the peasants filed a formal complaint against the prince-abbot in 1423” (105) to battle the idea that they had always been serfs. This of course is included to prove that the “divide” was already present within the Church; it was between social classes.

In the final chapter, Appold illustrates how Europe’s princes took charge of the Reformation. Appold tells us how some magistrates adopted it and others rejected it. Those who adopted the Reformation committed themselves to the administration of it and used the power of the sword to “steer it into a more settled course” (135). Those who rejected the Reformation, committed the same resources to “keeping it at bay” (135). Ultimately, the deciding factor to whether a government would accept Protestantism came down to whether or not that government would increase its powers through it. Thus, it shed light on yet another main source of tension within Pre-Reformation Christianity - the fight over power. It is at Augsburg in 1555, that “imperial law settled the medieval debate between royalism and papalism – not by declaring victor, but by recognizing *both* in separate jurisdictions” (167). This would of course seal the fate of the quasi-unified Church’s vision to ever becoming unified. It is here that Appold accordingly moves to discussing how the Reformation spread into Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland amongst other places. He then discusses Calvin and Geneva briefly, and concludes with the Counter-Reformation.

Appold meets the challenge of writing a “*brief*” account of the Reformation that is clear and concise. His account of the Reformation certainly raises the question of whether the Reformation caused a schism or if the schism was already there. Appold’s portrayal of the Church being already divided amongst the papal, the royalist, and the conciliar is convincing. He finds support for this view by the fact that prior to the Reformation, there were several ideological models of Church unity that were already competing for dominance – the papal, the royalist, and the conciliar (9). This competition did not cease even after Luther nailed his ninety-five thesis in October 31, 1517. The disputes would continue until eventually several kinds of churches would emerge and become established (9). Thus, for Appold, the Reformation was the process in which disputes had developed within the Church and how the different “victors” solidified themselves.

Kenneth Appold set out to provide a fair and brief exposition of the Reformation, and he succeeded in doing so. The greatest strength of the book is the historical background it provides as well as the myriad of sources he used and the conciseness of the story. The greatest weakness of the book is ironically that which Appold purposely withheld – namely, a theological perspective. One important thing to note is the exclusion of the English Reformation. For those

who are interested in learning about the Reformation in England, I would recommend reading “A Reformation Reader.” It is a great resource that includes many primary texts as well as introductions. Another critique I have for the book is the briefness of his section on Calvin and the Counter-Reformation; both accounts are rather short, even for a “brief” history. On the other hand, Appold does an excellent job with the “Luther” narrative. He goes into great detail on showing Luther as both a reformer and a theologian and describing the development of Lutheranism. Nevertheless, this book is definitely valuable to an academic audience and provides a fresh and new perspective on the common man’s plight during the Reformation. I would highly recommend this book to both undergraduate and graduate students of Reformation theology as an introductory text.

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