

What theological themes can be identified as central to the European Reformation?
To what extent, if at all, were they revolutionary?

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Academic honesty / referencing:	Academic honesty is required. In the main body of your submission you must give credit to authors on whose research and ideas your work is based. Append to your submission a reference list that indicates the books, articles, etc. that you have used, cited or quoted in order to complete this assessment.		

What theological themes can be identified as central to the European Reformation? To what extent, if at all, were they revolutionary?

At the heart of the European Reformation were the deeply religious struggle about people's relationship with God and their yearning for salvation and ways to achieve it. The theological debate wrestled with fundamental questions of whether religious authority and knowledge of God and salvation derived from an institution, namely the Roman Catholic Church, through its traditions and rituals or from personal faith in the 'Word of God' through Jesus Christ, whose gift to the world by his sacrifice on the cross was considered the only way to personal salvation. The European Reformation became a battle between Protestantism, what Professor Keith Ward has called the 'religion of the book', and Roman Catholicism, a religion not of the word which people can interpret for themselves but one in which the Pope and Catholic Church hierarchy could forgive sins on behalf of God and had sole authority to interpret the Bible.¹

The idea that the Pope and priests were unnecessary middlemen in our relationship with God was indeed revolutionary. Yet, as Ward and others are right to acknowledge, this revolution was unintentional. The aim of the Reformers was a return to Christianity in its simplest original form rather than the establishment of a new church. Owen Chadwick notes that the Reformation was fuelled by a feeling that the 'golden age of Christendom had been ruined when the Pope acquired wealth'.² Reformers were always looking backwards. Once the authority of popes had been questioned and with the proliferation of religious tracts in the vernacular and emergence of the nation state it was impossible to stem the tide of Reformation ideas. Luther, whose theology initially was essentially late Mediaeval in outlook, remained more conservative than Zwingli and other even more radical reformers. The theology of the Reformation arguably became more revolutionary as events developed. Yet the irony was that its radical nature replaced one form of orthodox authority for another in the quest to return to the ultimate source of Christian truth.

¹ Keith Ward, 'The Reformation and Liberal Christianity', Gresham College lecture, February 2006.
<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=keith+ward+reformation+lecture+2006&qvpt=keith+ward+reformati+on+lecture+2006&view=detail&mid=CB2ABA042456DF984D5DCB2ABA042456DF984D5D&&FORM=VRDGAR>

² Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (London: Pelican Books, 1972; repr. 1990), p. 20.

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In the space available I can consider only some of these central themes on which Reformation thought turned: the role of the Church and the source of religious authority, the sacraments and forms of worship and the diverse nature of Reformation thought. First, however, we turn to what was for Martin Luther ‘the summary of Christian doctrine’... ‘the sun which illuminates God’s Holy Church’ and what was for Calvin ‘the main hinge on which religion turns’.³

It is Martin Luther’s articulation of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) that came to represent a central principle of the Reformation. As he agonised over whether he was worthy of salvation, and concerned over the lack of clear and settled Church doctrine on the matter, Luther underwent what has been termed his ‘theological breakthrough’ between 1511 and 1517. The way to salvation for reformers came not through external acts of religion bound up in ritual and ceremony; rather it was a matter of the mind and heart and external acts of sacramental worship were simply expressions of inward faith.⁴ The good works of humankind were manifestations of faith but, for Luther, from his reading of Romans 1:17 and Augustine, these were not sufficient. Given the extent of humankind’s sinfulness we could not secure salvation by ourselves. Good works were the result of and not the reason for justification because through the righteousness of a merciful and just God revealed through the Gospel His gift of faith was vouchsafed to the sinner, who without that gift of faith was powerless to be saved.⁵ Carl Trueman puts it well in noting that Luther saw the providence of God as ‘more important than the mind and will of the individual’. For Luther ‘the essence of justification’ was ‘in the decision of God, not the intrinsic qualities of the one justified’.⁶ That decision was to bestow salvation through divine favour (the doctrine of grace) on an undeserving humanity.

³ Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 121.

⁴ Chadwick, p. 64.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, eds. (St. Louis, PA: Concordia, Fortress Press, 1999), 34: p. 336-337.

⁶ Carl R. Trueman, ‘Justification’ in *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. by David M. Whitford (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 59.

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Luther developed this notion of the Theology of the Cross in his *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), in which he refers to 'the joyful exchange of righteousness and sin between Christ and the believer when the sinner is united to Christ in faith'.⁷ The sinner was justified because the guilt of sin was unconditionally forgiven by Christ's sacrifice on the cross and through regeneration and sanctification the believer's soul was 'renewed from inside by the holy spirit'.⁸ Cameron identifies an honesty in the teachings of Melancthon, Zwingli, Bucer and Calvin that good works could be pursued on a voluntary basis instead of from fear of transgressing Church rules.⁹

This brings us to the emphasis on inward attitudes inspired by the teachings of Scripture rather than outward ritual observance of practices rooted only in priestly authority as a second major point of departure from the Roman Catholic Church. Again differences turned on what was necessary in order for believers to be in a right relationship with God. Reformers blurred the distinction between clergy and laity by valuing the 'priesthood of all believers', who, they believed, had full access to God without the aid of priestly intermediaries. Scripture was accepted as the Word of God: to be interpreted according to reason¹⁰ and to this the authority of popes and councils was subordinate. While the Roman Catholic Church also revered Scripture it emphasised as equally important the historical continuity of tradition and decisions made by popes and councils. This approach, Reformers considered, had resulted in the Church's going beyond what Scripture justified. In contrast to Eck of Ingolstadt who, echoing Augustine, said that 'scripture is not authentic without the authority of the church', those driving the Magisterial Reformation wanted to remove human additions or distortions to belief and worship because they believed the only basis for religious and therefore Church authority was in fidelity to Scripture (*sola scriptura*).¹¹ Only where papal pronouncements agreed with Scripture were they acceptable.¹²

⁷ Trueman, in *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology*, p. 62.

⁸ Cameron, p. 121.

⁹ Cameron, p. 125.

¹⁰ It has been noted that for Reformers 'interpretation' tended to mean one that agreed with their own reading of Scripture.

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1988), p. 95.

¹² Hans J. Hillerbrand, 'Introduction' in *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. by Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Perennial, 1968), p. xxii.

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This went hand in hand with a greater emphasis on the importance of individuals' studying the Bible. The publication of 100,000 Bibles by the Wittenberg Press between 1534 and 1584 and placing of German Bibles in pulpits, the introduction of German hymns to aid understanding of Scripture and growth in the importance of sermon preaching all reflected Luther's aim to kindle people's faith in Christ by dispensing with empty ritual and bringing religion into their hearts and homes.¹³ The right understanding of Scripture was the sole basis for belief and it was not for councils and popes to add a gloss to what Scripture revealed. The differences between Reformation theologians and Rome were brought into sharp focus over the role and number of sacraments and their basis in Scripture.

For Reformation theologians the Bible allowed for only two rather than seven sacraments. If Scripture revealed that salvation was a gift from God then it followed for Luther, Zwingli and Calvin that sacraments like confession, which suggested salvation could be earned, were theologically unjustified. In the eyes of the Reformers the sacraments held no quasi-magical powers obtained through ritual. Rather there was general agreement that the two sacraments with any Biblical foundation instituted by Christ – baptism and the Eucharist or Lord's Supper – were God's mark of His goodwill to the faithful. Both were about a public proclamation of inner faith.¹⁴ There was nevertheless no clear agreement among Reformation theologians themselves about the role of these two sacraments. Diversity of belief and interpretation on these matters, illustrated particularly through Luther's and Zwingli's different approaches, were characteristic of Reformation theology. They are ones to which we shall now turn.

Luther's approach to Scripture and forms of worship was permissive in contrast to Zwingli, who required more explicit Biblical authorisation. This is reflected in the more marked changes in the appearance of Swiss churches compared to those in northern Germany, where private confession continued to be sacramental. However, though both agreed that the Mass was not a sacrifice and did not accept transubstantiation, Zwingli disagreed with Luther that Christ's body was present 'in or

¹³ McGrath, p. 72.

¹⁴ Cameron, p. 157.

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under the elements of bread and wine'. Such objects for Zwingli could not convey God's gifts and indeed could only be symbolic of them.^{15 16} So central was this disagreement to theological debate among theologians of the Magisterial Reformation that Martin Bucer attempted a compromise position by arguing that while Christ was not present in or under the bread and wine he passes through them when they are taken by a faithful soul: for the faithless the elements remain what they are.

It could be said that such disagreements on points of theology echo trends in the theological diversity (the result of a weak Papacy, confusion over official Church teaching and growth of different theological schools linked to religious orders) of late Mediaeval Europe. By 1600 Protestant theology comprised a set of academic teachings as intricately argued as the theology of the Mediaeval schoolmen.¹⁷ The Bible was considered as divine guidance and the ultimate source of authority but, based on knowledge and understanding of language and context, it required interpretation. The question became whose was the right interpretation? Debates in Reformation theology around Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers played out in the different characters of Luther and Zwingli and the influences to which they were exposed. Zwingli and other Swiss Reformers were much influenced by humanism, to which Luther, a Nominalist and more conservative in his outlook, was far less sympathetic. The nuances in their beliefs were even reflected in their view of baptism. As McGrath notes, for Luther baptism generated faith into a baby but for Zwingli it signified loyalty or membership of a community.¹⁸ Both would nevertheless have rejected the soundness of adult¹⁹ baptism, a doctrine of the Anabaptists and a feature of the Radical Reformation.

So if 'believers' baptism' was beyond the pale just how revolutionary were Luther's, Zwingli's and Calvin's Reformation in their theology and practice? It was, depending

¹⁵ Chadwick, p. 78.

¹⁶ Chadwick notes on page 80 of *The Reformation* (1972, 1990 repr.) that at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 Luther wrote on the table 'This is my Body' and refused to ever depart from those words. 'I am not going to argue whether it *is* can mean *is a sign of*. I am content with what Christ said...The devil cannot get out of that.'

¹⁷ Cameron, p. 417.

¹⁸ McGrath, p. 128.

¹⁹ Also sometimes referred to as 'believers' baptism'.

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on personalities, geography and the political climate in which it played out (most notably in Wittenberg, Zurich or Geneva), both revolutionary and conservative; the Reformation represented continuity and discontinuity with the late Mediaeval world. Luther did not initially intend to form a new Church but wanted simply to rid the one into which he had been born of corruption and return Christendom to its supposed golden age. His attack on indulgences in the *Ninety-five Theses*, which did not mention justification, was designed to spark debate about financial burdens imposed by the Church and clerical abuses rather than as an outright attack on the authority of the Pope, who, Luther thought, would disapprove of exploiting the faithful to rebuild St Peter's. It was only after Luther had been backed into a corner by the Roman Catholic apologist Eck that Luther crossed the Rubicon and the full attack on the Roman Church followed.

Even so the Magisterial Reformation was about looking back to the primitive Church, from which, the Reformers claimed, the Pope and Church councils had strayed. Reformers did not question the three ancient creeds or the Doctrine of the Trinity; baptism remained the indication of God's promise to infants given faith by His grace. Predestination, the belief that God predetermines whom to save, goes back to Augustine and was present in Mediaeval thought.²⁰ This of course was a central doctrine of Calvin and the Reformed Church he instituted. While Zwingli took a harder line than Luther in celebrating the Eucharist and abolished the word 'Mass' (the term 'Lord's Supper' reduced its association with sacrifice) the more conservative Luther continued to use the term, albeit freed from the association with sacrifice and after rewriting it in the vernacular to remove unacceptable theological assumptions.²¹ Indeed he dispensed only with elements that were directly contradicted by Scripture and retained church art and traditional prayers such as the Sanctus and Gloria and permitted the continued use of candles and vestments.

Notwithstanding Luther's less iconoclastic approach to removing images of saints there was nevertheless a clear break with the past insofar as the Lutheran Church permitted priests to marry and aimed through catechisms and hymns in German to

²⁰ Cameron, p.128.

²¹ Luther, *Concerning the order of public worship*, 1523, referred to in Alister McGrath's *Reformation Thought*, p. 528.

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bring ordinary people closer to God. In this way some of the manifestations of Reformation theology might be described if not as 'revolutionary' then as 'radical'. The outward break with Roman Catholicism was certainly more marked in Geneva and Zurich, where Zwingli, whose services were even more austere than Calvin's,²² was more radical in reforming worship:

That Christ's Supper is seriously abused has been brought out quite strongly and clearly from the Word of God for a long time: therefore it will be necessary to remove from it everything which does not conform to the divine Word.²³

What however really was theologically explosive, and directly arising from the Reformers' view that 'justification must be the work of the mercy of God alone',²⁴ was the upturning of the Church's role in hearing confession and forgiving sins. As Cameron states, from that central idea the Reformation 'tore down the entire fabric of the institutional Church and built again from scratch, including only what was consistent with, and required by, the basic religious message'.²⁵ If there was no mortal representing God to forgive sins or ultimate authority to tell people the 'right' meaning of Scripture the theological genie was well and truly out of the bottle.

By publishing theological tracts in the vernacular and emphasising the primacy of the individual the modern era of a splintered Western Christendom began. Yet as Hillerbrand writes:

'The Reformation was hardly the cradle of the modern world - in a variety of ways its questions were medieval questions - Luther's plea at Worms was hardly a plea for religious tolerance for the autonomy of conscience, and Calvin's economic thought was hardly the paradigm for Adam Smith.'²⁶

²² Trueman, in *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology*, p. 170.

²³ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, translated by H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), p.148, cited in Carl R. Trueman, *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology* ed. by David M Whitford (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p169.

²⁴ Melancthon's Werke in Auswahi, ed. R. Stupperich (Gutersloh), II. i. 107-9, cited in Cameron, p. 122.

²⁵ Cameron, p. 422.

²⁶ Hillerbrand, p. xxiv.

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Cameron's view that 'the Reformation moved from clericalism to clericalism within two generations' further confirms this view.²⁷ While the Bible was the ultimate source of authority Reformers never intended the interpretation of God's Word to follow the libertarian 'let a thousand flowers bloom' approach: they came to the view that in order to be sure people arrived at the 'right interpretation' of the Word the doctrine of 'Scripture alone' was dangerous: it needed filtering. Anabaptists suffered ruthless persecution by fellow Protestants and Catholics alike for their position on adult baptism, illegal in some western European countries. Moreover, Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms enabled him to differentiate between a private Christian morality and a secular one: his role in the Peasants' War exemplified this.²⁸

There is a liberating but also a tragically striking irony in the course and outcome of the Magisterial Reformation. It revolutionised the individual's relationship to God, who offered His gift of salvation freely without the aid of priestly intermediaries. Yet the changes that occurred over generations produced in Calvinism a harsher theological discipline than operated in the Mediaeval Church: it simply exchanged a rigid Protestant orthodoxy in place of an established Roman Catholic one. While Western Christians continued to gather for communal worship there was no longer one undivided Holy Catholic Church to which every Christian believer belonged.

[2,500 words, excluding the bibliography and this endnote.]

²⁷ Cameron, p. 422.

²⁸ David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1995, repr. 2002), p. 113.

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