

LUTHER
AND CALVIN:
RELIGIOUS
REVOLUTIONARIES

For
Bruce McCormack,
inspirational teacher, scholar, friend

LUTHER AND CALVIN: RELIGIOUS REVOLUTIONARIES

Charlotte Methuen



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INTRODUCTION

The sixteenth century was a time of massive change in Western Europe, and much of that change focused on the church. Although there had been regional variations in the medieval church, its structures and in theory its beliefs were shared by all Western Christians. In 1500 there was really no religious choice. By 1600 that had changed. Different places had different churches, which had different structures, whose buildings looked very different, and whose theology, ideas and practices varied hugely. People still might not have had much choice about whether to be Catholic or Protestant – and if so, what sort of Protestant – but most would have known that other kinds of Christians existed. The structures and ways of doing things which were normal for people in 1500 had been questioned and, in some places, swept away. At the centre of these changes were two reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin. Between them, they brought about and then helped to stabilize the Reformation – which in modern parlance we might term a revolution – in the way that religion shaped people's lives.

This book offers an introduction to the lives and ideas of Luther and Calvin. It sets each in his historical context and explores some of the ways that their theology was shaped, encouraged, but also constrained by the circumstances in which they lived. One aspect of this is seeing how their theology changed in the course of their careers. This is particularly true of Martin Luther. Luther was a whole generation older than John Calvin, and his theology grew and developed as he began to understand and struggle with the consequence of the stance he took against the Roman church. In this, Luther

was like the other reformers of the 1520s who lived through the extraordinary experience of realizing that there could be a church other than that which had shaped the religious existence of Western Europe. They had to work out what it meant to talk about the church in these circumstances, and how to think about authority and truth without reference to a clerical hierarchy. Luther, a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, became an acknowledged leader in this movement. The decisions he made about theology and practice would influence many Christians in his generation. However, not everyone agreed with him, and by the end of the 1520s, it was clear that divisions were emerging within the Reformation movement, particularly between Luther and Huldrych Zwingli, the leader of the Reformation in Zürich. Honed in the 1530s and 1540s, Luther's theology would prove deeply influential not only in his native Saxony, but in many German-speaking lands and in Scandinavia, whence it would be exported in various forms to colonies around the world.

By the time Calvin began to explore theological ideas in the late 1520s and early 1530s, the Reformation had taken hold and was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Once he was converted to Reformation ideas, Calvin had the works of the first generation to read, and read them he clearly did. His theological system emerged in a mature form which would have been unthinkable in the previous generation. Calvin's attempts to mediate between the different parties of the Reformation – particularly between Zürich and Wittenberg – would be ultimately unsuccessful, but they shaped his theology. So too did his particular experiences of the church: of persecution in France and of exile in Strasbourg and Geneva. Calvin's theology would be influential in Switzerland, in France, in

England, in Scotland, in the newly formed Netherlands, and in parts of Hungary and some of the German lands. It would also prove inspirational for a generation of Christians who would draw on it to oppose the state-defined religion of their native countries. Calvinist radicals, often known as Puritans to the English-speaking world, took their theology with them into exile in North America, or in southern Africa. In particular, Calvin's theology was highly influential in many of the first colonies in North America, and helped shape the religious culture of the United States of America. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, colonial and missionary interests coupled with emigration took the ideas of Luther and Calvin into Asia, Africa, North America and Australia. Luther's and Calvin's ideas thus fertilized the roots of the Protestant thought and culture which shaped so many aspects of political and intellectual life across the modern world.

My intention in this book has been to allow Luther and Calvin to speak as much as possible in their own words. Since Luther wrote in German and Latin, and Calvin in French and Latin, English translations have necessarily had to be used. Many of Luther's works have been published in English translation in *Luther's Works* (St Louis: Concordia, 1974). Most of the exploration of Calvin's theology is drawn from three different editions of his *Institutes of Christian Religion*: the first Latin edition of 1536, the first French edition of 1541, and the final Latin edition to appear in his lifetime, of 1559. These translations do not all observe the same conventions, whether referring to God (as He or as he), or in referring to human beings (as people or as men). Quotations follow the conventions of the translation, and are therefore inconsistent between translations.

This book would not have been possible without the engaged interest of several generations of my students, in seminars at the University of the Ruhr in Bochum, in the Luther and Calvin classes at the University of Oxford, in the Reformation reading classes at Ripon College Cuddesdon, and those who have grappled with Luther's and Calvin's theology in studying the Reformation. I have benefited enormously from their careful reading of source texts and their probing questions of interpretation. Thanks are due also to my colleagues in Bochum, Professor Dr Christoph Strohm and Dr Judith Becker, both of whom helped me understand Luther and Calvin better. Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor Sarah Foot, and Dr Sarah Apetrei at Oxford have been greatly supportive during the time in Oxford which gave rise to this project. My husband, Robert Franke, has been a keen advocate of the book. Kate Kirkpatrick, Alison Hull, Sheila Jacobs, and Jessica Tinker, my editors at Lion Hudson, have been encouraging, patient and endlessly helpful. I am particularly grateful to those who read and commented on the earlier drafts: Betsy Gray-Hammond, David Hicks, Isabella Image, Michael Leyden, Jane Methuen, Elizabeth Muston, Jo Rose, Konstantin Schober, and Rob Wainwright. All have made suggestions which have improved the text greatly. Inaccuracies of course remain my own responsibility.

That I have become so engaged by the thought of the Reformation is ultimately a result of the inspirational teaching of Professor Bruce McCormack, now of Princeton, under whose direction I first read both Luther and Calvin while a student at New College in Edinburgh. This book is dedicated to him with grateful thanks.