“In clear and lively prose, Appold weaves the threads of a complex theological, economic, cultural, political and institutional story into a coherent narrative. Luther is clearly a central figure in the telling of his tale, but he is firmly located within the deep context of the medieval heritage, and other voices of the sixteenth century – perhaps most notably, the Anabaptists – get an ample and fair hearing as well. This deft, nuanced survey will serve general readers and classroom teachers alike as a reliable introduction to the Reformation era. I recommend it highly.”

John D. Roth, Goshen College

“A masterful synthesis of the latest scholarship, this well-written, clearly told account of the Reformation in central and northern continental Europe is both traditional and innovative. Those interested in a scholarly, up-to-date, and fresh study that privileges the perspectives of the Protestant reformers need look no further.”

Nelson H. Minnich, The Catholic University of America

In 1517, the actions of a simple monk ushered in a period of unparalleled religious and political upheaval. The Reformation: A Brief History provides a succinct yet comprehensive introduction to this extraordinary period, showing how and why the Protestant Reformation arose and unfolded.

In this rich account, the author skillfully blends social history, religious and theological ideas with economic and political factors. The description is well-rounded, drawing not just on the actions of the main characters, but also the experiences and ideas of ordinary people, the quest for social justice, and the conflicting approaches to Christian unity. The events of the Reformation are placed in the context of Christian history to offer a fuller understanding of the period. The result is a truly engaging narrative that shows the reader exactly what was at stake, and why, as the events unfolded.

Accessible, lucid and based on the best of current research, this book offers readers a wonderful overview of one of the most critical periods in Western history.

KENNETH G. APPOLD is the James Hastings Nichols Associate Professor of Reformation History at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is the author of two books on early Lutheranism and numerous articles on a variety of historical and theological topics.

Cover image: The Luther Window from St Thomas Church, Leipzig 1889, showing Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon with Elector Frederick the Wise. Image courtesy of Thomaskirche Leipzig.

Cover design by Nicki Averill
At a time when texts on the Reformation abound, one might ask whether there is room for yet another entrant into this crowded historiographical arena. My response after reading Appold’s book was an enthusiastic yes. In clear and lively prose, Appold weaves the threads of a complex theological, economic, cultural, political and institutional story into a coherent narrative. Luther is clearly a central figure in the telling of his tale, but he is firmly located within the deep context of the medieval heritage, and other voices of the sixteenth century—perhaps most notably, the Anabaptists—get an ample and fair hearing as well. This deft, nuanced survey will serve general readers and classroom teachers alike as a reliable introduction to the Reformation era. I recommend it highly.

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This well-written, clearly told account of the Reformation in central and northern continental Europe is both traditional and innovative. A masterful synthesis of the latest scholarship, it combines top-down studies of the theology and polemics of leading reformers with bottom-up analyses of the reception given to their ideas by urban dwellers and oft forgotten rural folk. It provides new perspectives by tracing the pre-Reformation papal, conciliar, and royal efforts to control the Church that found resolution in several models of the Church that emerged from the Reformation. It also traces the age-old quest to lead a purer form of Christianity modeled on the apostolic church that found its expression in the medieval monastic and mendicant orders and in various Anabaptist communities of the Reformation era. It concludes with a brief survey of reform efforts in the Catholic Church and with an epilogue assessing the significant changes wrought by the Reformation struggles. Those interested in a scholarly, up-to-date, and fresh study that privileges the perspectives of the Protestant reformers need look no further.

Nelson Minnich
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Writing a “brief history of the Reformation” poses several challenges. The greatest of these comes with the word “brief”—a deterrent to most any historian. The following book does, however, aim at brevity. It accomplishes that by making a number of sacrifices, and some readers will notice these. Certain subjects are missing; editorial decisions precluded treating the Reformation in Britain, for example. Other regions have received less attention than they deserve—particularly those to the south and east of the Holy Roman Empire. And while the book’s methods are eclectic, drawing on several disciplines and approaches, some readers may lament the relatively scant attention to academic theology. That, too, comes as a result of a conscious decision. (Disappointed readers are welcome to read this author’s other works.)

Virtually any of the book’s topics could be treated at much greater length. But most of them already have been. Herein lies not only a challenge, but also an attraction to writing a survey work. One needs to absorb vast amounts of material—but one also has the chance to take a step back and to craft an overarching narrative. For students of the Reformation, now may be an ideal moment to do that. We have seen old “grand narratives” displaced and partly discredited; we have witnessed a generation’s worth of attention to “micro-histories”; and we have absorbed lessons from an unexpected variety of sources and angles, changing forever
the way we approach the period. The time may be ripe, therefore, to shake the kaleidoscope and create a new synthesis.

Many traditional histories have portrayed the Reformation as an event that “divided” Western Christianity. The following account challenges that view. It argues that medieval Christianity was still searching for unity when the Reformation began. Several ideological models of church unity—among them papal, royalist and conciliar—were competing for dominance for much of the Middle Ages, and that competition was not settled in 1517, when Martin Luther published his famous “Ninety-Five Theses.” Luther somewhat unintentionally exposed those fault lines and brought to the surface forces that eventually led to a long-term settlement. By the time these events had run their course, not one, but several “victors” had emerged, and several kinds of church were established. That process, which took different paths in different places, is called the Reformation.

The Reformation occurred within a larger dynamic driven by the Christianization of Europe. After the fall of Rome, Western Europe became the scene of a vast mission initiative that would last more than a thousand years. It had both an “institutional” dimension (the organization and administration of church and state), and an “ethical” one (the moral and spiritual transformation of individual lives and communities). These were often in tension with each other. At times, the desire of Christians to live holier lives and to pattern their communities after biblical examples conflicted with the more profane needs of institutions seeking to establish power and authority amidst the chaos of post-Roman Europe. Such tensions provided much of the energy that gave the Reformation its unique character—a mix of religious, theoretical, social, political, and economic forces that, taken together and harnessed to a number of extraordinarily charismatic people, proved remarkably combustible. The added invention of the printing press turned these forces into a continental conflagration. As a result, a new landscape emerged.

Sixteenth-century Europe was rural. Nearly nine-tenths of its people lived in the country. That fairly basic fact has rarely figured
in traditional histories of the Reformation. Recent research into the lives of the period’s “common people,” however, has made it possible to begin creating more representative narratives—and that is something this “brief history” has aimed to do. That brings a shift in overall perspective. Events such as the German Peasants’ War acquire a more central position, as do religious groups such as the Anabaptists who, often expelled from cities, took refuge and built Christian communities in the country. Because most of the rural people were poor, issues relating to poverty (both as an unwelcome condition and as a religious value) and to property (both the defense and critique of its ownership) take on a greater importance than they have in most previous Reformation histories. Readers may be surprised at some of the results—and are invited to consider their implications for the present.

I am indebted to very many people, ranging from students to colleagues, family and friends, who have provided direct and indirect inspiration for this book. In keeping with its spirit of brevity, I would like to single out three Reformation historians whose influence has been particularly important: Carter Lindberg for his pioneering work on organized charity and for providing an inspirational model with his own superb textbook; Scott Hendrix, my predecessor at Princeton, for alerting me to the importance of Christianization for understanding the Reformation; and Peter Blickle, whom I have not met personally, but whose work on the ‘Revolution of the Common Man’ revolutionized my own thought on the subject.

Finally, I would like to extend my special thanks to the editors and staff at Wiley-Blackwell for their exceptional support and patience throughout this process.
Map 1  Europe about 1500
Christianity among the Rural Poor

Medieval Europe was rural. The vast majority of Europeans who lived in the Latin West of the continent were scattered about the countryside in villages, small towns and settlements. In most regions, less than 10 per cent of the population had come to live in cities by the year 1500. This is an important fact to keep in mind when studying the developments that led up to the Reformation. Medieval Europe’s rural demographics, its feudal social structure, and its minimal rates of literacy all influenced that history to an enormous degree.

There was probably no such thing as a “typical” medieval village, since their populations could vary from a few dozen to several hundred or even a thousand. Most rural communities, however, shared a number of important characteristics that remained remarkably constant over the centuries. For one thing, village economies were almost entirely agrarian. Villagers farmed the fields that surrounded their homes. Their lives were organized by the chores of the seasons: plowing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting. Winters were times to be endured, especially in places where they were long and hard, and villagers only survived them if they had stored enough grain and produce to make it through. The fortunate had livestock to help with the chores and to produce additional food. Not surprisingly, life-expectancies