

Preface

THE STORY BEHIND THE development of this book is a familiar one to scholars and academics. I've written previous books on the European and English Reformations, sometimes using them as recommended reading for religious history courses, but over the progression of my teaching career questions were raised which those books did not sufficiently answer or for which I did not immediately have a useful response. As any professional would, however, I searched for a means of pointing the questioner in the right direction, and together we found the answers they sought. This gave me good information should anyone ask a similar question in future of course and, eventually, the collection of books, articles, reports and websites began to add up and suggest useful revisions of my previous writings. This book is not merely an updating, however, of those previous books, but is rather an in-depth focus on a subject not covered before. This book is the result, therefore, of students asking the right questions at the right times, of my searches to give them useful answers quickly, and of the revelation of a topic that has been surprisingly rarely examined on its own terms. I hope that this volume adds something to our historical understanding of the reformers (great and small), to the work they tried to do, and to the faith they tried to spread. I also hope that it will raise further questions and inspire further research into issues of historical ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology is a catch-all term which brings together doctrines and theories, the subject of which is to define the church, define who belongs to it, and to discover what are its authorities, duties, and roles within the wider society. Many of the issues which defined the church, moot worthy nowadays were up to the late mediaeval period seemingly clear and generally agreed by most Christians. The church was a special hierarchy headed by a pope with both spiritual and secular authorities; it was institutionally identifiable; it was mandated by God to define scripture, doctrine and salvation to its members. Its mandate (based on Pauline scriptural writings

and Augustinian theology) was to identify, gather and safeguard the faithful toward peace in this life and salvation in the next. What I sought to do here was to examine how this surety broke down so rapidly in the early sixteenth century despite a body of evidence, including both scripture and tradition, underpinning those mediaeval beliefs. In the late mediaeval and early modern periods the surety with which the Roman Catholic Church claimed to be the only genuine Christian church began to face serious doubts and hard questions resulting in new ideas and new interpretations of the body of evidence. This ushered into existence at first only rival sects within the church but later rival churches claiming the same mandates and identifying factors as Rome, but also claiming to be truer representatives of the basic Christian ideals. This encapsulated some of the major doctrinal controversies separating Catholics and Protestants in the Reformation era and, moreover, it also then separated Protestants, sometimes drawing out significant theoretical conflicts in almost as divisive a way as did rival theologies of salvation or interpretations of the sacraments. Yet, as myself and my students sometimes found, this very important aspect of Reformation history, theology and the study of religion is either inexplicably ignored or relegated to merely footnote status in many modern textbooks. As noted, I wished for a book which tackled this issue and, finally, wishing turned to action.

Finally, this book is for interested general readers too, because they will recognize (even without having done years of study) many of the questions faced by the reformers. There are over 40,000 separate Christian denominations today. The questions pastors and priests face now perhaps have more to do with issues of practical modernization than they did 400 years ago, but the intent is similar. Today we hear questions about the legitimacy of women priests and bishops particularly in the Anglican/Episcopalian church, or gay rights and marriage issues elsewhere. Today we also hear a lot about rendering useful information from statistics like changing church memberships, attendance figures or age distributions. All churches are subject to practical self-imaging. These questions are all really ways of asking, like the ancients did and like the late medievalists did, what is the church and what is it for? Who does it serve? In the early modern era, while not the exact same questions as we face nowadays, similar issues were being raised. What is the church for and is it fulfilling its role? This is ecclesiology in the broadest sense. *The Wheat and the Tares* was conceived as a means of working out how such questions were considered and answered at the most sensitive, divisive time in Christian history. It may be a cliché, but it is true nonetheless, that to understand what the Christian churches are and where they are going, we have to be clear where they've been and what it was.