INTRODUCTION

The question that led to this book is simple: if the Lutheran gospel is a catalyst for political radicalism then why do so many Tudor evangelicals remain so zealously committed to submission and non-resistance? As I explored the subject there emerged two popular answers to this question: either they were not truly Protestant or they, somehow, did believe in radical political thinking despite their boisterous claims to the contrary. Yet the evidence for either of these conclusions was lacking. In the first place, we know that, while there were not overwhelming numbers of evangelicals in Tudor England, there was a not insignificant number of committed Protestants in England or in exile. It is increasingly impossible to compartmentalize Tudor evangelicals as non-Protestants. Similarly, the notion that evangelicals believed in resistance while also proclaiming their obedience to the king could not be squared with the testimony of the vast majority of evangelical writings. Most evangelical writings teach categorically that resistance leads to eternal damnation, so if this truly is masking nascent resistance theory, then we must conclude that evangelicals are either good liars or bad theologians.

The result is a book that attempts to explain the idiosyncratic nature of evangelical teachings on obedience and which, I hope, opens up a new facet for studying Tudor evangelicals. I have two goals. First, I want to trace the evangelical doctrine of obedience from the 1530s, with the advent of the Royal Supremacy, through the first decade of Elizabeth’s reign. Secondly, I want to examine a few connections between the political teachings of English evangelicals and Swiss Reformed leaders on the subject of obedience, in an effort to achieve a wider understanding of Protestant influence beyond that of Luther. Each chapter explores a range of evangelical texts that deal with the subject of obedience to the king, and I indicate a number of foundational principles that structured evangelical political thinking during the Tudor period.

The Nature of Political Obedience

For the better part of thirty years (1527–1553), most evangelicals adhered to a strict doctrine of non-resistance, even under persecution, and it was relatively late in the sixteenth century when evangelicals seriously began
to articulate resistance theory. While a few early evangelicals allowed for resistance, the vast majority did not.

Nevertheless the doctrine of obedience is rarely studied by historians. Scholars typically study reactions against the doctrine of obedience, while others hunt for the earliest expression of resistance theory in an effort to date its arrival in England. But it was the doctrine of obedience that dominated evangelical minds during the Tudor period. It was published, preached, and enforced in every corner of England. Thus, by focusing almost exclusively on the doctrine of resistance, historians have made the tail wag the dog. Resistance is only one side of the coin, and without a proper understanding of obedience, the context of resistance theory becomes obscured. By focusing on resistance, one can fall into the trap of overplaying the evidence. Older studies, for example, tend to focus on ‘deviant texts’ during the sixteenth century—texts that somehow hint at the possibility of rebellion. Historians looking for resistance theory too easily find phantom examples of potentially radical ideology lurking in the corners of books and letters, or they champion a figure as an early resistance theorist simply because he criticised the king or refused to comply with his orders. Such a method suggests the doctrine of obedience was merely a conventional appeal to civil order or perhaps a hangover of ‘medieval’ political thinking. In other words, obedience is believed to be conservative, while resistance is radical and new.

Oppositional figures play a role here, but they are not the focus of my analysis. Instead, I want to look at the doctrine of obedience without presupposing that it was ordinary, unadventurous, or conservative. Evangelical political theology was richly complex and defies easy categorisation, and this is no less true of those who taught non-resistance. Evangelicals who supported obedience described persecution as God’s providential hand at work, punishing them for their sins, and they proclaimed their willingness to die rather than lift a hand in vengeance or self-defence. The king’s heart is in God’s hand (Proverbs 21:1), they quoted, and any attempt to violently oppose the monarch was a usurpation of God’s prerogative.

Resistance theory, of course, grew in the minds of evangelicals, as for example during the Marian regime. But these Marian resistance writers stood against a well-defended doctrine of non-resistance. As a result, English evangelical resistance teachings went to extremes in order to criticise obedience theory. In the 1550s, when Knox and Goodman began to adopt resistance theory, they espoused views that were more radical, and more populist, than anything even Calvin and other Swiss leaders would