

The Reformation

As Martin Luther trotted away from the city, the late afternoon sun cast long shadows beneath his horse's feet. Ahead of him, the forest was already somber and ominous. As the road took its last curve around a ruined cottage, he could see nothing before him. He rode on, all his senses awake to the strange sounds and black shapes around him. If his enemies wished him harm, here was the place to do it. Then, to his horror, he saw large, dark shapes moving toward him. He wheeled his horse around to escape and saw more shapes coming at him from behind. Out of the darkness came a rough, military voice. "Dr. Luther, we have been sent by the duke of Saxony. We are to escort you to the duke's castle, for your protection. You have many enemies, Doctor, but you can count the duke as a friend."



Martin Luther

Luther did have many enemies, and it is not surprising. In 1517, this professor from the University of Wittenburg posted his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg Church. He wanted to debate about the sale of indulgences, and the 95 theses were his key arguments. **Indulgences** were documents sold by the church that were supposed to lessen the punishment for sinners in the afterlife. Luther's 95 theses were quickly published and distributed throughout Germany due to the newly invented printing presses. This caused an unforeseen explosion of complaints against the church.

The church in the early sixteenth century was different from what we know today. All Europeans belonged to one Christian church (the Roman Catholic church). The church was ruled over by bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and, at the top, the Pope in Rome. Almost a quarter of all farmland in Europe was owned by the church, so it was wealthy and influential. Priests were well-paid, but they were exempt from taxation. The **clergy**, as all of these churchmen were called, even had their own laws and law courts that were separate from the rest of the population. They also enjoyed the advantage of being one of the few groups of people in the sixteenth century who knew how to read and write. All of this, in addition to the fact that religion was at the center of people's lives, made the clergy the most powerful group in Europe.

With such a large and powerful human organization, there were bound to be problems. Some people felt the church was too preoccupied with money. Others criticized the church for getting too involved in politics. Still others felt that the church was controlled by Italians and no one else. When Luther condemned the sale of indulgences, others quickly followed his lead and began criticizing the church in other ways. The motives of the critics were mixed. For instance, German princes supported Luther because they hoped to seize church property. However, other thinking men and women, like Luther, genuinely wanted to improve religious life in Europe.

The Pope, Leo X, feared that Luther would weaken the church. Therefore, he tried to silence him. Luther was called to defend himself before a council of princes, bishops, and cardinals. Instead of giving in, he only added to his list of recommendations for reform. Fortunately, Luther had powerful friends, or he might have been arrested and executed. The duke of Saxony, as we saw above, gave him protection in his castle, the Wartburg. While hiding in the Wartburg, Luther used his time to translate the New Testament of the Bible from Latin into German. This activity grew out of one of Luther's main beliefs, that all people should be able to read the Bible for themselves. The publication of this book laid the foundation for the modern German language.

Because of the printing press, Luther's ideas about how the church should change spread throughout Europe. As a result, within a decade the church was permanently split in two. The followers of Luther's ideas came to be called **Protestants**. In an age when religion was taken so seriously, such an event was bound to have dramatic consequences. In Germany, peasants thought to themselves, if Luther could challenge the authority of the church, why couldn't they defy the authority of their landlords? In 1524, a revolt broke out. It was crushed, but only after countless peasants were killed. Meanwhile, princes and kings made themselves more wealthy by seizing church property. The question of religion also found its way into relations between kingdoms. For the next 130 years, Europe was torn apart by warfare as Protestants and Catholics battled for power. Even within the Protestant church, divisions began to occur. John Calvin broke away from the Lutherans and founded Calvinism. Conrad Grebel separated from other Protestants and founded the Anabaptists.

Although many left the old church to join the Protestant churches, the majority of Europeans remained faithful to the Catholic tradition. They still preferred the rituals and ceremonies and admired the way the old church cared for the poor and sick. However, many Catholics admitted there was a need for reform. The leaders of the Catholic church finally met in the Italian city of Trent in 1545 to decide if the break with the Protestants could be healed. The Council of Trent put through many reforms. For instance, it insisted upon better education for priests, less preoccupation with wealth, and the end of the sale of indulgences. However, on other important matters, it reaffirmed basic beliefs that the church had held before Luther published his 95 theses. Priests, for instance, were still seen as the main interpreters of the Bible. Luther believed that anyone could interpret the Bible for him- or herself. Much of modern Catholicism grew out of the Council of Trent. At the same time, the council was unable to reach an agreement with the Protestants, and religion in Europe remained permanently divided.

Name _____ Date _____

Challenges

1. What was the purpose of Luther's 95 theses? _____

2. What were indulgences? _____

3. How was the church in the early fifteenth century different from today? _____

4. What advantages did the clergy enjoy? _____

5. What were the main criticisms of the church? _____

6. What were some of the motives of the church's critics? _____

7. What did Luther do while hiding in the Wartburg? _____

8. What caused the Peasants' Revolt? _____

9. Why did many Europeans remain faithful to the old church? _____

10. How did the Council of Trent reform the old church? _____

Name _____ Date _____

Points to Ponder

1. Why are people, both in the sixteenth century and today, prepared to go to war over religious differences?

2. Why were political leaders in the sixteenth century so jealous of the church's power?

3. How did the Renaissance cause the Reformation?
