

## OVERVIEW: THE REFORMATION

There are dozens of Christian denominations in the world today: Presbyterian, Seventh-Day Adventist, Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, Quaker and more. Where did they all come from? Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a German monk accidentally started a religious revolution. The monk was Martin Luther and the “revolution” is known today as the Protestant Reformation.

Luther was born in 1483. At this time the Black Death, or bubonic plague, was over one hundred years in the past. Johann Gutenberg had already developed the modern European printing press. Using moveable type, Gutenberg and his assistants could produce thousands of pages of printed material in hours. The feudal order was breaking down, towns and cities were expanding, and a new commercialism (or market economy) was emerging. In nine years Christopher Columbus would arrive in the Americas and open a new world of intercontinental discovery, exchange, and development.

It was during this time that Martin Luther grew up. He studied law for his father and dreamed that he would become an attorney. However, it is said that Luther was caught in a terrible thunderstorm one night. Terrified by the crashing noise and blinding lightning, Luther called out an oath to Saint Anne—if I survive I will become a monk! He did survive, and he entered an Augustinian order, eventually becoming fully ordained.

As a monk and priest Luther was troubled by events around him. In particular, many of his parishioners became caught up by the promises of a Dominican monk who was traveling around Germany offering “letters of indulgence” for sale. These letters were backed by the spiritual authority of Pope Leo X. They guaranteed that souls caught in purgatory would be released to be in heaven with God. The letters could free people from sins they had committed in the past. They could even release people from sins that would be committed in the future! The Pope was encouraging the sale of these letters because he needed cash to hire the finest Renaissance architects and artists in Italy to make renovations to St. Peter’s Basilica, the cathedral that is the centerpiece of the Vatican today.

Luther felt the promises implicit in letters of indulgence, and the eagerness of his parishioners to buy them, violated the basic principles of Christian faith as expressed in the Bible. He sat down and summarized his objections in a document known as the *95 Theses*. It is said that he posted this document on the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. It is not clear whether or not he really did post the *Theses*. He might have, as it was customary for monks to post letters, commentaries, or other pieces of writing they wished to submit for discussion within their community. It was Luther’s intention that the *95 Theses* stimulate a scholarly debate in his religious community. However, the effect they had was to begin a revolution.

The printing press made it possible for multiple copies of Luther’s *Theses* to be circulated widely. Eventually, the Pope got wind of Luther’s writing and formally demanded that he recant, or take back his ideas. Luther refused. The Emperor, Charles V

of Spain, called a meeting of European leaders in the German city of Worms. The participants in this meeting published an edict which banned Luther's writings and declared him an outlaw in his own land. Luther was sheltered by Frederick the Wise, King of Saxony.

When he finally emerged from hiding in 1522, Luther found that the ideas he had summarized in his *Theses* had begun to influence a generation of monks and Christian parishioners. Eventually these new Christian ideas spread throughout Europe. Other leading scholars (including John Calvin) used them as a basis for forming churches that presented an alternative to the Catholic church, led by the Pope in Rome. These churches began to reflect the culture and traditions of the communities in which they were founded. Over time, they also differentiated themselves from one another on the basis of Christian beliefs and practices: for example, the age at which a person should be baptized, etc.

In this unit you will study several important documents, including a sermon by Johann Tetzel in which he was trying to convince people to purchase indulgences, Luther's *95 Theses*, and the *Edict of Worms* (the decision to ban Luther's writings and declare him an outlaw). These documents are the historical underpinnings of the Protestant Reformation—a religious revolution that started when Martin Luther set pen to paper to record his concerns about the practice of his Christian faith.

## Background to the Reformation Student Page

### Introduction:

Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Leo X sought to raise money for the expansion and improvement of St. Peter's Basilica (Cathedral) in Rome. One way of doing this was by increasing contributions to the church. The Pope offered to forgive the sins of the living and the dead if people would purchase what was called a "letter of indulgence." Many preachers, including a Dominican monk by the name of Johann Tetzel, traveled across Europe selling these letters. Tetzel in particular was a powerful speaker who would stop at nothing to convince people. In this lesson, you will read a selection from one of Tetzel's sermons, you will view an actual letter of indulgence from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and you will take a virtual "tour" of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at:  
<http://www.socialstudies.com/worldlinks.html>.

### Directions:

**Grace for Sale Through Indulgences: Johann Tetzel**  
<http://www.aloha.net/~mikesch/tetzel.htm>

Scroll down to the section titled "The Text of A Sermon on Indulgences."

1. Read the first paragraph. Tetzel reminds the listeners of the saints Lawrence, Bartholomew, and Stephen. What did these men do?
2. What do you think Tetzel meant by statements such as "Are you perhaps ashamed to visit the Cross with a candle and yet not ashamed to visit a tavern [a bar]?" and "Are you ashamed to go to the apostolic confessors [priests for confession], but not ashamed to go to a dance?"
3. According to Tetzel, who could obtain complete remission of their sins?

4. According to Tetzel, what were the wailing voices of his listeners' dead parents saying?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What was Tetzel trying to convince people to do?

**Copy of an Inexpensive Indulgence Sold by Tetzel**

[http://www.prca.org/standard\\_bearer/volume78/2001oct15\\_inexpensive\\_indulgence.html](http://www.prca.org/standard_bearer/volume78/2001oct15_inexpensive_indulgence.html)

6. What does this letter of indulgence promise?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Summarize the strategies Tetzel was using to convince people to donate money to the church or buy indulgences.

**St. Peter's Basilica—Virtual Tour**

<http://www.ewtn.com/gallery/sp/sp1.htm>

Johann Tetzel was raising money for the church in part because Pope Leo X wished to continue improvements to Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. During the Renaissance, this cathedral was beautified through the work of some of the most talented architects and artists of the time, including Michelangelo and Raphael. Select #5 to view *The Pieta*, a work by Michelangelo. Select #6 and #7 to view a larger perspective of the interior. Select #16, and #17 to view the interior of the dome. View some of St. Peter's sculptures in #9, #10, #19, and #20.

8. Select one of the images from your tour of St. Peter's. Describe the image. What is distinctive, or beautiful, or moving about it?

9. Imagine you were visiting St. Peter's and you personally experienced this enormous cathedral with all of its art in person. What impression do you think it would have on you?
10. Why might the Pope have sought to continue to expand and beautify St. Peter's?
11. In your opinion, who should have paid for improvements to St. Peter's? If you feel that ordinary Catholics should have paid because they were members of the church, do you think they should have purchased salvation for their souls or the souls of their departed loved ones? Why or why not? Give reasons for your point of view.