

The Protestant Reformation

During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church was the most powerful institution in Europe. However, beginning in the 1400s, a basic discontent developed on the Continent with the Church, its doctrines, its structures, and its clergy—and by the early 1500s, it had spread throughout most of Europe. Historians refer to this great religious, social, and political movement as the Protestant Reformation. How it all came about is complicated. How it changed the face of Christianity is extraordinary.

As early as the mid-1400s, the Catholic Church faced criticism from within. Some clerics saw the need for moral revivalism, such as the Italian Dominican Savonarola, who preached against the love of luxury he saw in his fellow Florentines. Still others were tired of clerical abuses; of priests, monks, bishops, even popes, who were very worldly. Even longstanding Church doctrine came under occasional fire.

One such early critic of Church doctrine was John Huss (1369?–1415). This Bohemian preacher from Prague taught at Oxford University. Huss believed that all Christians comprise a “priesthood of believers,” and considered professional priests unnecessary. Such ideas—including his belief that the State is supreme to the Church—landed him in trouble. A Catholic council condemned Huss and he was burned at the stake for his beliefs.

Huss was far ahead of his time. By the late 1400s and early 1500s, however, more Europeans were questioning the doctrines and policies of the Church. Because of changes during the Renaissance, Europeans were more apt to question authority, any authority, whether it be a local lord, a town council, a king, or even a pope.

By the 1500s, then, the Church was falling out of step with the populace in many corners of Europe. As a result, the Church of the early 16th century was in the greatest state of danger it had faced since the Great Schism of the 1300s.

Making matters worse for the Church were the popes. Renaissance popes were notoriously worldly. Many were considered morally corrupt: men who gave in constantly to extravagance and luxury. These popes often kept mistresses and fathered children illegitimately. Everything seemed to be for sale.

Renaissance popes sold church offices and even

appointed their own friends, even their children, to key clerical offices such as bishop and cardinal. It was said, for example, of Pope Leo X [1513–1521], “he would have made an excellent pope if he had only been a little religious.”

But one practice of the late 15th-century Church stood above the rest: the practice of selling indulgences. Traditionally, an indulgence was granted to someone when he or she confessed a sin.

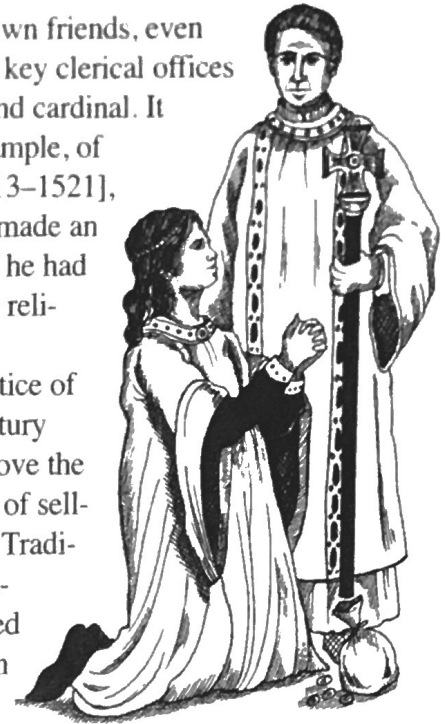
When sinners performed penance to receive forgiveness, the Church sometimes required an indulgence, usually an act of piety, to help provide complete forgiveness and to prove that the sinner was, indeed, sorry for having done wrong.

By the Middle Ages, the doctrine of indulgences allowed people to pay money rather than do a pious act. By the 15th century, Pope Sixtus IV claimed to have the power to release the souls of the dead from the penance they were experiencing in Purgatory. This meant that someone could buy an indulgence to help expedite a deceased loved one’s release from Purgatory. Indulgences took on a whole new value to people and to certain unscrupulous people in the Church.

This practice—profiteering in Indulgences—was the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. And one Catholic cleric—a German named Martin Luther—was soon to lead the assault on the Church.

Review and Write

By the 1500s, how had the Catholic doctrine of indulgences changed? Why did such a change lead to criticism of the Church?



The Life of Martin Luther, Part I

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was born in the German state of Thuringia. His father was a copper miner who became relatively prosperous.



When Luther was a young man, his father sent him to law school. According to legend, young Luther, while on his way home from his first term in law school, found himself caught in a violent storm. A lightning bolt struck close by. He was so terrorized he prayed to St. Anne, the traditional mother of Jesus' mother Mary, that if she helped him survive the storm, he would enter a monastery.

Luther survived the lightning and thunder and was true to his promise. He became a monk or, more accurately, a friar in the Augustinian Eremite Order. He continued his studies, however, studying theology at the University of Erfurt, an important German school of the period.

After graduation, he became a theology teacher, taking a position at the newly founded University of Wittenberg in Saxony. There, he inspired students with lectures known for their depth and scholarship.

Luther's studies caused him to begin to doubt some Church doctrines and practices. One practice which he felt was seriously abused was the selling of indulgences. One such indulgence salesman whose techniques Luther despised was John Tetzel. Tetzel was a Dominican friar who sold indulgences in the German state of Mainz.

Tetzel was notorious for his tactics. He preyed on ignorant, well-intentioned peasant Christians who wanted to help relieve their loved ones' time in Purgatory. Everywhere he went, he took with him a large barrel into which people were to pay their indulgences. He even told the believing crowds that "As soon as coin in coffer [barrel] rings, the soul from Purgatory springs."

Because of unscrupulous clerics like Tetzel, Luther came to object to indulgences. For example, he questioned whether popes had the power to release someone from Purgatory after an indulgence was paid.

As a protest of indulgences and other abuses, Luther took dramatic steps. He developed a list of 95 questions, or theses, taking issue with certain Catholic doctrines and practices, and nailed them to the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, which was All Saints' Day.

Luther intended his theses to provoke scholarly debate, but could not have anticipated the dramatic public response. In no time at all, his protest was published, and translated from Latin to German, causing widespread interest throughout the German states.

The Church took immediate note of Luther's objections and criticisms. A representative of the pope summoned Luther in 1518 and ordered him to confess his wrong for questioning Church doctrine. Luther refused. In 1519, Luther's teachings won over more converts after he debated a noted scholar named John Eck. During that debate, Luther said that earlier popes and Church councils had made wrong decisions. With that statement, Pope Leo X condemned Luther's teachings. When Luther burned a copy of the condemnation in a public fire, the pope excommunicated him.

The next year, 1521, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V [ruled 1519–1556] (only 21 years old at the time) summoned Luther to a council called the Diet of Worms [verms]. There, the emperor ordered Luther to recant his teachings. Luther refused. The emperor condemned him.

As Luther left the royal hall and walked into the streets, shaken after having stood before the emperor, he was greeted by guards shouting, "Into the fire!" Luther, fearing for his life, clasped his hands over his head and shouted, "I am finished!" He was certain the emperor would order his death.

Review and Write

1. Why did Martin Luther have problems with the practices of John Tetzel?
2. Describe the events of Martin Luther's life between 1517 and 1521 which caused him problems with the Church and with Emperor Charles V.

The Life of Martin Luther, Part II

After standing before the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, and defying his command to recant his teachings, Martin Luther assumed that death would come shortly. However, it was not to be. He had a friend in Frederick the Wise of Saxony.

Frederick was the elector of the German state of Saxony where Luther lived and taught. As an elector, he was one of a handful of men in all the Germanies with enough personal power to take bold steps and help Luther. Frederick, too, favored change in the Catholic Church and he was no friend of Rome. He felt that the pope exerted too much power over his German subjects. Frederick, like Luther, had despised the work of John Tetzel, the indulgence salesman, and had forbidden him from entering Saxony.

Now it was time for Frederick to make his move. On April 26, just a week after Luther's confrontation with Charles V, men under orders from Frederick whisked Luther out of the city and out of immediate harm's way. A dramatic escape followed, with the men hiding out by day and rushing through dark forests by night.

Luther was taken to a remote castle at Wartburg. There he hid out for nearly a year translating the Greek New Testament into German. He managed to accomplish this great scholarly feat in only three months. This work led to other such translations in other places in Europe by other reform-minded scholars. No longer would only those educated in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew be able to read the Bible.

By now, Luther had clearly developed his own personal theology. It did not follow the lines of strict Catholic doctrine. For example, Luther believed in salvation through faith in God rather than through ceremonies and good works. He no longer accepted the seven sacraments as a whole; instead, he kept only two: baptism and the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper. Luther no longer believed in a professional priesthood. He believed that all Christians together formed a priesthood.

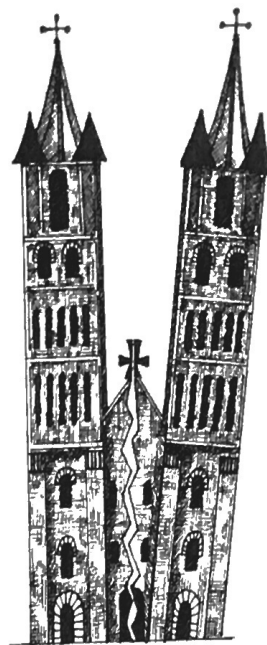
Luther also came to disregard the authority of Church traditions and decisions made by popes and Church councils. He only accepted the authority of the Bible.

By 1522, Luther returned to Wittenberg where he was still under the protective eye of Frederick the Wise. Charles V was busy with the Italian Wars and had little time to pay attention to religious problems.

Despite the delay, change was in the wind. What started as Luther's private protest against corruption in the church became a nation-wide movement across whole regions of Germany. In Wittenberg, the town council passed the first city ordinance of the Protestant Reformation, deciding to abolish the Catholic Mass (the elaborate, priest-led celebration of the Eucharist) and conduct all church services in German rather than Latin.

Other aspects of church worship changed as well. Church singing was done by the entire congregation of a church, not just a choir. This was an extension of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Support for Luther and his new theologies and doctrines spread rapidly through the German states. Many of his most active supporters were former monks, nuns, and friars, as well as priests and other clergymen. Such clerics often lived in poverty while resenting the wealth and privilege of bishops, archbishops, and even popes. (Incidentally, Luther renounced his vows as a monk and married a former nun.) Because of the work of Martin Luther, change was coming to Christianity in 16th-century Europe.



Review and Write

List Luther's grievances with the Catholic Church which lead him to defy its authority.

The Spread of Protestantism

What Luther began in the German state of Saxony spread to other places where people were disenchanted with the Catholic Church. With the success of his message, however, the Protestant Reformation took turns even Luther could not predict or support.

Luther's teachings faced a major threat during 1524–25 through a series of conflicts called the German Peasants' War. In this conflict, peasants tried to rebel against their landlords. While the war was not a religious one, but rather a response to poverty and high taxes, some claimed inspiration in Luther's words. After all, Luther preached the *equality* of a *priesthood of all believers*. Some peasants extended their new status into the social and economic world, and sought their freedom.

Luther did not support the peasant revolt. Ultimately, it failed, with as many as 100,000 peasants losing their lives. Thousands were blinded and maimed. The result of Luther's lack of support for the Peasants' War was to turn many peasants against Lutheranism.

With support from sympathetic German leaders, such as Frederick the Wise, the followers of Luther, in 1529, published a document protesting the pro-Catholic Emperor Charles V. This paper gave *protestantism* its name. In 1530, Luther again appeared before Charles V at the Council (Diet) of Augsburg where he presented his theological beliefs in a paper called the Augsburg Confession.

Luther did not actually write the Augsburg Confession. It was written by another leader of the movement, Philip Melanchthon (mel LANG thun) [1497–1560], who also wrote the Protest of 1529. Melanchthon's writings were important to the early Protestants, helping define their goals and beliefs.

After Luther made his Augsburg Confession, key German rulers, including the rulers of Saxony, Hesse, and several important German cities formed an alliance called the Schmalkaldic League. Its purpose was both religious and military, and was designed to protect the movement from the Catholic forces of the Habsburg Emperor Charles V.

These two forces went to war in 1546–47. The Schmalkaldic War was lost by the League.

By 1555, both sides were weary of conflict between German Catholics and Lutherans. In that year, both sides agreed to the Peace of Augsburg. Under this agreement, each German prince or elector could decide whether his state would be Protestant or Catholic. This agreement managed to keep the peace in Germany until the coming of the Thirty Years' War in 1618.

As Lutheranism grew in the German states, it spread to other countries where other men rose as important reform leaders. As early as 1518, Olaus Petri (1493–1552) introduced Lutheranism to Sweden. By 1593, Lutheranism had become the Swedish state religion.

In Switzerland, the reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) became prominent. He believed and preached many of Luther's ideas concerning justification by faith and the supreme authority of the Bible. He was killed by Catholics during a Swiss civil war in 1531.

France saw its greatest reformer in John Calvin (1509–1564). Calvin became a follower of Luther's ideas as well, but was forced out of France into exile in Switzerland. Through his studies, Calvin came to believe differently than Luther. In his belief system, people were born with no free will. He believed God selected those whom he would save. This doctrine is known as *predestination*. Also, Calvin established churches with elders.

Calvin's ideas, later known as Calvinism, became the source for new sects of believers in Switzerland, France, Scotland, and England. English Calvinists were known as Puritans.

Other sects created during the Reformation included the Anabaptists. They believed in adult, rather than infant, baptism. They became popular in Switzerland, Germany, Holland, and Belgium. They came into existence after the Peasants' War.



Review and Write

Name three significant leaders of the Protestant Reformation (other than Martin Luther) and identify one contribution each made.

The English Reformation

The theology of Martin Luther helped spark the Reformation in continental Europe, from Bohemia to France to the Scandinavian countries. In England, however, the Reformation began differently.

In 1527, the king of England, Henry VIII, longed for a male heir to inherit his throne. His wife, Catherine of Aragon, had only given birth to one child, a girl, named Mary. Henry decided to have his marriage annulled, so he would be free to marry another woman, a young beauty named Anne Boleyn. Such annulments were granted in Henry's time by the Catholic Church. (The Church did not sanction divorce.) Henry's request for annulment had some legal grounds. His wife was the widow of Henry's brother, Arthur, and such marriages were a violation of canonical law.

Henry's request was not an unusual one. Popes had annulled marriages for the French kings Louis XII and Francis I, and two of Henry's sisters had been granted annulments. But Henry's request was to no avail. Pope Clement VII would not grant the annulment. At that time, Rome and much of the Italian peninsula were under the control of Emperor Charles V. Henry's wife, Catherine, was Charles's aunt.

Furious, Henry VIII took other steps, appealing for support from theologians at several universities. He used diplomacy to convince the pope to change his mind. Nothing seemed to work.

Then, in 1531, an English Church Council, known as the Convocation, declared Henry VIII head of the Catholic Church in England. They took this step after much harassment and many threats from Henry. He then began to collect for himself the taxes annually raised to support the papacy.

Over the next few years, Henry solidified his leadership over the Church in England. Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, recognizing Henry as the head of the English Church. This decision by Parliament brought about the formal separation of England from the Roman Catholic Church.

With that, the pope excommunicated Henry, a decision he dismissed as unimportant. At the same time, the Convocation agreed to the annulment of

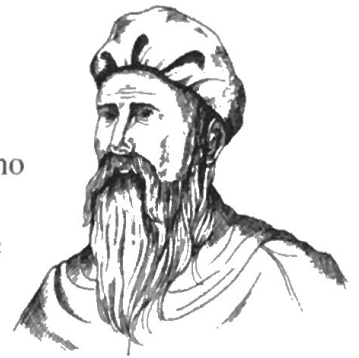
Henry's marriage to Catherine. (By that time, Henry VIII had secretly married Anne Boleyn, who was already pregnant.)

For these reasons, the beginning of the English Reformation was different, indeed, from the reform movement on the Continent. Officially, the break of England from Rome was a separation within the existing Church structure. Henry, in fact, had not been a supporter of the Luther-inspired Reformation. He even wrote a book in opposition to Luther in 1521. In many ways, Henry never stopped thinking of himself as a devout, believing Catholic.

Yet the English government began systematically tearing down Catholicism. Monasteries were closed, and monastic lands were confiscated by the government. Many of the monks and nuns retired under the threat of such moves.

The English Reformation had many supporters in England. Englishmen resented the Church's great wealth and landholdings. Church taxes, called tithes, were high, as well as the fees clergymen charged for funerals and burials.

Henry VIII legitimized his defiance against the Catholic Church through a series of Parliamentary laws. He also made former monastic lands available for sale to English lords and other wealthy people in an effort to garner their support for him and his new English Church.



Pope Clement VII

Research and Write

1. During the 1500s, the English Reformation found its way to neighboring Scotland. Research the history of the Reformation in Scotland in the 1500s.
2. How did Henry VIII solidify his control over the Catholic Church in England?

Reformation Era Map

The 1500s saw the rise of the Reformation and the spread of its influence. Beginning in the German states, Luther's influential doctrines and theologies ultimately changed the nature of Christianity across the whole of 16th-century Europe, not only on the Continent, but in the British Isles as well. Religious change seemed to know no borders as the Protestant faith found followers everywhere.

Using the map below and additional sources, identify the following places: Spain, England, France, the Holy Roman Empire, Denmark, Poland, Sweden, Norway, the Papal States, Portugal, Ireland, Swiss Confederation, Saxony, Wittenberg, Worms, Nuremberg, Munich, Augsburg, Erfurt, Thuringia, Vienna, Zurich, Geneva, Rome, Paris, London, Canterbury, and Madrid.

By 1560, most European nations had established state religions which supported either Catholicism, Lutheranism, or Anglicanism. Using outside sources, identify three states which were predominantly Catholic, three which were Protestant, and one Anglican.

