

The Protestant Reformation

Background

During the Middle Ages, the Church was the single largest and most important organization in western Europe. The Church provided stability in the face of political upheavals and economic hardships. This stability was evident both in its organization and in its message: life on Earth might be brutally hard, but it was the means to a joyful life in heaven. The Church taught that life on Earth was a time of divine testing and preparation for life after death.

Because of the central position of the Church in the West, the pope, the head of the Church, became a powerful secular as well as religious figure. As the Christian church grew during the Roman Empire, it developed a structure and a hierarchy. At the local level was the parish, a congregation of worshippers within a local community who were looked after by a priest. Many parishes made up a diocese, which was overseen by a bishop. Several dioceses were then combined into a province, which was overseen by an archbishop. Above the archbishops was a layer of cardinals who not only supervised the lower ranks, but who were advisers to the pope. In 1059, cardinals gained the power to elect new popes. At the head of the Church was the pope, who was also known as the Bishop of Rome.

The pope derived his power through the doctrine of Petrine Supremacy. This tenet of the Church said that the pope was the direct successor of St. Peter, the first Bishop of Rome. Because he possessed (or claimed to possess) that authority, the pope could claim to be God's spokesman on earth. Based on this concept, ambitious popes extended their authority to claim papal supremacy over secular rulers. Wielding political influence and the threat of excommunication—withholding the sacraments from an individual—various popes enforced and enlarged the power of the Church.

Papal power grew gradually during the Early Middle Ages. The height of papal power occurred during the reign of Pope Innocent III, from 1198 to 1216. Pope Innocent III had the Holy Roman Emperor Otto replaced and forced King John of England to become a vassal of the pope. However, the popes suffered some serious setbacks in the 14th century. From 1309–1377, the papacy relocated to Avignon in France. Then, from 1378 to 1417, there were actually rival popes, each claiming to be the head of the Church, and each denouncing the other. This was a serious blow to the prestige of the papacy.

After the schism was healed in 1417, the popes, now back in Rome, set about restoring the power of the papacy and rebuilding the city of Rome. They wanted to build new churches and redesign old ones. They were eager to hire the great artists of the day—men like Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael—to paint frescos. Of course, all of this was going to cost money, and the Church looked for ways to raise more money. The church tried to tax believers in other countries, but the rulers of those countries were trying to raise money themselves and did not want to see their subjects' money sent out of the country and to Rome—particularly since the Church generally did not pay taxes on its properties.

Resentment against papal fundraising was acute in some parts of Northern Europe. As a result, the Church had to develop creative ways of raising money. One of those creative ways evolved into the selling of indulgences, a practice which would lead to the Protestant Reformation.

In the past, historians have sometimes depicted the late Medieval Church as deeply corrupt and ripe for the Reformation that struck in the 1500s. However, more recent scholars believe this was not in fact the case. They argue that, in the centuries before the Reformation, the Church was in many ways quite strong, and in some ways it was actually gaining strength. This is not to say that there were no abuses. It was widely known that some priests were not well trained or well educated, that some monks were more interested in hunting than praying, that some friars actually seduced the women whose sins they were supposed to be forgiving, and that some popes and cardinals lived a life of luxury rather than a life of piety. Improprieties of this sort were noted in poems like Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (circa 1390s), and there were periodic efforts to curb these abuses and reform the Church from 1000 on. Even the Protestant Reformation began as a call for reform within the Church. Only later did it lead to the creation of a new Church.

Anticipations of the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation began as an attempt to reform certain beliefs and practices within the Roman Catholic Church and ended with the founding of various Protestant denominations and the division of European Christianity.

Although Martin Luther is usually credited with starting the Reformation, there had been other attempts at reform prior to Luther's time. One important early reformer was the English theologian John Wycliffe (died 1384), sometimes called "the morning star of the Reformation." In disputes between the English king and the pope, Wycliffe sided with the English king. Wycliffe also believed that all Christians should have access to the Bible in their native language. He therefore initiated a translation of the Bible into English. Wycliffe questioned other accepted ideas, including the idea of transubstantiation. This idea held that the bread offered to the people during the Eucharist (or communion) was transformed into the actual body of Christ. Wycliffe's ideas and writings were condemned, but Luther and other Protestant reformers would advance similar ideas many decades later.

Martin Luther and the 95 Theses

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was an Augustinian monk who later became a professor of Bible studies at the University of Wittenberg in Germany. Based on his close study of the Bible (especially the epistles of St. Paul), he concluded that man is justified by faith alone—not by works. The key Biblical text for Luther was Paul's statement: "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Romans 3:28). In other words, a person cannot obtain salvation by going on pilgrimages or performing other good works; salvation can only be obtained through faith in Jesus Christ. This idea eventually brought Luther into conflict with the Church. In order to understand why this happened, one must know a little about the Church's doctrines concerning sin and the forgiveness of sins.

According to Church teachings of the time, a person could confess his or her sins to a priest in the sacrament of penance and then receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the priest in God's name. The priest assigned prayers for the lay person to say as penance, that is, as an act of reparation. If the person was truly penitent, and said the required prayers, the sins would be forgiven and the person would have an opportunity to go to heaven in the afterlife.

However, if a person died without having gained forgiveness for all of his or her sins, that person's soul would be sent to a place called purgatory before it would be allowed to enter heaven. In purgatory a soul could work off sins accumulated during life.

The Church taught that good works, such as making a pilgrimage to a holy place or saying special prayers, could remove some or all of this additional punishment that would otherwise have to be worked off in purgatory. The Church called this remission, or pardoning, of punishment an indulgence. The Church insisted that an indulgence would only work if the sinner was truly sincere in his or her repentance.

Originally, there was no idea that forgiveness could be bought or sold. However, by the time Martin Luther became a professor at Wittenberg, indulgences were being bought and sold, sometimes by rather unscrupulous salesmen. One of these salesmen, a man named Johann Tetzel, sold indulgences in a town near Wittenburg. Some of the funds raised by the sale of these indulgences were to go to the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, one of the great architectural achievements of the Renaissance. Tetzel said people could gain an indulgence, not by being truly repentant, doing good works, and by saying prayers, but simply by paying money for a printed indulgence. Tetzel also claimed his indulgences were so powerful they could get not only the sinner, but also his or her relatives out of purgatory. He even had a little jingle he used to sell his indulgences: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul out of purgatory springs."

Tetzel's extreme sales tactics angered Martin Luther and prompted him to write out 95 Theses, or points of debate. In them Luther protested against indulgences and other Church practices. Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenberg in 1517.

Among Luther's teachings were the following:

- Salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone. You cannot buy your way into heaven with indulgences, or work your way to heaven by good works.
- The Bible contains all the guidance that anyone needs in matters of faith.
- Individuals are responsible for their own salvation. The power of the priest and of the sacraments that formed the core of the doctrine of the Catholic Church could be dispensed with. To Luther, every individual's spiritual status was as high as that of a priest. He believed in "the priesthood of all believers." The head of a parish still conducted church services as before and served as the group's leader, but he did so because that was his job, just as other members of the church had jobs and worked for a living. Every person held a great spiritual responsibility, as great as that which had formerly been ascribed to priests.
- The pope has no political authority over church organizations or property within nations; the rulers of the nations should govern churches within their boundaries.

- The longstanding policy of clerical celibacy was unwarranted. Priests should be allowed to marry. (Luther himself married. However, in the Roman Catholic Church the requirement of priestly celibacy continues to this day.)
- The church service was to be performed not in Latin but in a language the people could understand.
- There was no transubstantiation, or transformation of bread and wine into Christ's actual body and blood, in the Eucharist.
- Only a handful of the traditional sacraments of the Church had a genuinely biblical basis.
- Nunneries and monasteries should be closed.

Because of his emphasis on the Bible as the central element of faith, Luther translated the Scriptures into German. One reason that his ideas created so much interest and spread so widely is that he wrote in German, not Latin. Another reason was the development of the printing press. Many historians believe that without Gutenberg's invention of movable type decades before the Reformation, Luther's revolt against the Church would have failed from lack of popular support. 43

Luther's ideas spread rapidly. The pope sent a papal bull (a special order) ordering Luther to retract his views. Luther refused—and even burned the papal bull in defiance. Luther wrote more pamphlets and added to his list of complaints about the pope and the Church. The pope gave Luther opportunities to recant his statements. When Luther refused, the pope excommunicated him. Luther was declared an outlaw, but one of the local princes protected Luther and kept him from getting arrested for heresy. Over the next 18 years, Luther published several more works denying additional church teachings.

Because Luther questioned the authority of the pope and suggested that the ruler of a territory should lead the church in that territory, his ideas attracted the support of a number of princes in northern Germany. These princes were only too happy to seize church property and declare themselves heads of new, local Christian churches that were independent of Rome. Eventually war broke out between Luther's supporters and supporters of the pope. There was also an uprising among the peasants. Luther condemned this uprising, and it was put down with brutal force. By the time the wars and bloodshed ended in 1555, Germany had suffered through a series of terrible religious and political wars. Many thousands of people had died, and the area was divided between Protestants (those who protested against Rome, including Lutherans and some other groups) and Catholics (those who remained loyal to the pope and rejected Luther's ideas). In general, Protestantism was stronger in the north and Catholicism had more favor in the south.