

# THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

## 1517 - 1603AD

In this Article, we will look at:

- **Calls for reform prior to Luther**
- **Luther's revolt**
- **Rome's response to Luther**
- **A divided Germany**
- **Divisions within Protestantism**
- **Reformation in England**
- **Reformation in France**
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### Calls for reform prior to Luther

Before Martin Luther—recognized as the founder of Protestantism—posts his *Ninety-Five Theses* on a church door in Wittenberg, others before him were calling for renewal and reform in the Church. Some of the best known of these reformers are John Wycliffe, John Hus, Girolamo Savonarola and Erasmus.

**John Wycliffe (1320-1384)**, zealous priest and teacher at Oxford, attacks the corrupt lives of the clergy, including the pope in Rome. Wycliffe advocates the confiscation of all Church property to force the clergy and monks to live a simple life. He maintains that the Bible should be regarded as the sole source of God's revelation. He denies the doctrine of transubstantiation. Initially, many devout Catholics, disgusted with the corrupt lives of the clergy, supported Wycliffe, but when he attacks the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the number of his followers dwindle greatly.

**John Hus (1369-1415)**, Czech priest and influential preacher in Prague, is one of Wycliffe's strongest supporters. He teaches that the faithful should receive both the Body *and* Blood of Christ. At the university where he works, he has posters on the walls contrasting the simple life of Christ with the opulence of the Pope. He condemns the sale of Indulgences.

Hus is very popular amongst the people who resent having to pay taxes to Rome. He yields to the urging of the Emperor to defend his beliefs before the Council of Constance, the same one that ended the Great Western or Papal Schism. When Hus refuses to renounce his beliefs, he is condemned by the Council and burned at the stake.

**Savonarola (1452-1498)**, a Dominican priest, preaches fiery sermons against the decadence and immorality of life in Florence, Italy. He becomes so popular that he rules the city for several months. When he preaches against the corruption of the Roman Curia and Pope Alexander VI, he is excommunicated. When he refuses to recant, he is imprisoned, tried and burned at the stake.

**Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536)** is regarded as the greatest Catholic humanist and scholar of his time. "Christian Humanism" emerges from the Renaissance as a movement promoting the study of the great classics of Greece, Rome and Christian antiquity (Scripture and the Fathers of the Church). Erasmus studies in Paris, Oxford, Louvain and Bologna. While in England, he becomes a friend of St. Thomas More. Like the others mentioned above, Erasmus (who is also a priest) is said to have anticipated the Protestant Reformation by his biting satires of papal corruption and the excesses of popular devotion and other abuses within the Church. So scathing are Erasmus' reform writings that it would later be said, "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

Erasmus initially backed Luther's efforts to reform the Church, but later withdraws his support when Luther calls the pope the anti-Christ and sees how he lines up with German princes in their revolt against the Church. Unlike Luther, Erasmus tries to reform the Church from *within*.

### Luther's protest

**"Faith alone  
justifies sinners"  
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foundation stones of  
Luther's Reformation.**

**Martin Luther** was born in 1483 and becomes an Augustinian monk in 1505. He is a devout and zealous young monk. Despite his dedication to God, he suffers greatly from scruples and a guilty conscience, believing that despite his many acts of penance and self-denial, his sins are not forgiven. He pictures God as stern and unforgiving. One day, Luther has a great spiritual awakening when he reads a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans: "*Man is justified by faith alone in God's mercy*" (3:27-28). He feels a great sense of joy as he experiences God's mercy. This insight ("Faith alone justifies sinners") becomes one of the foundation stones of Luther's attempt to reform the Church.

Luther's experience of salvation by faith immediately comes into conflict with the widespread and scandalous abuse of the Church's teaching on Indulgences. It is taught that one can receive an Indulgence for the "temporary punishment" for sin by prayers, almsgiving and good works. In the true teaching of the Church, the reception of an Indulgence *always* involves an interior change of heart. (See more on Indulgences at the end of this Article.)

In Luther's time, the papacy is involved in the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, a huge project that Rome does not have the money for. Pope Leo X (1475-1521), a member of the wealthy Medici family, devises a scheme for raising funds for his lavish building projects. He turns his eyes towards wealthy Germany with a plan to work with Luther's Archbishop, Albert Mainz. Mainz is way behind in the taxes he owes Rome. Leo's idea involves the *sale* of Indulgences in Mainz's diocese. Catholics can purchase Indulgences to wipe out all punishment for sin, not only for their own soul but for the souls of deceased relatives. This means that one can *buy* his/her own salvation or that of a relative without any conversion of heart. Clearly, this is a scandalous misuse of the practice of Indulgences.

When Luther becomes aware of this terrible practice, he is outraged and starts to preach against it. In addition, Luther writes his now famous *Ninety-Five Theses* (or propositions) in which he attacks not only the sale of Indulgences but also the papal and Church authorities who condone this widespread practice. Luther posts his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517—an action that will later be regarded as the birth of Protestantism. By such action, Luther is inviting Church leaders and the ordinary faithful to enter into a debate about Indulgences and the Church's authority to promote such a practice.

Sadly, had Pope Leo and Luther's archbishop acknowledged the misuse of Indulgences, the huge split in Christendom would most likely have been averted. It is generally recognized that Luther's intention is *not* to break with Rome but to bring reform to the Church.

### Rome's response

Rome is slow to respond to Luther's challenge. Pope Leo X who lives a lavish lifestyle and who is very busy with building projects, does not want to be bothered with what he sees as a small squabble in a small German town. But then as Luther's ideas start

to catch on, members of his own religious order and envoys from Rome try for three years to get Luther to recant his beliefs. Most likely during this three-year period, lots of words are said that will only fuel the fire that leads to a big split in Western Christianity.

In 1519, in a public debate with theologian Jon Eck at Leipzig, Luther blurts out: "*A Church council may sometimes err. Neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture.*" In speaking thus, Luther is establishing his second strong challenge to the Church, namely, that Scripture, not popes or councils, is the standard for Christian belief and behavior. This stance by Luther becomes known as '*sola scriptura*' (Scripture alone). Luther's first conviction or belief is that one is saved by faith alone and not by good works.

After the debate, Eck urges Rome to excommunicate Luther. Luther responds by bringing his case before the German people. He writes three booklets in which he (1) denounces the authority of the Catholic Church and the pope; (2) attacks the Church's sacramental system, accepting only two of the seven sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist; and (3) calls for the Christian princes of Germany to rise up and start their own national church. The spread of Luther's ideas is greatly helped by the invention of the Printing Press in 1440.

***Luther excommunicated.*** In June 1520, Pope Leo issues the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* ("*Arise, O Lord, for a wild boar has invaded Thy vineyard.*") condemning 41 of Luther's propositions and giving him two months to recant. In December 1520, Luther publicly burns the papal bull and other Catholic books. In January 1521, Luther is excommunicated.

Shortly after, Charles V, Germany's young Emperor, becomes involved with the religious rebellion that he sees as dividing his country. He summons Luther to an imperial gathering called the *Diet* (assembly) of *Worms* (a small town in Germany).

Before the assembly, Luther famously states: "*My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*" Charles is not impressed and declares Luther an outlaw. Luther is saved from arrest and probably from burning at the stake by the Prince of Saxony. During his time in hiding at the Prince's castle, Luther translates the New Testament into German – a great achievement and one which gives ordinary German people who can read access to

**The sale of Indulgences becomes one of the reasons for Luther's Reformation.**

the Bible. In a short time, the worship services of the breakaway church are in the language of the people. Five hundred years later, the bishops gathered at Vatican Council II will also conclude that it is a good idea to have people worship in their own language.

### **A divided Germany**

As Luther's ideas spread, Germany is divided between those who are for him and those against him. While we can assume that some of those who support him are attracted to his way of reforming the church, others, especially the nobles, are drawn to him because it frees them from paying taxes to Rome. Still others, like the poor peasants, are motivated by Luther's ideas on freedom to rise up against their landlords. Frightened that the peasants are using his idea to rebel, Luther tries to calm them down. When this does not work, he orders the nobles to exterminate them without mercy.

About this time (1524), Luther breaks with Erasmus who does not accept his pessimistic attitude towards human nature and who desires to reform the Church from within and not by breaking unity with the successor of Peter. Luther also rejects the Church's law on celibacy. He marries a former nun and has six children. Later, the former monk will reflect: "*There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage. One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pig-tails on the pillow which were not there before.*" Luther goes on to become a prolific writer and preacher. Many come to listen to him from outside Germany and take his new beliefs back with them to other parts of Europe. His followers begin to be called Lutheran. In 1530, Luther's friend and follower Philip Melancthon composed the basic creed for Lutherans, calling it the *Augsburg Confession*. The Augsburg Confession is still the statement of faith for Lutherans, and the year 1530 is considered the beginning of Protestantism.

***Peace of Augsburg 1555.*** In the decades following Luther's excommunication in 1521, many towns and princes, especially in Northern Germany, begin to convert to Lutheranism. Priests marry and turn their parishes and churches from Catholic to Lutheran. They are glad to be free from Rome which they perceive as a corrupt institution.

Emperor Charles V wants to wipe out Lutheranism in Germany by force but is constantly distracted by his wars with the French and the Turks. When Charles sees that millions of Germans have become Lutheran and that he cannot forcibly bring them back to the Catholic Church, he agrees in 1555 to the *Peace of*

*Augsburg* which mandates the people to adopt the religion of the ruler of the land they live in. Those not in favor of this ordinance are free to migrate to any place that supports their choice of faith. The Peace of Augsburg is the first official recognition that Luther's protest (hence Protestantism) has divided Western Europe. The Pope is no longer pastor to all of the Catholics in Western Europe.

The word *Protestant* is first used to describe German princes and free cities which have declared their dissent from the decision of the *Diet of Speyer* (1529) denouncing the Reformation. Today, the word Protestant does not specify any particular group of Christians; rather, it refers to a large number of non-Catholic Christian churches.

### **Divisions within Protestantism**

Almost from the very beginning of the Reformation initiated by Luther, other voices have started to speak out seeking a 'reform within the reform.' In time this has led to the many branches of Protestantism that we know today. Two of the best known of these other reformers were Zwingli and Calvin. A brief word about each of them.

***Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)***, a Swiss Catholic, is ordained a priest in 1506. Scandalized by the excesses he experiences at a well-known Marian shrine, he gradually becomes critical of Catholicism. Like Luther, he believes in the authority of the Bible over the Pope and Church councils. Also with Luther, he believes only in laws that are backed up by the Bible. For instance, marriage is considered lawful for all—clergy and laity alike. Unlike Luther, Zwingli does not believe in the presence of Christ in the bread and wine at Mass. He removes all images and paintings from churches. Though Zwingli does not found a major religion as Luther has, his radical interpretations of Scripture are imitated by John Calvin and other Protestant Reformers. When Switzerland becomes divided because of his teaching, Zwingli is killed in a religious war.

***John Calvin (1509-1564)***, like the other reformers, is born Catholic. He is very intelligent and very well educated. He becomes very embittered towards the Church when his father dies excommunicated. While studying in Paris, he meets up with a group of Reformation intellectuals. In 1533, he experiences a sudden conversion which leads him to believe that his mission is to reform the Church. Because of the persecution of reformers in France, Calvin moves to Switzerland.

While Calvin agrees with Luther on some things, he disagrees with him on other things, thus developing his own brand of Protestantism which becomes known as *Calvinism*.

Calvin's most controversial teaching is his doctrine on **predestination** which declares that all things are foreordained by God. For Catholics, the belief is that God knows who will be saved and not saved—yet God wills that *all* be saved. To this end, God gives us grace and other benefits which we are free to accept or reject. This means that while certain people will be lost, this is their own choice, not God's. In contrast, Calvin believes that God not only knows who will be saved and not saved, but that God destined some people to be saved and some to be lost. Calvin sees God as *creating* some people for hell and some for heaven. Each person's fate is destined by God and no one can do anything about it.

**Strict, intolerant theocracy.** Calvin spends the last twenty years of his life in Geneva where he gradually develops a strict, intolerant theocracy—a civil government totally dominated by the church. Calvin's personality and outlook (strict and harsh) affect the kind of God and church that he believes in. He reads the Bible as revealing an angry, wrathful God whom Christians have to serve in fear and trembling. He prescribes capital punishment for fornicators and adulterers. He and his followers regulate the dress code especially for women. In time, Geneva will become known as *Protestant Rome*.

Calvin's beliefs are more influential and widespread than Luther's. From the university he established in Geneva, his beliefs will be taken to many parts of Europe including England and Scotland.

Reformed, Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches today look to John Calvin as their spiritual father. John Knox (1505-1572), a former Catholic priest, brings Presbyterianism—an offshoot of Calvinism—to Scotland and England.

### The Reformation in England

Protestantism comes to England not out of any desire to reform the church, but because King Henry VIII has gotten into a fight with the pope. Before his altercation with Rome, Henry, who reigns from 1509 to 1547, was given the title 'Defender of the Faith' by Pope Leo X for his defense of Catholicism against Luther's ideas.

But then Henry faces a big problem: he has no son to succeed him on the English throne. He petitions Rome to grant him an annulment from his wife, Catherine of Aragon. When the pope refuses his request, Henry responds by making himself the head of the church in England. This action is known as the *Act of Supremacy* (1534) which requires all Catholics in England to take an oath of allegiance to him as the head of the English church. Doctrinally, nothing has changed. England remains Catholic but it is now ruled by the King and not by the pope. The *Roman Catholic Church* in England is replaced by the *Church of England* with Henry as its head. While most Catholics abandon their allegiance to Rome, some brave souls lay down their lives in defense of their faith. The best known of these martyrs is Sir Thomas More, Henry's close friend and the Lord Chancellor of England. Another brave soul is Cardinal John Fischer. Both are beheaded in 1535.

**Thomas Cranmer's Reformation.** The Reformation in England goes through two stages. The first is when Henry VIII breaks up with Rome. The second is during Henry's son's seven-year reign. When Henry dies in 1547, England is still basically a Catholic country. However, Edward VI, Henry's son, was only a child when crowned, and he and his advisors were devout Protestants. It is during the short reign of this boy king (1547-1553) that the Protestant Reformation is actually introduced into England. The key figure in bringing about this change is Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury, who now has a free hand in making the doctrinal and liturgical changes that he dared not attempt while Henry was alive.

Under Cranmer's leadership, the Mass is replaced with a communion service in English. Cranmer composes a liturgy based on the *Book of Common Prayer*. However, it is a liturgy that no Catholic can accept because it rejects both the sacrifice of the Mass and the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

**Mary and Elizabeth I.** After the death of Edward VI, a conservative reaction brings to the throne Henry's Catholic daughter, Mary Tudor. Mary wants to restore Catholicism in England but does it largely by force. In her brief reign (1553-1558), she executes 273 Protestants, including Thomas Cranmer. She has been known ever since in English history as "Bloody Mary."

#### THEOCRACY

A form of government in which God is understood to be the head of the state, ruling by divine guidance granted to its clergy or other ruling officials.

Mary dies without an heir, leaving the crown to her half-sister Elizabeth, who will reign for 45 years. A strong ruler and skilled politician, Elizabeth is a Protestant who desires religious peace through political compromise. Like her father, Henry VIII, she has Parliament declare her supreme governor of the Church of England. Then she sets about fashioning a middle-of-the-road Protestant church that she hopes will please everybody.

Elizabeth's brand of Protestantism becomes known as *Anglicanism*. (In the United States, Episcopalians are spiritual descendants of the Anglican Church.) While Elizabeth wants to have a form of Protestantism that will be embraced by all, this does not happen. Consequently, those who refuse to take the oath of supremacy are persecuted—Catholics and radical Protestants alike. Catholic priests who are caught celebrating Mass are executed. One group of Protestants who undergo persecution is called 'Puritans'—a branch of Calvinism that seeks to 'purify' Protestantism of all things Catholic.

***Puritans come to the New World.*** In the 1620's and 1630's, more than 20,000 Puritans sail to the New World to escape persecution. They bring with them Calvin's stern views about God which affect most churches with a "fire-and-brimstone" type of preaching. Gradually, the Pilgrims develop the religious prejudice of their day by passing laws against other religious groups like the Catholics and Quakers. Also in the 1630's, some Catholics leave England for both financial opportunity and religious freedom. A Catholic family, the Calverts, start a colony, settling mainly in Maryland. Maryland is the first colony to allow freedom of worship.

### **Reformation in France**

Initially, the Reformation does not gain a foothold in France for two reasons. First, the French Catholic Church was already semi-independent before Luther's revolt. King Francis I, only a year before Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses*, gained from Pope Leo X the right to appoint French bishops and abbots in France. Second, most intellectuals in France have decided to remain in the church.

Yet the ideas of Luther and Calvin gradually make their way into France. When King Francis murders large numbers of Protestants in southern France, the outrage produces more converts to Protestantism. These converts call themselves *Huguenots*. French princes, like their German counterparts, think they can use religion to further their political ambitions. They

are hoping the Protestant movement will help them do that.

By 1559, the religious turmoil has reached fever pitch. Close to half of the French nobility renounces Catholicism for one Protestant sect or another. In 1562, religious warfare breaks out. Cruelty and persecution are practiced by both sides. The worst incident occurs in 1572 when King Charles IX has thousands of Huguenots murdered in their homes. This atrocity becomes known as "*St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.*"

When King Charles dies, he is replaced by a Protestant prince, Henry of Navarre. But French Catholics refuse to accept Henry. As a pure act of expediency, Henry converts to Catholicism expressing that "*Paris (which he wants to take hold of) was worth a Mass.*" Henry's opportunistic conversion shows that the Reformation is not just about religion but also political power. What started out with Luther as a religious revolt, will end up a half-century later as a competition for political control of the Church and the concomitant control of people's lives.

### **Statement on Indulgences**

"Every sin has consequences. It disrupts our communion with God and the Church, weakens our ability to resist temptation, and hurts others. The necessity of healing these consequences, once the sin itself has been forgiven, is called temporal punishment. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other works of charity can take away entirely or diminish this temporal punishment. Because of the fullness of redemption obtained for us by Christ, the Church attaches to certain prayers and action an *Indulgence* or pardon, that is, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due to sin. Christ, acting through the Church, brings about the healing of the consequences of sin when an individual uses such a prayer or engages in such an action" (United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p.244).

### **Reflection questions**

1. What spoke to you most in this Article?
2. The Church is always in need of reform. Can you see how some reformers may be led to leave the Church when their reforming efforts seem to fall on deaf ears?
3. What external reforms and internal renewal are needed in the Church today?
4. Do you have any questions about this period in Church history?