

chapter 2

The Reformation, 1455–1600



The Reformation is the name given to the era in which discontent with the practices and policies of the Catholic Church boiled over, causing widespread attempts at reform (hence the name “Reformation”). Because the Church resisted change, thousands of Christians abandoned the Catholic Church and joined new Christian denominations. These new churches came to be known as Protestant denominations, so-called because they were born in protest against the original Church.

The word *catholic* means “universal.” Before 1517, the Catholic Church was the universal Christian church in Western Europe and had controlled many aspects of people’s lives for close to a thousand years. In 1517, however, the birth of the Lutheran Church put an end to the unquestioned spiritual authority of the Catholic Church. By 1600, thousands of Europeans were worshipping in Protestant churches: Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican.

In response, the Catholic Church made serious efforts to reform itself from within, in what is generally called the Counter-Reformation. Positive efforts included founding seminaries all over Europe where young men could be educated and trained for the priesthood. Negative efforts included forcible attempts to stamp out Protestantism (or heresy, as the Church called it) through the Inquisitions in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. The Church’s reforms succeeded to a large extent; however, the Protestant churches continued to thrive. The era in

which one Christian church ruled all of Western Europe had definitely come to an end.

CHAPTER 2 OBJECTIVES

- Define the term *Reformation* and explain its importance in European history.
- Explain what caused the widespread protests against the Catholic Church.
- Identify the major Protestant denominations and explain how and why each one came into being.
- Identify the major figures of the era.
- Describe the Catholic response to the Reformation.

Chapter 2 Time Line

- 1455 Johannes Gutenberg publishes the Vulgate Bible, the first book in Europe printed with movable type
- 1517 Luther publishes Ninety-Five Theses
- 1521 Diet of Worms
- 1534 Act of Supremacy declares Henry VIII Supreme Head of the Church of England
- 1540 Society of Jesuits is founded
- 1541 Calvin establishes theocracy in Geneva
- 1545–1563 Council of Trent; Catholic Reformation (Counter-Reformation)
- 1555 Peace of Augsburg
- 1598 Henry of Navarre becomes King of France; issues Edict of Nantes

Causes of the Reformation

The rise of Protestantism had multiple causes. They included a growing realization that the Church was not as powerful as it had claimed, a rise in secular

political power, and the perfection of the printing process stimulating a rise in literacy (see Chapter 1). The spark that finally pushed people into widespread, open rebellion against the Church was the trade of indulgences for financial contributions to the Church.

The Catholic Church functioned on a system of the forgiveness of sins. A person sinned, repented, confessed to a priest, and received absolution in exchange for some form of penance. This might involve repeating a certain number of prayers or doing good work in the community. A sinner who was granted an indulgence did not have to go through such a penance; an indulgence was an official promise that the Church forgave earthly punishment for sins already committed. The first indulgences were granted to soldiers who had fought in the Crusades, as forgiveness for sins committed in the course of war. Of course, God might still choose to punish sins after death; the Church could only forgive earthly punishment.

The practice of granting indulgences quickly became corrupt. Both the Church and its agents, most notably Johann Tetzel in Germany, grew greedy for money and began offering indulgences in exchange for financial donations. People were assured that if they donated money, their sins would be forgiven, not only on earth but also after death. They were also told that they could purchase heavenly forgiveness for family members who were already dead. The idea that one could buy forgiveness for sins with money, or that the Church could preempt God's power to forgive sin after death, deeply offended many devout Catholics. The most notable of these was Martin Luther.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in the German state of Saxony. He became a theological scholar and a professor of scripture at Wittenberg University. A devout Catholic, Luther was outraged by the notion that salvation could be bought and sold. His Ninety-Five Theses, which appeared in 1517, were propositions for debate that questioned and criticized many aspects of the Catholic Church, including a prominent and harsh reference to the sale of indulgences. The Ninety-Five Theses were printed and widely circulated, and many people were convinced by Luther's arguments. The pope ordered Luther to recant his criticisms of the Church on pain of excommunication; Luther refused.

At this time in history, the German city-states of north-central Europe were bound in a loose alliance known as the Holy Roman Empire. Each state had its

own prince, with one emperor ruling over all. The rulers of the provinces were called electors because the emperor was chosen by election. Over time, the election had become purely ceremonial; since 1440, the title had been passed down in the ruling Hapsburg (spelled “Habsburg” in some sources) family in the same manner as any hereditary monarchy in Europe. In 1519, Charles I of Spain was crowned Holy Roman emperor, succeeding his grandfather Maximilian I. He would rule as Emperor Charles V.

In 1521, Charles called all his princes together for a diet—an official assembly—at the town of Worms. Summoned to appear before the diet, Luther refused to recant his statements. Ordered to leave the empire, he instead accepted an offer of protection from the elector of Saxony. Luther continued to write and publish and, to his own astonishment, soon realized that instead of bringing about reform in the Catholic Church, he had founded a new denomination.

The most important idea behind Lutheranism is the notion that salvation depends on faith. Each believer must read, study, and understand scripture for himself or herself—in effect, each soul would serve as his or her own priest, instead of relying exclusively on an ordained priest to interpret the word of God. Part of what made this possible was, of course, the technology of printing, which before long brought a Bible into every household. Luther’s German translation of the Bible appeared in 1534. For the first time, Germans could read the Bible in their own language rather than having to learn Hebrew, Latin, or Greek.

Luther advocated a simple worship service, arguing that the communion between the individual and God took place in the individual’s heart and mind. The elaborate ceremony of the Catholic mass, to Luther, was merely an outward show that had no spiritual significance. Luther also argued that worship services should be conducted in the language of the people, so that they could understand exactly what was being said and think about it for themselves. These ideas and reforms appealed to thousands of Germans.

Several of the German princes became enthusiastic Lutherans as well. When Lutheranism became the state religion, the Church’s vast wealth and property passed from the pope’s control into the hands of the prince. This was a powerful practical reason for adopting Lutheranism, above and beyond questions of spirituality. However, many princes remained devoutly Catholic.

At first, Charles V tolerated Lutheranism, but as it spread, various groups began using it as a basis for social and political revolt. In 1529, the emperor

decreed a ban on Lutheranism. It was during this period that the term *Protestant* first came into use, describing the Lutheran princes and people who *protested* against the emperor's decree. War eventually broke out between the German states over this issue. In 1555, the Peace of Augsburg settled the matter by declaring that each German prince could determine the religion of his own state.

Lutheranism took firm hold in Germany and also spread north to the Scandinavian countries. Meanwhile, a rather different form of Protestant Christianity developed in Switzerland.

John Calvin

John Calvin was born in France in 1509. He studied philosophy, law, and humanism and learned both Latin and Greek. Like Luther, Calvin came to believe that the Catholic Church needed reform. When he spoke out on this issue, he found himself so unpopular in France that he fled to Switzerland. Here he eventually acquired so much power and influence that many historians describe the city of Geneva as a theocracy—a state ruled by religious laws.

The central idea of Calvinism is predestination—the belief that God predestines everything that will happen on earth. According to this belief, human beings are already marked for salvation or damnation at birth, and no amount of faith or good deeds can earn salvation. Calvin argued that those who were saved would naturally perform good works and lead exemplary lives; therefore, all believers must live this way, because it was one sure sign that they were among the saved. Calvinism strictly regulated every aspect of a person's life: it made church attendance mandatory, encouraged simplicity in dress, and forbade many forms of enjoyment such as dancing, singing, and playing cards.

Despite its harsh rules and its intolerance of other forms of worship, Calvinism gained many converts. Calvin's followers spread his ideas and practices throughout Switzerland, the Netherlands, and France. John Knox transported many of Calvin's ideas home to Scotland, where the religion was called Presbyterianism after the *presbyters*, or elders, who ruled the church. In 1560–1561, Parliament made Presbyterianism the state religion of Scotland.

In France, Calvin's followers were called French Protestants or Huguenots. Despite tens of thousands of individual converts to Protestantism, France as a whole was not sympathetic to the Reformation. The French monarchs sided with the Catholics throughout a series of civil wars fought from 1562 to 1598,

helping to ensure that Protestantism could not establish itself securely. Thousands of Huguenots were massacred, and many more fled France to settle in Holland, Belgium, and England.

The 1580s saw a struggle for the French throne known as the War of the Three Henries. These were King Henry III and two of his kinsmen, Henry of Guise and Henry of Navarre. With the support of Philip II of Spain, Henry of Guise made a bold move to take the throne, but he was taken by surprise by supporters of Henry III and assassinated. When a fanatic assassinated the king the following year, Henry of Navarre inherited the throne. He would rule as King Henry IV of France.

Henry IV was a Calvinist, but his religious convictions were not nearly as strong as his political ambition. His main goal was to strengthen the monarchy, and he believed that siding with the religious majority was a crucial step to achieving security on his throne. Therefore, Henry converted to Catholicism. In 1598, he issued the Edict of Nantes, which established Catholicism as the state religion of France and its territories, but allowed Protestants to worship as they saw fit, without molestation. This ended the French civil wars of religion. Henry was enlightened enough to understand that tolerance in the matter of private worship would lead to domestic accord in the population and would therefore benefit the kingdom.

Henry VIII and the Church of England

The Anglican Church, also called the Church of England, is unique in history for two reasons. First, it was created solely for political reasons, not religious ones. Second, it was the most sweeping assertion of secular authority in the history of Europe.

By the 1520s, King Henry VIII of England and the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon had been married for several years. Although Catherine had given birth to several children, only one, a daughter, had survived past infancy.

Lacking a male heir, Henry dreaded possible rival claims to the throne and a return to the civil wars that had battered England throughout the 1400s. He was also personally tired of Catherine. Therefore, Henry petitioned Pope Clement VII for an annulment of his marriage. The king had fallen in love with lady-in-waiting Anne Boleyn, who was several years younger than Catherine and seemed likely to provide him with healthy children. (Ironically, only one

daughter of their marriage would survive; Henry would have to marry yet again in order to produce a son.)

Henry VIII never tolerated opposition at any time in his life. When the pope refused to grant him his annulment, the king determined to find another way to get what he wanted. In 1533, he named Thomas Cranmer, a loyal official of the court, the new archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Cranmer granted Henry his annulment and then married him to Anne Boleyn. The new pope, Paul III, excommunicated both the king and the archbishop for violating the sacrament of marriage.

In 1534, the British Parliament retaliated against the pope by passing the Act of Supremacy. This act acknowledged the king as the Supreme Head of the Church in England, thus creating a new Christian denomination and eliminating any papal involvement in British affairs. In effect, the British monarch now had the same authority over England that the pope had over the rest of Europe. No secular government had ever asserted such power in a thousand years of Church authority.

It is important to note the role of Parliament in the creation of the Church of England. The king did not create the Anglican Church with a wave of a royal scepter; instead, the duly elected representative government passed the Act of Supremacy according to the laws of the land. Thus, Henry VIII could claim with some reason that the English people and the government fully supported his desire to break away from the Catholic Church.

In a clear sign that Henry's action had been politically and not spiritually motivated, the Anglican Church continued to hear confessions and celebrate mass in just the same manner as the Catholic Church. Under Henry's son and successor, Edward VI, the clergy introduced various reforms, such as permission for priests to marry. In 1549, Archbishop Cranmer published *The Book of Common Prayer*, which contained the prayers and proper forms of all Anglican services—in English, not Latin. During the next century, the status of the Church of England fluctuated according to the personal faith of the monarch. (See Chapter 4.)

The Counter-Reformation

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church was well aware of the need to reform itself from within. However, reform depended largely on the personality of the pope in power at any given time. This made for inconsistency; reform proceeded

slowly, by fits and starts. Some popes felt a genuine need to reform corrupt practices, others hoped to reclaim Protestants who had left the Church, and still others stubbornly refused to support any changes.

Pope Paul III called for a council of high Church officials to meet in the city of Trent to devise a plan for reform. Due to strong opposition from within the Church, the Council of Trent did not meet until 1545 and took more than fifteen years to reach any conclusions. In the end, it supported all doctrines that Protestants had criticized, banned the sale of indulgences, and required the founding of hundreds of new seminaries for the education and training of priests.

Paul III appointed many pro-reform cardinals in the hope that they would continue to elect popes who would fight corruption in the Church and try to restore it to its former glory. This attempt was largely successful; the popes who followed Paul III continued to support reform.

In 1542, Paul III created the Congregation of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Its purpose was to supervise the Roman Inquisition, whose job was to try people accused of heresy. The Roman Inquisition generally assessed penalties such as fines or public whippings. The most serious sentence it could hand down was one of life imprisonment. However, if the Inquisition handed a prisoner over to secular authorities, it almost certainly meant the person would be executed. It began as a sincere attempt on the part of reformers to root out heresy within the Church. Under some of Paul III's successors, it became a byword for torture and terror. Portugal and Spain had their own Inquisitions; these, however, reported directly to the monarchs rather than being supervised by the Church. (See Chapter 4.)

Paul IV, who served as pope from 1555 to 1559, was a particularly strict reformer, focusing his energy on a variety of targets. He came down especially hard on the practice of simony, or the sale of Church offices; although this was a dependable source of income for the Church, it was clearly corrupt. Paul IV also made the Church bureaucracy more efficient by eliminating many unnecessary positions. In 1559, the Church published the *Index of Forbidden Books*; this document listed all books that, according to the Holy Office, contained heretical ideas and thus were off limits to Catholics because of their corrupting influence. Not content with banning the books, the Church also burned thousands of copies. Owning a copy of a forbidden book made the possessor liable to punishment under the Inquisition.

The founding of the Society of Jesus, also known as the order of the Jesuits, was a more positive Catholic reform. Its founder, Ignatius Loyola, was born in the Basque region of Spain in 1491. An active military career led to severe injuries and wounds; while he lay still recovering, Loyola passed the time with books, studying the life and teachings of Jesus. Greatly impressed by Jesus' simplicity and humility, Loyola vowed to emulate him. He took vows of poverty, wore the simplest of clothing, and spent his days serving and helping the poor. He published a work called *Spiritual Exercises*, which advocated a period of intense contemplation and study for any man wanting to devote his life to serving the Church.

In 1540, the pope approved Loyola's petition to found the order of the Jesuits. The society grew quickly as many men joined, attracted by Loyola's high ideals. Like their leader, the Jesuits lived simply and chastely, indifferent to physical comforts or luxuries. Jesuit schools offered the best education then available to children in Europe; pupils from all income levels and all ranks of society were welcomed and treated equally. The Jesuits were characterized by reforming zeal, preferring to persuade non-Catholics to convert, rather than resorting to the bullying techniques of the Inquisition. Their missionary ambitions eventually led them to the most remote areas of the world, far beyond Europe's borders.

The Jesuits were not the only order founded during the Counter-Reformation. The Ursuline order of nuns and the Capucine order of priests, among others, provided both men and women with the opportunity to teach, preach, and serve. Because these orders, like the Jesuits, turned their backs on the pomp, ceremony, and display that Luther and Calvin had found so objectionable, the common people were impressed. Seeing that these Catholic orders practiced the simplicity and purity that they preached, thousands of people were inspired to follow them. The activities of these orders, especially the Jesuits, helped to counteract the effects of the Protestant Reformation and to strengthen and improve the Catholic Church as an institution.

QUIZ

- 1. The Edict of Nantes decreed**
 - A. that Catholics were forbidden from reading anything listed in the *Index of Forbidden Books*.
 - B. that the people of France had the right to worship in the church of their choice.
 - C. that each elector in the Holy Roman Empire could choose the religion for his own electorate.
 - D. that the monarch was the supreme head of the Church of England.
- 2. _____ presided over a virtual theocracy in Geneva during the Reformation.**
 - A. John Calvin
 - B. John Knox
 - C. Henry IV
 - D. Paul III
- 3. The term *Protestant Reformation* refers to**
 - A. the campaign of reform carried out in the Catholic Church in an attempt to recover lost ground.
 - B. the attempt to reform Protestant churches that grew gradually corrupt during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
 - C. the creation of several Christian denominations in a protest against the practices of Catholicism.
 - D. the pilgrimages made by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries to distant lands to win converts.
- 4. What was the most important effect of Henry IV's declaration of religious toleration in France?**
 - A. It ended the religiously based civil wars.
 - B. It earned him the lasting hostility of England and Spain.
 - C. It led directly to the Peace of Augsburg.
 - D. It forced thousands of Huguenots to flee the country.

5. The publication of _____ was the spark that created the Reformation.
- the Edict of Nantes
 - The Book of Common Prayer*
 - the Bible in German
 - the Ninety-Five Theses
6. _____ is an important historical figure because he founded the Society of Jesus in 1540.
- Thomas Cranmer
 - Henry of Guise
 - Ignatius Loyola
 - John Calvin
7. The main purpose of the Council of Trent was
- to establish Church supervision of the Roman Inquisition.
 - to reunite the Catholic and Protestant denominations.
 - to devise a plan for the reformation of the Catholic Church.
 - to persuade Martin Luther to recant the Ninety-Five Theses.
8. Which Protestant denomination preached the doctrine of predestination?
- Anglicanism
 - Calvinism
 - the Church of England
 - Lutheranism
9. The overall main point of the Ninety-Five Theses was that
- believers would win salvation by a combination of faith and good works.
 - God predetermined everything that happened on earth.
 - people should abandon the Catholic Church and found a new denomination.
 - the Catholic Church had become corrupt and needed reform.
10. Anglicanism differed from other Protestant denominations in that
- it was the result of discontent among the people.
 - it was embraced and made official by the head of state.
 - it was founded for political, not spiritual, reasons.
 - it was not a Christian religion.

- 7. What explains Elizabeth I's belief in the importance of her subjects' personal affection?**
- A. The people were more likely to vote for a popular monarch.
 - B. The people were less likely to rise up against a popular monarch.
 - C. The people would not pressure a popular monarch to marry.
 - D. The people would not support the policies of a popular monarch.
- 8. Charles of Ghent ruled over Spain and all the central European Hapsburg lands by right of _____.**
- A. inheritance
 - B. military conquest
 - C. popular election
 - D. royal appointment
- 9. Charles V abdicated as Holy Roman Emperor in the wake of**
- A. the conquest of Granada.
 - B. the Peace of Augsburg.
 - C. the marriage of his son Philip.
 - D. the defeat of the Armada.
- 10. Why did Ferdinand I consider it important to establish a centrally controlled bureaucracy?**
- A. to enable his armies to defeat the Turks
 - B. to run a diverse empire effectively and efficiently
 - C. to maintain the loyalty of the major landowners
 - D. to suppress the practice of Lutheranism