

The Reformation in Europe 1350-1600

THE STORY MATTERS...

The Protestant Reformation is the name given to the religious reform movement that divided western Christianity into Catholic and Protestant groups. Martin Luther's bold attempts to reform the Church led to new forms of Christianity. Although Luther did not see himself as a rebel, the spread of Protestantism ignited decades of bloody religious conflict and ended a thousand years of domination by the Catholic Church.

Lesson 16-1

The Protestant Reformation

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

Fundamental external valid

Content Vocabulary

Christian humanism salvation
indulgence Lutheranism

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

• What conditions can encourage the desire for reform?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The humanist ideas of the Renaissance, in addition to perceived worldly and corrupt practices in the Catholic Church, gave rise to a widespread call for Church reform. The Protestant faith that resulted gave new directions to European history and culture by fragmenting western Christianity and reshaping political power.

Prelude to Reformation

GUIDING QUESTION *How did Christian humanism and Desiderius Erasmus pave the way for the Protestant Reformation in Europe?*

A German priest and professor named Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500s. Prior developments, such as widespread intellectual changes during the preceding century, had already set the stage for religious change.

Christian Humanism

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the new classical learning that was part of Italian Renaissance humanism spread to northern Europe. From that came a movement called **Christian humanism**, or Northern Renaissance humanism. The major goal of this movement was the reform of the Catholic Church. The Christian humanists believed in the ability of human beings to reason and improve themselves. They thought that if people read the classics, and especially the fundamental teachings of Christianity in the Bible, they would become more sincerely religious. This religious feeling would bring about a reform of the Church and society.

The best-known Christian humanist was Desiderius Erasmus (ih • RAZ • muhs). Erasmus believed that Christianity should show people how to live good lives on a

daily basis, not just provide beliefs that might help them be saved. He also thought that the Catholic Church needed to return to the simpler days of early Christianity. Stressing the inwardness of religious feeling, Erasmus thought the **external** forms of medieval religion, such as pilgrimages, fasts, and relics, were not all that important.

Erasmus wanted to educate people in the works of Christianity and worked to criticize the abuses in the Church. In his satire *The Praise of Folly*, written in 1509, Erasmus humorously criticized society's moral and religious state and called for a simpler, purer faith. In this passage, he satirizes what he views as the folly of clergy who encourage the practice of visiting the shrines of saints:

PRIMARY SOURCE

"[They] attribute strange virtues to the shrines and images of saints and martyrs, and so would make their credulous proselytes believe, that if they pay their devotion to St. Christopher in the morning, they shall be guarded and secured the day following from all dangers and misfortunes: if soldiers, when they first take arms, shall come and mumble over such a set prayer before the picture of St. Barbara, they shall return safe from all engagements."

-from *The Praise of Folly*

Erasmus sought reform within the Catholic Church. His intention was not to have people break away from it. His ideas, however, prepared the way for the Reformation. As people of his day said, "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

Need for Reform

Erasmus and the Christian humanists were not the only ones calling for reform. Popular songs and printed images from the era, as well as court records, show that ordinary people, humanists, and some Church leaders were critical of the Church. For example, from 1450 to 1520 a series of Renaissance popes were viewed as more concerned with Italian politics and worldly interests than with the spiritual needs of their people. Church officials were viewed as using their Church offices to advance their careers and their wealth. At the same time, many ordinary parish priests appeared to their parishioners as ignorant of their spiritual duties. People

wanted to know how to save their souls, but many parish priests appeared unwilling or unable to offer them advice or instruction.

While the leaders of the Church were failing to meet their responsibilities, ordinary people desired meaningful religious expression and assurance of their **salvation**, or acceptance into Heaven. As a result, for some, the process of obtaining salvation became almost mechanical.

According to Church practice at that time, venerating a relic, such as a scrap of a saint's clothing, could gain someone an **indulgence**. An indulgence was a document sold by the Church and signed by the pope or another church official that released the bearer from all or part of the punishment for sin. Making pilgrimages to view relics grew popular as a way to acquire indulgences and, therefore, salvation.

As more people sought certainty of salvation through veneration of relics, collections of such objects grew. Frederick III, also known as Frederick the Wise, Luther's prince, had amassed more than 5,000 relics. Some people believed the indulgences attached to them could reduce time spent in purgatory by 1,443 years. The Church also sold indulgences.

Other people sought certainty of salvation in the popular mystical movement known as the Modern Devotion. The Modern Devotion downplayed Church practices and stressed the need to follow the teachings of Jesus. This deepening of religious life was done within the Catholic Church. It also helps explain the tremendous impact of Luther's ideas.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Central Issues Why, according to Erasmus, other Christian humanists, and other critics, did the Church need reform?

Martin Luther

GUIDING QUESTION *What role did Martin Luther and his ideas play in the Reformation?*

Martin Luther was a monk in the Catholic Church and a professor at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany, where he lectured on the Bible. Through his study of the Bible, Luther arrived at an answer to a problem that had bothered him since he had become a monk. He wanted to know about the certainty of salvation.

Catholic teaching had stressed that faith and good works were needed to gain personal salvation. In Luther's opinion, human beings were powerless in the sight of an almighty God and could never do enough good works to earn salvation. Through his study of the Bible, Luther came to believe that humans are not saved through their good works but through their faith in God. This idea, called justification by faith alone, became the chief teaching of the Protestant Reformation. Because Luther had arrived at his understanding of salvation by studying the Bible, the Bible became for Luther, as for all later Protestants, the only valid source of religious truth.

The Ninety-five Theses

Luther did not see himself as a rebel, but he was greatly upset by the widespread selling of indulgences. Especially offensive in his eyes was the monk Johann Tetzel. The Catholic Church had authorized Tetzel to sell indulgences to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Tetzel told the faithful that their purchases would free the souls of their loved ones from purgatory. His slogan was: "As soon as coin in the coffer [money box] rings, the soul from purgatory springs." This enraged Luther, who believed that indulgences only soothed the conscience. They did not forgive sins.

On October 31, 1517, Luther, angered by the Church's practices, made his Ninety-five Theses public, perhaps by posting them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The act of posting may be a legend, but posting topics to discuss was a common practice of the time. In any case, his theses were a stunning attack on abuses in the sale of indulgences. Thousands of copies of the Ninety-five Theses were printed and spread to all parts of Germany.

A Break with the Church

By 1520, Luther began to move toward a more definite break with the Catholic Church. He called on the German princes to overthrow the papacy in Germany and establish a reformed German church.

Luther also attacked the Church's system of sacraments. In his view, they were the means by which the pope and the Catholic Church had destroyed the real meaning of the Gospel for a thousand years. He kept only two sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist, which is also known as Communion. Luther also called for the clergy to marry. This went against the long-standing requirement of the Catholic Church that its clergy remain celibate, or unmarried.

Through all these calls for change, Luther continued to emphasize his new doctrine of salvation. It is faith alone, he said, and not good works, that justifies and brings salvation through Jesus.

Unable to accept Luther's ideas, the pope excommunicated him in January 1521, excluding him from Church membership. He was also summoned to appear before the imperial diet—or legislative assembly—of the Holy Roman Empire, which was called into session in the city of Worms by the newly elected emperor Charles V. The emperor believed he could convince Luther to change his ideas. However, Luther refused.

The young emperor was outraged. "A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for a thousand years," he declared, "must be wrong." By the Edict of Worms, Martin Luther was made an outlaw within the empire. His works were to be burned, and Luther was to be captured and delivered to the emperor. However, Frederick III, the elector (or prince) of Saxony, was unwilling to see his subject killed. He sent Luther into hiding and then protected him when Luther returned to Wittenberg at the beginning of 1522.

The Rise of Lutheranism

During the next few years, Luther's religious movement became a revolution. Luther was able to gain the support of many of the German rulers among the approximately three

hundred states that made up the Holy Roman Empire. These German rulers, motivated as much by politics and economics as by any religious feeling, quickly took control of the Catholic churches in their territories, forming state churches supervised by the government. The political leaders, not the Roman pope, held the last word. As part of the development of these state-dominated churches, Luther also set up new religious services to replace the Catholic mass. These services consisted of Christian Bible readings, preaching the word of God, and song. Luther also married a former nun, Katharina von Boren, providing a model of married and family life for the new Protestant ministers. Luther's doctrine soon became known as **Lutheranism** and the churches as Lutheran churches. Lutheranism was the first Protestant faith.

A series of crises soon made it apparent, however, that spreading the word of God was not an easy task for Luther. The Peasants' War was Luther's greatest challenge. In June 1524, German peasants revolted against their lords and looked to Luther to support their cause. Instead, Luther supported the lords. To him, the state and its rulers were called by God to maintain the peace necessary to spread the Gospel, the first four books of the New Testament in the Christian Bible. It was the duty of princes to stop all revolts. By the following spring, the German princes had crushed the peasant revolts. Luther found himself even more dependent on state authorities for the growth of his reformed church.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Interpreting How did Luther's ideas lead to a break with the Church and to a new faith?

Politics in the German Reformation

GUIDING QUESTION *Why was the Holy Roman Empire forced to seek peace with the Lutheran princes?*

From its beginning, the fate of Luther's movement was tied closely to political affairs. Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor, ruled an immense empire consisting of Spain and its colonies, the Austrian lands, Bohemia, Hungary, the Low

Countries, the duchy of Milan in northern Italy, and the kingdom of Naples in southern Italy.

Religious authorities primarily saw the Reformation as a challenge to Church power. Rulers such as Charles also saw the Reformation as a force that disrupted the political and social order. Charles hoped to preserve his empire's unity by keeping it Catholic and under the control of his dynasty, the Hapsburgs. However, a number of problems cost him his dream and his health. These same problems helped Lutheranism survive by giving Lutherans time to organize before facing Catholic forces.

The chief political concern of Charles V was his rivalry with the king of France, Francis I. Their conflict over a number of disputed territories led to a series of wars that lasted more than 20 years. Invasions by Ottoman Turks forced Charles to send forces into the eastern part of his empire as well.

Finally, the internal political situation in the Holy Roman Empire was not in Charles's favor. Germany was a land of several hundred territorial states. Although all owed loyalty to the emperor, many rulers of the German states supported Luther as a way to assert their authority and dislike of papal control. By the time Charles V brought military forces to Germany, the Lutheran princes were well organized. Unable to defeat them, Charles was forced to seek peace.

An end to religious warfare in Germany came in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg. This agreement formally accepted the division of Christianity in Germany. The German states were now free to choose between Catholicism and Lutheranism. Lutheran states would have the same legal rights as Catholic states. Subjects did not choose their religion. German rulers determined that for them.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Evaluating How were the goals of Charles and the Holy Roman Empire at odds with the desires of Lutheran princes?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

- Christian humanism** a movement that developed in northern Europe during the Renaissance, combining classical learning and individualism with the goal of reforming the Catholic Church
- salvation** the state of being saved (that is, going to heaven) through faith alone or through faith and good works
- indulgence** a release from all or part of punishment for sin by the Catholic Church, reducing time in purgatory after death
- Lutheranism** the religious doctrine that Martin Luther developed; it differed from Catholicism in the doctrine of salvation, which Luther believed could be achieved by faith alone, not by good works; Lutheranism was the first Protestant faith