

## *Introduction to the Reformation*

The two centuries before the Reformation saw the Roman Catholic Church increasing in prestige. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the last pagan state in Europe, embraced Catholicism (1386) and the reconquest of Iberia from the Moors finished with the triumphant conquest of Granada (1492). The difficulties of the Avignon papacy (1309–1377) and the bitter period of two, and sometimes three, contending popes (1378–1417) were resolved. The Ecumenical Councils of Constance (1414–1418), Florence (1431–1445), and Lateran V (1512–1514) defined papal authority and brought (temporary) reconciliation between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Churches.

At the same time as the Church's institutional triumphs, common men and women across Europe became increasingly active in their religious devotion. The widespread use of the rosary, the explanation of the Beatific Vision, the formal proclamation of the doctrine of indulgence (1350), and the translation of the Bible into vernaculars all expressed the common man's concern with his salvation. Moreover, mysticism, actively seeking union with God in this life, marked these two centuries. Individuals, such as Catherine of Sienna (1347–1380) and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), as well as organizations of like-minded men, including the Brethren of the Common Life and the Friends of God, modeled and encouraged mystical union with God.

The emphasis on popular religious experience could, and did, lead to significant misunderstandings by the laity, sometimes culminating in heresy. The Fraticelli and the Michaelites, for example, declared wealthy clerics disqualified as clergy. The Waldensians, the Cathars, the Free Spirits, the Bogomils, the Lollard followers of John Wycliffe (1320–1384), and those who accepted the teachings of Jan Hus (1369–1415) all embraced some deviation from orthodox Catholic teaching, and suggested that authority to interpret Scripture and doctrine must rest with the Catholic Church itself.

The emphasis on personal piety did not usually lead to heresy; most Christians could pursue personal devotion and remain faithful sons of the Church. A striking contrast, however, appeared between those passionately seeking God and the lifestyle of many clergy. The moral lapses of the clergy were, by far, the most common theme both of Renaissance vernacular literature and of the Church's edicts. Writers as geographically and chronologically diverse as Dante (1265–1321), Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), Erasmus (1466–1536), and Thomas More

(1478–1535) criticized the failings of the clergy. The Church, though clearly and thoroughly condemning the shortcomings of its priests, was unable wholly to eradicate those failings. Some bishops and abbots obtained their positions through purchase, rather than by merit and sincerity. Other clerics passed years without visiting their parishes or fulfilling their spiritual obligations. Some priests might possess multiple Church appointments simultaneously, unable adequately to perform their functions, even if they were so inclined. Other forms of moral laxity were often lampooned—priests with concubines, bishops extorting money, clerics playing cards or dice during the Mass.

Despite its shortcomings, it should be remembered that the Church was, though not perfect, strong and vibrant as the sixteenth century opened.

Martin Luther (1483–1546), son of a Saxon mine owner, reluctantly followed his father's wishes and prepared for a career in law. In 1505, after nearly being struck by lightning during a thunderstorm, Luther decided to follow his own calling. He withdrew from law school and became an Augustinian monk in Erfurt. Deeply troubled by a consciousness of his own sins, he frequently fasted, often prayed straight through the night, and even flagellated himself. At the same time, Luther demonstrated remarkable academic talents, and thus in 1508 received an assignment to the faculty at the recently established University of Wittenberg.

While teaching his courses on the Psalms, Hebrews, Romans, and Galatians, Luther concluded that the Catholic Church had lost sight of the biblical understanding of justification and righteousness. No works of penance, regardless of their number, could achieve righteousness, and justification was obtainable through faith alone (*sola fide*).

As Luther began teaching and preaching his beliefs, local events drew him into conflict with Church authorities. Johann Tetzel (1465–1519), a Dominican monk, was selling papal indulgences near Wittenberg. Tetzel offered complete remission of all punishment for sins, even those not yet committed or those of the dead, to anyone who “donated” to the construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. According to Catholic doctrine, an indulgence offers remission only to those purchasers who fully and sincerely repent of their sins, not to those who pay for the privilege. Tetzel, however, demanded no evidence of contrition or repentance; he seemed simply to sell forgiveness to anyone with ready cash.

Luther, disgusted with Tetzel’s abuse of indulgences, wrote a list of ninety-five theses challenging the sale of indulgences, both in theory and in practice. Among other criticisms, Luther rejected the right of the pope to authorize indulgences, whether sold or freely dispensed. This rejection, in turn, rested on a denial of all papal authority to forgive sins and of the power of any penance in achieving righteousness. On 31 October 1517, Luther nailed his theses, written in Latin,

to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, offering to debate these propositions with any interested academic. Luther’s theses were rapidly translated into German and, thanks to the new printing press, quickly distributed across Germany.

The Archbishop of Mainz forwarded the theses to Rome rather than address Luther himself. While the Church discussed his propositions, Luther further developed his theology. He rejected the apostolic succession, endorsed councils as the ultimate arbiter in matters of faith and doctrine, and asserted that nobles were as much church leaders as the ordained clergy. Finally, a year-and-a-half later, Pope Leo X (r. 1513–1521) responded with sharp criticism of Luther and summoned the wayward monk to Rome. Frederick III (r. 1486–1525), ruler of Saxony, intervened and arranged for Luther instead to meet the pope’s representative at Augsburg.

After an inconclusive meeting, and Luther’s refusal to cease preaching, Leo X formally excommunicated Luther in 1520 and appealed to Charles V (r. 1519–1556), the young Holy Roman Emperor, to enforce the edict. The Emperor, a devout Catholic, desired to obey the Church; at the same time, he did not want the pope to dictate his imperial policy. Charles therefore summoned Luther before the Imperial Diet (a type of parliament) at the city of Worms to defend himself. After three days of discussion, the Diet condemned Luther’s writings and ordered him to renounce his beliefs. Luther refused, asserting that he must follow his conscience, and the Emperor in turn declared Luther an outlaw.

Frederick of Saxony (who never embraced Luther’s ideas) quickly swept Luther into one of his castles, hiding the reformer from the Emperor’s agents. During his year-long exile, Luther wrote and studied diligently. In early 1522, Luther emerged from hiding, returning to Wittenberg to reform church practices and moderate some of his more radical followers. As Luther’s ideas spread across Germany, they were sometimes misunderstood and radicalized. The bloody Peasants’ War (1524–1525), sparked by the radical Zwickau Prophets, sought to create an egalitarian society holding all property in common and abolishing all social distinctions.

Luther, for his part, continued as the guiding light of the German Reformation until his death. He wrote extensively, addressing a wide variety of theological concerns, many issues of church governance, and significant problems of the Christian life. He participated, for example, in the Marburg Colloquy (1529), a conference to find unity among divergent Protestant groups, and the following year collaborated with Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) in writing the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran statement of faith. By the time of his death, Luther left a widespread and well-established church.

Throughout his life, Luther emphasized respect for and obedience to the state. He did not claim individual Christians should make personal decisions about religious doctrine, but rather they ought to submit to the authorities established

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by God. His own ruler, the Elector of Saxony, endorsed and adopted his reforms; Luther did not attempt to impose them nor to subvert the authority of the prince. Lutheranism, then, spread across Germany and Scandinavia as it was adopted by rulers and princes, not as a movement of missionaries appealing to individual consciences. Some of those rulers were prompted by secular concerns—economic benefit from seizing Church lands, enhanced political power by excluding the authority of Rome, or increased prestige due the head of a Church. This should not obscure the fact, however, that other rulers acted from conviction—wrestling with the issues Luther raised and sincerely concluding he was right.

Luther sparked the Protestant movement in central Europe; the teachings of John Calvin (1509–1564) dominated Protestant thought and practice west of the Rhine. Son of a notary, Calvin studied Latin at the University of Paris and earned an M.A. in Theology; he earned his degree in law from the University of Orléans. In 1532, after his return to Paris to practice law, Calvin experienced a spiritual conversion. He became an active preacher, publically questioning Catholic doctrine until royal pressure forced him to flee.

His flight carried him to Basle, Switzerland, where he published his first great work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which became the definitive statement of Calvinist thought. After some wandering, he wound up in Geneva (1536), where the city fathers undertook a “new reformation of the faith.” Within a few months, Calvin’s learning and skill became apparent, and he was appointed pastor of a local church. The more conservative reformers eventually managed to force Calvin and his friends from the city, and they fled to Strasbourg, where Calvin served as a pastor for several years.

In 1541, Geneva’s city council invited Calvin to return, and offered him authority to restructure political authority and power in the city along Protestant principles. While in Geneva, Calvin completed his final revision of *The Institutes*, the definitive statement of Reformed Protestant doctrine. Among Calvin’s most significant institutional creations was the creation of a school for preachers, which drew students from across Europe. More significantly, it sent those same students back across Europe, fostering and nurturing Reformed Protestant movements in England, the Netherlands, Scotland, and France. In contrast to Luther, Calvin encouraged literate individuals to evaluate his theological claims for themselves, even if their rulers objected. In a world predicated on an organic conception of society, appeals to individual conscience seemed to reject social order and were, therefore, politically seditious. For this reason, Calvinism was always viewed as far more politically subversive than Lutheranism.

In England, the major reforming impulses of European Christianity met with explosive results. Christian Humanists demanded wayward clergy be brought into obedience with accepted practice, but explicitly affirmed Catholic doctrine. Adherents of Luther desired theological reforms in England along the lines that

German theologians followed. Followers of Calvin, on the other hand, sought a Protestantism emanating from Geneva. To complicate the situation further, members from many minor Protestant sects had fled to England, making theological discussions still more complex.

Henry VIII (? 1509–1547) found himself in the midst of this complicated matrix. Well-educated and literate, he actively followed theological discussions on the continent, even winning the title “Defender of the Faith” from Pope Leo X for his condemnation of Luther. In addition to his genuine interest in theology, Henry was concerned with his political future. His father had seized the throne, terminating thirty years of intermittent civil war. As a consequence, Henry was not secure on the throne, and sought to consolidate his position in the person of his heir.

Henry’s first wife, Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), produced no sons that lived more than a few weeks. Henry sought an annulment of the marriage so that he might marry a more fertile wife, and began inquiries with the papacy. Catherine’s nephew, Charles V, was the most powerful man in Christendom and would not permit the indignity of annulment for his aunt. Perceiving the pope would never grant his petition, Henry at last declared the English Church independent of Rome (1534).

A significant problem now confronted the English Church—following the break with Rome, which reformer’s theology, if any, should the Church now follow? Over the next hundred years, the Anglican Church wrestled with this question, at times variously embracing Calvin’s Reformed theology, Luther’s beliefs, and Roman Catholic doctrine. Henry himself was generally unwilling to vary from Catholic doctrine, other than rejecting the primacy of Rome. The reign of his successor, Edward VI (? 1547–1553), marked at first a clear Lutheran ascendancy, then increasing Calvinist preeminence. Edward’s short reign was followed by his sister, Mary I (? 1553–1558), who actively encouraged a return to Catholicism. In her turn, Mary was succeeded by her sister, Queen Elizabeth I (? 1558–1603), who emphasized a moderate Protestantism, allowing much room for personal understanding of the vaguely worded doctrinal statements, so long as no one disturbed the peace of the kingdom. The English Reformation witnessed the deaths of many martyrs, both Catholic and Protestant. Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536), Hugh Latimer (c. 1485–1555), Nicholas Ridley (d. 1555), Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), and the Earl of Northumberland (1528–1572) number among the many who suffered martyrdom for their faith.

The Catholic response to laxity and disorder within the Church began before the Protestant Reformation, but was clearly quickened by the reformers and their complaints. Christian humanists had long agitated for changes to improve clerical discipline and education. In Castile, for example, the preeminent example of pre-Reformation Catholic reform was guided by Jiménez de Cisne-

ros (1436–1517). As Archbishop of Toledo and confessor to Queen Isabel I (? 1451–1504), Cisneros established seminaries for the nation's priests, demanded regular visits by bishops to their subordinate clergy, printed manuals of instruction and catechism, drove corrupt monks into conformity or exile, and produced the first multi-lingual Bible. His activities in reforming the clergy were models to Catholic states across Europe, and are typically cited to explain Protestantism's utter failure to penetrate Spain.

Most other European states, however, did not receive the farsighted and systematic Catholic reform Cisneros provided. As a result, in much of Europe, the Catholic Church was faced with responding to the emerging Protestant challenges. The Church's institutional response, the Council of Trent (1545–1563), admitted, apologized for, and addressed many of the institutional abuses pointed out by Renaissance humanists and Protestant reformers. At the same time, the Council of Trent rejected Protestant theological claims and explicitly defined and explained Catholic dogma.

Believing many Protestants had embraced heresy through an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of Catholic doctrine, several new monastic orders were created specifically as educational orders. Some, like the Barnabites and Capuchins, focused on educating Catholics to prevent the spread of heresy. Others, like the Theatines, emphasized a role among Protestants, to win them back to the Church. The most famous of the new foundations, the Jesuits, gladly embraced both roles. Prominent individuals likewise labored to convert Protestants and educate Catholics. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), for example, wrote *Concerning the Controversies of the Christian Faith Against the Heretics*, a persuasive defense of Catholic doctrine, and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) wrote *The Defense of the Catholic Faith Against Anglican Errors* specifically to refute Protestant claims made by the James I (? 1603–1625), King of England.

Despite the profound, and sometimes violent, disagreements among Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, they all agreed in their condemnation of one group—Anabaptists, the most radical elements of the Protestant movement. Never a single group, Anabaptists did share certain beliefs in common. Central among these beliefs, and the source of their name, Anabaptists believed in the necessity of adult baptism. Many of their other tenets marked them as socially marginal at best, revolutionary at worst. Their refusal to take oaths precluded them from most public service. Their emphatic pacifism further distanced them from the communities in which they resided. Their egalitarianism suggested a rejection of the very ideas of property and social order. Extremists, such as the murderous Zwickau Prophets, simply confirmed the fears of their detractors. To all other Christians, then, the Anabaptists were an example of reform run wild—an excess of zeal uncoupled from traditional authority and educated leaders—and were the most consistently persecuted group in every part of Europe.

## ADDRESS TO THE CHRISTIAN NOBILITY MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, most Christians generally agreed that the Church was in serious need of reform, as it had been from time to time in the past. The financial expedients to which the Avignon popes (1309–1377) had resorted to replace the traditional revenues they could not collect, together with the general perception that they were puppets of the kings of France, had undermined confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the papal office. The unseemly scramble for support during and after the Great Schism (1378–1415), as well as the tendency of more recent popes to focus on the Papal States, had further eroded the papacy's credibility.

In some areas, pluralism (the holding of more than one Church office, especially more than one that involved pastoral duties) and worldly lifestyles among the clergy had led to a significant loss of respect among the ordinary faithful, for many of whom religious practice had become largely a matter of external observance. It was clearly time for some soul-searching, and thoughtful men of the day such as Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466–1536), Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), and others brought the techniques of the new humanist scholarship to bear on the problems of the contemporary Church.

For a variety of reasons, the situation in the early sixteenth century differed from other periods that preceded major reform movements within the Church. Though still cherished by many, the ideal of a single Christian commonwealth had been declining for quite some time in the face of increasing loyalty to secular kingdoms. The growing diversity of lay religious experience meant the institutional Church no longer offered the only channel of access to God. The advent of paper in the fourteenth century and printing with movable type in the fifteenth made it possible for new ideas to circulate faster and more widely than ever before. But above all else, for the first time prominent reformers took issue with Church teaching more than with the conduct of the clergy. In a lecture on Galatians in 1535, Martin Luther wrote:

*First Principles of the Reformation*, ed. Harry Wace and C. A. Buchheim (London: John Murray, 1883), 617–26.