

The Protestant Reformation

Problems in the Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church was an extremely powerful institution in Europe during the Middle Ages. Many European emperors and princes gained an increase in power if the church blessed their reign. As a consequence of this the pope had considerable political power. The Church was the one institution that the people of Western Europe had in common. It was a unifying force, an institution believed to be sanctioned by God. The Church held itself out as the undisputed authority on all things worldly and otherworldly. The pope was seen as the connection between man and God. The only way to get to heaven was to go the way of the Catholic Church.

The Church understood the amount of power that it had. When the Church needed to finance building projects or pay Renaissance artists, the Church began to sell **indulgences**. An indulgence was a certificate that the faithful could purchase to reduce time in purgatory so they could enter heaven. Selling indulgences increased income and was also a way to keep the faithful under Church control.

Other problems with the Catholic Church also began to appear. Many church leaders lived more like kings, than priests, and became increasingly involved in political matters. To raise money for these activities, the Church raised fees for services such as, marriage and baptism. This caused both anger and resentment across Europe, and many called for reforms to take place.

During this time, land-owning nobles grew increasingly resentful of the Church, which had amassed an enormous amount of power and wealth and exploited a huge number of resources at the expense of the nobles. The resentment and mistrust fueled anti-Church sentiments. The selling of indulgences propelled the frustration into the ranks of the peasant class and helped set the stage for confrontation.

1. How did the Church raise money? For what purpose?
2. Why did land-owning nobles become upset with the Church?

Indulgences

According to Catholic theology, individuals who sin alienate themselves from God and his love. In order to be reconciled with God, the sinner must confess their sins to a priest and do the penance. The doctrine of **indulgences** had a few principles. One is that, Christ and his saints established a “treasury of merits” on which the Church can draw. The Church has the authority to grant sinners the spiritual benefits of those merits. This is how indulgences were justified.

Beginning in the 12th century, the papacy and the bishops had given crusaders such indulgences. By the later Middle Ages people widely believed that an indulgence secured total remission of penalties for sin on earth or in purgatory and ensured swift entry into heaven. An archbishop hired a friar named **John Tetzel** to sell indulgences. Tetzel mounted an advertising blitz. One of his slogans was “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” This brought phenomenal success. Men and women bought indulgences not only for themselves, but also for deceased parents, relatives and friends.

Martin Luther, a German monk and priest was severely troubled that people believed that no further need for repentance was necessary once they purchased an indulgence. Thus, according to historical tradition, on the Eve of All Saints’ Day, October 31, 1517, Luther attached to the door of the Wittenberg Church a list of 95 propositions on indulgences. He called them the 95 Theses. By this act Luther was trying to draw out a confrontation and debate the sale of indulgences with the Church.

1. What are indulgences?
2. Why did Luther write the 95 theses?

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Martin Luther

In 1517, a German monk named **Martin Luther** nailed a list of **95 theses** on the Wittenberg Church door. This list was quickly distributed and widely read with the aid of the newly invented printing press. His list outlined his frustrations with current Church practices, including the church's practice of selling indulgences, which he said amounted to selling salvation for a profit. Luther's frustration had begun when he traveled to Rome, and was unnerved by what he saw.

Among Luther's many complaints was his insistence that the church services should be conducted in the local languages of the people, not in Latin. To help his effort, he translated the Bible into German so that it could be read and interpreted by everyone. He did this because he did not want the people to be solely dependant on the Church for biblical understanding. Luther's most significant claim was that salvation was given directly by God through grace, not through indulgences, and not through the authorization of the Church. Luther proposed that the Bible would teach people to appeal directly to God for salvation and forgiveness of sins. This would reduce the role of the church as the middleman between the people and God.

Pope Leo X was outraged, and ordered Luther to recant. Meanwhile, Luther's ideas were spreading through much of Northern Europe. When Luther refused to recant, he was excommunicated. He was soon allowed to address church leaders and princes at an assembly at Worms. At this assembly he still refused to recant his statements. The pope called for his arrest but a nobleman protected Luther and he continued to spread his ideas and his writings.

1. Who was Martin Luther? What was the 95 theses?
2. According to Luther how can a person reach salvation?

Christianity Splits Again

Luther's followers began to refer to themselves as Lutherans, or Protestants and began to separate themselves from the Catholic Church. Luther's ideas opened up an entirely new way of looking at religion and other men followed in his footsteps.

John Calvin from France led a powerful Protestant group by preaching an ideology of Predestination. Calvinist doctrine stated that God had predetermined an ultimate destiny for all people, most of whom God had already damned. Only a few, he preached, would be saved, and those people were known as the Elect. In the 1530's the city of Geneva in Switzerland invited Calvin to construct a Protestant theocracy in their city. Calvinist teachings spread from there and were very important for the spread of the Protestant Reformation. His writings influenced John Knox of Scotland and in France with the growth of the Huguenots.

In time the Reformation spread to England where **King Henry VIII** did not have a son as heir to the throne. He sought to abandon his wife, Catherine of Aragon because of it. When the pope denied the annulment of the marriage, Henry VIII denounced Rome and declared himself head of religious affairs in England. He called this the Church of England also known as the Anglican Church. Henry VIII went on to marry five more wives and finally had a son but it was his daughter Elizabeth that took the throne.

1. Who was John Calvin? What is predestination?
2. Why did King Henry VIII create his own church?

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Martin Luther's 95 Theses

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us may do so by letter.

In the Name our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by assenting to God's remission; If his right to grant remission in such cases were despised, the guilt would remain entirely unforgiven.
21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved;
27. They preach man who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out [of purgatory].
28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the Church is in the power of God alone.
36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.
43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;
52. The assurance of salvation by letters of pardon is vain, even though the commissary, nay, even though the pope himself, were to stake his soul upon it.
82. To wit: -- "Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial."
86. Again: -- "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is to-day greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"
88. Again: -- "What greater blessing could come to the Church than if the pope were to do a hundred times a day what he now does once, and bestow on every believer these remissions and participations?"

1. According to Luther, who is the only one who can grant forgiveness?
2. According to Luther, how does one help gain favor with God?
3. What are some of his problems with the Church and the pope?