

Chapter 7: The Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was the permanent split within the Catholic church that resulted in multiple competing denominations (versions, essentially) of Christian practice and belief. From the perspective of the Catholic hierarchy, these new denominations - lumped together under the category of "Protestant" - were nothing more or less than new heresies, sinful breaks with the correct, orthodox beliefs and practices of the Church. The difference between Protestant churches and earlier heretical movements was that the Church proved unable to stamp them out or re-assimilate them into mainstream Catholic practice. Thus, what began as a protest movement against corruption within the Church very quickly evolved into a number of widespread and increasingly militant branches of Christianity itself.

The Context of the Reformation

The context of the Reformation was the strange state of the Catholic Church as of the late fifteenth century. The Church was omnipresent in early-modern European society. About one person in seventy-five was part of the Church, as priests, monks, nuns, or members of lay orders. Practically every work of art depicted Biblical themes. The Church oversaw births, marriages, contracts, wills, and deaths - all law was, by implication, the law of God Himself. Furthermore, in Catholic doctrine, spiritual salvation was only accessible through the intervention of the Church; without the rituals (sacraments) performed by priests, the soul was doomed to go to hell. Finally, popes fought to claim the right to intervene in secular affairs as they saw fit, although this was a fight they had never had much luck with, losing even more ground as the new, more powerful and centralized, monarchies rose to power in the fifteenth century.

Simply put, as of the Renaissance era, all was not well with the Church. The Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism both undermined the Church's authority. The stronger states of the period claimed the right to appoint bishops and priests within their kingdoms, something that the monarchs of England and France were very successful in doing. This led both laypeople and some priests themselves to look to monarchs, rather than the pope, for patronage and authority.

At the same time, elite churchmen (including the popes themselves) continued to live like princes. The papacy not only set a bad example, but attempts to reform the lifestyles and relative piety of priests generally failed; the papacy was simply too remote from the everyday life of the priesthood across Europe, and since elite churchmen were all nobles, they usually continued to live like nobles. In many cases, they openly lived with concubines, had children, and worked to ensure that their children receive lucrative positions in the Church. Laypeople were well aware of the slack morality that pervaded the Church. Medieval and early-modern literature is absolutely shot through with satirical tracts mocking immoral priests, and depictions of hell almost always featured priests, monks, and nuns burning alongside nobles and merchants.

These patterns affected monasticism as well. The idea behind monastic orders had been imitating the life of Christ, yet by the early modern period, many monasteries (especially urban ones) ran successful industries, and monks often lived in relative luxury compared to townspeople. Furthermore, the monasteries had been very successful in buying up or receiving land as gifts; by the late fifteenth century a full 20% of the land of the western kingdoms was owned by monasteries. The contrast between the required vow of poverty taken by monks and nuns and the wealth and luxury many monks and nuns enjoyed was obvious to laypeople.

The result of this widespread concern with corruption was a new focus on the inner spiritual life of the individual, not the focus on and respect for the priest, monk, or nun. New movements sprung up around Europe, including one called Modern Devotion in the Netherlands, that focused on moral and spiritual life of laypeople outside of the auspices of the Church. The handbook of the Modern Devotion was called *The Imitation of Christ*, written in the mid-fifteenth century and published in various editions after that, which was so popular that its sales matched those of the Bible at the time. It promoted the idea of salvation without needing the Church as an intermediary at all.

Within the Church, there were widespread and persistent calls for reform to better address the needs of the laity and to better live up to the Church's own moral standards. Numerous devout priests, monks, and nuns abhorred the corruption of their peers and superiors in the Church and called for change - the Spanish branch of the Church enjoyed a strong period of reform during the fifteenth century, for example. Despite this reforming zeal within the Church and the growing popularity of lay movements outside of it, however, almost no one anticipated a permanent break from the Church's hierarchy itself.

Indulgences

The specific phenomenon that brought about the Protestant Reformation was the selling of indulgences by the Church. An indulgence was a certificate offered by the Church that offered the same spiritual power as the sacrament of confession and penance: to have one's sins absolved. Each indulgence promised a certain amount of time that the individual would not have to spend in purgatory after death. Catholic doctrine held that even the souls of those who avoided hell did not go straight to heaven on death. Instead, they would spend years (centuries, usually) in a spiritual plane between earth and heaven called purgatory - there, their sins would be purged (note the overlap between the words "purge" and "purgatory") through fire until they were purified. Only then could they ascend to heaven. Naturally, most people would much rather proceed directly to heaven if possible, and so the Church found that the sale of indulgences to avoid time in purgatory was enormously popular.

At first, indulgences were granted by the pope for good acts that were supported by the Church; they were heavily associated with the crusades, both in terms of mitigating the normal spiritual consequences of the atrocities committed by the crusaders and in rewarding the crusaders for trying to recapture the Holy Land for the Church. Later, popes came to succumb to the temptation to sell them in order to raise revenue, especially as the Renaissance-era popes built up both their own secular power and patronized the art and architecture associated with the Vatican. By the early sixteenth century the practice was completely out of control. Roaming salesmen, contracted by the Church, sold indulgences without the slightest concern for the moral or spiritual status of the buyer, and even invented little jingles like "when the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs" – that was the jingle of John Tetzel, the specific indulgence salesman who infuriated the key figure in the Reformation, Martin Luther.

The concept of indulgences relied on the notion of a "treasury of merit" – a kind of spiritual bank – whose savings had been deposited by the sacrifices made by Christ and the saints. When someone bought an indulgence, she drew against that treasury in order to avoid time in purgatory. Another way to gain access to the treasury of merit was to possess, or even come into contact with, holy relics (typically the bones of saints). Thus, many rulers did everything in their power to create large collections. One German prince had his court preacher calculate the total number of years that his (the ruler's) large collection of relics would eliminate from his and his subjects' time in Purgatory; the total was 1,902,202 years and 270 days. There was another prince whose total was 39,245,120 years of get-out-of-Purgatory-free time. From

this context, of widespread corruption and the fairly blatant abuse of the notion of spiritual salvation through the Church, Martin Luther emerged.

Lutheranism

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) was a German monk who endured a difficult childhood and a fraught relationship with his father. He suffered from bouts of depression and anxiety that led him to become monk, the traditional solution to an identity crisis as of the early modern period. Luther received both a scholastic and a humanistic education, eventually becoming a professor at the small university in the city of Wittenberg in the Holy Roman Empire. There, far from the centers of both spiritual and secular power, he contemplated the Bible, the Church, and his own spiritual salvation.

Luther struggled with his spiritual identity. He was obsessively afraid of being damned to hell, feeling totally unworthy of divine forgiveness and plagued with doubt as to his ability to achieve salvation. The key issue for Luther was the concept of good works, an essential element of salvation in the early-modern church. In Catholic doctrine, salvation is achieved through a combination of the sacraments, faith in God, and good works, which are good deeds that merit a person's admission into heaven. Those good works could be acts of kindness and charity, or they could be gifts of money to the Church - a common "good work" at the time was leaving money or land to the Church in one's will. Luther felt that the very idea of good works was ambiguous, especially because works seemed so inadequate when compared to the wretched spiritual state of humankind. He could not understand how *anyone* merited admittance to heaven no matter how many good work they carried out while alive - the very idea seemed petty and base compared to the awesome responsibility of living up to Christianity's moral standards.



A 1528 portrait of Luther.

In about 1510 Luther began to explore a possible answer to this quandary: the idea that salvation did not come from works, but from grace, the limitless love and forgiveness of God, which is achievable through faith alone. Over time, Luther developed the idea that it takes an act of God to merit a person's salvation, and the reflection of that act is in the heartfelt faith of the individual. A person's willed attempts to do good things to get into heaven were always inadequate; what mattered was that the heartfelt faith of a believer might inspire an infinite act of mercy on the part of God. This idea - salvation through faith alone - was a major break with Catholic belief.

This concept was potentially revolutionary because in one stroke it did away with the entire edifice of church ritual. If salvation could be earned through faith alone, the sacraments were at best symbolic rituals and at worst distractions - over time, Luther argued that only baptism and communion were relevant since they were very clearly inspired by Christ's actions as described in the New Testament. In Luther's vision, the priest was nothing more than a guide rather than a gatekeeper who could grant or withhold the essential rituals, and a believer should be able to read the Bible directly rather than be forced to defer to the priesthood.

Having developed the essential points of his theology, Luther then confronted what he regarded as the most blatant abuse of the Church's authority: indulgences. In 1517, Pope Leo X issued a new indulgence to fund the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther was incensed at how crass the sale of indulgences was (it was as bad as a carnival barker's act in nearby Wittenberg) and at the fact that this new indulgence promised to absolve the purchaser of all sins, all at once. Furthermore, the indulgence could be purchased on behalf of those who were already dead and "spring" them from purgatory in one fell swoop. Luther responded by posting a list of ninety-five attacks against indulgences to the door of the Wittenberg cathedral. These "95 Theses" are considered by historians to be the first official act of the Protestant Reformation.

The 95 Theses were relatively moderate in tone. They attacked indulgences for leading to greed instead of piety, for leading the laity to distrust the Church, and for simply not working - they did not, Luther argued, absolve the sins of those who purchased them. Written in Latin, the 95 Theses were intended to spark debate and discussion within the Church. And, while he criticized the pope's wealth and (implied) greed, Luther did not attack the office of the papacy itself. Soon, however, the 95 Theses were translated into German and reprinted, which led to an unexpected and, at least initially, unwanted celebrity.

Within two years, Luther was forced to publicly defend his views and, in the process, to radicalize them. A fellow professor and member of the Church, Johann Eck, publicly debated Luther and forced him to admit that the pope had the authority issue indulgences. This, however, led Luther to argue that the pope could be wrong if his position was not authorized by the Bible itself. In the end, Luther argued that the pope, and by extension the entire Church, were irrelevant to spiritual salvation. He argued that true Christians were part of the priesthood of believers, united by their faith and without need for the Catholic Church.

By 1520 Luther was actively engaged in writing and publishing inflammatory pamphlets that attacked the pope's authority and the corruption of the Church. He was summoned to Rome to recant, but refused to go. In turn, the secular authorities stepped in. In 1521 Luther was tried at the Diet of Worms, the Holy Roman Empire's official meeting of princes, where the emperor Charles V ordered him to recant. Luther refused and was declared an "outlaw" by the emperor, stipulating that no subject of the Empire was to offer Luther food or water, and suffer no legal penalty should Luther be murdered. Luther was swiftly taken into the custody of a sympathetic German prince, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, who spirited Luther away and allowed him to continue his work writing anti-papal propaganda.



A (highly dramatized) portrayal of Luther at the Diet of Worms painted in the nineteenth century.

Much of Luther's, and Protestantism's, survival owes to the simple fact that both the pope and Charles V were reluctant to threaten Frederick the Wise, who was one of the electors of the empire and one of its most powerful nobles – essentially a king in his own right. Frederick both genuinely supported and agreed with Luther's views and also realized that he could benefit from rejecting the authority of the pope and, to a lesser extent, the emperor. Charles V had enormous prestige and some ability to influence his subjects, but practically speaking each prince was sovereign in his own domain. This loose overall control was disastrous for Catholic uniformity in the empire, as Luther's doctrines, soon referred to as Lutheranism, rapidly spread. To make matters worse, Charles V was too preoccupied with wars against France to spearhead a genuine effort to crush Lutheranism; in turn, the French King Francis I extended royal protection to Lutherans in France, since doing so undermined the authority of Charles.

Luther's position continued to radicalize after 1521. He claimed that the pope was, in fact, the anti-Christ foretold in the Book of Revelations, and he came to believe that it was the End Times. He also personally translated the Bible into German and he happily met with his ever-growing group of followers. Initially a slur against heretics, the term "Protestant" was soon embraced by those followers, who used it as a defiant badge of honor.

Very quickly, Protestantism caught on across the empire, especially among elites, churchmen, and the educated urban classes. In the 1520s most Lutherans were reform-minded

clerics; they saw Luther's movement as an effective and radical protest against all of the problems that had plagued the Church for centuries. Part of the appeal of Lutheranism to priests was that it legitimized the lifestyle many of them were already living; they could get married to their concubines and acknowledge their children if they left the Church, which drove them off starting in the 1520s. Thanks both to the perceived purity of its doctrine and the support of rulers, nobles, and converted priests, Lutheranism started spreading in earnest among the general population starting in the 1530s.

Charles V was in an unenviable position. As Holy Roman Emperor, he felt honor-bound to defend the Church, but he could not do so through force of arms. He spent most of his reign fighting against both France and the Ottoman Empire, which besides Spain were the greatest powers of the era. Thus, in 1526 he allowed the German princes to choose whether or not to enforce his ban on Lutheranism as they saw fit, in hopes that they would continue to offer him their military assistance – he tried unsuccessfully to repeal this reluctant tolerance in 1529, but it was too late. Practically speaking, the German states ended up being divided roughly evenly, with a concentration of Lutheranism in the north and Catholicism in the south.

Luther was elated by the success of his message; he happily accepted the use of the term "Lutheranism" to describe the new religious movement he had started, and he felt certain that the correctness of his position was so appealing that even the Jews would abandon their traditional beliefs and convert (they did not, and Luther swiftly launched a vituperative anti-Semitic attack entitled *Against the Jews and their Lies*). Much to his chagrin, however, Luther watched as some groups who considered themselves to be Lutherans took his message in directions of which he completely disapproved.

Luther himself was a deeply conservative man; his attack on Catholic doctrine was fundamentally based on what he saw as a "return" to the original message of the Bible. Many Protestants interpreted his message as indicating that true Christians were only accountable to the Bible and could therefore reject the existing social hierarchy as well. In 1524, an enormous peasant uprising occurred across Germany, inspired by this interpretation of Lutheranism and demanding a reduction in feudal dues and duties, the end of serfdom, and greater justice from feudal lords. In 1525, Luther penned a venomous attack against the rebels entitled *Against the Thieving, Murderous Hordes of Peasants* which encouraged the lords to slaughter the peasants like dogs. The revolt was put down brutally, with over 100,000 killed, and Lutheranism was able to keep the support of the elites like Frederick the Wise who sheltered it.

Still, the uprising indicated that the movement Luther had begun was not something he could control, despite his best efforts. The very nature of breaking with a single authoritarian

institution brought about a number of competing movements, some of which were directly inspired by and connected to Luther, but many of which, soon, were not.

Calvinism

The most important Protestant denomination to emerge after the establishment of Lutheranism was Calvinism. Jean Calvin, a French lawyer exiled for his sympathy with Protestantism, settled in Geneva, Switzerland in 1536. Calvin was a generation younger than Luther, and hence was born into a world in which religious unity had already been fragmented; in that sense, the fact that he had Protestant views is not as surprising as Luther's break with the Church had been. In Geneva, Calvin began work on Christian theology and soon formed close ties with the city council. The result of his work was Calvinism, a distinct Protestant denomination that differed in many ways from Lutheranism.

Calvin accepted Luther's insistence on the role of faith in salvation, but he went further. If God was all-powerful and all-knowing, and he chose to extend his grace to some people but not to others, Calvin reasoned, it was folly to imagine that humans could somehow influence Him. Not only was the Catholic insistence on good works wrong, the very idea of free will in the face of the divine intelligence could not be correct. Calvin noted that only some parishioners in church services seemed to be able to grasp the importance and complexities of scripture, whereas most were indifferent or ignorant. He concluded that God, who transcended both time and space, chose some people as the "elect," those who will be saved, before they are even born. Free will is merely an illusion born of human ignorance, since the fate of a person's soul was determined before time itself began. This doctrine is called "predestination," and while the idea of the absence of free will and predetermined salvation may seem absurd at first sight, in fact it was simply the logical extension of the very concept of divine omnipotence according to Calvin.



Sixteenth-century portrait of Calvin. Austere black clothing became associated with Calvinists, who rejected ostentatious dress and decoration.

Practically speaking, however, Calvinism involved a kind of circular argument about salvation. Those who were among the elect acted in certain ways: they lived according to the standards of behavior defined in the Bible, they refrained from worldly pleasures, and they strove to conduct themselves within the legal and social framework of their societies. Thus, good Calvinists were supposed to devote themselves to the study of scripture, temperate living, and hard work. Counterintuitively, it was not that these behaviors would lead to salvation, it is that the already-saved acted morally according to God's will. Furthermore, one sign of being a member of the elect was financial success, because success was a side-effect of the focus and hard work that the elect naturally, again through God's will, exhibited.

After developing his theology and winning many converts, Calvin colluded with the city council of Geneva to enforce a whole set of moralistic laws that regulated almost every aspect of behavior. He was originally asked to reform the local church by the city fathers, then in 1555 he worked with a group of fellow French exiles to stage a coup d'état. He created the Consistory, a group of Calvinist ministers who scrutinized the behavior of Geneva's citizens,

fining or imprisoning people for intemperate or ungodly behavior. The idea was that, predestination or not, Geneva would be the model Christian community.

While Lutheranism spread to northern Germany and the Scandinavian countries, Calvinism caught on not just in Switzerland, but in France (where Calvinists were known as Huguenots) and Scotland, where the Scottish Calvinists became known as Presbyterians. Everywhere, Calvinists set themselves apart by their plain dress and their dour outlook on merriment, celebrations, and the pleasures of the flesh. The best known Calvinists in the American context were the Puritans, English Calvinists who left Europe (initially fleeing persecution) to try to create a perfect Christian community in the new world.

It should be emphasized that Lutherans and Calvinists quickly came to regard one another as rivals, even enemies, rather than as “fellow” Protestants. Luther and Calvin came to detest one another, finding each other’s respective theology as flawed and misleading as that of Catholicism. While some pragmatic alliances between Protestant groups would eventually emerge because of persecution or war, for the most part each Protestant denomination claimed to have exclusive access to religious truth, regarding all others as hopelessly ignorant and, in fact, damned to hell.

The English Reformation

Whereas Lutheranism and Calvinism had both come about as protests against the perceived moral and doctrinal failings of the Catholic church, the English Reformation happened because of the selfish desires of a king. Henry VIII (r. 1509 – 1547) had received a special dispensation from the papacy to marry his brother’s widow (a practice banned in the Old Testament of the Bible), Catherine of Aragon, aunt of Charles V and hence a member of the most powerful royal line in Europe. Catherine, however, was only able to bear Henry a daughter, Mary, and failed to produce a son. Henry decided he needed a new wife and another chance at a male heir, so he started an affair with Anne Boleyn, a young noblewoman in his court. Simultaneously, Henry petitioned the pope for a divorce - a practice that was strictly forbidden. The pope refused, and in defiance in 1531 Henry, under the auspices of a compliant local Catholic leader, divorced Catherine and married Anne.

When Anne did not produce a male heir in a timely manner, Henry trumped up charges of adultery and had her beheaded. In 1534, as papal threats escalated over his impiety, Henry issued the Acts of Supremacy and Succession, effectively separating England from the Catholic Church and founding in its stead the Church of England. the Church of England was almost

identical to the Catholic Church in its doctrine and rituals, it simply substituted the king at its apex and discarded allegiance to the Roman pope. It also gave Henry an excuse to seize Catholic lands and wealth, especially those of England's rich monasteries, which funded the crown and its subsequent military and naval buildup into the reign of his daughter Elizabeth.



Easily the best-known portrait of Henry VIII in the prime of life.

Henry went on to marry an astonishing total of six wives over the course of his life, with two divorced, two executed, one dying of natural causes, and the last, Katherine Parr, surviving him. In the end, Henry had three children: a young son, Edward, and two older half-sisters, Mary and Elizabeth. They each took the throne in fairly rapid succession after his death in 1547; under Edward and Mary (both of whom died of natural causes after only a few years), the kingdom oscillated between a more extreme form of Protestantism and then an attempted Catholic resurgence. Elizabeth I went on to rule for decades (r. 1558 – 1603) as one of Europe's most effective monarchs. Part of her success was in stabilizing the religious issue in England: she insisted that her subjects be part of the Church of England, but she did not actively persecute Catholics.

The end result of the English Reformation was that England and Scotland were divided between competing Christian factions, but ones very distinct to the British Isles in comparison to the more straightforward Catholic versus Protestant conflicts on the continent of Europe. The

Church of England, whose adherents are known as Anglicans, had an official "high church" branch supported by the nobility and the monarchy itself. A growing movement within the Church of England, however, openly embraced Calvinism, and that movement became known as Puritanism (or "low church") - still technically Anglican, but rejected by the Church hierarchy. Meanwhile, numerous Catholics continued to worship in secret. Finally, most of Scotland became devoutly Calvinist, under the Presbyterian branch of the Calvinist movement (many Scottish nobles remained Catholic until well into the seventeenth century, however).

The Effects of the Reformation

By the late sixteenth century, the lines of division within western Christianity were permanently drawn. Christianity was (and remains, although the enmity between the different groups is much less pronounced in the modern era) divided as follows:

The Catholic (Roman/Latin) Church

The Catholic Church remained dominant in almost all of southern Europe, including Italy, Spain, Austria, parts of the Balkans, and kingdoms like Poland as well. Catholic minorities existed either openly or in secret depending on the relative hostility of the local rulers throughout much of the rest of Europe.

The Eastern Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church was the product of medieval divisions within the Church itself, pitting the western papacy against the Byzantine emperors. It was unaffected by the Protestant Reformation, since the Reformation occurred in Western Europe. Thus, the Orthodox church remained in place in Greece, parts of the Balkans, and Russia.

The Protestant Churches

"Protestant" came to mean all of the different groups that broke away from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. These denominations included Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, and other (generally smaller and less historically significant at the time) denominations like Anabaptism. Protestant churches dominated in northern Europe, including much of Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, England and Scotland. There was also a very significant minority of Huguenots - French Calvinists - in the southern half of France.

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