

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

Why he was important: *Martin Luther was a Christian priest who did not agree with some of the teachings of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. He was one of the first people to speak against the pope (leader of the Catholic Church), which was a very dangerous thing to do during his time. The result was the Protestant Reformation; an event that changed the world.*

For about 1,000 years, Christians in Western Europe all belonged to the Catholic Church. They observed the sacraments, confessed their sins to priests, prayed to the saints, made donations to the church, and did other religious acts (called "works") to make sure they got to heaven. The pope, as head of the Catholic Church, was the spiritual leader. His views on religious teachings were considered final. If you broke a rule laid down by the pope, your chances of getting to heaven were considered very small.

In the 16th Century CE, the Roman Catholic Church was a major political and even a military power in Western Europe. Popes used this great power to defend and expand the church's influence and money. But many Germans, living under weak local rulers and a useless emperor, believed that the church treated them unfairly.

Germans constantly complained that endless church fees, taxes, and payments made life miserable for them, while the people in Rome got all the benefits and money. Many Germans felt that the Church was more concerned with wealth than helping people get to heaven. Those who could not pay their dues to the church were threatened with excommunication. This meant the church would refuse them the sacraments and other "works" necessary for saving their souls. Those who were excommunicated would no longer be able to get to heaven; they would be considered lost souls, doomed to spend eternity in pain and suffering. The prospect of excommunication terrified believers.

In order to make sure they could get to heaven, Catholics believed they had to confess their sins to a priest. Usually, after hearing a confession, a priest would often tell the person to complete an act called a penance. The penance was done so that the sinner could work off his/her sins. The work depended on the seriousness of the sin and might range from saying special prayers to travelling to a distant holy place. Another form of penance that began around the time of Martin Luther (the 16th century CE) was the indulgence, a certificate from a bishop or the pope who forgave a person's sins. The person got an indulgence by buying it from the church. Popes and other church officials highly encouraged the sale of indulgences to raise money for many purposes. Eventually, people came to believe that they could buy their way into heaven with indulgences. It was even possible to purchase them for the dead. However, not everyone agreed with the sale of indulgences in order to save their souls. Now, instead of following rules, praying, and performing "works", Christians had to pay in order to make it to heaven.

Despite their many problems with the Roman Catholic Church, very few people dared to speak out for fear of being excommunicated or even burned at the stake as a heretic. However, in 1517, a German priest and university professor named Martin Luther stood up against the church and the pope. Europe and the world would never be the same again.

Luther Challenges the Pope

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in northern Germany. After surviving a lightning strike, he decided to devote his life to God. He studied to become a Catholic priest, and eventually he became a Professor of the Bible at the University of Wittenberg. He also preached at the Wittenberg town church.

"Works" like indulgences bothered Martin Luther. He believed that a person could only be saved by personal faith in Jesus Christ and the grace of God. Luther considered indulgences, praying to saints, pilgrimages, and many

other such "works" as worthless that were forced upon people by the Catholic Church. He also believed that the office of the pope was unnecessary and that only God could make rules for Christians, not the pope.

On October 31, 1517, Luther wrote a letter to the archbishop protesting the sale of indulgences. This letter included Luther's famous "Ninety-Five Theses" that listed all of his problems with church practices. Luther believed that only God could forgive people's sins, not the pope or a bishop.

After receiving Luther's *shocking* letter, the archbishop promptly sent it to Pope Leo. Before the pope could react, however, Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses" became a big hit among the German people. They were surprised that Luther challenged the idea that the pope had the ability to forgive people's sins. They were also excited to have someone tell the pope what many of them were already thinking.

Starting in 1520, Luther took full advantage of a new invention: the printer. He published many writings that criticized the church. Luther's radical religious ideas spread rapidly, gaining popularity with the German people. Soon, he was the most published author of the 16th century.

Luther and other writers, increasingly called "Protestants," criticized the priests and other Church officers for avoiding hard work, not paying taxes, and taking money from the common people.

Luther was put through many trials and debates by Catholic leaders. During this time, Luther was asked to abandon what he had said about the church (they called it heresy) and beg for forgiveness. However, Martin Luther never gave up his beliefs, even under constant attacks.

Building a New Church

Luther soon married and eventually became the father of six children. As a father, he understood the importance of educating all children, even girls, so that they could read the Bible. He urged city councils to build schools to educate children for both daily life and religious life.

His new religion, Lutheranism, became very popular in Europe, especially Germany. However, there were many people who disagreed with both the Catholic Church *and* Martin Luther on some beliefs. Eventually, they broke away into other religious groups. They remained firm to the basic Christian beliefs, but some ideas were different, so they began new denominations of Christianity that are still around today.

New Protestant churches, all different from one another on matters of Christian faith, arose throughout Western Europe and later in America. The Catholic Church soon eliminated the sale of indulgences and other ideas that Luther had attacked. Even so, the Catholic Church was never able to unite under one Christian church again.

The Protestant Reformation that Martin Luther started continued for over 100 years. However, it was rarely peaceful. Catholics and Protestants did not get along to begin with. Both groups persecuted each other, causing many problems in Europe. In addition, wars between Protestants and Catholics in Europe produced long-lasting religious hatreds. On the other hand, the Protestants strongly believed in literacy, education, and hard work, which laid the foundation for the rise of a modern, educated Europe.

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Directions: Answer the following questions using POQ (complete sentences!)

1. How could Christians make sure they got to heaven before Martin Luther?
2. Why was the idea of excommunication so terrible for Christians?
3. Explain what indulgences are and why the Catholic Church used them:
4. What did Martin Luther consider worthless? (Be specific!)
5. How did Martin Luther spread his ideas?
6. How did new denominations of Christianity develop?