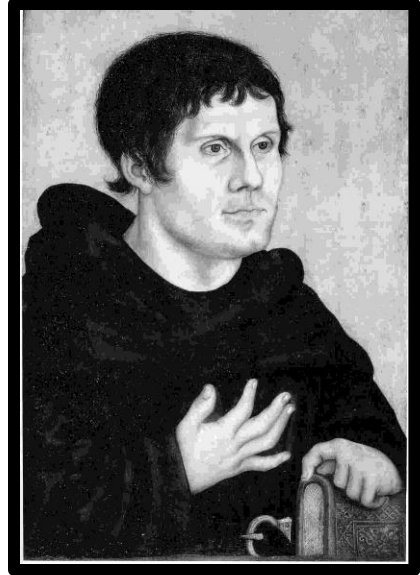


## WHAT WAS THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH?

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The term Protestant is immediately associated with the term the Reformation. This was an attempt launched by Martin Luther in the early sixteenth century to rid the Roman Catholic Church of some of the flagrant abuses which he and others perceived in the hierarchy and in the practice of the Roman Catholic religion. Luther, who was an Augustinian monk, demanded a return to what he perceived as a much truer vision of Christian life based on the Bible and an immediate end to the economic abuses of the clergy (of the sort we encounter in Chaucer's General Prologue). Luther was unsuccessful in launching a reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church, and he was excommunicated early in the sixteenth century. Church leaders also sought to kill him. This launched a decisive split within the unity of Christian Europe, so that now there were two rival camps, the Roman Catholics and the breakaway Protestants.



It is important to note that the Roman Catholic Church had, from its earliest beginnings, been subject to large internal strains between those who wished to foster the Church's growing prestige, political power, and wealth and those who saw the essence of Christianity as a spiritual discipline which renounced earthly powers and devoted itself to contemplation or service. The growing wealth, power, and extravagance of the Papacy [the office of the Pope] (to say nothing of its often scandalous political behavior) had launched repeated reform movements for centuries.

Typically the Roman Catholic authorities had dealt with pressures for reform in one of two ways: they made adjustments to the Church in order to accommodate the demands of the reformers (for example, by creating the mendicant orders of monks and friars for those who wished to dedicate their Christian lives to contemplation or to service, especially among the urban poor) or they had resorted to often harsh discipline, when the reformers proved adamant (e.g., some heretical movements). But the key principle for all the decisions of the Roman Catholic Church was that to be a Christian one had to be a member of the Church: as the traditional saying established, *ex ecclesio nulla salvatio* [no salvation outside the Church]. To be a devout Christian, one followed what the Church had established as appropriate behavior, and one referred to the Church authorities any and all disputes over religious matters.

Luther was by no means the first to challenge the authority of the Papacy and the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but he was the first to succeed in breaking the power of that hierarchy in matters of faith. He succeeded where others failed for three key reasons: first, he was an uncommonly brilliant, courageous, and stubborn adversary; second, he had the incalculable assistance of printing, so that his views could not be regionally isolated and dealt with but could spread almost instantly; and third, he had strong secular support from some political rulers who were alarmed at the economic drain caused by so much money being siphoned off

southward to Rome for the expensive projects of the Papacy (like the building of St. Peter's). The immediate cause of Luther's movement was the sale, by officials licensed from the Vatican, of indulgences (i.e., days off purgatory) for money. The greed of this practice disgusted Luther, and the cost to the local economy alarmed the secular princes.

The break with Rome launched one of the bloodiest wars in European history (the Thirty Years' War, from 1618 to 1648) in which Catholic princes sought to re-impose Catholicism on the breakaway states and the Protestants fought amongst themselves for which of them had the one true version of an alternative to Rome. After some of the most devastating military campaigns Europe had ever seen (which left large parts of Europe, especially in Germany, totally destroyed), peace was concluded, with no clear winners and losers, and the principle was adopted throughout Western Europe that the ruler of any particular region would determine the religion of the people (the *cuius regio eius religio principle*). The period we call the Enlightenment which followed marked the beginning of a turning away from religion as the basis for European life. Since people no longer agreed about religious matters and there was no authority to rule on disputed questions, the search was on for a new authority in reason and science.

The Protestants, however, were by no means united in anything other than two things: hostility to the Roman Catholics (especially to the insistence that the Church must determine all matters of faith), and the belief that Christianity was essentially a matter of an individual relationship between the believer and God. The only crucial material needed in this relationship was the holy text of the revealed word of God. Hence, Protestants really stressed the importance of translating and printing the Bible, distributing it as widely as possible, and justifying one's religion with constant references to it (rather than to any prescriptions from a Church hierarchy). The key concept in Protestantism is "grace," the free gift of God to the believer. Grace, according to Luther, comes only from one thing: from faith. It does not come from good works and certainly not from any external form of obedience to a particular church.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What were some of the corrupt practices that occurred in the church during the Middle Ages? Think back to what you read in *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Inferno*, and other works.
2. Why was the Protestant Reformation such an important event in history? What might have happened if Martin Luther had not taken a stand? Explain.
3. The Protestant Reformation placed emphasis on individualism—salvation was a matter between you and God. Any believer could read the Bible for his or herself and interpret its meaning. This idea gave birth to the Renaissance, where individualism and knowledge were celebrated. Is individualism still celebrated today?
4. Since the Protestant Reformation encouraged common people to read the Bible for themselves, they had to be educated. For the first time education became important to the lower classes. Do you think all classes of people should be able to read and write? Explain.
5. The printing press developed by Johann Gutenberg in the 1400's made the Bible and other books cheap enough for the Bible to become widely distributed. Ideas were able to spread faster and further. How do you think this contributed to the Renaissance?