

- ◀ Corruption in the church led to questions about the morals of church officials.

The Reformation Begins

31.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you met 10 leading figures of the Renaissance. At the height of the Renaissance, western Europe was still Roman Catholic. In this chapter, you will learn about the beginnings of the **Reformation**. This historic movement led to the start of many new Christian churches that broke away from the Catholic Church.

The Reformation began in the early 1500s and lasted into the 1600s. Until then, all Christians in western Europe were Catholics. But even before the Reformation, the church's religious and moral authority was starting to weaken.

One reason for the weakening of the church was the humanism of the Renaissance. Humanists often were very secular (non-religious) in their thinking. They believed in free thought and questioned many accepted beliefs.

Problems within the church added to this spirit of questioning. Many Catholics were dismayed by worldliness and corruption (immoral and dishonest behavior) in the church. Bishops and clergy often seemed devoted more to comfort and good living than to serving God. Sometimes they used questionable practices to raise money for the church. Some popes seemed more concerned with power and money than with spiritual matters.

These problems led a number of Catholics to cry out for reform. They questioned the authority of church leaders and some of the church's teachings. Some broke away from the church entirely. They became known as **Protestants** because of their protests against the Catholic Church. The establishment of Protestant churches divided Christians into many separate groups.

In this chapter, you will learn more about the problems that weakened the Catholic Church. You'll meet early reformers who tried to change the church. Then you will learn how a German priest, Martin Luther, ignited the movement that ended the religious unity of Europe. Finally, you'll read about other early leaders of the Reformation.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help you explore the causes and spread of the Reformation.

31.2 The Weakening of the Catholic Church

By the Late Middle Ages, two major problems were weakening the Catholic Church. The first was worldliness and corruption within the church. The second was political conflict between the pope and European monarchs.

Worldliness and Corruption Within the Church During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church united the Christians of western Europe in a single faith. But the church was a political and economic institution as well as a religious one. By the 1300s, many Catholics felt that the church had become far too worldly and corrupt.

Too often, people who were supposedly dedicated to the church failed to live up to their role as spiritual leaders. For example, priests, monks, and nuns made vows, or solemn promises, not to marry or have children. Yet many broke these vows. Some seemed to ignore Christian values and morals. Church leaders often behaved like royalty instead of humble servants of God. Popes, cardinals, and bishops lived in elegant palaces and wore jeweled robes.

People were also troubled by the way many church officials tried to get money to support the church. One practice was the selling of **indulgences**. An indulgence was a release from punishment for sins. During the Middle Ages, the church granted indulgences in return for

gifts to the church and other good works. People who received indulgences did not have to perform good deeds to make up for their sins. Over time, popes and bishops began selling indulgences as a way of raising money. This practice made it seem that people could buy forgiveness for their sins. Many Catholics were deeply disturbed by the abuse of indulgences.

The church also sold offices, or leadership positions. This practice is called **simony**. Instead of being chosen for their merit, buyers simply paid for their appointments. Buying an office was worthwhile because it could be a source of even more income. Often people acquired multiple offices in different places without actually going there to perform their duties.

People questioned other practices as well. Some clergy charged pilgrims to see holy objects, such as the relics of saints. In addition, all Catholics paid taxes to the church. Many people resented having to pay taxes to Rome as well as to their own governments.

indulgence a grant by the Catholic Church that released a person from punishment for sins

simony the buying and selling of spiritual or holy things

The selling of indulgences made it seem as though people could buy forgiveness for their sins. This and other moneymaking practices led people to distrust the church.



Political Conflicts with European Rulers

In medieval times, the pope became a powerful political figure as well as a religious leader. The church also accumulated vast wealth. Its political and economic power presented a problem for monarchs, because the church claimed to be independent of their control.

As kings and queens tried to increase their own power, they often came into conflict with the pope. They quarreled with the pope over church property and the right to make appointments to church offices. Popes also became entangled in other political conflicts.

These disputes added to the questioning of the pope's authority. At times they led to scandals that damaged the church's reputation.

One dramatic crisis unfolded in France in 1301. When King Philip IV tried to tax the French clergy, the pope threatened to excommunicate him. In response, soldiers hired by the king kidnapped the pope. The elderly pope was soon released, but he died a few weeks later.

The quarrel with the king ended under Pope Clement V. In 1309, Clement moved his headquarters from Rome to the French city of Avignon. He appointed 24 new cardinals during his reign, 22 of whom were French. The next six popes also lived in Avignon and named still more French cardinals. Many Europeans believed that France's kings now controlled the **papacy** (the office of the pope). As a result, they lost respect for the pope as the supreme head of the church.

An even worse crisis developed after Pope Gregory XI moved the papacy back to Rome in 1377. The next year, Gregory died, and an Italian was elected pope. The new pope refused to move back to Avignon. A group of cardinals, most of them French, left Rome and elected a rival pope. The church now had two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon. Later a church council elected a third pope. Each pope claimed to be the real head of the church.

This division in the church is called the Great Schism. For nearly 40 years, the various lines of popes denounced each other as impostors. Catholics were divided and confused. The Great Schism lessened people's respect for the papacy and sparked calls for reform.



When Pope Clement V moved his headquarters from Italy to France, the quarrel between King Philip IV and the pope ended.

papacy the office, or position, of pope as head of the Catholic Church

31.3 Early Calls for Reform

As you have seen, by the 1300s the church was beginning to lose some of its moral and religious standing. Many Catholics, including clergy, criticized the corruption and abuses that plagued the church. They challenged the authority of the pope. Some began to question church teachings and express new forms of Christian faith.

Reformers wanted to purify the church, not destroy it. By challenging the church's practices and teachings, however, they helped pave the way for the dramatic changes of the Reformation. In this section, you will meet four of these early reformers.

John Wycliffe (About 1330–1384) John Wycliffe was a scholar in England. Wycliffe challenged the church's right to money that it demanded from England. When the Great Schism began, he publicly questioned the pope's authority. He also attacked indulgences and immoral behavior on the part of the clergy.

During the Middle Ages, church officials tried to control interpretations of the Bible. Wycliffe believed that the Bible, not the church, was the supreme source of religious authority. Against church tradition, he had the Bible translated from Latin into English so that common people could read it.

The pope accused Wycliffe of **heresy**, or opinions that contradict church **doctrine**. Wycliffe's followers were persecuted, and some of them were burned to death. After his death, the church had his writings burned. Despite the church's opposition, Wycliffe's ideas had a wide influence.

heresy beliefs that contradict the official teachings of a religion or church; one who holds such beliefs is called a *heretic*
doctrine the official teachings of a religion or church

Priest Jan Hus was an early reformer who agreed with Wycliffe's ideas and spoke against the pope. For this, he was burned at the stake as a heretic.



Jan Hus (About 1370–1415) Jan Hus was a priest in Bohemia (today’s Czech Republic). He read Wycliffe’s writings and agreed with many of his ideas. Hus criticized the vast wealth of the church and spoke out against the pope’s authority. The true head of the church, he said, was Jesus Christ.

Hus wanted to purify the church and return it to the people. He called for an end to corruption among the clergy. He wanted both the Bible and the mass to be offered in the common language of the people instead of Latin.

In 1414, Hus was arrested and charged with heresy. In July 1415, he was burned at the stake.

Like Wycliffe, Hus had a major influence on future reformers. Martin Luther would later say that he and his supporters were “all Hussites without knowing it.”

Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) Catherine of Siena was an Italian **mystic**. She was extraordinarily devoted and felt that she had a direct experience of God. Even as a child, she had visions of Jesus and promised to be his “bride.”

Catherine spent long hours deep in prayer and wrote many letters about spiritual life. She also involved herself in church affairs. Her pleas helped convince Pope Gregory XI to move the papacy back to Rome from Avignon. Later she traveled to Rome to try to end the Great Schism.

Catherine was a faithful Catholic, and in 1461 the church declared her a saint. Yet her example showed that people could lead spiritual lives that went beyond the usual norms of the church. She and other mystics emphasized personal experience of God more than formal observance of church practices. This approach to faith helped prepare people for the ideas of the Reformation.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) Desiderius Erasmus was a humanist from Holland. A priest and devoted Catholic, he was one of the most outspoken figures in the call for reform.

In 1509, Erasmus published a book called *The Praise of Folly*. (*Folly* means “foolishness.”) The book was a sharply worded satire of society, including abuses by clergy and church leaders. Erasmus argued for a return to simple Christian goodness.

Erasmus wanted to reform the church from within. He angrily denied that he was really a Protestant. Yet perhaps more than any other individual, he helped to prepare Europe for the Reformation. His attacks on corruption in the church contributed to many people’s desire to leave Catholicism. For this reason it is often said that “Erasmus laid the egg, and Luther hatched it.”



Catholic priest Erasmus of Holland was perhaps the most influential person in spreading the ideas of reform before the Reformation.

mystic a person who is devoted to religion and has spiritual experiences



Luther nailed his list of 95 arguments, called the Ninety-Five Theses, to a church door in Wittenberg. Church leaders condemned the ideas in this document.

31.4 Martin Luther Breaks Away from the Church

By the early 1500s, there was considerable turmoil in the church. In Germany, then part of the Holy Roman Empire, a priest named Martin Luther became involved in a serious dispute with church authorities. Condemned by the church, Luther broke away and began the first Protestant church. The Reformation had begun.

Luther's Early Life Luther was born in Germany in 1483. Raised as a devout Catholic, he planned a career in law. As a young man, he was badly frightened when he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. As lightning flashed around him, he vowed that if he survived, he would become a monk.

Luther kept his promise and joined an order of monks. Later he became a priest. He studied the Bible thoroughly and earned a reputation as a scholar and teacher.

Luther Pushes for Change in the Catholic Church Like many Christians of his time, Luther asked the question, "What must I do to be saved?" The church stressed

that keeping the sacraments and living a good life were the keys to salvation. Luther's studies of the Bible led him to a different answer. No one, he believed, could earn salvation. Instead, salvation was a gift from God that people received in faith. People, he said, were saved by their faith, not good works.

Luther's views brought him into conflict with the church over indulgences. In 1517, Pope Leo X needed money to finish building St. Peter's, the grand cathedral in Rome. He sent preachers around Europe to sell indulgences. Buyers were promised pardons of all of their sins and those of friends and family. Luther was outraged. He felt that the church was selling false salvation to uneducated people.

Luther posted a list of arguments, called *theses*, against indulgences and church abuses on the church door in the town of Wittenberg. He also sent the list, called the Ninety-Five Theses, to church leaders.

Luther's theses caused considerable controversy. Many people were excited by his ideas, while the church condemned them. Gradually, he was drawn into more serious disagreements with church authorities.

In response to critics, Luther published pamphlets that explained his thinking. He argued that the Bible—not the pope or church leaders—was

the ultimate source of religious authority. The only true sacraments, he said, were baptism and the Eucharist. The church's other five sacraments had no basis in the Bible. Moreover, all Christians were priests, and all should study the Bible for themselves. "Faith alone," Luther wrote, "and the efficacious [effective] use of the word of God bring salvation."

In the eyes of church leaders, Luther was attacking fundamental truths of the Catholic religion. In January 1521, he was excommunicated (no longer allowed to be a member of the church). The church also pressured the authorities in Germany to silence him once and for all.

In April, Luther was brought before the Diet, an assembly of state leaders, in the city of Worms. At the risk of his life, he refused to take back his teachings. The Holy Roman emperor declared Luther a heretic and forbade the printing or selling of his writings. For a time Luther went into hiding. But the movement he had started continued to spread.

Luther Starts His Own Church Many Germans saw Luther as a hero. As his popularity grew, he continued to develop his ideas. Soon he was openly organizing a new Christian **denomination** known as Lutheranism. The new church emphasized study of the Bible. Luther translated the Bible into German. He also wrote a baptism service, a mass, and new hymns (sacred songs) in German.

Having rejected the church's hierarchy, Luther looked to German princes to support his church. When a peasants' revolt broke out in 1524, the rebels expected Luther to support their demands for social and economic change. Instead, Luther denounced the peasants and sided with the rulers. He needed the help of Germany's rulers to keep his new church growing. By the time the uprising was crushed, tens of thousands of peasants had been brutally killed. Many peasants rejected Lutheranism.

Several princes, however, supported Luther, and Lutheranism continued to grow. Over the next 30 years, Lutherans and Catholics were often at war in Germany. These religious wars ended in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg. According to this treaty, each prince within the Holy Roman Empire could determine the religion of his subjects.

The Peace of Augsburg was a major victory for Protestantism. Christian unity was at an end, and not only in Germany. As you will learn next, by this time a number of other Protestant churches had sprung up in northern Europe.

denomination a particular religious grouping within a larger faith; for example, the Lutheran church is a denomination of Christianity

At the Diet of Worms, Charles V declared Luther a heretic and forbade the printing of his writings.



31.5 Other Early Leaders of the Reformation

The movement begun by Martin Luther soon swept across much of Europe. Many people who were dismayed by abuses in the church remained loyal Catholics. Others, however, were attracted to new forms of the Christian faith. The printing press helped spread new ideas, as well as translations of the Bible, faster than ever before. In addition, government leaders had learned from Luther's experience that they could win religious independence from the church. The Reformation succeeded most where rulers embraced Protestant faiths.

Many reformers contributed to the spread of Protestantism. Let's take a look at four early leaders of the Reformation.

Huldrych Zwingli

(1484–1531) Huldrych

Zwingli was a Catholic priest in Zurich, Switzerland. Zwingli was influenced by both Erasmus and Luther. After reading Luther's work, he persuaded the local government to ban any form of worship that was not based on the Bible. In 1523, Zurich declared its independence from the authority of the local Catholic bishop.

Zwingli wanted Christians to focus solely on the Bible.

He attacked the worship of relics, saints, and images. In Zwinglian churches, there were no religious statues or paintings. Services were very simple, without music or singing.

Zwingli took his ideas to other Swiss cities. In 1531, war broke out between his followers and Swiss Catholics. Zwingli died in the war, but the new church lived on.

John Calvin (1509–1564) In the late 1530s, John Calvin, a French humanist, started another Protestant branch in Geneva, Switzerland. His book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, became one of the most influential works of the Reformation.

Calvin emphasized that salvation came only from God's grace. He said that the "saved" whom God elected (chose) lived according to strict standards. He believed firmly in hard work and thrift (the careful use of money). Success in business, he taught, was a sign of God's grace. Calvin tried to establish a Christian state in Geneva that would be ruled by God through the Calvinist Church.



Booksellers helped to spread the ideas of the Reformation by selling books and pamphlets in public marketplaces.

Calvin influenced many other reformers. One of them was John Knox, a Scotsman who lived in Geneva for a time. Knox led the Protestant reform that established the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

King Henry VIII (1491–1547)

England's Protestant Reformation was led by King Henry VIII. In 1534, Henry formed the Church of England (also called the Anglican Church), with himself as its head.

Unlike Luther and Calvin, King Henry did not have major disagreements with Catholic teachings. His reasons for breaking with the church were personal and political. On a personal level, he wanted to end his first marriage, but the pope had denied him a divorce. On a political level, he no longer wanted to share power and wealth with the church. In 1536, Henry closed down Catholic monasteries in England and took their riches.

William Tyndale (About 1491–1536) William Tyndale was an English priest, scholar, and writer. Tyndale traveled to Germany and met Martin Luther. His views became more and more Protestant. He attacked corruption in the Catholic Church and defended the English Reformation. After being arrested by Catholic authorities in the city of Antwerp (in present-day Belgium), he spent over a year in prison. In 1536, he was burned at the stake.

Tyndale was especially important for his translations of books from the Bible. To spread knowledge of the Bible, he translated the **New Testament**, and parts of the **Old Testament**, into English. In the early 1600s, his work was used in the preparation of the King James, or Authorized, Version of the Bible. Famed for its beautiful language, the King James Bible had an enormous influence on English worship and literature.



Writer and scholar Tyndale was burned at the stake for his Protestant views.

New Testament the second part of the Christian Bible, which includes the Gospels and other writings of the early Christian church

Old Testament the first part of the Christian Bible, corresponding to the Jewish Bible

31.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how the Reformation began. By the Late Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had been weakened by corruption and political struggles. Early reformers hoped to purify the church. Martin Luther, however, broke with the church completely. Luther started the first Protestant church. Other reformers soon followed.

In the next chapter, you'll take a closer look at three Protestant faiths: Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anglicanism. You will also learn how the Catholic Church responded to the challenge of Protestantism.