

SECTION 3

The Protestant Reformation

Guide to Reading

Main Ideas

- The major goal of humanism in northern Europe was to reform Christendom.
- Martin Luther's religious reforms led to the emergence of Protestantism.

Key Terms

Christian humanism, salvation, indulgence

People to Identify

Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus, Charles V

Places to Locate

Wittenberg, Bohemia, Hungary

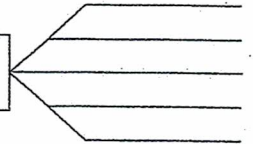
Preview Questions

1. What were the beliefs of Christian humanists?
2. Explain what is meant by justification by grace through faith alone.

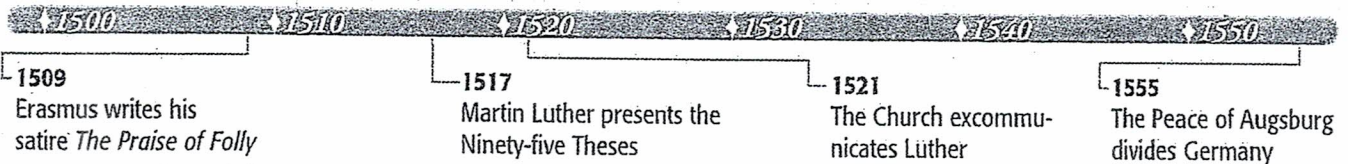
Reading Strategy

Cause and Effect Use a diagram like the one below to identify steps that led to the Reformation.

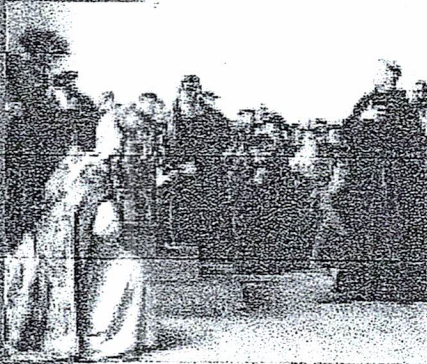
Steps Leading to the Reformation



Preview of Events



Voices from the Past



Martin Luther addressing the emperor in Worms

On April 18, 1521, Martin Luther stood before the emperor and princes of Germany in the city of Worms and declared:

“Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

—*Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Roland Bainton, 1950

With these words Martin Luther refused to renounce his new religious ideas. Luther's words became the battle cry of the Protestant Reformation.

Erasmus and Christian Humanism

The Protestant Reformation is the name given to the religious reform movement that divided the western Church into Catholic and Protestant groups. Although Martin Luther began the Reformation in the early sixteenth century, several earlier developments had set the stage for religious change.

One such development grew from widespread changes in intellectual thought. During the second half of the fifteenth century, the new classical learning that was

part of Italian Renaissance humanism spread to northern Europe. From that came a movement called **Christian humanism**, or Northern Renaissance humanism. The major goal of this movement was the reform of the Catholic Church.

The Christian humanists believed in the ability of human beings to reason and improve themselves. They thought that if people read the classics, and especially the basic works of Christianity, they would become more pious. This inner piety, or inward religious feeling, would bring about a reform of the Church and society. Christian humanists believed that in order to change society, they must first change the human beings who make it up.

The best known of all the Christian humanists was **Desiderius Erasmus** (ih•RAZ•muhs). He called his view of religion “the philosophy of Christ.” By this, he meant that Christianity should show people how to live good lives on a daily basis rather than provide a system of beliefs that people have to practice to be saved. Erasmus stressed the inwardness of religious feeling. To him, the external forms of medieval religion (such as pilgrimages, fasts, and relics) were not all that important.

To reform the Church, Erasmus wanted to spread the philosophy of Christ, provide education in the

works of Christianity, and criticize the abuses in the Church. In his work *The Praise of Folly*, written in 1509, Erasmus humorously criticized aspects of his society that he believed were most in need of reform. He singled out the monks for special treatment. Monks, he said, “insist that everything be done in precise detail. . . . Just so many knots must be on each shoe and the shoelace must be of only one color.”

Erasmus sought reform within the Catholic Church. He did not wish to break away from the Church, as later reformers would. His ideas, however, did prepare the way for the Reformation. As people of his day said, “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.”

Reading Check **Examining** How did Erasmus pave the way for the Reformation?

Religion on the Eve of the Reformation

Why were Erasmus and others calling for reform? Corruption in the Catholic Church was one reason. Between 1450 and 1520, a series of popes—known as the Renaissance popes—failed to meet the Church’s spiritual needs. The popes were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the Catholic Church. As leaders of the Papal States, however, they were all too often more concerned with Italian politics and worldly interests than with spiritual matters.

Julius II, the fiery “warrior-pope,” personally led armies against his enemies. This disgusted Christians who viewed the pope as a spiritual, not a military, leader. One critic wrote, “How, O bishop standing in the room of the Apostles, dare you teach the people the things that pertain to war?”

Many church officials were also concerned with money and used their church offices to advance their careers and their wealth. At the same time, many ordinary parish priests seemed ignorant of their spiritual duties. People wanted to know how to save their souls, and many parish priests were unable to offer them advice or instruction.

While the leaders of the Church were failing to meet their responsibilities, ordinary people desired meaningful religious expression and assurance of their *salvation*, or acceptance into Heaven. As a result, for some, the process of obtaining salvation became almost mechanical. Collections of relics grew more popular as a means to salvation. According to church practice at that time, through veneration of a



Raphael's depiction of Pope Julius II

relic, a person could gain an indulgence—release from all or part of the punishment for sin. Frederick the Wise, Luther's prince, had amassed over five thousand relics. Indulgences attached to them could reduce time in purgatory by 1,443 years. The Church also sold indulgences, in the form of certificates.

Other people sought certainty of salvation in the popular mystical movement known as the Modern Devotion. The Modern Devotion downplayed religious dogma and stressed the need to follow the teachings of Jesus. This deepening of religious life was done within the Catholic Church. However, many people soon found that the worldly-wise clergy had little interest in the spiritual needs of their people. It is this environment that helps to explain the tremendous impact of Luther's ideas.

Reading Check Explaining What was the Modern Devotion?

Martin Luther

TURNING POINT In this section, you will learn how, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther presented a list of Ninety-five Theses that objected to the Church practice of indulgences. The publication of Luther's theses began the Protestant Reformation.

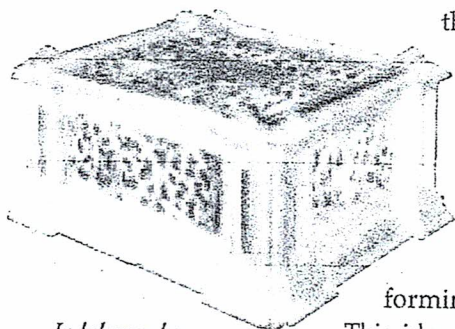
Martin Luther was a monk and a professor at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany, where he lectured on the Bible. Through his study of the Bible, Luther arrived at an answer to a problem—the certainty of salvation—that had bothered him since he had become a monk.

Catholic teaching had stressed that both faith and good works were needed to gain personal salvation. In Luther's eyes, human beings were powerless in the sight of an almighty God and could never do enough good works to earn salvation.

Through his study of the Bible, Luther came to believe that humans are not saved through their good works but through their faith in God. If an individual has faith in God, then God makes

that person just, or worthy of salvation. God will grant salvation because God is merciful. God's grace cannot be earned by performing good works.

This idea, called justification



Indulgence box



The advent of the printing press allowed Luther's views to spread beyond Wittenberg.

(being made right before God) by faith alone, became the chief teaching of the Protestant Reformation. Because Luther had arrived at his understanding of salvation by studying the Bible, the Bible became for Luther, as for all other Protestants, the only source of religious truth.

The Ninety-five Theses Luther did not see himself as a rebel, but he was greatly upset by the widespread selling of indulgences. Especially offensive in his eyes was the monk Johann Tetzel, who sold indulgences with the slogan: "As soon as the coin in the coffer [money box] rings, the soul from purgatory springs." People, Luther believed, were simply harming their chances for salvation by buying these pieces of paper.

On October 31, 1517, Luther, who was greatly angered by the Church's practices, sent a list of Ninety-five Theses to his church superiors, especially the local bishop. The theses were a stunning attack on abuses in the sale of indulgences. Thousands of copies of the Ninety-five Theses were printed and spread to all parts of Germany. Pope Leo X did not take the issue seriously, however. He said that Luther was simply "some drunken German who will amend his ways when he sobers up."

A Break with the Church By 1520, Luther had begun to move toward a more definite break with the Catholic Church. He called on the German princes to overthrow the papacy in Germany and establish a reformed German church. Luther also attacked the Church's system of sacraments. In his view, they were the means by which the pope and the Church had destroyed the real meaning of the gospel for a thousand years. He kept only two sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist (also known as Communion). Luther also called for the clergy to marry. This went against the long-standing Catholic requirement that the clergy remain celibate, or unmarried.

Through all these calls for change, Luther continued to emphasize his new doctrine of salvation. It is faith alone, he said, and not good works, that justifies and brings salvation through Christ.

Unable to accept Luther's ideas, the Church excommunicated him in January 1521. He was also summoned to appear before the imperial diet—or legislative assembly—of the Holy Roman Empire, which was called into session at the city of Worms by the newly elected emperor Charles V. The emperor thought he could convince Luther to change his ideas, but Luther refused.

The young emperor was outraged. "A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for a thousand

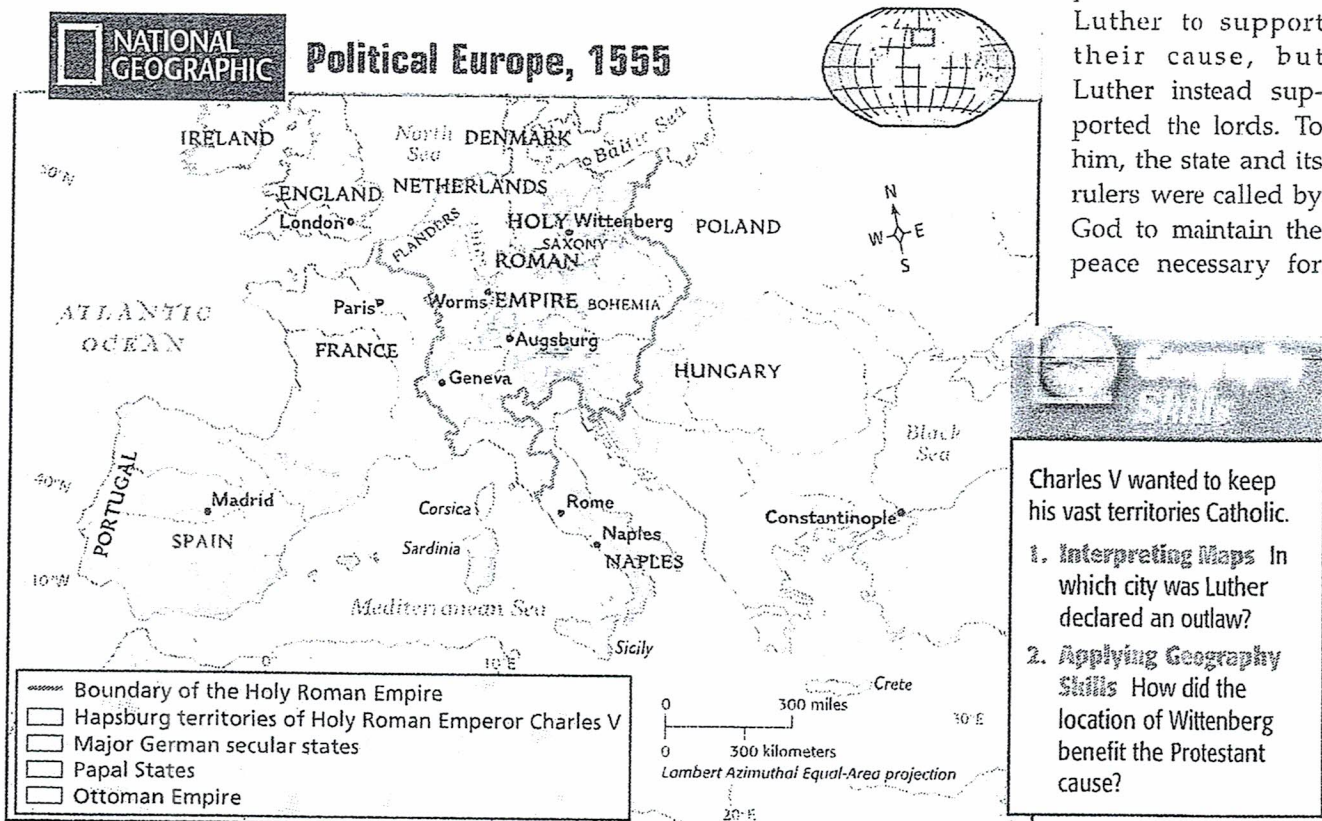
years," he declared, "must be wrong!" By the Edict of Worms, Martin Luther was made an outlaw within the empire. His works were to be burned and Luther himself captured and delivered to the emperor. However, Luther's ruler, Elector Frederick of Saxony, was unwilling to see his famous professor killed. He sent Luther into hiding and then protected him when he returned to Wittenberg at the beginning of 1522.

The Rise of Lutheranism During the next few years, Luther's religious movement became a revolution. Luther was able to gain the support of many of the German rulers among the numerous states that made up the Holy Roman Empire. These rulers quickly took control of the Catholic churches in their territories, forming state churches whose affairs were supervised by the government.

As part of the development of these state-dominated churches, Luther also set up new religious services to replace the Catholic Mass. These featured a worship service consisting of Bible readings, preaching of the word of God, and song. The doctrine developed by Luther soon came to be known as Lutheranism, and the churches as Lutheran churches. Lutheranism was the first Protestant faith.

In June 1524, Luther faced a political crisis when German peasants revolted against their lords. The

peasants looked to Luther to support their cause, but Luther instead supported the lords. To him, the state and its rulers were called by God to maintain the peace necessary for



the spread of the gospel. It was the duty of princes to stop revolt. By the following spring, the German princes had crushed the peasants. Luther found himself even more dependent on state authorities for the growth of his church.

Reading Check **Contrasting** How did Luther's theory of salvation differ from what the Catholic Church believed was necessary for salvation?

Politics in the German Reformation

From its very beginning, the fate of Luther's movement was closely tied to political affairs. Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor (who was also Charles I, the king of Spain), ruled an immense empire consisting of Spain and its colonies, the Austrian lands, Bohemia, Hungary, the Low Countries, the duchy of Milan in northern Italy, and the kingdom of Naples in southern Italy.

Politically, Charles wanted to keep this enormous empire under the control of his dynasty—the Hapsburgs. Religiously, he hoped to preserve the unity of his empire by keeping it Catholic. However, a number of problems kept him busy and cost him both his dream and his health. These same problems helped Lutheranism survive by giving Lutherans time to organize before having to face the Catholic forces.

The chief political concern of Charles V was his rivalry with the king of France, Francis I. Their conflict over disputed territories in a number of areas led to a series of wars that lasted more than 20 years. At the same time, Charles faced opposition from Pope

Clement VII. Guided by political considerations, the pope had joined the side of the French king. The advance of the Ottoman Turks into the eastern part of Charles's empire forced the emperor to send forces there as well.

Finally, the internal political situation in the Holy Roman Empire was not in Charles's favor. Germany was a land of several hundred territorial states. Although all owed loyalty to the emperor, Germany's development in the Middle Ages had enabled these states to free themselves from the emperor's authority. Many individual rulers of the German states supported Luther as a way to assert their own local authority over the authority of the empire and Charles V.

By the time Charles V was able to bring military forces to Germany, the Lutheran princes were well organized. Unable to defeat them, Charles was forced to seek peace.

An end to religious warfare in Germany came in 1555 with the **Peace of Augsburg**. This agreement formally accepted the division of Christianity in Germany. The German states were now free to choose between Catholicism and Lutheranism. Lutheran states were to have the same legal rights as Catholic states. The peace settlement did not recognize the principle of religious toleration for individuals, however. The right of each German ruler to determine the religion of his subjects was accepted, but not the right of the subjects to choose their own religion.

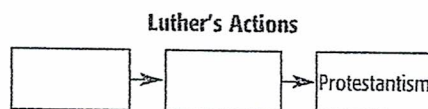
Reading Check **Evaluating** How did the Peace of Augsburg influence the political and religious development of Germany?

Checking for Understanding

- Define** Christian humanism, salvation, indulgence.
- Identify** Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus, Edict of Worms, Charles V, The Peace of Augsburg.
- Locate** Wittenberg, Bohemia, Hungary.
- Explain** the impact of the Edict of Worms.
- List** the ways Erasmus wanted to reform the Catholic Church.

Critical Thinking

- Discuss** What were the consequences of Luther's Ninety-five Theses?
- Sequencing Information** Use a diagram like the one below to show Luther's actions leading to the emergence of Protestantism.



Analyzing Visuals

- Identify** the event illustrated in the painting on page 173. Why was this event significant? How has the painter portrayed Martin Luther?

- Persuasive Writing** Martin Luther's father wanted him to become a lawyer. Write a letter in which Martin Luther tries to convince his father that the path he chose was better than the law.