

1500-1600: The Reformation

Smart History

The Protestant Reformation

At this point in history there is only one church in the West -- the Catholic Church -- under the leadership of the Pope in Rome. The Church had been for some time a notoriously corrupt institution plagued by internal power struggles (at one point in the late 1300s and 1400s there was a power struggle within the church resulting in not one, but three Popes!), and Popes and Cardinals often lived more like Kings or Emperors than spiritual leaders. Popes claimed temporal (or political) power as well as spiritual power, commanded armies, made political alliances and enemies, and waged war. Simony (the selling of church offices) and nepotism (favoritism based on family relationships) were rampant. Clearly, if the Pope was concentrating on these worldly issues, there wasn't much time left for caring for the souls of the faithful! The corruption of the Church was well known, and several attempts had been made to reform the Church, but none of them was successful until Martin Luther in the early 1500s.

Martin Luther, a German priest, began the Protestant Reformation (before we go on, notice that Protestant contains the word "protest" and that reformation contains the word "reform" -- this was an effort, at least at first, to protest against some of the practices of the Catholic Church and to reform the Church). Luther began the Reformation in 1517 by posting his "95 Theses" -- a list of statements that expressed Luther's concerns about some Church practices. Luther has four main gripes with the church that I would like to discuss: 1. Good Works 2. Transubstantiation 3. The Sale of Indulgences 4. The Role of art in the church

1. Good Works

Luther, a very devout man, had experienced a spiritual crisis. Luther recognized that no matter how "good" he tried to be, no matter how he tried to stay away from sin, he still found himself having sinful thoughts. He was fearful that no matter how many good works he did, he could never do enough to earn his place in heaven (remember that, according to the Catholic Church, doing good works, like commissioning works of art for the Church helps one's chances of getting to heaven). I think that this was a profound recognition of the inescapable sinfulness of the human condition. After all, no matter how kind and good we try to be, we all find ourselves having thoughts which are unkind and sometimes much worse. And I'm not talking here about serious

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sinful thoughts, but also more minor thoughts: for example, haven't you ever been jealous of a friend's success, and then in your heart found yourself happy when something went wrong for them? Luther found a way out of this problem by reading St. Paul, who wrote "The just shall live by faith alone." Translated into 21st century English that means that those who go to heaven (the just) will get there by faith alone -- not by doing good works! You can't, in other words, according to Luther earn yourself a place in heaven.

2. Transubstantiation

Transubstantiation is the miracle whereby, during Holy Communion, when the priest administers the bread and wine, they change (the prefix "trans" means to change) their substance into the body and blood of Christ. Luther said that the priests -- and even the Pope -- had no special power to make that change happen. He said the priests and the Pope have no closer relationship to God than anyone else, and he denied that anything changed substance during Holy Communion. Luther says that if you go back and read the bible it says nothing about bread and wine changing their substance into the body and blood of Christ by the power of a priest -- therefore do not listen to the teachings of the church, and read the Bible for yourself (see below for how this was now possible)! Luther thereby challenged one of the central sacraments of the Catholic Church, one of its central miracles, and thereby one of the ways that human beings can achieve grace with God, or salvation. Luther essentially says that people should not listen to what the Church tells them -- because the church misleads them about the true teachings of Christ, they should read the bible for themselves -- and guess what! This is exactly the time of the invention of the Printing Press! And so one of the first things Luther does is he translates the bible into German and it gets printed and for the first time in history people can read the bible for themselves! Before this all bibles were copied by hand.

3. The Sale of Indulgences

Luther attacked one of the most obvious abuses of the time -- the Sale of Indulgences by the Church. This was a practice where the church sold you a piece of paper that bought you time off from purgatory. Purgatory is a place between heaven and hell, where souls who need to do more repenting go before they go to heaven. This meant that people who were wealthy -- who could

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purchase an indulgence, spent less time in purgatory than poor people -- exactly the opposite of Christ's teachings where he says that it is easier for a poor man to get to heaven than for a rich man.

4. The role of art in the church

Luther and his followers agreed that there should be no art in the church for two reasons: 1. It costs too much money when it could be better spent on feeding the poor. 2. It is too close to a violation of one of the ten commandments which forbids the making of any idol or image of God. What we see as a result is that in areas of Europe which convert to Protestantism is that artists can no longer work for their most important patron -- the church! We'll look at Protestant Holland to see what happens to artists there.

The Counter-Reformation

At first, the Church ignored Martin Luther, thinking that he would just go away. When that didn't work, they excommunicated him (in other words they kicked him out of the church so, according to them he could never go to heaven). Luther's ideas (and variations of them, including Calvinism and Anglicanism) quickly spread throughout Europe. As we have seen, there were many reasons for opposing the Church during this period. The Church's response to the threat from Luther and others during this period is called the Counter-Reformation ("counter" meaning against).

In 1545 the Church called the Council of Trent to deal with the issues raised by Luther. The Council of Trent was an assembly of high officials in the Church who met (on and off for eighteen years) in the Northern Italian town of Trent for 25 sessions.

These are some of the outcomes of the Council:

1. The Council agreed that the Church was corrupt and needed reform in several areas. They prohibited any further sale of indulgences and simony was disallowed.
2. The Council denied the Lutheran idea of justification by faith. They affirmed, in other words, their Doctrine of Merit, which allows human beings to redeem themselves through Good Works, and through the sacraments.
3. They affirmed the existence of Purgatory and the usefulness of prayer and indulgences in shortening a person's stay in purgatory.

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4. They reaffirmed the belief in transubstantiation
5. They reaffirmed the necessity and correctness of religious art

So, at the Council of Trent, the Church reaffirms the usefulness of images -- but is careful not to violate the commandment against creating graven images. They are careful, in other words, to try to prevent people from worshipping the images themselves. But the images are important "because the honour which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent" and "because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety."

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