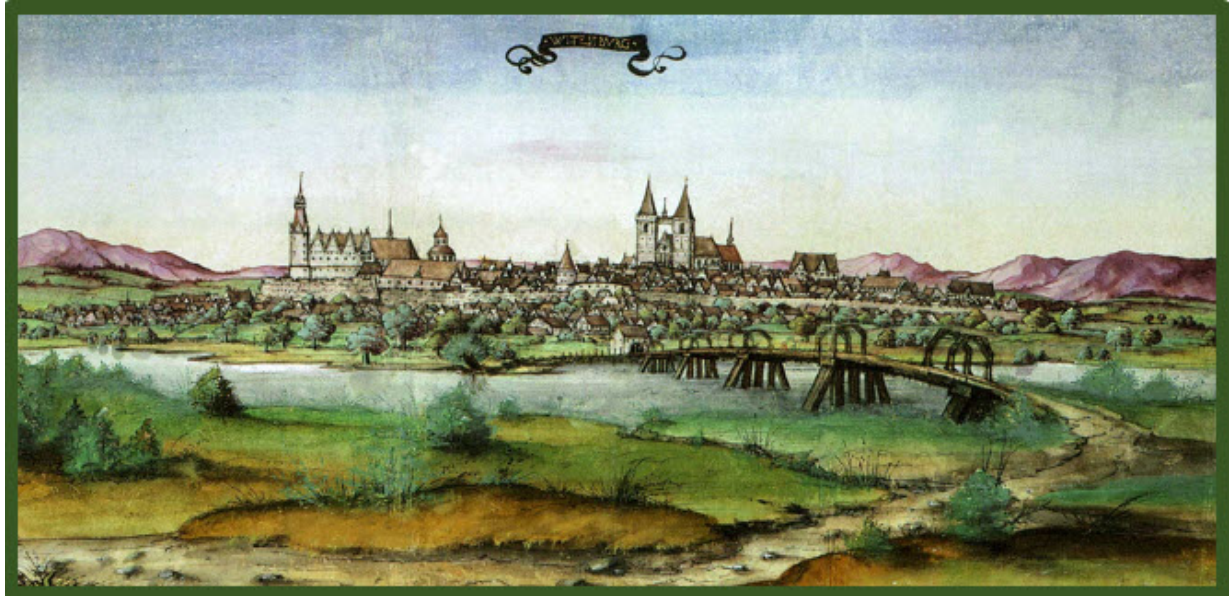




CHALLENGING THE CHURCH



Wittenberg, Germany: 1536

Unit Overview

The Roman Catholic Church, which represented all of Europe's Christians throughout the Middle Ages, was a major social, political and economic force. Its influence, however, began to decline as the fifteenth century drew to a close. Abuses of power and the spirit of the Renaissance led Martin Luther and others to question its teachings and its mission. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, more Christians were reading and interpreting the Bible on their own. This led to demands for reform and eventually to the development of new religious groups. Let's see how it all happened.

Questions about the Church

The Renaissance encouraged Europeans to view their world with a critical eye. With books more readily available thanks to the development of the printing press, people were exposed to a wider variety of opinions and philosophies. Many traditional values were questioned,

including authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Many European Christians concluded that the Church had been abusing its power and had been ignoring its true mission. The lavish lifestyle of the Renaissance popes, who controlled Rome from 1447 to 1534, reinforced this idea. These men became increasingly more involved in Europe's political and economic affairs. They raised armies to defend the Papal States and plotted against the rulers of other Italian cities. As patrons of the arts, the popes used church funds to hire painters, sculptors and architects. Although these activities created beautiful churches and memorable works of art, they required huge amounts of money.



St. Peter's Basilica: Construction Started during the Renaissance Papacy

To finance their patronage of the arts, the popes approved increases in fees for services, such as baptisms and weddings. The sale of **indulgences** also became popular. An indulgence, granted by a clergyman, decreased the amount of time a soul had to spend in **purgatory**, a place of cleansing before entering heaven. Traditionally, priests offered indulgences as rewards for joining crusades or other good deeds. By the late 1400s, however, people could obtain them in exchange for a gift of money to the Church. Many Christians, who were now reading the Bible on their own due to the printing press, resented this practice. The middle class, already angry over the increase in fees, saw indulgences as an easy way for sinners to buy themselves out of trouble. For many, it was simply another sign of corruption within the Church. Protests against the practice became common and eventually led to a full-scale revolt.

Why Were Some Europeans Angry with the Church?			
Political	Social	Religious	Economic
<p>Some European rulers saw the pope as a foreign power that challenged their leadership.</p> <p>Monarchs resented the pope's claim that the Church was the supreme authority in Europe.</p>	<p>The printing press spread ideas that questioned the Church's teaching.</p> <p>Renaissance humanism led people to be critical of the Church.</p>	<p>Some people thought that the sale of indulgences and other practices were unacceptable.</p> <p>Some Church leaders had become corrupt and worldly.</p>	<p>The middle class resented having to pay taxes to the Church.</p> <p>European rulers were jealous of the Church's wealth.</p>

Martin Luther and the Protest of Indulgences

In 1517, **Martin Luther**, a German monk and theology professor in the German city of **Wittenberg**, brought the issue of indulgences to the forefront. A priest named **John Tetzel** wanted to collect money for a construction project at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. With this in mind, he set up shop on the outskirts of Wittenberg and sold indulgences. He told his customers that their purchases would ensure a quick access to heaven for them and their relatives. Martin Luther was already disillusioned by the corruption of the Church, and the news of this example was the last straw.



Doors of Castle Church: Wittenberg, Germany

Furious, Luther made a list of ninety-five reasons why indulgences were unacceptable. For example, he noted that there was no biblical basis for them and that Christians could only gain admittance to heaven by faith. The *Ninety-five Theses*, as they came to be called, were written in Latin and intended for Church leaders rather than the average person. In Luther's time, the doors of churches served as community bulletin boards. Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the main entry of **Castle Church** as a form of protest. This action did capture the attention of Church officials. At the same time, the document was quickly translated into several European languages, printed and distributed across the continent. This pushed the **Reformation**, which began as a movement to correct abuses within the Roman Catholic Church, into high gear.



From Reform to Protest

The Church demanded that Luther take back or recant his statements. He refused and urged Christians to reject the authority of the pope. It was no surprise that **Pope Leo X** excommunicated Martin Luther in 1521. The dispute between the monk and the Church soon involved all of Germany. In the sixteenth century, German territory was divided into several states with each one ruled by a prince. Together, they made up the **Holy Roman Empire**. Emperor **Charles V** supported the pope's position in the controversy. He ordered Luther to appear at a **diet** or meeting of the German princes in the city of **Worms**. Like the pope, Charles V ordered Martin Luther to admit that he was wrong. Again, Luther refused. The emperor called him an outlaw and declared it a crime for anyone to offer him even basic necessities. Although some people agreed with the emperor, thousands of Germans considered Luther a hero.



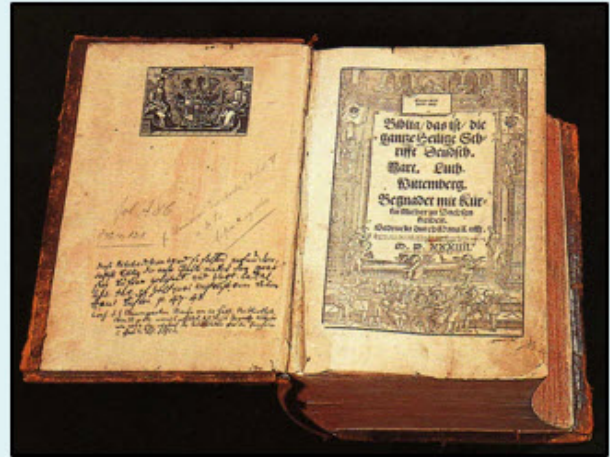
An Artist's Rendition of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms

Following the Diet at Worms, Luther spent the next year in the German province of **Saxony**. Here, **Prince Frederick** offered him shelter in his castle. During this time, Luther translated the New Testament of the Bible into German. Because no one had been arrested for assisting him, he returned to Wittenberg in 1522 and was amazed at the changes that had taken place. Local priests were conducting services in German rather than in Latin and were referring to themselves as ministers. Things were so different that Luther's followers thought of themselves as a separate religious group called **Lutherans**. By 1530, they were also known as **Protestants** because they protested the pope's authority.

Luther's Desk



Luther's 1534 German Bible



Support for the Protestant Movement

The Protestant Reformation movement attracted support for several reasons. Some clergy saw it as an opportunity to clean up the corruption within the Roman Catholic Church. In some cases, German princes took advantage of the situation and seized valuable Church lands for themselves. Many German middle class citizens simply no longer wanted to send their hard-earned money to support Church officials in Italy. The peasants saw the Reformation as a way to end the feudal system once and for all. This viewpoint led to the **Peasants' Revolt** in 1524. When the rebels began to burn churches and monasteries, however, Martin Luther refused to support their cause. To restore order, the nobles used their soldiers to end the rebellion, and this resulted in the deaths of thousands of peasants.



War also broke out between the Roman Catholic princes and the Protestant princes. Charles V tried to force the Lutheran rulers to return to the Roman Catholic Church, but he had little success. In 1555, the German princes signed the **Peace of Augsburg**, an agreement which permitted each prince to choose the religious faith followed in his territory. For the most part, the northern states adopted Lutheranism while the southern states remained Roman Catholic. It

was certain, however, that the Roman Catholic Church would never again represent all of Europe's Christian population.

What Happened Next?

Although Martin Luther continued to write sermons and pamphlets until his death in 1546, the Protestant Reformation became less dependent on his leadership. Other reformers demanded change and challenged the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church in several parts of Europe, especially England. Before reading about these events in the next unit, review the names and terms in Unit 22; then, answer Questions 21 through 30.