

His-Story

Church history and why it matters to me

THE REFORMATION 1500-1600

I. A word about history

How shall we labor with any effect to build up the church, if we have no thorough knowledge of her history, or fail to apprehend it from the proper point of observation? History is, and must ever continue to be, next to God's word, the richest fountain of wisdom, and the surest guide to all successful practical activity. To reject her voice is to rob ourselves of our own right to exist, or, at least, to condemn our own life; since we owe to her, in fact, whether we choose to do so or not, all that we can become. –Philip Schaff

II. Where are we? The Context of the Reformation

A. Political context

1. Germany
 - a. Not completely unified, but the first to invent the printing press, which was one of Germany's greatest products during the Renaissance
 - b. Elector of Saxony (Ruler of Germany): Frederick the Wise (1463-1525)
 - Wealthy and influential ruler
 - While retaining his Roman Catholic faith, he supported Luther and the tenants of the Reformation
2. Holy Roman Empire
 - a. Controlled by the House of Hapsburg (in Austria)
 - b. Charles V became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1519
 - c. House of Hapsburg produced influential leaders for Bohemia, England, Ireland, Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Portugal, Spain and several Dutch and Italian principalities
3. France
 - a. Strong and unified as a nation
 - b. Francis 1 became king in 1515
 - c. Context to the original Cinderella story (Written by Charles Perrault in 1697, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, Cendrillon*)
4. England
 - a. Now unified after the Hundred Year's War
 - b. House of Tudor (Henry VII)
 - c. Henry VIII became king in 1509
5. Italy
 - a. Not a unified country
 - b. Five major regions: Venice, Milan, Florence, Papal States, Naples
 - c. Spiritual decline in the papacy



Hapsburg Castle



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B. Social context

1. Growing cities: more people moving to the cities from the country
2. New money: Economy no longer based on land and titles, but based on business, ingenuity, and investment
3. Nationalism and patriotism continued to increase in each country

C. Intellectual context

1. New university in Wittenburg, Germany (highly scholastic)
2. Latin waning in popularity and use; renewed interest in the classics (Greek) as well as each country's national language
3. Printing
 - a. Allowed literature to be widely disseminated
 - b. Gutenberg Bible printed in 1455

D. Global context

1. Discoveries spearheaded by the Western Powers: Portugal and Spain
 - a. Columbus and the Americas (1492)
Note: the name *America* dates from the early 16th century and is believed to derive from the Latin *Americus*, the name of Amerigo Vespucci, who sailed along the west coast of South America in 1501 (*English Oxford Dictionary*).
 - b. Magellan (1519-1522): circumnavigated the globe
2. Decline of Christianity in Asia
 - a. Two small pockets of Christianity survived: the northern hills of Syria, and the in India on the Malabar Coast
 - b. Why did Christianity thrive in Europe and the New World but declined in Asia?
 - Geographical isolation
 - Small numbers of adherants
 - Persecution
 - Growing strength of Asian religions: Persian Zoroastrianism, Indian Hinduism, Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism, Arabic Islam
 - c. *No single one of the above reasons can be taken by itself as a definitive answer, and not even all of them taken together are sufficient... There are times when history can only be described, not explained, and perhaps this history of Christianity in Asia is best left as one of the mysteries of the providence of God* (Moffet, pg. 509).
3. *An old world was passing away, and a new one was being born in its place. It was unavoidable that the church too would feel the impact of the new times and that, just as new forms of being human were emerging, new forms of being Christian would also emerge. Exactly how this was to be done, however, was open to debate. Some sought to reform the old church from within, while others lost all hope for such reformation, and openly broke with the papacy. In such an age of turmoil, many sincere Christians went through profound soul searching that eventually led them to conclusions and positions they themselves could not have predicted. Others, equally sincere and devout, came to opposite conclusions. The resulting disagreements and conflict marked the entire age that we now call the Reformation of the sixteenth century* (Justo González. *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2.* page 10).

III. Religious Context

- A. Church (and papacy) moved more by the glories of the Renaissance than by the message of the Cross
 1. *Through war, intrigue, bribery, and licentiousness, these popes sought to restore and even to outdo the glories of ancient Rome. As a result, while most people still believed in the supreme authority of the Roman see, many found it difficult to reconcile their faith in the papacy with their distrust for its actual occupants* (González, pg. 6).
 2. In the church: "*Tutto va al contrario*" (Everything is falling apart)
 - a. Preoccupation with money: the church needed more and more money to build

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and keep up their buildings and cathedrals

- b. Obsession with relics: church's growing need for relics and artifacts to display and venerate
- c. Abuse of indulgences: paying to reduce someone's time in purgatory
- d. Immorality of the church leaders: while celibacy was the law of the church, many bishops and clergy had (and flaunted) illegitimate children
- e. Monasteries and abbeys became places of leisure and laziness

B. The church turning a deaf ear to the real problems in culture

1. Fear

- a. Fear of the black plague
- b. Fear of the threat of Islam and Turkish takeovers who were moving north (Muslim Turks had overtaken Gallipoli in 1354 and Constantiople in 1453)

2. Despair

- a. Uncertainty about eternal fate; the church should have been speaking into the lives of those who doubted
- b. The church offered no peace to troubled souls
 "How can I find peace of conscience? I suffer so much in my heart, and I find no release for my suffering and anxiety in confession, prayer, the mass, pilgrimages, or penance—in no work under the sun" (Heinrich von Kettenbach).

IV. The Reformation

A. Officially began October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany

B. Luther's purpose:

- 1. To point out, using Scripture, the abuses and corruption of the church
- 2. To bring about much needed reformation of the church
- 3. *Luther's purpose [was] to contrast the Bible's teaching with human ecclesiasticism and sacerdotalism—a bold, and astonishingly bold, and a powerful, and astonishingly powerful, assertion of the evangelical doctrine of salvation* (B. B. Warfield, *The Ninety-five Theses in their Theological Significance*).

V. Why this segment of history matters (or *should matter*) to me

- A. How does this lesson enhance your knowledge of God?
- B. In what new ways are you challenged in your own walk with Christ?