

The Reformation

On October 31, 1517, a priest named Martin Luther marched up to the door of his local church and posted a document that would change the world forever. Let's learn more about this man and the movement he inspired: the Protestant Reformation.

The Catholic Church was far and away the most powerful institution in medieval Europe. Not only was it a religious home for millions, but it was also the center of social and political life at large. It ran orphanages, gave alms to the poor, offered educational programs, and owned over a third of all the land in Europe. But the Church was also plagued by corruption and power struggles. Nepotism and bribery were commonplace. Popes claimed dominion over all other rulers of Europe, creating their own political alliances and sometimes even raising armies to wage war. Over the years, some attempted to challenge the Church's authority, but none came close to the impact that Luther would later have.

As a monk in Erfurt, Germany, Luther was initially devoted to the Church. But eventually, he became disillusioned with what he was seeing. At the time, a major source of revenue for the Church was indulgences—certificates you could buy to reduce your time in purgatory. The more money you spent, the clergy said, the faster you'd get into heaven. Luther was outraged by this practice and thought that the Church was taking advantage of believers. So, he wrote up a list of all his objections—95 in total—and posted it on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg.

The Catholic Church was not too happy about this development. At first they tried to just ignore Luther, but his ideas were spreading quickly. Over the next several years, the Church dispatched priests from Rome to debate Luther and quell his resistance. But their efforts had the opposite effect. Luther only became more radical over time, and his disagreements with Church doctrine extended far beyond indulgences. While Church officials believed that people earn their place in heaven by doing good works, Luther argued that faith alone guarantees salvation. He also challenged core Church rituals, or sacraments, as unbiblical, and denied that priests had any real spiritual powers. Everyday people, he said, didn't need the clergy to mediate their connection to God. These beliefs formed the foundations of Protestantism—a word that, as you might

notice, prominently features the word “protest.”

Things came to a head in 1521, when the Church summoned Luther and asked him to disavow his statements. After he refused, he was declared a heretic and excommunicated from the Church. From there, Luther’s celebrity only grew. He preached to massive crowds across Germany and wrote hundreds of articles outlining his ideology and attacking his opponents. And in 1534, he published his most radical work yet: a German edition of the Bible. For the first time ever, regular people could read the scriptures for themselves instead of relying on a priest to translate them from Latin. Hundreds of thousands of copies were printed, and it became one of the bestselling books of its time.

Luther believed that if everyone could read the same text, they’d all come to the same conclusions. This was a major miscalculation. Not only did Luther give people the ability to read the scriptures themselves, but he also told them that their opinions were just as legitimate as those of the clergy. Naturally, people started coming up with lots of different ideas on how to be a good Christian. Groups like the Zwinglians, the Calvinists, and the Anabaptists all eventually split from the Lutherans over religious disagreements.

The Protestant Reformation was aided in large part by the invention of a key technology: the printing press. Luther was able to distribute his ideas far and wide in the form of pamphlets, posters, and cartoons—and his opponents followed suit. Historically, books were incredibly expensive and time-consuming to produce, and since most people were illiterate anyway, there was little point to creating them. But everyone wanted to get their hands on Luther’s Bible. Though it was still too expensive for many peasants to afford, it was distributed widely to churches and schools throughout the region.

Over the next couple of centuries, the Protestant Reformation would transform the social landscape of Europe, leading to political upheaval, further religious schisms, and even all-out war. Still, Luther’s movement lived on. Today, Protestantism is one of the three major branches of Christianity worldwide, with hundreds of denominations to its name.