CHURCH HISTORY
Week Six: Reforming the Church (1500–1619)

Renaissance Critics

By 1500, it was clear to many observers that the Catholic Church, particularly the papacy, was in a state of moral and spiritual decline. This spiritual declension helped to usher in an unprecedented period of reforms, schisms, and religious conflicts. Some of the earliest critics of Rome were Renaissance figures such as Erasmus, Lorenzo Valla, John Colet, and Michelangelo. The most famous of the Renaissance critics was Erasmus, a humanist scholar who edited a critical edition of the Greek New Testament and wrote several tracts criticizing the immorality of the Catholic clergy (including the pope). Erasmus was widely considered to be the greatest scholar of his era.

Valla and Colet were also humanist scholars. Valla demonstrated that the Latin Vulgate had mistranslated a key Greek word, causing Catholics to read “do penance” every time the Bible calls for repentance. He also proved a famous document that supported papal supremacy was a forgery. Colet was the dean (senior pastor) of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. He publicly preached against Catholic corruption and immorality. Michelangelo, the famous artist, was a member of the *spirituali*, a reform movement that championed justification by faith alone and criticized clergy corruption. These Renaissance critics remained critical, but committed members of the Catholic Church, though Erasmus in particular inspired many of the early reformers who left the Church.

The Lutheran Movement

The first movement to break away from the Catholic Church was the Lutherans. Martin Luther abandoned his legal studies to become a monk, much to the chagrin of his parents. Luther harbored an immense fear of God’s wrath against his sin, leading Luther to become a very legalistic monk. He earned a doctoral degree in biblical studies and became a professor at the University of Wittenberg. While lecturing on Psalms and Romans, Luther began to struggle with his own legalism. He also became increasingly concerned with corruption in the Church, especially the abuse of indulgences. In 1517, Luther published the *Ninety-Five Theses*, a document that criticized indulgences and pushed back against supreme papal authority. By 1520, Luther had embraced justification by faith alone and the supreme authority of Scripture, had rejected papal authority, and was arguing for a German state church.

In 1521, the pope excommunicated Luther and the emperor demanded that Luther appear before the Diet of Worms. While testifying before the emperor and the German nobles, Luther famously argued that his conscience was captive to God’s Word and that he wouldn’t back away from his views. After hiding out in a castle for a brief season, Luther returned to Wittenberg in 1522 and spent the next quarter century building the movement that the Catholics dubbed the *Lutherans*. In addition to justification by faith alone and the supreme authority of Scripture, Luther advocated congregational freedom, the priesthood of all believers, predestination, and clerical marriage—Luther married Katherine von Bora in 1525. He also wrote catechisms, composed hymns, and helped draft confessions that helped to define the fledgling movement.
Following Luther’s death in 1546, leadership of the Lutherans passed to Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s protégé. Melanchthon, who was a gifted systematic theologian, set out to further define and consolidate the Lutheran movement. Melanchthon disagreed with Luther about predestination, and since that time most Lutherans have followed Melanchthon rather than Luther. In 1555, Lutherans and Catholics signed the Peace of Augsburg, a treaty that declared that every state in the Holy Roman Empire (Germany) could be either Catholic or Lutheran, depending upon the preferences of the nobleman who ruled that state. The treaty was necessary so that Lutherans and Catholics could form a military alliance against the Turks, who were threatening to invade Central Europe from North Africa. Reformed Christians and Anabaptists weren’t included in the Peace of Augsburg.

The Early Reformed Tradition

In 1519, Ulrich Zwingli became the new pastor of the Great Minster in Zurich, at that time the most important church in the most important city in the Swiss states. Zwingli soon broke from Catholic tradition by preaching verse-by-verse expositional sermons through entire books of the Bible. He also secretly married his longtime mistress, defended his parishioners who refused to fast during Lent, and finally renounced Catholicism and resigned his church in 1522 (they subsequently renounced the Catholic Church, reconstituted as a new congregation, and called Zwingli as their “new” pastor). He convinced the city’s elected officials to officially endorse and help implement reform measures in all the churches in Zurich. Soon the so-called Reformed movement spread to other cities such as Strasbourg, Bern, and Basel.

Zwingli was similar to Luther in many ways. He affirmed justification by faith alone, predestination, infant baptism, and close cooperation between church and state. But Luther and Zwingli also disagreed in some key areas. Zwingli was far more conservative in his views of corporate worship, arguing that only practices evidenced in the New Testament were appropriate for public worship. Luther believed churches were free to add new elements to public worship that were not practiced by the apostolic churches. Far more divisive were their respective views of the Lord’s Supper. Luther argued that Christ was physically present in the bread and the wine, though he rejected transubstantiation. Zwingli countered that Christ was spiritual present in the celebration of communion, but argued Christ was physically present at the Father’s right hand. This quarrel over communion prevented the Lutheran and Reformed churches from merging into a single movement. Zwingli died in battle against Catholic invaders in 1531, but not before he inspired other Reformed leaders such as Martin Bucer and Heinrich Bullinger.

The English Reformation

By the 1520s, some English professors and pastors were reading Luther’s works and embracing justification by faith. The most famous early English Protestant was William Tyndale, who published an English translation of most of the Bible before being martyred in Belgium in 1536. Henry VIII, the king of England, was a devout Catholic who desperately wanted a male heir, which would facilitate a peaceful transition of royal power. Unfortunately for Henry, his wife Catherine of Aragon failed to give birth to that heir (though two sons died in infancy). Henry wanted to annul the marriage and find a more “fertile” queen (by which he meant one who could
produce healthy baby boys), but the pope refused on political grounds—Catherine’s nephew was the German emperor, who was the pope’s chief political rival on the Continent. Henry fell in love with Anne Boleyn, and in 1533 he secured an annulment from an English court, declared himself head of the Church of England, and began persecuting clergy who remained loyal to Rome. Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, began leading the Church of England in a cautiously Reformed direction.

Over the next quarter century, England vacillated between Protestantism and Catholicism. Henry put the brakes on most reforms in 1536, but his son and successor Edward VI, a convinced Protestant, allowed Cranmer to pick up where he had left off a dozen years earlier. (Edward was the son of Henry’s third wife, Jane Seymour—he married six times, but Edward was his only surviving son.) Under Cranmer’s leadership, the Church of England became moderately Reformed in theology, though only incremental changes were made to English worship. When Edward died in 1553, Mary Tudor, daughter of Catherine of Aragon, became queen and reverted England to Catholicism. Hundreds of Protestant pastors were exiled to the Continent and at least three hundred were martyred. The most famous martyrs were Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, two Reformed bishops, and Archbishop Cranmer, who by now was an old man.

When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth Tudor, daughter of Anne Boleyn, was crowned queen. Elizabeth, who ruled until 1603, implemented a moderate strategy intended to unite the English people in terms of religion. The so-called Elizabethan Settlement combined a mildly Reformed theology with a generally Catholic approach to worship, though perceived extremes on both ends were rejected. English citizens were allowed to affirm whatever private religious views they desired, but their public practice had to conform to the Book of Common Prayer, which embodied Elizabeth’s moderate sympathies. Debates over the merits of the Elizabethan Settlement defined English Christianity for the next century and a half.

### The Later Reformed Movement

In the decade after Zwingli’s death, John Calvin emerged as the key Reformed leader. Calvin was the most important Protestant scholar of the Reformation era. He led the Reformation in Geneva, which many considered to be the model Reformed city. Thought the citizens of Geneva resented Calvin early on (and briefly ejected him from the city), by the early 1540s they had accepted his reform measures. Dancing, drunkenness, and public swearing were declared illegal. Calvin founded a ministerial academy to train younger pastors in Reformed theology. A church-sponsored public welfare system was enacted to care for the poor. All parents were urged to catechize their children in the Reformed faith. Before long, other Reformed leaders from all over Europe were traveling to Geneva to learn from Calvin’s example. Missionaries were sent from Geneva to France and Brazil.

Calvin was the most prolific theologian during the Reformation era; his Institutes of the Christian Religion is still considered the foundational theology text of the Reformed tradition. Calvin built upon the doctrinal foundation of Zwingli and other early Reformed theologians in advocating justification by faith alone, predestination, expositional preaching, infant baptism, church-state cooperation, and biblically regulated worship. Calvin also added his own emphases
on progressive sanctification, the centrality of prayer in the Christian life, a close relationship between Word and Spirit, the ongoing importance of God’s moral law, and foreign missions.

After Calvin’s death, his protégé Theodore Beza became the leading Reformed theologian. Beza further developed Calvin’s views, becoming the father of the Reformed Orthodoxy movement. The emphases of Reformed Orthodox thinkers such as Beza and the English theologian William Perkins so pervaded the movement that much of what we call “Calvinism” is based as much on Reformed Orthodoxy as it is Calvin himself (who, of course, was himself building on earlier thinkers). When one of Beza’s former students, Jacob Arminius, began to challenge the Reformed understanding of salvation, a group of Reformed theologians met at the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619 and adopted a document called the Canons of Dort. This statement codified the so-called five points of Calvinism, which became the most well-known understanding of salvation in the Reformed tradition.

The Counter-Reformation

Some Catholics, such as the aforementioned spirituali, agreed with justification by faith alone, though they remained loyal to the pope and waffled on other points of Protestant theology. The most influential of the spirituali, Cardinal Contarini, tried to broker a compromise that would lead to reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants. In 1541–1542, representative Catholics and Protestants met in Regensburg, Germany; Contarini was the pope’s official ambassador, while the key Protestants were Philip Melanchthon and Martin Bucer. The parties negotiated a consensus statement on justification, but it was rejected by the pope for being too Protestant and by Luther for being too Catholic! The pope shut down the meeting and called for an ecumenical council to respond to the Protestants.

The Council of Trent met off and on from 1545 to 1563. No Protestants were invited to participate in the council. Several key decisions were made at Trent, most of which were in response to Protestant ideas. The apocryphal books were formally declared to be inspired in the same way as the sixty-six canonical books are inspired. The Latin Vulgate was declared to be the authoritative Biblical text. Unwritten church tradition was declared equally authoritative with Scripture. Instant justification by faith was rejected in favor of justification as a progressive act based upon faith and works. The seven sacraments were reaffirmed, and the mass was declared to be a “propitiatory sacrifice.” Clerical celibacy, purgatory, and the accumulation of relics were reaffirmed. The Council of Trent is often considered the height of the so-called Counter-Reformation, the official Roman Catholic response to Protestantism. Trent made it clear that Protestants were heretics who were headed for eternal damnation unless they repent of their errors and reunite with Rome. This remained the official view of Rome toward Protestants until the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965.