Luther and the Reformation in Europe

1500–64

RUSSEL TARR AND KEITH RANDELL

FOURTH EDITION
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**Dedication**  

**Keith Randell (1943–2002)**  

The Access to History series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to ‘cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be’. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.
Luther’s protest

The German Reformation is a truly remarkable story. Martin Luther became a monk following a promise he made to St Anne, his patron saint. After a blinding revelation, he decided to rebel by nailing a list of complaints against the Catholic Church to the door of his city church. This was a brave action. In the sixteenth century, the Christian Church was incredibly powerful, and there was only one accepted Christian faith in the whole of Europe: Roman Catholicism, led by the Pope in Rome. Luther’s protest started a process that ended with the division of the Christian Church into two rival factions: Protestant and Catholic. This separation, known as the Reformation, has been a source of fascination for tens of thousands of students over several centuries, and there is no sign of the interest abating.

This chapter introduces the Reformation by covering the following themes:

★ The indulgences controversy
★ Attempts to silence Luther 1517–21
★ The main disagreements between Lutherans and Catholics

The key debate on page 13 of this chapter asks the question: When did the Reformation begin and end?

Key dates

1505 Luther joined the priesthood
1511 Luther began lecturing at Wittenberg University
1516 Sola fide: Luther concluded that ‘faith alone’ gets a soul into heaven
1517 Luther listed his complaints – the Ninety-five Theses – against Church abuses
1518 Luther appeared before Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg

1519 Luther appeared before Johann Eck at Leipzig
 Sola scriptura: Luther concluded that the Bible was the sole source of religious authority

1521 Jan. Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X
 April Luther was outlawed by Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms
 May Luther was ‘kidnapped’ and hidden at Wartburg Castle
The indulgences controversy

Why did Luther find the indulgences being sold by Tetzel particularly offensive?

Between the years 1517 and 1521 the actions of Martin Luther shook the foundations of the Catholic Church, and threatened to shatter the medieval concept of Christendom. This situation was not the outcome of a planned series of attacks that was designed to have this result. It was just that one thing led to another until eventually there was no going back, and the only way forward was schism (the division of the Church into several Churches). It was as much a matter of events controlling people as of people controlling events.

Johann Tetzel

Luther’s initial protest was triggered by the activities of Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar, authorised by the Pope to sell ‘indulgences’ – paper certificates promising forgiveness of sins. In the past, the Catholic Church had clearly

KEY TERM

Christendom The territories whose official religion was Christianity.

SOURCE A

Why did Luther’s Ninety-five Theses focus so heavily on the sale of indulgences?

Johann Tetzel Put to Flight by the Mighty Hero Luther is the title of this pamphlet showing Tetzel going about his business.
insisted that these documents only worked if the purchaser was genuinely remorseful for their sins. However, Tetzel brushed aside this subtlety by selling the most powerful indulgences ever offered. Not only could they assure forgiveness for all the sins of the purchaser, they could even secure the release from purgatory of the soul of a friend or relative who was already dead.

In his sermons, which were little more than advertisements encouraging people to buy, Tetzel appealed to his audiences to prove how much they loved their dead parents or children by giving them the most precious gift of all. The jingle ran: ‘As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, So the soul from purgatory springs.’ Tens of thousands of people, including many from Wittenberg who made special journeys to reach Tetzel, invested their savings in indulgences. It was with these events especially in mind that Luther wrote his Ninety-five Theses.

The Ninety-five Theses: timing

Legend has it that on the eve of All Saints’ Day, 31 October 1517, Luther pinned the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the main church in Wittenberg, the capital of electoral Saxony. The theses were in Latin and were intended to invite academic debate on the subject. The fact that they were pinned to the church door was not unusual. This was an accepted way of ‘going public’ with a point of view in the days before newspapers and television. What was a little unusual was the timing of the action. The Ninety-five Theses appeared just a few hours before the one day in the year on which the Elector of Saxony sold indulgences to those who visited his famous collection of holy relics. Luther clearly had intended his arguments to receive wide publicity.

The main ideas

At this time Luther was a professor at the recently founded University of Wittenberg. His particular interest was the Bible, about which he had been lecturing at the university since he had been sent there in 1511. Luther was driven by a remarkably strong inner force which gave him no peace as long as he remained in doubt about the exact way in which God decided who should enter heaven. This force had been the most important influence in his life ever since he had become a monk in 1505 at the age of 21 following a promise he had made to St Anne, his patron saint (a holy figure associated with a particular trade), for protecting him when caught in a frightening thunderstorm.

In his early years, Luther had accepted the Church’s teaching that salvation was to be gained by being ‘sin-free’ at the time of death. This could be assured by carrying out good works in life which could counterbalance any sins committed. It was almost a book-keeping exercise. Yet the more Luther tried, the more he became convinced that the task was impossible. Humanity was so weighed down with the original sin committed by Adam and Eve that it was hopeless trying to wipe it out. He became deeply depressed about the lack of control he had over his fate. He grew to fear God as a figure of vengeance who punished humanity in eternity for every sin committed in the earthly life.
Luther’s sense of despair slowly disappeared with his increasing study of the Bible. He became convinced that here, rather than in the teachings of the Church, lay the true meaning of God’s will. In 1516 he realised in a flash of inspiration that salvation was secured by what he believed and not by what he did. He no longer saw God as the terrible judge who weighed each life in the balance and rejected those he found wanting, but rather as the God of love who was freely offering salvation to all who would believe in Him and in His son, Jesus Christ. He interpreted the force of the phrase ‘by faith are ye saved’ as being ‘by faith alone are you saved’. So the Latin phrase sola fide (by faith alone) became the central idea of Luther’s thinking. Now, for the first time in his life, he felt certain of salvation, writing that ‘It is written: “The just person lives by faith.” I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith … All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light.’

Luther became convinced that the Church’s teachings on matters of salvation were fundamentally incorrect. Good works were not only useless in gaining salvation: they could even lead to damnation if they were looked on as a substitute for faith.

Albert of Brandenburg

Luther hoped that the arguments contained in his theses would convince the Archbishop of Mainz, Albert of Brandenburg, under whose authority Tetzel was operating, that the sale of indulgences should be halted. Albert was still in his early twenties and had had no religious training, but he had already bought his way into a bishopric and two archbishoprics, each of which carried with it large territories over which he was the sole ruler. In the process he had become one of
Chapter 1

Luther’s protest

the most powerful princes in Germany. Luther therefore sent him a copy of the
Ninety-five Theses, along with a covering letter in which he explained why he was
so concerned.

**SOURCE B**

Extract from a letter by Martin Luther to the Archbishop of Mainz, October
1517, quoted in Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, *et al.*, translators
and editors, *Works of Martin Luther*, volume 1, A.J. Holman Company, 1915,
pp. 25–8.

*I do not complain so much of the loud cry of the preacher of indulgences, which
I have not heard, but regret the false meaning which the simple folk attach to it,
the poor souls believing that when they have purchased such letters they have
secured their salvation. Also, that the moment the money jingles in the box
souls are delivered from purgatory, and that all sins will be forgiven through a
letter of indulgence … And, lastly, that through these indulgences the man is
freed from all penalties! Ah, dear God! Thus are those souls which have been
committed to your care, dear father, being led in the paths of death, and for
them you will be required to render an account.*

What, according to Source B, are Luther’s
main objections to the
sale of indulgences?

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Summary diagram: The indulgences controversy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The indulgences controversy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Johann Tetzel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold indulgences near</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wittenberg offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... operating under the authority of ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... Luther complained about him to ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert of Brandenburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed money from sale of indulgences to pay off his debts to the Pope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 Attempts to silence Luther
1517–21

*What steps were taken to silence Luther between 1517 and 1521
and why did they prove unsuccessful?*

Unfortunately for Luther, Albert of Brandenburg was relying on the money
raised from the sale of indulgences to pay off his debts. He therefore felt greatly
threatened by Luther, whose Ninety-five Theses were rapidly translated into
German, printed and widely distributed. Many people agreed with Luther’s
comments. Those who understood theology recognised the strength of Luther’s
attack on indulgences, while others shared his resentment at the way in which
Luther and the Reformation in Europe 1500–64

the poor of Germany were constantly pressurised into paying money to the Church, much of which went to a foreigner: the Pope in Rome. It therefore became a matter of priority for the Catholic Church to deal with this rebellious monk.

**Luther is threatened by Cardinal Cajetan**

Albert immediately appealed to the Pope for support, requesting that Luther be silenced. Given the great distances over which correspondence had to travel, the reaction of the Pope, **Leo X** (1513–21), was swift. Luther was ordered to come to Rome. He refused and Cardinal Cajetan was sent to Germany to deal with him. Cajetan summoned Luther to meet him in Augsburg in October 1518 and made it clear that the Pope’s patience was running out.

Luther remained unmoved. His position had been clearly stated from the outset, and his conscience would not allow him to change it. He argued that he had identified mistakes in the Church’s teachings. He could abandon his point of view only if he could either be shown evidence from the Bible which proved him wrong, or be convinced of his errors by ‘sound reason’. The Church’s position was equally clear. It maintained that it was for the Pope alone to interpret the Bible and to decide which features of the Church were really necessary. Luther thereby challenged many beliefs and sacraments and rejected the authority of the Pope.

Luther was complex and illogical. On the one hand, he was a religious revolutionary. He stressed the power of individuals to control their own destinies. He risked his life challenging the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor rather than compromising his religious convictions. He spearheaded a movement which shattered the power of the Church. On the other hand, Luther was a conservative who failed to see how his radical religious ideas had social and political implications. When the peasants revolted in 1524–5, demanding greater social equality on the Lutheran basis that all men were equal before God, Luther was appalled and encouraged the government to ‘smite and slay’ the rebels. Thousands were killed and Luther’s reputation was seriously damaged.

**Martin Luther**

1483 Born the son of a copper miner. He later studied law at Erfurt University
1505 Caught in a thunderstorm, he pledged to become a monk if his life was spared
1511 Began lecturing at Wittenberg University
1517 Published *Ninety-five Theses* against Church abuses
1521 Excommunicated
1521 Refused to recant at the Diet of Worms
1546 Died in Wartburg Castle

Martin Luther is the towering figure of the German Reformation. While studying as a monk he came across the phrase ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ in St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.

For Luther, this meant that faith alone (in Latin, *sola fide*) got a soul into heaven – not the purchase of ‘indulgences’ or any other ‘good works’ which the Catholic Church promoted. In debates and disputations with Cardinal **Thomas Cajetan**, **Johann Eck** and then at the Diet of Worms with Emperor Charles V, Luther defended *sola fide* and went further, arguing that the Bible alone (*sola scriptura*) should decide which features of the Church were really necessary. Luther thereby challenged many beliefs and sacraments and rejected the authority of the Pope.

KEY FIGURES

**Thomas Cajetan** (1469–1534)
An Italian cardinal who debated with Luther at Augsburg in 1518.

**Johann Eck** (1486–1543)
A German Catholic theologian who debated with Luther at Leipzig in 1519.

**Leo X** (1475–1521)
Came from the wealthy Medici family of Florence. He had a reputation for being more concerned with money and power than with religious affairs.

**, 9781471838538_ATH LutherAndReformation_.indb   6 01/04/2015 09:38"
convince anybody of anything, It merely had to insist on good discipline. Thus, the two sides were arguing at cross purposes with no real point of contact.

Luther is questioned by Johann Eck

After Cajetan’s unsuccessful mission, the Pope realised that threats against Luther were never going to work. The Church was offering no defence to Luther’s charges and was leaving the way clear for him to gain increasing numbers of supporters in Germany. The Pope was so unpopular in Germany due to his extortionate taxes that the traditional appeal to unthinking obedience was being rejected. So it was decided to meet Luther’s challenge in open debate.

The Papacy wins a technical victory

A formal debate was arranged to take place in Leipzig in July 1519. Eck was chosen to uphold the Church’s position. He was recognised as being the most skilful debater in Germany. For eighteen days the issues were argued before a panel of ‘neutral’ academics, in the presence of local officials. Eck arguably won the competition in technical terms. But Luther’s passion and conviction impressed observers more than Eck’s cold logic.

Luther clarifies his position

Luther had come to Leipzig with the reputation of being a tiresome rebel who just needed to be brought under control. However, the debate gave him the reputation of an inspirational revolutionary. Eck was responsible for the change. This is because he forced Luther to take each of his arguments to its logical conclusion. In particular, Eck agreed with Luther that the Bible provided no evidence that indulgences could guarantee salvation. However, Eck pointed out that neither was there any mention of purgatory, or of several sacraments, or even of a pope — yet surely Luther did not deny the authority of these things as well? To Eck’s astonishment, Luther did indeed reject all of these things too. Luther had already developed the idea that entry into heaven could only be through *sola fide* (faith alone). Now, he developed his second revolutionary idea: that the way of searching for that faith was through *sola scriptura* (scripture alone).

Luther had started off by merely claiming that the Pope was exceeding his powers. But he was now claiming that the Pope had no special powers at all! Instead of merely seeking the reform of abuses, Luther was now challenging the very foundations of the Church itself. Early in the disputation, Eck had accused Luther of following the ideas of the heretic Jan Huss, who had been killed for challenging the authority of the Pope a century earlier (see page 25). This failed to discredit Luther in the eyes of the German princes. Nor did it frighten Luther. By the end of the debate Luther was proud to admit that he agreed with the main ideas of his Czech predecessor Huss, who had been declared a heretic and burned for his beliefs.
Luther is excommunicated by Pope Leo X

Following the Leipzig debate, Pope Leo X issued a papal bull condemning Luther’s teachings. This document, known by its first words, *Exsurge Domine* (‘Lord, cast out’), was issued in June 1520. Luther showed his contempt for the Pope by burning the Bull publicly. Shortly afterwards, he produced a vicious pamphlet whose title, *Against the Bull of the Antichrist*, claimed that the Pope was the Devil. This was the point of no return for Luther. In January 1521 Luther was formally excommunicated by the Pope. This meant not only that all obedient Christians would refuse to have any dealings with Luther, but also that his soul would be condemned to burn in hell forever. To ensure that this was known, the bull would be read from the pulpit of every church.

Luther is outlawed by Emperor Charles V

At this point, the Pope called on Emperor Charles V to bring Luther under control. The Pope’s strategy was a sensible one. Emperor Charles V was a strong Catholic who was determined to uphold the interests of the Church.

Charles invites Luther to attend the Diet of Worms

In 1519 the Prince-Electors had chosen Charles to become the new Holy Roman Emperor following the death of his grandfather, Maximilian I. By this time Charles was already the King of Spain and the Duke of Burgundy (an area based around the Netherlands of today). The election had been hotly contested, with King Francis I of France standing as a strong rival. Although the precise details of the process remain vague, it appears likely that Charles was able to offer larger bribes than Francis and thus secure his unanimous election.

Charles was potentially one of the most powerful European monarchs in history. He arrived in Germany in time for a Diet that was to take place in the city of Worms in April 1521. The Church authorities hoped that the Diet would condemn Luther without even giving him a hearing. They argued that his publications were by now so numerous and so clearly heretical that no defence was possible. But Charles decided to allow Luther to make an appearance so that there could be no complaint of unfair treatment. Luther was summoned to appear at Worms under a promise of ‘safe conduct’, which would protect him from arrest whatever the outcome of his hearing.

Luther’s closest associates advised him not to appear. It was well known that, according to the Church’s teaching, there was no need to keep one’s promises to a heretic. It was also remembered that Jan Huss had been arrested and executed while under a promise of safe conduct. But Luther was not too concerned about his chances of survival. He regarded himself as being in God’s hands, and was sure that if God meant him to live he would return safely from Worms. One thing he was certain of was that God wished him to preach the truth as widely as possible.
Even now the Pope’s representatives hoped to limit Luther’s participation to answering two questions:

- whether the books and pamphlets that had appeared in his name were really his, and
- whether he was prepared to abandon the views contained in them.

Luther asked to be allowed to consider the questions over night. His request was granted. On the next morning he answered ‘Yes’ to the first question, but said that it was impossible to give a one-word answer to the second question. He then proceeded to explain this point in a way that allowed him another opportunity to advertise his main ideas.

First, he said, some of his writings agreed with the teachings of the Church, so it made no sense for him to reject these. He then proceeded as explained in Source C.

**SOURCE C**


The second group of my books is written against the papacy and papal scheming and action … Likewise the goods and wealth of this most famous German nation were and are devoured through unbelievable tyranny in unreasonable manner … Were I, therefore, to revoke these books I would only strengthen this tyranny … There is a third kind of book which I have written against certain private, and as they call them, distinguished individuals. These are they who endeavour to maintain the Roman tyranny and to destroy the holiness taught by me … It is not right for me to retract these works, because this very retraction would again bring about a state of affairs where tyranny and ungodliness would rule and rage among the people of God more violently than they ever ruled before.

Equally clear was the Church’s case against Luther, which had remained constant throughout and had become stronger as he provided more and more evidence of his heretical thinking.

**SOURCE D**


Is it not the case that you want Holy Scripture to be understood by your whim and your ideas? … Is it right to open to question and drag into dispute, those matters which the Catholic Church has carefully settled, matters which have turned upon [beliefs] which our fathers held with absolute faith … indeed they would rather have endured a thousand deaths than have departed from them a hair’s breadth? … Do not, I beg you, Martin [claim] that you are the one and...
only person … who alone grasps the true sense of Holy Scripture … Do not make your judgement superior to that of so many of the most brilliant men. Do not seem to be wiser than all others … He despises the authority of the Church Fathers, an authority the Church accepts.

It was, of course, the political implications of Luther’s position that were uppermost in the minds of many of his opponents, as described in Source E.

**SOURCE E**


He utterly takes away obedience and authority, and writes nothing which does not have the effect of promoting … war, murder, robbery [and] the complete collapse of the Christian faith. He teaches a loose, self-willed kind of life, without any kind of law, utterly brutish … As he shows as much regard for the secular sword as he does for the Pope’s excommunication and its penalties, so has he done greater harm to secular law and order.

**SOURCE F**

Luther in front of Charles V at the Diet of Worms.

**Charles V delivers his verdict in the Edict of Worms**

Given the evidence, there could be only one outcome of the trial at Worms: Luther was found guilty of heresy. However, Luther’s supporters hoped that the Emperor would at least compromise by restricting the power of the Church in Germany. They were bitterly disappointed. In the Edict of Worms, Charles announced that Luther and all who supported him would be punished unless
they immediately agreed to accept the teachings and authority of the Church. The terms of the bull Exsurge Domine should be carried out: citizens of the Empire had to burn Luther’s writings wherever they were found and refuse to provide Luther or his supporters with food or shelter. Anyone failing to do these things would be imprisoned and lose all their property. The Pope had got everything he wanted – except Luther’s imprisonment.

Luther is protected by Frederick the Wise

Luther was not the first theologian in western Europe to take up this revolutionary position. But he was the first who was able both to maintain it and to avoid being put to death as a heretic. Others before him had either retracted their criticisms or been killed. Why did this not happen to Luther?

Luther is kidnapped by his own supporters

One reason why Luther survived is that in May 1521, even before the Edict of Worms was announced, he left the city. He had been persuaded by powerful supporters that there was nothing to be gained by remaining and much to be lost if some Catholic enthusiast decided to take the law into his own hands. His ‘escape’ from Worms was well planned, as was his subsequent disappearance. As he and his escort were passing through a forest on their way to Wittenberg, they were seized by a group of unidentified horsemen who then rode off with Luther as their ‘captive’.

The man responsible for Luther’s ‘kidnap’ was none other than his staunchest supporter, Elector Frederick ‘the Wise’ of Saxony. Frederick had decided that the political situation was too uncertain for the ‘notorious heretic’ to be anywhere but in hiding. Luther was taken to Frederick’s castle at Wartburg, where he disguised himself by growing a beard and adopting the name of ‘Farmer George’ before starting work on a German translation of the Bible.

Frederick’s power and authority

A second reason for Luther’s survival is that he lived in the German state of electoral Saxony, where the Pope’s direct influence was minimal. Frederick the Wise was one of the seven electors of the Empire. This meant that he was a member of an elite group of territorial rulers whose influence was considerable. The Emperor required their agreement before he could take action of any significance, and he was careful not to upset them without very good reason. Frederick the Wise was sympathetic to Luther from the start, and Leo X, who wished to retain Frederick’s support within Germany, was unwilling to risk angering him. He preferred to wait until Luther had been given every opportunity to recant. If persuasion failed he could then call on Frederick to do his duty as a Christian prince; hence the efforts made to persuade Luther that he was wrong to challenge the authority of the Church. However, Frederick was not prepared to be manipulated by Pope Leo.
Frederick was not only powerful but also highly esteemed. His nickname ‘the Wise’ seems to have been justified. He was generally regarded as the outstanding ruler in Germany, and as a man whose judgement was to be respected. When, before the election of Charles V, there had been behind-the-scenes scheming to break the hold of the Habsburgs on the imperial title, it had been Frederick’s name that had been put forward as the one likely to command general support.

**Frederick’s motivation**

It is widely accepted that without Frederick’s protection Luther would have been executed as a heretic early in his career as a reformer. Yet it is not fully clear why the Elector acted as he did, eventually risking the anger of all who had the right and the power to act against him. It was not that he came under the personal influence of Luther. He was careful to keep a distance from him so that he could always claim that he had not met the man whom he was defending. In this way it was impossible for his opponents to claim that he had been bewitched. His motivations can be summarised as follows:

- **Political:** at first, Frederick’s motivation seems to have been purely political. Luther’s attacks on Tetzel were, in effect, attacks on Albert of Brandenburg. The rivalry between Albert’s and Frederick’s families for influence in Germany was intense, so it was only natural that Frederick should defend a subject who was attacking his enemy. Moreover, Frederick had established the University of Wittenberg in 1502 and was keen to protect the independence of lecturers such as Luther who worked within it.

- **Nationalistic:** Frederick was also motivated by German nationalism. For many years there had been widespread resentment in Germany that the papacy had been able to extract huge quantities of money from the country in a way that was not possible in Spain, France or England (see page 32). Luther tapped this reservoir of anti-papal feeling and appealed to a common hatred of the grasping foreigner. Frederick shared these sentiments. When Luther was summoned to Rome by Pope Leo he was able to refuse because Frederick was firmly behind him and was arguing that any case against Luther should be heard on German soil. Even when the bull *Exsurge Domine* was issued against Luther, Frederick refused to obey it. He claimed that it carried no weight until Luther had been given an opportunity to answer the charges against him in person and in Germany.

- **Religious:** yet there was more to Frederick’s support of Luther than these ‘political’ issues. Although he was not an early convert to the new religious beliefs, his brother John ‘the Steadfast’ was a committed Lutheran, and Frederick was sensitive to this. Frederick was also sufficiently interested and in touch with what Luther was teaching to understand that something of major importance was taking place in his small capital city. He was not prepared to stop it or to allow others to stop it until the rightness or otherwise
of Luther’s claims had been fairly decided. This meant approaching the issue with an open mind, which the Church was clearly failing to do.

In his dealings with the problem of what to do about Luther, Frederick seems to have started by acting in what he saw as his own best interests. Within a short time, however, it appears that his determination to see justice done and his developing feeling that Luther was probably right took over as the main motivating forces that led him to make certain that Luther remained safe despite the storm that was gathering against him.

**Summary diagram: Attempts to silence Luther 1517–21**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Luther was ...</th>
<th>by ...</th>
<th>at ...</th>
<th>with the effect that ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>threatened</td>
<td>Cardinal Cajetan</td>
<td>Augsburg</td>
<td>Luther refused to abandon <em>sola fide</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questioned</td>
<td>Johann Eck</td>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>Luther developed the idea of <em>sola scriptura</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excommunicated</td>
<td>Pope Leo</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Luther decided that the Pope is the ‘Antichrist’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outlawed</td>
<td>Charles V</td>
<td>Worms</td>
<td>Luther realised that Charles V would not compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protected</td>
<td>Frederick the Wise</td>
<td>Wartburg</td>
<td>Luther started to write a German Bible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key debate

**When did the Reformation begin and end?**

Historians are divided into three main camps with regard to what dates should be used to represent the start and the end of the Reformation.

Some historians argue that the period between the *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517 and Luther’s death in 1546 marked a truly decisive break with the past: Martin Luther formulated revolutionary religious ideas that had an immediate impact. This viewpoint was championed by Luther’s early followers such as Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75); it has continued to be supported by the great biographers of Luther such as Wilfried Joest, Oswald Bayer and Roland Bainton.
EXTRACT 1


Very naturally he is a controversial figure. The multitudinous portrayals fall into certain broad types already delineated in his own generation. His followers hailed him as the prophet of the Lord and the deliverer of Germany. His opponents on the Catholic side called him the son of perdition and the demolisher of Christendom ... Luther was above all else a man of religion. The great outward crises of his life which bedazzle the eyes of dramatic biographers were to Luther himself trivial in comparison with the inner upheavals of his questing after God.

Other historians argue that, from a religious standpoint, the start date of the Reformation needs to be much earlier than 1517. They maintain that Luther's theology merely consolidated ideas which had been developing within and outside the Catholic Church since the Middle Ages. This view is supported not only by Ernst Troeltsch, a German Protestant theologian, but also by historian Heiko Oberman, who describes Lutheranism as `the harvest of medieval theology`.

EXTRACT 2


It is a curious – and dangerous – coincidence that the late medieval period is one of the least known in the history of Christian thought ... for too long a time it has been regarded solely as a part of the history of philosophy. Consequently its theological contributions have been largely neglected. [This] is undoubtedly due to the fact that this period forms the frontier between the so-called high middle ages and the Reformation. This has certainly made it difficult for scholars to come to a reasonably unbiased evaluation of the place and function of the late medieval period in the history of Christian thought.

It is also argued, often by the same historians, that in political and social terms, the end date of the Reformation needs to be much later than 1546. Their view is that Luther’s ideas did not have any major impact on ordinary people until the second half of the sixteenth century, when a new generation of reformers focused on the creation of Church institutions and practices which helped to create distinct `national` identities. The three historians most closely associated with this position are Heinz Schilling, Wolfgang Reinhard and Peter G. Wallace.

EXTRACT 3


After 1550, the European Reformation’s central battlefields spread beyond the German-speaking regions, as communities of belief galvanised into confessional
camps and the political cost of religious division became clear. Religious wars in France, the Netherlands, Central Europe and England demonstrated the destructive potential of the new religious and political mix. Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist leaders drew up clear statements of ‘orthodox’ beliefs referred to as ‘confessions’ … Confessional solidarity demanded intolerance of religious minorities but also provided those minorities with the self-discipline necessary to resist pressures to conform. [This] stained the century after 1550 with blood … Everywhere authoritative force inevitably generated resolute opposition, stiffened by economic misery and social antagonism.

The main disagreements between Lutherans and Catholics

How and why did Protestants and Catholics disagree about the beliefs and practices of the Christian Church?

This book is mainly concerned with the causes, the course and the consequences of the Reformation. However, it is not possible to understand the personalities, concepts and events of the period without a more detailed understanding of what Lutherans and Catholics actually argued about.

Justification

Lutherans and Catholics agreed that to enter heaven a soul must ‘justify’ itself before God. Once justified, the soul is placed into a state of Grace and enters the gates of paradise. Both groups also agreed that the process of justification was no easy matter, because mankind is tainted with the original sin of Adam and Eve. They also agreed that Christ’s death on the cross created a ‘store’ of Grace which God used to save people from the flames of hell. The key disagreement was over how God chose to use that store of Grace.

The Catholic view: free will/justification by works

The Catholic view was that God puts the store of Grace at our disposal. We earn Grace by doing ‘good works’ – for example by giving to charity and going on pilgrimages. In other words, God gives us free will to make our own way to heaven or hell. A connected idea was that the saints, because of their pure lives, went into heaven with a surplus of Grace which they could bestow on deserving souls as they saw fit. From this came Catholic devotion to particular saints, most notably to the Virgin Mary, but also in the form of pilgrimages to shrines such as that of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury in England. This store of Grace was also at the disposal of the Pope, who could grant ‘indulgences’ to members of his
Church, which were documents promising forgiveness for sins. Even after death, Catholics could continue doing ‘good works’. Catholics believed that before entering heaven, most souls went to purgatory – a halfway house between heaven and hell – where they would be purified. In their wills, many Catholics therefore left money to *chantries*, where monks spent their time praying for the souls of their benefactors to help them get out of purgatory and into heaven more quickly. Henry VII of England left a small fortune to chantries in this way.

This theory of justification provided a clear and stable framework for an uneducated population and stressed the free will of people to control their destinies. Nevertheless, while the Church stressed that good works were meaningless without real faith, some people took the view that the rich could almost buy their way into heaven, especially when many popes lived lavish lifestyles.

**Lutherans: justification by faith alone (sola fide)**

Luther felt that the Catholic stress on good works had led people to become rather lazy in their devotion to God. He also felt that worship of saints distracted people from the teachings of Jesus Christ and the importance of His sacrifice on the cross. Lutherans believed that God did not put the store of Grace created by that sacrifice at our disposal. Instead, He had already used it to save the whole world, although some people through exercise of their free will could lose this salvation by failing to maintain their faith. Good works did not bestow Grace in themselves, but were merely the natural product of someone who possessed true faith. After death, each soul either went into heaven or hell; purgatory was dismissed as a cynical papal invention designed to encourage people to purchase indulgences to help save the souls of departed friends and family. The Lutheran view of justification ingeniously encouraged virtuous living while simultaneously denying the Catholic idea that good works earned salvation. On the other hand, the stress on personal faith and inner reflection compared with unquestioning obedience to the Pope threatened to fragment the entire Church and, by implication, all of the political and social structures built on it (for more on Luther’s view on predestination, see Chapter 2).

**The Bible**

**Catholics: Latin Vulgate**

The Catholic demand for obedience to the Pope required one centrally controlled Biblical text. This text, called the *Vulgate*, was in Latin, partly because this was the international language of diplomacy of the time, but also because this ensured that it could not be read by the *laity*. The *papacy* argued that this was important to avoid misinterpretations and confusion. Critics suggested that it was just a way of preserving the power of the Church by preventing people from thinking for themselves.
Lutherans: vernacular versions

The Lutheran stress on individual reflection led to the production of Bibles in the vernacular. Luther said that only by reference to scripture alone (sola scriptura) could each person decide whether they had faith and were therefore among the Elect. The downside was that people often formed different interpretations of what the Bible meant on key issues. Also, those who could not read were left feeling lost and abandoned as different preachers told them different things. Some reformers such as Caspar von Schwenkfeld and Andreas von Karlstadt (see page 92) even rejected the Bible altogether as a ‘paper pope’ and instead advocated direct communication with the Holy Spirit through prayer. These reformers were called ‘spiritualists’ and are examined in more detail in Chapter 5.

**SOURCE G**

A sinner in purgatory purges his wickedness but hopes for better things as one of his companions who has served her term is released by an angel.

**KEY TERM**

**Vernacular** The language of the people. Luther argued that the Bible should be in the vernacular rather than in Latin.

Why did Luther argue that purgatory did not exist and that many other Catholic beliefs were incorrect?
The priesthood

Catholics: separate, centralised clergy

For Catholics, the clergy was of central importance. Grace was earned by the stable framework of good works defined by the Church through a standard Latin Bible. It followed that the priesthood needed to be highly educated, able to read Latin, knowledgeable about the complexities of Church beliefs and able to express them clearly and accurately to the people. With their exclusive access to the Bible, the priesthood guided its flock through their lives and towards heaven. Priests were ‘special’: a halfway house between God and the people. It was only through the sacraments, administered by the priests, that sanctifying Grace could be obtained. From this came the idea of a celibate clergy and monasteries where holy men could cut themselves off from the corruption of the everyday world. It also meant a complex Church hierarchy including a pope, cardinals, bishops and parish priests. This provided stability and order to society, but it also created tension since priests could easily abuse their power for financial gain.

Lutherans’ decentralised ‘priesthood of all believers’

The Lutheran belief in individual reflection, using a vernacular Bible, made much of the clergy redundant. Luther instead advocated a ‘priesthood of all believers’: no one knows or can influence who is damned and who is saved, so all men are equal and have the potential to become priests. The implications of this were enormous. If the clergy was just as likely to be damned as everyone else, then monasteries, a celibate clergy and the Pope himself were pointless. Luther attempted to moderate the implications of this idea by supporting a ‘Magisterial Reformation’, a process of change led by the ruling class rather than the mob. Nevertheless, Radical reformers such as Thomas Müntzer spearheaded a ‘popular Reformation’, arguing that if we are all equal before God then there is no divine reason why the peasants should be downtrodden. Indeed, as the largest class in society peasants should lead the movement. Luther was appalled by this application of his religious ideas to social affairs. When the peasants rose up in open revolt in 1524 (see Chapter 3), Luther wrote his notorious pamphlet Against the Thieving, Murdering Hordes of Peasants, but this had little impact on the course of events.

Ceremonies and appearances

Catholics

With its structured beliefs, a strict hierarchy and a conviction that charitable donations to the Church could help a soul into heaven, the Catholic Church had become incredibly wealthy and powerful. Inside a typical church, one would find numerous visual aids designed to inspire and to teach: images of Christ’s mother, the Virgin Mary; murals (wall paintings) of heaven, hell and purgatory; stories from the lives of those saints who might be persuaded to give members of
the congregation some of their Grace. Catholic devotion to the saints, combined with the idea of good works, also led to the building of shrines at certain holy sites, which quickly attracted pilgrims from far and wide. The more visually inspiring they were, the greater the number of pilgrims who visited and donated to their ‘upkeep’. The shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury had so many treasures that Henry VIII had to use scores of wagons to bring the loot to London.

Central to the ritual and theatre of the Catholic Church were the seven sacraments, each one carried out by a priest:

- baptism: temporary admission of an infant into the Church
- penance: confession of sins and their forgiveness
- the Eucharist: drinking of wine which has been transformed into the blood of Christ
- confirmation: permanent admission of an adult into the Church
- marriage: union of two people with the aim of producing children
- ordination: commitment of a person to pursue a career in the Church
- last rites: final blessing and forgiveness of sins before death.

These provided ‘cradle to the grave’ spiritual healthcare, a framework for life that Catholics found deeply reassuring. The sacraments also reinforced the status of the ‘elite’ clergy by making it clear that these sacraments could only help people into heaven if carried out by a priest.

**Lutherans**

For Lutherans, the solemn rituals and visual magnificence of the Catholic Church merely distracted attention from the sacrifice of Christ and the centrality of the Bible. Getting into heaven would require a soul to have faith; the only way to discover that faith was through the Bible, and anything that detracted from the Bible was therefore to be discouraged. This emphasis on inward reflection regarding God’s message meant that Lutheran churches were plain and simple. Nothing should distract attention from the Bible and the preacher. Rituals, images and financial donations to the Church were irrelevant at best, godless at worst. Only those things with a clear Biblical basis could hold a central place in the rituals of the Church. As a result, only three sacraments (baptism, penance and the Eucharist) were to be kept. Even they were to be interpreted in new terms: the sacrament of penance should emphasise ‘being penitent’ (justification by faith) rather than ‘doing penance’ (justification by good works); the sacrament of the Eucharist needed to involve the congregation partaking of both the bread and the wine (priesthood of all believers).
## Summary diagram: The main disagreements between Lutherans and Catholics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catholics</th>
<th>Luther</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good works</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sola fide</strong> ('faith alone')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We earn Grace by showing our faith to the world with unquestioning obedience to the Church and by doing 'good works' – for example by giving to charity and going on pilgrimages.</td>
<td>Luther felt that faith was the key to salvation, and that this faith was freely given by God and could not be earned by performing good works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Vulgate</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sola scriptura</strong> ('Bible alone')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic emphasis on obedience to the Pope necessitated one centrally controlled Biblical text – the Vulgate, which was in Latin to prevent the laity misinterpreting it.</td>
<td>To discover if one had this faith and was therefore predestined to go to heaven, one had to read the Bible to see if one believed in its teachings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious hierarchy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Religious equality</strong> ('priesthood of all believers')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests were ‘special’ – a halfway house between God and the people. From this premise came the idea of a celibate clergy and monasteries where holy men could cut themselves off from the corruption of the everyday world.</td>
<td>Luther believed that all men were equal before God. He rejected the idea of monasticism and clerical celibacy. However, he also felt that the new Church should be led by the princes and magistrates ('Magisterial Reformation') rather than the common mob ('popular Reformation').</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seven sacraments</strong></td>
<td><strong>Three sacraments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central to the ritual and theatre of the Catholic Church were the seven sacraments: baptism, penance, the Eucharist, confirmation, marriage, ordination and the last rites. These provided a framework for life that Catholics found deeply reassuring.</td>
<td>Luther argued that baptism, penance and the Eucharist were the only sacraments supported in the Bible so the rest should be rejected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Images = important</strong></td>
<td><strong>Images = unimportant</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the body of a Catholic church, one would expect to see a breathtaking array of visual aids designed to inspire and to teach – images of the Virgin Mary; murals of heaven, hell and purgatory; stories from the lives of those saints who might be persuaded to give us some of their Grace.</td>
<td>Luther felt that images were a distraction from the main business of hearing the sermon from the Bible, but did not concern himself too much with the issue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter summary

The indulgences controversy in Saxony provided a ready audience for Luther’s message that faith alone, not good works, was necessary for salvation. This brought Luther into direct conflict with the Pope, whose determination to silence Luther merely pushed the renegade monk into clarifying and radicalising his position still further. By the end of the Diet of Worms, Luther had rejected the authority of the Pope and anything else not specifically sanctioned by scripture. His break from the Catholic Church now complete, he would probably have faced prompt execution as a heretic had he not been kidnapped for his own protection by his own supporters and placed in hiding by Frederick the Wise. Luther’s bold assertion that justification came from faith alone, and that good works were meaningless, set a process in motion that culminated in the permanent division of the Christian faith between Protestants and Catholics. Nevertheless, despite his importance, Luther is only one figure in a long tradition of protest against the Catholic Church. This makes it very difficult for historians to pin down the exact dates when the Reformation started and ended.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter:

1. Why was the attack on indulgences so controversial?
2. In what ways did the debate with Eck push Luther into a more radical position?
3. What was the significance of the papal bull, Exsurge Domine?
4. Why did Charles V give Luther the chance to speak at the Diet of Worms?
5. Why did Luther’s friends advise him not to attend the Diet of Worms?
6. Why did Luther refuse to retract his writings?
7. How and why did Charles V refuse to compromise with Luther?
8. To what extent was the Diet of Worms a victory for the Pope?
9. Why was Frederick able to defy the Pope and Emperor Charles V?
10. Why was Frederick so determined to support Luther?
11. In what ways was Luther a contradictory character?
12. Why were the Lutheran ideas of sola fide and sola scriptura so threatening to the Catholic Church?
13. Why did Catholics think that the Bible should be in Latin rather than the language of the people?
14. Why did Lutherans challenge the power of the Catholic priesthood?
15. How did Catholics and Lutherans disagree about ceremonies and appearances within the Church?
ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. To what extent was the support of Frederick the Wise necessary for ensuring the success of Luther’s revolt?
2. How accurate is it to say the Catholic Church failed to silence Martin Luther?
3. ‘The publication of the Ninety-five Theses in 1517 did not represent a serious challenge to the Church.’ How far do you agree with this statement?
4. Which of the following handled Luther least effectively: i) Emperor Charles V or ii) the papacy? Explain your answer with reference to both i) and ii).

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. Read the interpretation and then answer the question that follows: ‘Luther was above all else a man of religion. The great outward crises of his life … were to Luther himself trivial in comparison with the inner upheavals of his questing after God.’ (From Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand – A Life of Martin Luther*, Signet, 1955, p. 6.) Evaluate the strengths and limitations of this interpretation, making reference to other interpretations that you have studied.

SOURCE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. Why is Source B (page 5) valuable to a historian studying the origin of Luther’s ideas? Explain your answer using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context.
2. How far could a historian make use of Sources B (page 5) and C (page 9) together to investigate how Luther’s attitudes to the Catholic Church changed in the period 1517–21? Explain your answer using the sources, the information given about them and your own knowledge of the historical context.
3. With reference to Sources B (page 5), C (page 9) and D (page 9), and your understanding of the historical context, assess the value of these sources to a historian studying the nature and development of Luther’s religious thinking.