

The Protestant Reformations

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Writer: Eva Stimson

Published especially for use in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Meet the Writer

Eva Stimson, a graduate of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), is a freelance writer/editor, an oil painter, and the former editor of *Presbyterians Today*. She is a ruling elder, Sunday school teacher, and member of Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.



Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Reformation Backgrounds

Scripture

Matthew 16:13–20; Ephesians 4:1–16

Main Idea

The Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century inaugurated far-reaching changes that extended beyond religion to all sectors of society.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. How changes in worldview, technology, government, and communication contributed to changes in the church
2. The tools for church reform provided by Renaissance humanism
3. How various Pre-Reformation movements prepared the way for Luther's reforms

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Christ candle and lighter

Newsprint and markers in at least 5 different colors

Small notebook for each participant

Pens or pencils

Leader Prep

Prepare for leading each session by reading the participant's book and highlighting important points. Read and reflect on the Scripture passages for this session. Tape several sheets of newsprint end-to-end lengthwise to form the beginnings of a timeline of the Protestant Reformations. In each session of this study, you will be adding important people, events, and themes to the timeline.

Using markers in five different colors, draw five parallel lines across the length of the newsprint. Label one line for the Roman Catholic Church and the others for the four Reformation traditions (Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Anglican). Leave plenty of room to write between the lines. Post the timeline on a wall or bulletin board where there is plenty of room to expand it as needed.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle) on a table in the center of your meeting space. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture.

For Head, familiarize yourself with the Introduction to this study and the material in Session 1 (participant's book, pp. 7–13). Post a sheet of newsprint where it is visible to all. Be prepared to give an overview of this study, introduce the timeline, and help participants list changes brought by the Reformation. Have available Bibles, newsprint, and markers. Think about how you would answer the second Question for Reflection (participant's book, p. 13) so you can help the small groups engage with the question.

For Heart, participants will need pens, markers, and small notebooks. They will use the notebooks throughout this study to record learnings and reflections. Plan to store the notebooks in a safe place between sessions. Be prepared to help participants think about the importance of church unity and create prayers or drawings inspired by Ephesians 4:1–16, some of which may be shared in your closing worship.

For Hands, think about how you would respond to the first and third Questions for Reflection (participant's book, p. 13). Have newsprint and markers available for the small groups. Think about a practice you could take on to help heal divisions in the church, as suggested in the Spiritual Practice (participant's book, p. 13).

For Depart, be prepared to incorporate into your closing prayers words and/or drawings by participants who are willing to share.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to introduce themselves and share a name, phrase, or event that comes to mind when they hear the words “Protestant Reformation.” Invite each of them to share briefly what they hope to gain from this study.
- Light the Christ candle.

- Read Matthew 16:13–20.
- Pray together the prayer at the beginning of Session 1 (participant’s book, p. 7).

Head

- Review together the Introduction to this study (participant’s book, pp. 7–8), noting that you will be exploring multiple “Reformations” that took place during the sixteenth century. Point out the timeline you have prepared, and label each colored line with the name of one of the church traditions you will be learning about. Write the date 1517 at the beginning of the timeline. Ask: *What is the significance of this date? How shall we label it on the timeline?* Note that 2017 is the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s posting of his Ninety-five Theses, the event generally regarded as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.
- Have a volunteer read aloud the quote from Philip Jenkins in the Introduction to Session 1 (participant’s book, p. 8). Ask: *What do you think this means? How did the Reformation build on changes that were already underway?* Invite participants to call out changes mentioned in the participant’s book material for Session 1, and list these on a sheet of newsprint. Be sure to include names of significant people as well. Post the list just before (to the left of) your timeline.
- Have someone read aloud the last paragraph of “A Changing World” (participant’s book, p. 9). Ask: *What did the church look like before the Reformation? After the Reformation?* Distribute Bibles and have participants look up Matthew 16:13–20. Ask: *What does this passage say about the church? Are there differences in the way Protestants and Catholics interpret Jesus’ words “on this rock I will build my church”?*
- Gather participants into several small groups to discuss the second Question for Reflection (participant’s book, p. 13). Give each group newsprint and markers. Suggest they start by listing characteristics of scholasticism and humanism, as described in “Intellectual Currents” (participant’s book, pp. 10–11), and then discuss how humanists such as Erasmus might have influenced pre-Reformation dissenters such as Wycliffe and Savonarola (participant’s book, pp. 11–12). Ask: *What insights from humanism are important for biblical interpretation today?*

Heart

- Give each participant a small notebook. Explain that these will be used throughout the study to record reflections and insights from the Reformers. Over the course of the study, some may want to try composing their own “95 (or 25) Theses,” which could be calls for church reform, statements of what they believe, or a mixture of both. Invite them to spend a few minutes writing about a particularly meaningful insight from one of the pre-Reformation reformers.
- Note that church division is one of the downsides to reformation. Have participants read silently Ephesians 4:1–16. Invite them to write in their notebooks a brief prayer for church unity, incorporating language from the passage, or to draw an image of a unified church.

Hands

- Note that reformation of the church was not a one-time event. The church is always in need of reforming. In small groups, discuss the first and third Questions for Reflection (participant’s book, p. 13). Have someone from each group record responses on newsprint and report highlights of the discussion.
- Invite participants to spend a few minutes reflecting on the Spiritual Practice (participant’s book, p. 13). Challenge each person to think of one thing he or she can do to promote church unity. Have them record the commitments in their notebooks.

Depart

- Light the Christ candle.
- Read aloud together Ephesians 4:4–7.
- Invite any who are willing to share prayers or drawings created during “Heart.”
- Close with a charge based on Ephesians 4: “Now go out speaking the truth in love, and use your gifts to build up the body of Christ.”

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Reformation Backgrounds

Scripture

Matthew 16:13–20 Peter confesses Jesus Christ to be the Messiah.

Ephesians 4:1–16 Unity in the Body of Christ is held before us as our calling as Christians.

Prayer

O God of the church, help us to love your church, the church for which Jesus Christ gave himself. Guide us in your ways. Show us where we are failing to be the people of God you want us to be. May we see needs around us that you want us to meet as we share the love of Christ. Open our hearts to the sufferings of our neighbors. Reform us when we need reforming. Open us to your Spirit who gives us the vision of your will and purposes. Help us live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

The Protestant Reformations of sixteenth-century Europe took shape in the context of earlier historical events, movements, and the work of persons of faith. Many complex factors contributed to the period when the Protestant Reformations began. Scholars have studied these extensively, examining the late medieval period and the currents at work in the world, the church, and among those who advocated reform of the Roman Catholic Church and who were questioning some of its teachings based on Scripture.

We can recognize the far-reaching and significant changes the European world was experiencing at the beginning of the sixteenth century. These led to dramatic changes in many dimensions of life, including attitudes toward traditions and power, which had been bulwarks of European society for centuries.

Intellectual currents that challenged traditional methods of teaching in European universities provide an important groundwork for the work of Protestant reformers. The rise of humanism with its emphases on history and the study of ancient texts in their contexts

and their original languages was significant. Early Protestant reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) and John Calvin (1509–1564) imbibed Christian humanism and used its insights for their reforms—for the interpretation of Scripture.

The work of sixteenth-century Protestant reformers had precursors in the dissent and reform movements of earlier centuries. These movements caused concerns in the Roman church and identified theological issues and practical problems that later became magnified and scrutinized more fully by Protestant reformers.

The Reformations branched into what we call Protestant traditions. These took their distinctive courses as they developed their theological views and enacted ways of being the church that marked their different doctrinal beliefs and practical understandings of the nature of the Christian life. The Reformation backgrounds here provide contexts out of which the following reforms developed. In the broadest sense, the Reformation “touched everything. It altered not just the practice of religion but also the nature of society, economics, politics, education and law.”¹ This wide-ranging movement continues to affect us today in significant ways. Its beginnings help us appreciate some key factors.

A Changing World

The beginning of the sixteenth century brought some life changes to Europeans, whose society and culture were changing as the effects of significant developments took hold.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus had discovered what became known as the “New World,” as Europeans began to encounter previously unknown lands and people. New commercial avenues were opening, especially trade with Asia. This meant encounters with Muslims and the Ottoman Empire, an ever-expanding Muslim state larger than any Christian nation. Ottoman Turks were a constant threat to Europe, a scourge so dangerous that many believed they were setting the stage for the end of the world.

The information revolution was beginning as well. Johannes Gutenberg (1395–1468) had invented the printing press, making it possible to produce many copies of a book—all exactly alike and within the financial reach of common people. The first book to be published this way was the Bible—the Word of God. The worldview

1. Philip Jenkins, “The Next Christianity,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 290, no. 3 (October 2002), 53 cited in *Protestantism After 500 Years*, ed. Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

of multitudes of people could be shaped by the books they read, as literacy rates rose.

As cities grew, changes in commerce and education also emerged. The old medieval feudal order was collapsing. Towns and cities were connected by roads, with forests disappearing, and seaports on the coasts being reached by navigable rivers. Foreign markets were becoming important in fueling increased trade. The drive to educate children was growing stronger, and universities were established to further the quest for human knowledge.

Politically, new power structures were also emerging. Relationships of power were being reconfigured through consolidation and centralization. Rulers who had enjoyed absolute power were now faced with sharing functions with landed aristocracy, the church, and other entities as they formed alliances to hold on to powers threatened by a changing society. Europe was becoming a collection of states, each charting its course, fighting for itself—and its religion.

The medieval Roman Catholic Church was the major institutional force, binding Europe together under the leadership of the pope, the Bishop of Rome. However, it, too, was on the verge of change as the sixteenth century began. Movements of dissent and for reform would develop, setting the stage for the upheaval of religion in what became known as the Protestant Reformation—or Reformations. The massive changes in European Christianity in the sixteenth century would lead to breaks within the Roman church and divisions within the church universal. Before the Reformation period, Europeans could speak of one church—the Roman church united through its hierarchy. They could maintain what the church believed was an unbroken chain of apostolic succession, stretching back to the early church and ultimately to St. Peter, whose successor—the pope—was the vicar of Christ on earth. After the Protestant Reformations, what was most visible was the plural: churches. The changing world featured a changing church, now divided into discreet traditions that would develop on their own—up to the present day.

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Intellectual Currents

The medieval universities that developed between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries played a major role in producing intellectual leaders. The universities focused on the study of the arts (what we today call the “liberal arts”) and on the advanced disciplines of theology, law, and medicine.

The teaching methods of the universities were based in “scholasticism” (“of the schools”). This approach was marked by a heavy reliance on logic, philosophical concepts, reason, and the precise use of language. The study of theology in the universities proceeded this way with the overall goal of presenting Christian theology in an organized, systematic fashion. Among major theologians who carried out their studies this way were Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1161), and most famously, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Their complex theological systems became foundational for the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Renaissance of the fourteenth century, beginning in Italy and spreading throughout Europe, produced an alternative to scholasticism for studying the arts and perceiving the nature of knowledge.

Renaissance humanism sought to rediscover and recover literary sources from the classical period of Greece and Rome. Christian humanists applied this desire for understanding classical sources to the texts of ancient Christianity. The humanist motto was: *Ad fontes!*—“to the sources.”

Christian humanists applied this desire for understanding classical sources to the texts of ancient Christianity.

Thus, the humanist stress was on history instead of logic. The way to understand texts was to learn about their historical contexts, understand the original languages in which they were written, and try to understand what the texts were urging for the living of life, rather than focusing on their logical structure or speculative issues.

Christian humanists, using the *ad fontes!* principle, looked to recover a Christianity they believed had been lost through the centuries by uncovering the pure and original Christianity of antiquity. They wanted to regain the vitality of what had been lost and bring it to life again for their contemporary society. Scholasticism held no hope of helping in the humanist quest. Instead of an emphasis on correct doctrine, what was needed was piety and

ethics so the Christian life could be lived, and not merely speculated upon as in scholasticism.

The most important and famous humanist scholar in Europe was Desiderius Erasmus (1467–1536). Erasmus was devoted to recovering ancient texts and, as a Christian, particularly interested in producing a new edition of Christianity’s classical text—the New Testament. Erasmus published a text of the New Testament (1516 and later editions) that used the best ancient manuscripts available. The fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, was the official biblical text of the Roman Catholic Church. Erasmus’ push back to the original Greek texts meant that he challenged some of the Latin translations while he also produced a new Latin translation. Erasmus’ work provided a text for future reformers—Roman Catholic and Protestants—enabling them to work from a common biblical text.

The emergence of Christian humanism helped lay a groundwork for the work of some Protestant reformers whose focus was on Holy Scripture.

Reform Movements

In the changing contexts leading to the beginnings of the Protestant Reformations, significant reformers and disciples of dissent within the Roman Catholic Church became important.

Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) was an Italian priest who in 1495 called his fellow Florentine Christians to repent before the coming judgment of God. He preached against the corruption of the clergy, the authoritarian government, and the exploitation of the poor. Savonarola’s fiery preaching led to his arrest, torture, and death by hanging and burning on May 23, 1498.

The Roman church, while recognizing needs for reform, also continued in corruption. The papacy itself appeared corrupt, and corruption among the clergy included dereliction of duties by bishops, the practice of selling of church offices (simony), nepotism, and the lifestyle of many priests.

Earlier, in England, the Oxford University professor John Wycliffe (1330–1384) raised issues that were to resonate through the years and become part of sixteenth-century reformatory concerns.

Wycliffe’s focus was on the Bible as the central authority for the church and the authoritative source for Christian belief and Christian living. This meant he was critical of the authority of the pope and the

Roman Catholic hierarchy. Wycliffe critiqued monks and monasteries for their corruption and raised theological questions about the church's teachings on the Eucharist. He believed the church's view of transubstantiation—which taught that in the Lord's Supper, the substance of the bread and wine became changed into the body and blood of Christ—was unbiblical. Wycliffe also dissented from clergy celibacy, indulgences, purgatory, and the practice of pray-ing to saints. Wycliffe's focus on Scripture led him to labor in translating them into English so the common people of England could read the Word of God. On May 4, 1415, Wycliffe was declared a heretic by the Council of Constance. His body was exhumed and burned, and his ashes were thrown into a river.

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Wycliffe's followers were called Lollards. Theirs was a movement of the common people, and they used Wycliffe's translations to denounce the church's teachings. Lollards emphasized that individual Christians could function as priests and that the movement was anticlerical in nature. If all Christians could be priests, church practices such as the confession of sins to a priest and the sacrament of penance were unnecessary. Confession is to Christ alone.

Dissent and movements for church reform included the Hussites, followers of the Czech reformer John (Jan) Hus (1372–1415). Hus read Wycliffe and in turn influenced Martin Luther. Hus advocated free preaching, reception of bread and cup in communion and condemned many secular and church abuses. Hus was charged with questioning the primacy and power of the pope. With Wycliffe, Huss was condemned at the Council of Constance and burned at the stake. His followers were condemned and fought five wars against papal crusades (1420–1431) in the Hussite Wars.

Pre-Reformation reformers were collectively considered heretics by the Roman Catholic Church. The devil was the common source of all errors. However, these reformers all believed the Church was not able to reform itself and was fully corrupt.

Spiritual Practice

Find ways to overcome divisions among Christian persons and church bodies and work for the church's unity, even in small yet meaningful ways.

Questions for Reflection

What factors today are changing society in significant ways and are affecting the church as well?

What effects of sixteenth-century humanism do you see as important for understanding the nature of the Bible and its interpretation?

What movements for reform of the church have you experienced and what impact have they had on the church as you know it?