

# The Protestant Reformations

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”

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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?