

The medieval and Renaissance Christian church experienced numerous problems, yet remained a single church throughout. Why, then, did the Christian Church splinter starting in the 1520s? The reason the church started to splinter has to do with the differing reactions of church authority versus the general public to the ideas evident in Martin Luther's writings. The stark disagreements between the teachings of the church and the ideas of Luther and other reformers are what fueled the Protestant Reformation. Thus I'll discuss Luther's writing as well as the reactions his writing received, and other key influences on the Protestant Reformation.

It is first necessary that I briefly discuss what the Church was teaching that got Luther to write his theses and ultimately *On Christian Liberty*. As a component of the ideas surrounding purgatory, church doctrine in Germany in the 16<sup>th</sup> century said that you could buy indulgences as a means of shortening your stay there. You had to merely pay the church a predetermined monetary amount to get yourself, or someone else, a predetermined number of days off your stay in purgatory. As an old saying went, "when the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs" (Luther's 95 Theses paragraph 1). Luther's writings were in response to the inherent notion that sin became monetary debt and that the pope had no authority to dole out the excess good works of Jesus and the saints.

So what were the ideas from a few of Luther's initial theses in response to this doctrine? For one, that the pope has no power to remit punishments he doesn't dispense, including those for sins (Thesis 5). Ultimately the pope simply cannot remit penalties imposed outside the human realm. In dying everyone pays all their

debts, and are dead to canon law (Thesis 13). Thus the pope is using sin for the church's own gain. Since scripture has no mention of indulgences, and scripture is the basis of doctrine, then indulgences aren't valid doctrine. All of these theses are quite compelling statements, and are but a taste of Luther's full ideas and writings. These are important to touch on because they exhibit the direction Luther aimed to take the church, and lay the foundation for his later writings. All 95 of his theses were posted to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (Luther's 95 Theses paragraph 1).

Let us now turn to Luther's *On Christian Liberty* and discuss its key points as writing against the church doctrine. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." (On Christian Liberty 2). Christians are free from human chains but due to their spiritual nature they'll want to be dutiful and serve others. The church must be faithful to the scriptures, and anyone can interpret scripture (On Christian Liberty 93). Faith comes from obedience to God (On Christian Liberty 16). Even though faith alone is justification, Christians do have to worry about their behavior. Reading scripture is what brings us to God and faith (On Christian Liberty 7). What is Luther getting at in this writing? Only through faith, not anything human, are Christians saved. The church itself is not faithful in preaching that human works and monetary payments will save the soul. The church is missing the point of scripture by saying such things, in doing so it is telling lies, and ultimately is sending souls straight to hell not heaven (On Christian Liberty 63). The papacy is corrupt in avoiding reforms, but Luther is clear to say that he's criticizing the institution and not the pope himself. It is easy to

see how this work of Luther's can thrust apart a scarred church into splinters. Those that read and passed along these works of Luther helped to create a new church and rile up the old church. This writing is important since it was one of the most well known writings of Luther's and set the stage for much of the reformation, as well as the papacy's hatred toward Luther.

It is one thing to describe what Luther's ideas were and that an increasing number of Christians believed in such ideas, but what was the response of the papacy to such claims? The pope issued a papal bull with forty-one errors listed and ordered any writings of Luther's with one or more of the errors to be condemned, rejected, and denounced (Papal Bull paragraph 4). Pope Leo X issued an order that forbid all Christians from reading, speaking, considering, or publishing such works (Papal Bull paragraph 4). This same document made it clear that unless Luther recanted these claims he would be excommunicated (Papal Bull paragraph 1). By issuing such a condemnation on these writings the papacy made this splintering visible. Before the pope's opinion was known there wasn't a visible pair of sides, but after his opinions were known it became clear that one side stood with Pope Leo X, and another with Luther, thus creating a rift between the sides and initiating the splintering.

Peasants were one of the major groups of people that followed Luther's teachings. As they were a large proportion of the population they pulled quite a lot of weight to the splintering of the church. What peasants got out of Luther's teachings can be summed up in saying they understood the notions that we may call democracy. They desired "that in the future we shall have power and authority so

that the entire community should choose and appoint a minister, and that we should have the right to depose him should he conduct himself improperly” (First Article of the Peasants). They desired proper taxation (Second Article of the Peasants), and in turn wanted to be treated even half as equal as everyone else (Sixth Article of the Peasants). These peasants wanted their demands met, but didn’t want any of them to go against the scripture teachings. With a large peasantry sold on Luther’s theology the church got pulled closer to splintering. If many Christians are peasants, and they follow Luther, then the splintering of the 1520s is bound to occur.

However, it is important to note that since the peasants were using Luther’s ideas for social, and not spiritual, change Luther himself wanted the peasants suppressed. He deemed the difference in focus to be hurtful to his goals.

The response of Marie Dentière to Luther’s ideas is worth discussing here as well. At the time women hardly had any roles in the Church (or society), they were completely secondary to men. If most men (everyone in the laity, essentially) were not permitted to read scripture, then women (save for nuns) were kept from the task even more so. Marie Dentière saw in Luther’s reforms the possibility that women would have a greater role in the Church (after all, in the times of the New Testament women were teachers alongside men), and she was hopeful that this would happen with Luther’s reforms. In reality that didn’t materialize until after her time, but this account, like that of the peasants, shows us that the Protestant Reformation grew beyond Luther’s works and intentions following the hopes of these other groups.

All these responses would not have been possible, indeed the reformation would not have even occurred, had the printing press not been invented. Starting in 1500 it got

drastically easier to transmit ideas with the advent of the printing press since you didn't have to handwrite the separate copies, but could instead print them. Luther's followers used this technology to help spread the ideas of the reformation. Had the printing press not existed Marie Dentièrè would not likely have run across Luther's writings. Neither, quite likely, would the literate members of society who shared such ideas with the peasants have seen the writings. It is this factor (along with the fact that Luther translated the bible from Latin to the vernacular German) that quite possibly enabled the Protestant Reformation, especially since most of Luther's ideas were not original, but simply revived claims of some that came before him.

Thus we can now move to a briefer discussion of another major reformer who helped splinter the Church, Jean Calvin. Calvin lived in France and found Erasmus' writings a stimulant to reforming the church (Merriman 107). Calvin's emphasis was on the notion that the church made the faithful anxious by emphasizing that good works are necessary for salvation (Merriman 108). Calvin developed the doctrine of election or predestination in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Merriman 109). In leading the second major pillar that splintered the church Calvin, like Luther, is a notable figure to discuss when thinking about why the church splintered. Both people deviated from the religion they started with and were able to sway enough Christians over to their side that the church splintered as a result. At one time you had just one, albeit bruised, Christian Church, and at another time you had a new Church that formed from those splinters off the Christian Church.

As these discussions show there was immense support for the ideas to reform the church, yet still significant support for the papacy's longstanding notions of what the church should be. These ideas were not just minor reforms either, but significant changes in theology that are in opposition enough to not be able to coexist in one religion. Therefore, when Christians started taking sides the woodwork of the church started to splinter and a new church formed.

In conclusion let me restate that what caused the splintering of the Christian church was ultimately the divided reactions to reformers like Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, who were influenced to some extent by the recent past of the church's problems. The papacy had steadfast views condemning these people and all who followed them. Though many Christians sided with the papacy, maybe these would be considered "loyal Christians," a decent number of Christians sided instead with the reformers. Many of those who sided with Luther and Calvin were peasants, and as such made up a significant majority of the Christian population. Thus, when they started believing in the ideas of the reformers they created a major splintering of the Christian church. Therefore, a church that remained whole throughout numerous problems in medieval and Renaissance times, though it left those times scarred, splintered apart starting in the 1520s.