

Lesson Summary

The Protestant Reformation

In the 1500s, the Renaissance in northern Europe sparked a religious upheaval that affected Christians at all levels of society. This movement is known as the Protestant Reformation. In the late Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had become caught up in worldly affairs. Popes led lavish lives and hired artists to enhance churches. To finance such projects, the Church increased fees for services. Many Christians protested such acts. They also questioned why the Church in distant Rome should have power over their lives.

In 1517, protests against Church abuses turned into a revolt. A German monk named **Martin Luther** triggered it over an event in **Wittenberg**, Germany. There, a priest sold **indulgences** to Christians to raise money to rebuild St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. To Luther, the priest's actions were the final outrage. He wrote 95 Theses, or arguments, against indulgences. He said that they had no biblical basis, that the pope did not have the authority to release souls from purgatory, and that Christians could be saved only through faith. Throughout Europe, Luther's 95 Theses stirred furious debate. The new Holy Roman emperor, **Charles V**, summoned Luther to the **diet**, or assembly, at the city of Worms. Luther refused to change his views. Thousands hailed Luther as a hero and renounced the authority of the pope. At the heart of Luther's doctrines were several beliefs, including the idea that all Christians have equal access to God through faith and the Bible. Printing presses spread Luther's writings and ideas throughout Germany and Scandinavia. By 1530, Luther's many followers were using a new name, "Protestants," for those who "protested" papal authority.

In Switzerland, the reformer **John Calvin** also challenged the Catholic Church. Calvin shared many of Luther's beliefs but also preached **predestination**. Protestants in **Geneva** asked Calvin to lead them. In keeping with his teachings, Calvin set up a **theocracy**. Reformers from all over Europe visited Geneva and then returned home to spread Calvin's ideas. This new challenge to the Roman Catholic Church set off fierce wars of religion across Europe. In the 1600s, English Calvinists sailed to America to escape persecution.

