

Was the Reformation 'a good thing'?

In the 16th century, the power of the Church came under attack. This led to one of the most important and turbulent periods in history – the Reformation. This section of the book will look at:

- why people became increasingly critical of the Catholic Church in the 16th century
- who Martin Luther was, and why he was important
- how these criticisms led to the European Reformation.

The Catholic Church comes under attack

Learning objectives

- Understand the criticisms of the Catholic Church that were being made in the 16th century.
- Know who Martin Luther was, and his role in the Reformation.

What do you think?

Why do you think people were criticising the Catholic Church? Think back to what you have already learned.

Key term

Abbot*: The head of an abbey.

Relic*: Part of the body or clothing of a holy person.

In Cumbria, the ruin of Furness Abbey can be found near the town of Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria. Much of the abbey has long since disappeared. There is no roof, vegetation grows on the walls, and stairs lead to nowhere. However, you can still sense what a grand and important building this once was as you walk around the ruins.



Source A: The ruins of Furness Abbey, Cumbria.

In 2012, archaeologists discovered at the site the grave of a former abbot*, who probably died during the 12th century. They found the remains of the abbot's golden staff and a ring, which at one time may have contained a fragment of a holy relic*. The abbot must have been a very rich and powerful man.

At the time of the abbot's death, Furness Abbey was one of many rich monasteries in England. The Catholic Church was richer and more powerful than ever. People tried to avoid the agonies of purgatory through praying to saints, and going on pilgrimages to worship holy relics.

Within a few hundred years, however, many of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in England had been destroyed, with precious relics and statues of saints smashed and scattered. England seemed to have abandoned Catholicism.

Why were people criticising the Catholic Church?

By the start of the 16th century, there was growing criticism of the Catholic Church across Europe, not only from those who attended services, but also from some priests. Figure 1.1 contains a summary of some of the doubts that people had about the Church.

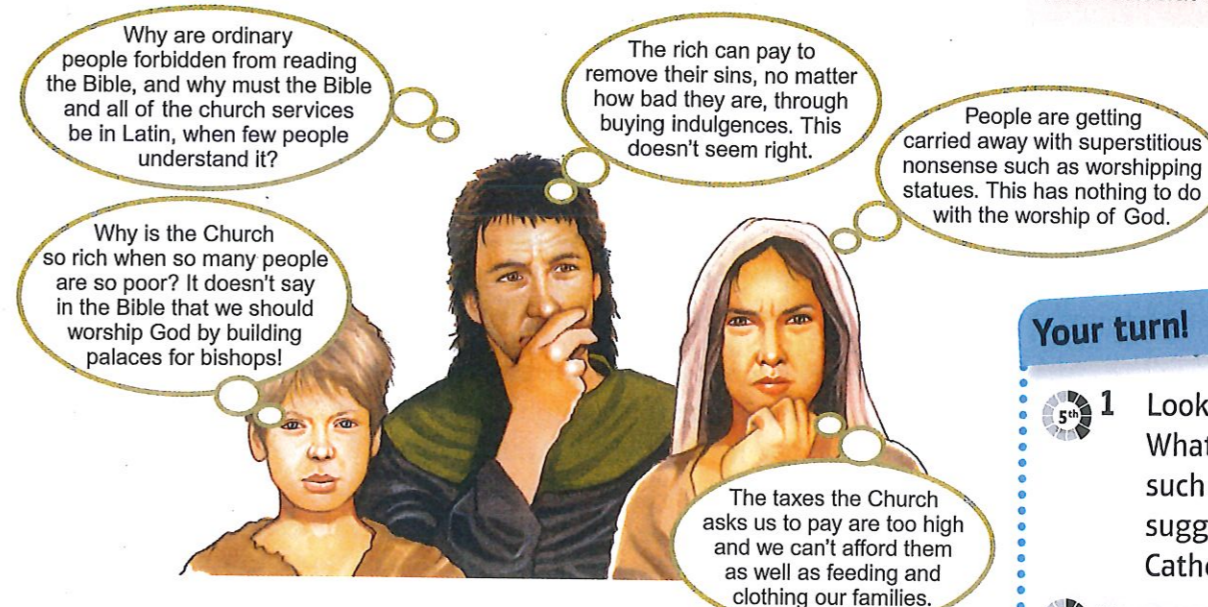


Figure 1.1: Criticisms of the Catholic Church in the 16th century.

At the time, speaking such doubts aloud could lead to harsh punishments, including execution as a heretic*. As the new century progressed, however, these criticisms intensified, particularly over the issue of **indulgences**.

Indulgences were sold by the Catholic Church, and allowed the holder to reduce their time in purgatory, for a fee. The invention of the printing press around 1440 meant that copies of indulgences could be cheaply and easily produced. Many people were critical of these indulgences, including a German priest called Martin Luther.



Source B: A woodcut by Hans Holbein the Younger in the early 16th century, showing the sale of indulgences in a German marketplace.

Key term

Heretic*: A person with religious views that disagree with official Church teaching.

Your turn!

- 1 Look at Source A. What do buildings such as these suggest about the Catholic Church?
- 2 Look at Source B. Explain why many people criticised the sale of indulgences.
- 3 What sort of changes do you think people would have liked the Catholic Church to make? Discuss this and jot down some examples.



Martin Luther and the '95 theses'

Key terms

Basilica*: A type of building, usually a church, given special status by the pope.

Dominican friar*: Monk following the rule of St Dominic. Friars were monks who could travel around, instead of staying in a monastery.

Reformation*: A movement in the 16th century which led to the founding of Protestantism. A Protestant is a type of Christian whose beliefs are different from those of the Catholic Church.

In 1516, the basilica* of St Peter's in Rome, which was considered one of the most holy buildings in Christendom, needed rebuilding. Johann Tetzel, a German Dominican friar*, was dispatched back to his homeland with indulgences to try to raise money for the work.

Source C gives an example of what supposedly happened when one person purchased one of these indulgences.

Source C: Description of an incident involving Johann Tetzel, written by Martin Luther and published in the early 16th century.

After Tetzel had received a substantial amount of money at Leipzig [a city in Saxony], a nobleman asked him if it were possible to receive a letter of indulgence for a future sin. Tetzel quickly answered [yes], insisting, however, that the payment had to be made at once. This the nobleman did, receiving thereupon letter and seal from Tetzel. When Tetzel left Leipzig the nobleman attacked him along the way, gave him a thorough beating, and sent him back empty-handed to Leipzig with the comment that this was the future sin which he had in mind. Duke George [of Saxony] at first was quite furious about this incident, but when he heard the whole story he let it go without punishing the nobleman.

The reaction of Martin Luther

Many were angry at what they saw as the latest abuse of power by the Catholic Church. In 1517, in the university town of Wittenberg, a professor of theology, Martin Luther, approached the heavy doors of All Saints' Church and nailed a piece of paper to the door. This piece of paper became known as the '95 theses' and was to prove one of the most explosive documents in history. It would help to set in motion the Reformation* and change many countries forever.



Interpretation 1: A 19th-century engraving of Luther pinning his '95 theses' to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Who was Martin Luther?

Martin Luther was a former monk who, by 1517, was Professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg. He had become deeply disillusioned with the Catholic Church, and began to argue that salvation* could not be achieved through indulgences, charity or the worship of relics. In Luther's mind, only God had the power to grant absolution*.

These doubts led Luther to post his famous '95 theses' (see Source D), which summarised many of his criticisms of the Catholic Church.

Source D: Extracts from Luther's '95 theses', 1517.

32. Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.

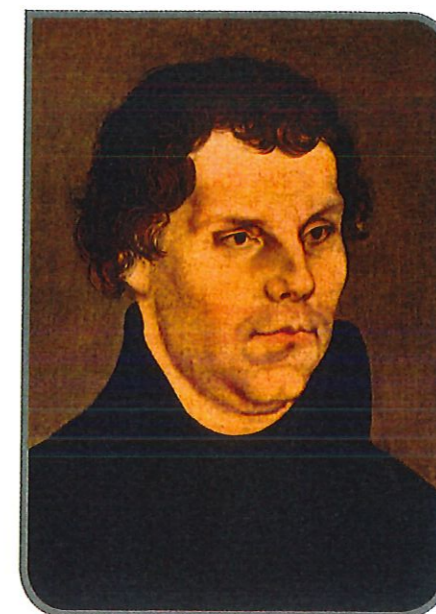
62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

86. Why does not the pope [...] build the basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?

Although the '95 theses' were only meant to reform the Catholic Church, they were to have devastating consequences. The existence of the printing press meant that copies were widely read meant that copies were widely read. German peasants, inspired by Luther's words, revolted against their Catholic rulers. As a result, the pope branded Martin Luther a heretic and he was excommunicated* in 1521. Some German princes sided with the peasants, leading to a civil war in which thousands of peasants died. The revolt ultimately failed, but Luther's ideas spread and soon Protestant rulers across a large proportion of Europe were inspired to denounce Catholicism, resulting in the Protestant Reformation.

Your turn!

- 1 What does the story in Source C suggest about why people were criticising the Catholic Church and the practice of indulgences?
- 2 What criticisms does Luther make of the Catholic Church in Source D, and why? How did Luther believe people could achieve 'salvation'?
- 3 Luther wrote the description in Source C. How might this affect how you would treat it as a source?



Source E: A portrait of Martin Luther, painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder, c.1532.

Key terms

Salvation*: Deliverance from sin and its consequences.

Absolution*: The forgiving of a person's sins.

Excommunicated*: Cut off or banished from a religious group, in this case, the Catholic Church.

Checkpoint

- 1 List two criticisms made of the Catholic Church in the 16th century.
- 2 Who was Martin Luther?
- 3 What were the '95 theses'?
- 4 List two consequences of Luther's actions.