

The Protestant Movement

Summary: Martin Luther was a 16th century German monk who grew disillusioned with the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and insisted that salvation was entirely a gift of God's grace. He began a process of Christian reform that eventually moved beyond Catholicism and became known as the Protestant Reformation. And that process of reform would continue in Protestant churches themselves, generating new practices, theologies, movements, and denominations.

The 16th century Protestant Reformation was sparked by Martin Luther, a German monk whose study of the Bible led him to speak out against the leadership of the Catholic Church. Luther became convinced that religious authority lay not primarily in church traditions, nor in the hierarchy of bishops and popes, but in the Bible alone. He believed that the church's teachings and leaders must be judged by the standard of scripture. Thus, he insisted that the Bible and the church's worship be translated from Latin into the languages of the people, so that all might hear and understand it.

From his reading of the New Testament, Luther concluded that there was nothing anyone could do to merit salvation. It came from God's grace alone. Nor could salvation be obtained by any action or penance. The only appropriate human response was faith. Luther especially objected to what were known as "indulgences" sold by the church to assure one's own well-being in the afterlife or the well-being of those who had already died. Luther, by contrast, preached that salvation was a free gift that could not be earned, much less bought. In his break with Rome, the reformer left the monastic life and married, thus establishing the precedent for married clergy in Protestant churches. And in his assault on the Catholic hierarchy, he advocated for greater participation from the laity, the goodness of Christian life within society, and the "priesthood" of all believers. Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther from the Catholic Church in 1521.

The Protestant Reformation marked the beginning of what would become a new movement in the Christian tradition. Its leaders and forms were many, but they were held together by their commitments to the importance of personal faith, the free gift of grace, and the authority of the Bible.

In Germany, a "Lutheran" tradition was built on Martin Luther's heritage. Lutheran national churches also developed in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland. A second "Reformed" tradition in

Protestantism began to take form in Switzerland, where Huldrych Zwingli launched a movement of church reform in Zurich in 1522. At the same time in Geneva, John Calvin—in some ways the most influential of the reformers—led a movement that helped found Reformed churches in France, the Netherlands, Hungary, England, and Scotland. Presbyterian churches stand in this tradition, many of which trace their history back through the 16th century Scottish reformer, John Knox. Congregationalists, as well as many Baptists and Anglicans, also inherited the ideas of Zwingli and Calvin.

Anabaptists constituted a third Protestant tradition, owing their existence to what is sometimes called “the Radical Reformation.” These smaller communities took issue with Lutheran and Reformed leaders over two issues: the establishment of a state church and infant baptism. They held that Christian faith is a conscious and voluntary commitment of the heart. Thus, they rejected the coercion of state churches and insisted that baptism be reserved for adult believers. European Anabaptists included the Mennonites and other historic “peace churches,” and these movements influenced the formation of Baptist and Quaker churches in England.

The English Reformation began in the 16th century when King Henry VIII declared the independence of the Church of England from the authority of the Pope. The result was Anglicanism, which accepted Protestant theology but retained a considerable amount of Catholicism’s liturgy and hierarchy. Some Protestants in England went even further than Henry VIII and called for a complete purification of the church. Later known as “Puritans,” some of these radicals in the Church of England set out for North America in the early 1600s. They envisioned establishing a new kind of Christian community, “holy commonwealths,” in the New England colonies. In the 1700s, John Wesley, a priest of the Church of England, launched another energetic reform movement, emphasizing dramatic conversion experiences and personal devotion. “Methodism,” as this movement was called, would eventually separate from the Church of England and thrive as an independent denomination. Those who remained within the Church of England continued to spread their version of Christianity as the British Empire encircled the world. After the Empire’s dissolution, those churches banded together as the Worldwide Anglican Communion.

Evangelicals have also played a key role in ongoing reformation efforts. Originally, the term evangelical was used to describe the 18th-19th century religious reform movements and denominations that resulted from the revivals that swept the North Atlantic Anglo-American world. These revivals were often led by

figures like the Methodist John Wesley (1703-1791); the itinerant Anglican evangelist, George Whitefield (1714-1770); and the American Congregationalist preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). By the 1820s, evangelicals dominated most American Protestant denominations, and organized across denominations to play a major role in reform movements such as abolitionism and prohibition. In the early 20th century, some conservative evangelicals rejected Darwinism and modern biblical criticism, creating schisms between “fundamentalist” and “mainline” Protestants.

Protestantism has remained a potent force in American politics and culture. Mainline Protestant denominations claimed a privileged position in the media, universities, and other institutions through the middle of the 20th century. In the 1960’s, Black Protestant churches offered critical hubs for the Civil Rights Movement and clergy like Martin Luther King, Jr., supplied much of the movement’s leadership. Then during the 1980’s, conservative white evangelicals exerted their power through organizations like the Moral Majority and Concerned Women for America, motivated by a commitment to what they called “traditional family values.” With their ever-expanding variety, divisions, and recombinations, American Protestant churches have shaped the country in a multitude of diverse, often contradictory ways.

The Protestant Reformation launched not a Protestant Church, but a Protestant movement—a dynamic movement of many churches, engaged in energetic and ongoing reformation, even today.