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Luther Sparks a Protestant Reformation How It Relates to the First Amendment

History-Social Science Content Standards:

7.9 Students analyze the historical developments of the Reformation.

7.9.2 Describe the theological, political, and economic ideas of the major figures during the Reformation (e.g., Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Tyndale).

Background:

By challenging the authority of the Roman Catholic pope in 1517, Martin Luther ignited the flames of reform that brought about the end of Christian unity in Western Europe. The resulting Protestant and Catholic Reformations changed the course of Western civilization.

For about 1,000 years, Christians in Western Europe all belonged to the Catholic Church centered in Rome. They observed the sacraments, confessed their sins to priests, prayed to the saints, made donations to the church, and did other religious acts (called "works") to assure their place in heaven. The pope, as head of the Catholic Church, was the spiritual leader. His views on religious doctrine were regarded as final.

As with any institution of such size and proportion, there were differences among leaders and across regions as to best practices and interpretation of laws and doctrines. There were also incidences of corruption and mismanagement. Through the years there were many efforts to change and reform the church, such as the founding of the Franciscan order in the early 13th c. to renew the Church's emphasis on poverty and charity. The number of reform efforts increased during the 15th century. These usually involved church councils, efforts by religious orders to return to what they interpreted as core Christian beliefs, and scholarly dialogues as to proper translations and interpretations of the Bible and Christian writings. At the time, most people did not read and write so they experienced Christian beliefs and teachings through art, architecture, feasts, festivals, mystery plays, homilies, and sermons. The totality of church governance or doctrinal thinking was not part of their world.

However, by the beginning of the 16th century, the power of kings was increasing in most Western European countries. But the middle of Europe did not have strong kings and was fragmented into many German principalities, duchies, and cities, known collectively as the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman emperor attempted to impose his authority over them, but the Germans remained largely independent.

The Roman Catholic Church was a major political and even a military power in Western Europe. Popes used this power to defend and expand the church's influence and wealth.

Catholic kings could usually protect their people from ambitious popes. But many Germans, living under weak local rulers and an ineffective emperor, believed that the church took advantage of them.

Germans bitterly complained that unending church fees, dues, taxes, tithes, and payments to support numerous clergymen impoverished the common people while enriching Rome. Those who could not pay their debts to the church were threatened by local and regional church leaders with excommunication. This meant the church would refuse them the sacraments and other "works" necessary for saving their souls. The prospect of excommunication terrified most believers.

The German people also resented the church's practice of appointing foreigners as their priests, bishops, and other church officials. These clergymen had the right to collect fees from the people while being exempt from the government taxes everyone else had to pay. Many Germans felt that the clergy seemed more interested in the privileges and the wealth of their office than attending to the spiritual needs of the people.

Despite their many grievances against the Roman Catholic Church, few people dared to speak out for fear of being excommunicated or even burned at the stake as a heretic. Yet, in 1517, an obscure German priest and university professor named Martin Luther stood up against the church and pope. Europe and the world would never be the same again.

Luther Challenges the Pope's Authority

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in what is now northern Germany. After surviving a lightning strike, he decided to devote his life to God. He joined a monastery, studied to become a Catholic priest, and went on to earn a doctor of theology degree, vowing to remain true to the teachings of the church. In 1513, Luther was appointed a professor of the Bible at the University of Wittenberg, not far from his birthplace. He also preached sermons at the Wittenberg town church.

After hearing a Catholic's confession of sins, a priest will often direct the person to complete some devotional act called penance. The penance depends on the seriousness of the sin and might range from saying special prayers to making a pilgrimage to a distant holy shrine. Another form of penance in the 16th century was the indulgence, a certificate from a bishop or the pope who forgave a person's sins. The person secured an indulgence by making a donation to the church. Popes and other church officials encouraged the sale of indulgences to raise money for many purposes. Over time, people came to believe that they could literally buy their way into heaven with indulgences. It was even possible to purchase them for the dead.*

* Catholic doctrine included the idea of Purgatory, a time of spiritual cleansing after death. Acts of penance by living people allowed sinners (everyone was a sinner) to shorten their time of suffering in Purgatory.

In spring 1517, a representative of Pope Leo X began selling indulgences in the Wittenberg area after the local archbishop had made a deal to split the revenue with the pope. Pope Leo was anxious to raise money to finish construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Performing good "works" like purchasing indulgences had long troubled Martin Luther. His reading of the scriptures (the Bible, especially the New Testament) led him to conclude that a person could only be saved by personal faith in Jesus Christ and the grace of God. Luther considered indulgences, praying to saints, pilgrimages, and many other such "works" as worthless and a fraud inflicted on the people by the church.

On October 31, 1517, Luther wrote a letter to the archbishop protesting the sale of indulgences. This letter also included Luther's famous "Ninety-Five Theses" that spelled out his criticisms of other church practices. Luther argued that nothing in the Bible granted the pope authority to free a person of his sins in life or after death. Only God could do this, he wrote. A legend grew that Luther personally nailed the "Ninety-Five Theses" to the door of the Wittenberg church, but this dramatic scene probably never happened.

After receiving Luther's shocking letter, the archbishop promptly sent it to Pope Leo. Before the pope could react, however, Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses" became a sensation among the German people. They were stunned that Luther challenged the idea that the pope had the authority to forgive people's sins.

Pope Leo summoned Luther to Rome to answer for his heresy (an opinion or a doctrine different from established religious beliefs). But an important German noble, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, intervened and called for Luther to appear before German judges. Pope Leo and Frederick then worked out a compromise. In October 1518, a representative of the pope examined Luther, but on German soil. He screamed at Luther to renounce his heresy. Luther refused to back down, saying he could not renounce his conscience, which he believed was based on the scriptures, the word of God.

"I Will Not Recant (retract or take back) Anything"

These actions by Luther became a very public event because of a major change in technology. About 70 years before in 1450, a German goldsmith named Johann Gutenberg had introduced movable-type printing to Europe. By the early 1500s, printers were mass-producing written works, even the church's indulgences. Starting in 1520, Luther took full advantage of this new technology and published a steady stream of his writings, mainly in the form of pamphlets criticizing the church. He became the most published author of the 16th century.

Luther and other pamphleteers, increasingly called "Protestants," argued that priests should marry and have children, that the number of sacraments should be reduced, and that the Catholic mass should be held in German instead of Latin. They especially criticized priests and other Church officers for avoiding hard work, not having to pay

taxes, and living like parasites off the common people. The Protestant pamphlet writers proposed that the people should choose their own priests and even decide matters of belief based on the Bible.

In January 1521, Pope Leo X threatened to excommunicate Luther. But by then he was a hero to many Germans. Hans Holbein the Younger, a German artist, published a woodcut drawing that portrayed Luther as the "German Hercules," holding in his mouth a cord attached to a strangled pope.

Luther was anxious to debate and prove the rightness of his cause before the Holy Roman emperor. In April 1521, Luther was summoned to an Imperial Diet, an occasional assembly of German nobles headed by the emperor. But the 20-year-old emperor, Charles V, was a strong Catholic and only wanted Luther to renounce his heresy.

When Luther appeared for questioning by the Diet, all his books and pamphlets were piled before him. After admitting they were all his writings, his questioner asked, "Will you now recant? Yes or no?" After some delay, he ignored a simple yes or no, and presented a well-reasoned defense based on the scriptures. He concluded by saying that since "my conscience is captive to the word of God, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me, Amen."

Charles declared Luther a heretic and an outlaw of the empire. But again Frederick the Wise stepped in and rescued Luther, this time by hiding him for nearly a year. Luther used this time to write more pamphlets against the church, publish his sermons, and compose Protestant hymns. He also translated the New Testament into German so all literate persons could read the word of God for themselves.

Building a New Church

Returning to Wittenberg in 1522, Luther married and eventually became the father of six children. As a father, he understood the importance of educating all children, including girls, so that they could read the Bible. He urged city councils to establish schools to educate children for their role in society as well as church life.

Luther's radical religious ideas spread rapidly, gaining favor with the German people and their rulers in the northern part of the Holy Roman Empire. The southern part remained mostly Catholic. As Protestant princes adopted Lutheranism as the official religion of their lands, Luther was forced to sort out the relationship between church and state.

Luther developed a doctrine that he called the "Two Kingdoms." He welcomed the worldly kingdom of princes and city councils to aid the new Lutheran Church. But he also preached that political authorities have no business intruding into the spiritual kingdom of one's conscience. He even advocated resistance if this should occur. Luther, however, was no political revolutionary. He totally opposed the peasant's revolt against the feudal nobility that broke out in the empire in 1524.

Luther assumed that reading the scriptures could simply decide all matters of faith. But it did not take long for other Protestants to read the Bible differently than he did. Soon Lutheranism itself split apart into different Protestant churches.

Disputes arose between Luther and other Protestants over many religious issues. Should infants be baptized? Luther said yes; a group called the Anabaptists said no. Luther became infuriated when other Protestant reformers like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli contradicted him. Luther also ranted against witches and demons. He attacked Jews for failing to convert to Christianity, and his writings helped spread anti-Semitism in Germany and Europe. Paradoxically, while he grew more and more intolerant of those who disagreed with him, his life was a testament to freedom of religious conscience.

At the end of his life, Luther grew convinced that reconciliation or compromise with the Catholic Church and the papacy (the office of the pope) was impossible. In 1545, he wrote a pamphlet titled, "Against the Papacy in Rome Founded by the Devil." He died the following year at age 63.

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The Protestant Reformation that Martin Luther sparked continued into the next century. The Holy Roman Empire remained divided between the Protestant north and the Catholic south. Religious minorities in both areas were persecuted. In addition, wars between Protestants and Catholics in Europe produced long-lasting religious hatreds. On the other hand, the Protestant emphasis on literacy, education, and hard work laid the foundation for the rise of modern Europe.

"Reformations" continued both within and outside the Church. Christian humanist, Erasmus was an early leader of the effort to reform the excesses of the Catholic Church brought about by the Renaissance and the commercial revolution. He made a translation of the Bible and wrote extensively. After Luther, John Calvin began to preach and organize a group of believers into a Christian society in Switzerland. Reformed Protestant churches followed the Calvinist system of doctrine that emphasized that only God could determine who was saved and that God alone determines a person's capability of following the faith. Calvinism had a great influence in America. Henry VIII led a reformation in England, called Anglicanism, that broke with the pope but maintained much of the Catholic doctrine and practice. Finally what scholars refer to as radical reformers spoke out at the end of the 16th century arguing that church and state should be separated and that Christian faith was a process of being born again and that baptism into the faith should take place only among adults who had experienced this conversion.

New Protestant churches, all differing from one another on matters of Christian faith, arose throughout Western Europe and later in America. Thus the Christian unity in Western Europe that once flourished came to an end. The Catholic Church eliminated the sale of indulgences and other abuses that Luther had attacked. Catholics also formed their own Counter-Reformation that used both persuasion and violence to turn back the tide of Protestantism. In the end, neither Protestants nor Catholics fully succeeded in winning the

hearts and minds of all Christians.

For Discussion and Writing

- 1 What was the fundamental point of disagreement between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church?
- 2 Did Martin Luther advance or hold back freedom of religion? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3 How did the Protestant Reformation change the course of Western civilization? Was this change for better or for worse? Explain.

For Further Information

Martin Luther Encyclopedia Britannica's article on Luther.

The Life of Martin Luther A timeline of Luther's life.

A C T I V I T Y

Two Kingdoms

Martin Luther did not draw a sharp line between his "Two Kingdoms" of church and state. In the United States, the First Amendment says that government "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Thomas Jefferson believed this amendment built "a wall of separation between Church and State . . ." The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed with Jefferson's interpretation. Even so, today we are still debating what the relationship of church and state should be. In this activity, students decide whether or not the government acts related to religion listed below violate the First Amendment.

1. Form small groups. Assign each group one of the Government Acts Related to Religion listed below.
2. In each group, do the following:
 - a. Discuss the assigned government act and its pros and cons.
 - b. Decide whether it violates the First Amendment.
 - c. Be prepared to report your answers to the class.
3. After the groups report, hold a class discussion on each government act followed by a class vote on whether it violates the First Amendment.

Government Acts Related to Religion

- 1 Public funding for a museum of religion
- 2 A city law requiring stores to close on Sunday.
- 3 Tax exemptions for churches.

- 4 Vouchers for students to attend any school, including religious schools.
- 5 Public funding for computers with Internet connections in religious schools located in poor neighborhoods.
- 6 A law requiring religious schools accepting any aid from the government to use the same standardized tests required in public schools.

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