

Many reformers, including More and Erasmus, came from the new Christian Humanism, which grew out of Renaissance thought. Challenging the luxury of the institution of the Church, they called for a revitalized Christianity. Historians believe that reflections about family life, questions regarding personal responsibility and authority, and the identification of some movements with the growing power of secular authority were factors that contributed to the atmosphere that led to the Protestant Reformation. Moreover, the power of the printing press permitted the spread of ideas more widely than ever before.

## MARTIN LUTHER AND THE BEGINNINGS OF PROTESTANTISM

The Reformation began as a crisis of faith within the Church, which in turn led to a challenge to the institutions of the Church, particularly the power of the papacy. Almost at once, the Reformation became involved in the struggle between Church and state. The questions initially asked by Martin Luther (1483-1546) were those that were foremost in the minds of many religious individuals: How do I attain salvation? What assurances do I have that I am proceeding properly in life? What is my relationship to my community and to God? The answers he formulated had momentous consequences for both religion and politics.

Luther was the son of a successful miner in Germany. In accordance with his father's wishes he attended the University of Erfurt. After graduation, instead of entering the law faculty, Luther joined an Augustinian monastic order. In 1510, Luther went to Rome and came home a critic of the worldly papacy. He moved to Wittenberg in Germany in 1511, took his doctorate in 1512, and became a professor there, teaching biblical studies.

Luther was obsessed with the question of how an individual might be saved. The prevailing theology stressed salvation through doing good works—fulfilling the sacraments required by the Church, and performing acts of prayer, charity, and kindness. Luther began to feel that no amount of doing of good works could bring inner peace, and he himself was tortured by the sense of uncertainty with regard to his salvation. In

studying the Bible, he was particularly struck by a passage by St. Paul in Romans 1:17: "For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" He came to the conclusion that salvation must come first through faith. As he said in 1520:

Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but an evil man does evil works. Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person. . . .

We do not despise ceremonies and works . . . but we despise the false estimate placed upon works in order that no one may think they are true righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

Luther slowly began to break with the formal teachings of Catholicism. He stressed reading the Bible, inner peace, and a personal relationship with God. He challenged ceremonies and rituals, including some of the sacraments not found in the Bible. Conscientious and determined, he sought a religious life not much different from that of the reformers of his day.

The issue of **indulgences** transformed Luther's personal quest into a political and institutional struggle. An indulgence was a release from the temporal penalty given by priests, on the authority of the Church, to individuals who had confessed their sins. Originally, it was given to crusaders who could not perform acts of penance because they had died in battle for a holy cause. Indulgences came to be understood as ensuring release from the penalties for sin committed in this world for those who were no longer here, clearing the way for their entry into heaven. It was believed that the merits of the saints made up a treasury that could be tapped by the Church to ease the road to salvation. Indulgences were sold and many believers donated money in return for release of penalties for sin for themselves and for deceased relatives and friends. In some cases, this practice was used to raise money for institutional needs.

In 1517, to raise funds for rebuilding St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, indulgences were sold all over Europe. Some of the money from indulgences sold in Germany went to Rome and some was used to pay off

90. To suppress these most conscientious questionings of the laity by authority only, instead of refuting them by reason, is to expose the church and the Pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to make Christian people unhappy.<sup>3</sup>

The theses expressed the frustrations that many reformers had with the Church. Luther and others were now forced to develop their positions. Salvation by faith alone, not works, became the cornerstone of Lutheran belief. Also, the Bible was emphasized as the word of God and the ultimate authority, and the community of believers was the body understood to be the Church. The implication in all this was that the institution of the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy were not superior to the community of believers and to the individual Christian.

In 1519, in a debate, Luther was forced to challenge the authority of the pope and Church councils, arguing that truth was to be found first in scripture. In 1520, in several pamphlets, his break with the Catholic Church was definite. Luther asked the German princes to reform the Church in their areas and to limit its power. In theological matters, Luther challenged the seven sacraments that were defined by the Church as necessary. These were baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, matrimony, holy orders, penance, and extreme unction. He argued for the retention of only two, baptism and the Eucharist, because they were to be found in the Bible. He supported antimonastic activities and marriage for the clergy. He argued that relationship to the Deity was a personal matter and the institution of the Church was not necessary for salvation.

Luther was excommunicated, expelled from membership in the Church, in January 1521 as a heretic (someone who holds beliefs contradicting the accepted dogma of the Church). The Emperor Charles V (1519–1556) presided over the Diet of Worms, an assembly called to discuss the new ideas, in April 1521, where Luther was ordered to recant his views. He gave a reply that became famous:

Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each

other—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. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

After a short time in hiding, which he spent translating the Bible into German, Luther began teaching again. His beliefs and those of other reformers spread quickly, through students, preaching, public debates, and pamphlets. By 1529, the word Protestant first appeared, denoting the new Lutheran Church, but soon referring to all groups of non-Catholic Christians in the West.

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Luther sought the support of local German authorities, the princes of the Holy Roman Empire, in order to institute his reforms. Thus, the Reformation quickly became a political matter. It pitted the north of Europe against the authority of Rome, the secular princes against the clergy, and the local authority against central power. As well, it raised questions about the nature of responsibility and authority. What is the relationship between the secular power and the Church? How does an individual make decisions in the face of competing authorities? What is the relationship between individual conscience and authority?

Social upheavals can have an impact well beyond the intention of the initiators. The peasants of Germany saw Lutheran beliefs as supporting their grievances against local nobles who abused authority and often disregarded tradition in levying taxes. Germany experienced a number of peasant uprisings during this time, and witnessed the appearance of an ideology that made all equal under God. Some wished release from serfdom, others argued against excessive rents and the appropriation of common lands by individuals. Crop failures in 1523 and 1524 made people desperate and in 1524, rebellions of peasants broke out in the German states. Over a quarter of a million people took part, often using arms against their feudal lords. Some peasants used Luther's teachings as justification for their acts, and believed that scripture legitimized their needs.

Luther, whose vision did not include political freedom, utterly condemned the peasants. He made it

