**The Protestant Reformation**

**Meaning:**

The term ‘Reformation’ is often described as a revolt against abuses which had grown in the Catholic Church. It refers to two major developments in the history Europe towards the later part of the Renaissance:-

1. The Protestant Reformation which resulted in a split in Christianity.
2. The second development concerned reforms within the Roman Catholic Church, generally referred to as Catholic Reformation or Counter Reformation.

**Causes:**

* Authority of the Church-

The Catholic Church, during the early medieval period, had a vast hierarchical organization headed by the Pope in Rome. The pope was the supreme authority. Systematic efforts were made to extend the authority of the Church over everyone, high or low.

* Confession of sins-

Making an oral confession of sins to a priest at least once a year and suffering the punishment imposed was made obligatory for everyone. The people who did not follow this were excommunicated. Other Christians were forbidden from associating with such people.

* Theory of sacraments-

The Church laid great emphasis on sacraments. Sacraments were the only way in which man could attain salvation (eternal life). Baptism, penance and anointing the sick are a few examples.

* The theory of priesthood-

The priest, according to this theory, had the power to cooperate with God in performing certain miracles and in saving sinners from the consequences of their sins.

**Evils of the Catholic Church:**

* Some of the priests and higher-ups in the Church hierarchy received their appointments through corrupt means. Many such appointees led lives of luxury and immorality.
* Religious offices were sold to the highest bidder.
* The priests imposed a punishment on a person who had sinned and he was required to perform a special service or make a pilgrimage to a holy place. However, sinners with enough money could be freed from doing a penance for their sins by paying the clergy for a ‘letter of Indulgence’. The **sale of indulgences** which began to be considered as passports to heaven became one of the major **immediate issues** which caused the Protestant Reformation.
* Any belief that was strongly opposed to the established beliefs of the church was termed as **‘heresy’**. Heresy was punishable. People who committed heresy were called heretics. Heretics were burnt at the stake or executed.
* By payment of fees any problem could be solved. There were fees for every transaction in life, from birth to death, fees for peace of the soul and peace for souls of the people who were dead long ago.
* Wandering monks carried portable altars which they set up when they wanted to, heard confessions, awarded punishments for sins and remitted the punishment for fees.

**Protests against the Church:**

* From the 14th century, opposition to some of the Church practices began to grow.
* The language of the Catholic Church was Latin which the common people did not understand. Translation of the Bible into any other language, it was believed, would destroy its sanctity.
* However, Wycliffe asserted that the Bible was the only source of true Christianity. For this it was necessary that they were translated into the languages of the people. Wycliffe was the first inspirer and sponsor of the first English translation of the Bible.

**Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation:**

* The Protestant Reformation can be said to have begun in 1517 when Martin Luther, a German monk, nailed his **ninety-five theses** or statements which attacked the sale of indulgences, on the door of the church in Wittenberg in Germany. He challenged people to come and hold debates with him on these theses and sent copies of his theses to his friends in a number of cities.
* During the next two years, Luther wrote a series of **pamphlets**. In 1520, the Pope ordered him to recant (withdraw) within sixty days or condemned as a heretic.
* Luther burnt the proclamation of the Pope in public.
* During this period, he was protected by the ruler of Saxony who was his friend.
* Many rulers in Germany were hostile to the Church and when Luther was excommunicated, he remained unharmed.
* During the next ten years, he occupied himself with the task of building an independent German Church.
* He rejected the entire system of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.
* He introduced German as the language of church services.
* He abolished the special status of priests as representatives of God on earth, eliminated most of the sacraments and **emphasized faith** rather than pilgrimages.
* He gave highest priority to the **supreme authority of the scriptures**. (Bible)
* The German rulers and common people of Germany supported Luther because the rulers wanted to be free from the authority of the Church. It gave the common people the opportunity to demand more freedom from their rulers.

**Spread of Protestant Reformation:**

* The Protestant Reformation did not, nor was it meant to lead to the establishment of a universal Protestant Church under a single authority like the Catholic Church was under the Popes.
* It **led to the establishment of separate national Churches** under the control of the state.
* The Protestant Reformation soon spread to different countries including Switzerland, Scotland, England, France, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. By the 17th century, half of Europe was Protestant.

**Counter Reformation:**

* The Protestant Reformation was followed by a realization by the Catholics (Popes, priests, rulers, scholars) that the spread of Protestantism could not be stopped by persecution or by political and military means.
* What was needed was a moral regeneration of the Catholic Church.
* A series of measures were taken to introduce reforms in the Catholic Church.
* The period in which Catholic Church officials attempted reform and worked to bring back to the Church some of its lost power is known as the ***Counter Reformation.***
* In Spain, where there were no Protestants, a soldier named Loyola started an organization for priests to work wholly as ‘soldiers of Jesus’ in the service of the Church. Its members came to be called ***Jesuits.***
* They went from place to place and won back followers in France and Germany.
* They established missions in India, China, Africa and the Americas to gain new followers.
* The Jesuit schools which they started to strengthen the Roman Catholic Church, are still in existence in many countries of the world.

**Results of Protestant Reformation:**

* The Reformation brought about a split in Christendom and, along with it, for a long time, an increase in religious conflicts and wars.
* The hatred that developed between Protestants and Catholics during and following the Reformation knew no bounds.
* In a period of about 25 years, from 1560s, eight religious wars ravaged France.
* Cruel persecutions and wars resulted, encouraged by **fanatics** with no regard for the teachings of Jesus Christ.
* In the Netherlands, thousands of followers of Calvin were burnt or hanged.
* Religious persecution in England brought about the Civil War and the execution of King Charles I.
* The period from 1560 to 1630 was the worst period in the history of witch-hunting. Innocent women were caught, accused of being witches and burnt.

**Driven to Defiance**

**"I would never have thought that such a storm would rise from Rome over one simple scrap of paper..." (Martin Luther)**

Few if any men have changed the course of history like Martin Luther. In less than ten years, this fevered German monk plunged a knife into the heart of an empire that had ruled for a thousand years, and set in motion a train of revolution, war and conflict that would reshape Western civilization, and lift it out of the Dark Ages.

Luther's is a drama that still resonates half a millennium on. It's an epic tale that stretches from the gilded corridors of the Vatican to the weathered church door of a small South German town; from the barbarous pyres of heretics to the technological triumph of printing. It is the story of the birth of the modern age, of the collapse of medieval feudalism, and the first shaping of ideals of freedom and liberty that lie at the heart of the 21st century.

But this is also an intensely human tale, a story that hurtles from the depths of despair to the heights of triumph and back again. This is the story of a man who ultimately found himself a lightning conductor of history, crackling with forces he could not quite comprehend or control.

For Luther, in a life full of irony, would find himself overwhelmed by his own achievements. As his followers sought to build a new and just Europe around him, he could only turn on them in frustration, declaring that his - and their - only goal should be Heaven.

Martin Luther stands as a hero, the man who built the bridge between the two halves of the last millennium, the Medieval and the Modern. His tragedy was that he would never find the courage to cross it himself.

Martin Luther was born into a world dominated by the Catholic Church, which holds spiritual dominion over all the nations of Europe. For the keenly spiritual Luther, the Church's promise of salvation is irresistible - caught in a thunderstorm, terrified by the possibility of imminent death, he vows to become a monk.

|  |
| --- |
| Selling indulgences |
| **Selling indulgences** |

But after entering the monastery, Luther becomes increasingly doubtful that the Church can actually offer him salvation at all. His views crystallize even further with a trip to Rome, where he finds that the capital of Catholicism is swamped in corruption.

Wracked by despair, Luther finally finds release in the pages of the Bible, when he discovers that it is not the Church, but his own individual faith that will guarantee his salvation.

With this revelation, he turns on the Church, attacking its practice of selling Indulgences in the famous 95 Theses. The key points of Luther's theses were simple, but devastating: a criticism of the Pope's purpose in raising the money.

Luther was not only a revolutionary thinker, he would also benefit from a revolutionary technology: the newly invented machinery of printing. A single pamphlet would be carried from one town to another, where it would be duplicated in a further print run of thousands. Within three months, all Europe was awash with copies of Luther's 95 Theses.

Martin Luther had inadvertently chosen unavoidable conflict with what was the most powerful institution of the day, the Catholic Church.