The Protestant Reformation: Crash Course European History #6

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course European History.

And today it's time to find out what else besides money was behind the competition between Spain and England as they fought it out on the seas and across the globe after 1550. That's right, today we get to talk about religion.

As you may know, the Internet is terrible at engaging in nuanced and thoughtful conversations about religion. But if you think like our contemporary religious discourse is bad, just wait until you get a load of 16th century Europe. INTRO Okay, so over the centuries the Catholic church had developed a powerful structure under the papal monarchy.

Its courts, religious law, local priests, and a huge bureaucracy of religious officials enforced its domination. And Catholic ideas of the time backed up social and political inequality: for example, Church teachings described monarchs and noble people as closer to God than ordinary people. It also had ideas about how the universe worked and sought to repress those whose ideas were different, as we'll discuss further when we turn our attention to the Scientific Revolution.

But in general, Catholic domination of so many aspects of life produced so much resistance beginning in the early 16th century that European Christianity eventually split into two, and then split into like 17,000 competing subgroups. It all starts with Martin Luther—a bright young German man whose father wanted him to become a lawyer, as so many fathers do. So Martin Luther went to law school.

But his real concern, even after getting his law degree, was salvation, so he became a devout monk. Still though, he was agitated, worried about salvation generally and specifically about Church teachings that faith and good works were needed to achieve salvation. For Luther, doing good works seemed a bit like bribery; like wasn't full faith in God the important thing?

This kind of thinking meant that Luther was on his way to heresy—that is, beliefs that went against the principles of the Catholic faith. And the heresy of-for instance-denying the pope's authority could get you burned at the stake, as John Hus was in 1415. Now many of Luther's objections to Church teachings were highly theological, concerning beliefs about, say, whether the word repent in the Bible can be said to refer to the sacrament of penance.

But one of Luther's objections was not nearly that obscure, and was much more relevant to ordinary people. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. Okay so in Catholic doctrine there was a state after death called Purgatory, a kind of holding place for souls that are not pure enough to ascend to heaven but not bad enough to go to hell.

Souls in purgatory can be purified by prayers from the living, and also purified by tortuous afterlife punishment. And in 1517, the pope issued a special indulgence to raise money to continue building the splendid St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Purchasing one of these indulgences was said to release a soul from purgatory--so if you had a deceased friend or family member whose sins might not have been totally cleansed through their faith and good works, you could buy an indulgence and get them a ticket to heaven. Now this may sound to you like a naked attempt to use people's worry and grief as a cash grab. And Luther agreed.

Like, one monk who sold indulgences literally said, quote "Don't you hear the voices of your dead parents and other relatives crying out, 'Have mercy on us, for we suffer great punishment and pain. From this, you could release us with a few alms. … Why do you treat us so cruelly and leave us to suffer in the flames, when it only takes so little to save us?" I'm not here to criticize any particular religion but that is a smidge manipulative It wasn't only Luther who took offense to this practice. Merchants and artisans also noted that it seemed a lot like blackmail.

Many city-dwellers objected to their hard-earned money going to support the aristocratic children of the wealthy who held high positions in the clergy and lived in luxury without ever having to, you know, earn money. Thanks, Thought Bubble. So for Luther, salvation wasn't something you bought, either by good works or by purchasing indulgences.

Instead he believed in salvation by faith alone and so one should seek to fortify one's faith. In 1517, Luther, then in his early thirties, composed "Ninety-Five Theses" expressing questions and differing opinions on these and many other theological issues, perhaps posting them to the door of the chapel of Wittenberg. But in whatever form, his ideas spread.

Soon, papal documents and books of canon law were being burned by students during protests as earnest young Christian humanists vented their anger. And Luther's initial questioning of the Church rapidly became rejection: "For we claim the papacy not to be the holy Church," Luther stated, "nor any part of it, and we are unable to cooperate with it." This rejection of the Church as it operated in the early sixteenth century came to be called the Reformation. Luther began to take on the entire Church establishment.

In European Catholicism at the time, priests were the authority; THEY read the Bible and then told you what it said. But Luther argued that priests like all people were themselves sinners, and that the only true authority was the Bible; it was, he argued, the word of God that provided the relationship with God, not the word of priests. He believed that the hierarchy of priests, and bishops, and cardinals, and the Pope was inherently corrupt, and that such corrupt individuals could hardly serve as intermediaries with the divine.

Sola scriptura, only the Bible or scripture, was his motto alongside the keys to salvation: sola gratia and sola fide, only grace and only faith. The idea of sola scriptura led to a wide-ranging revolution, especially by boosting reading and individual study. Because suddenly, it was important not just for scholars to learn to read, but for everyone, because the written word of God was the way to God.

Now at first, authorities didn't see cause for alarm, although early in 1521 the Pope did excommunicate Luther. Several months later, Luther was summoned before representatives of the Holy Roman Empire at the Diet of Worms, which is overwhelmingly the easiest history term to remember because they literally called it the diet of worms. Leading the assembly in the town of Worms, Germany was Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

Oh! Did the globe open? Weird.

I don't get it? I don't get it, it's just a can of mixed nuts what does this have to do with the diet of worms? Oh!

Stan. Gah. Very frightening.

I have a diet...of worms. That's good stuff, Stan. Right but back to Charles V.

At the time, Charles was nineteen and ruler of Spain, the Low Countries and Duchy of Burgundy. Also, the entire Habsburg Empire, Italy, and all the Spanish possessions in the Western Hemisphere and Southeast Asia, which--if you've ever met or been

a 19-year-old, you'll know is a lot of responsibility for someone who can't legally drink wine in America. Although on the other hand he does look like he is 50 in this stained glass window of the Diet of Worms.

Charles' rulership of the Holy Roman Empire was gained- through the votes of electors, who had selected him from other royal or noble contenders. Among them was the elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, whom Charles had bribed for his vote. Frederick was religious, but not a fan of the papacy.

And many aristocrats saw Charles as threatening world domination because, you know, he was dominating a lot of the world. So when called to account by such a massively powerful ruler, everyone expected that an insignificant monk like Martin Luther would completely fold and admit his errors. But he did not: "I can do no other" he supposedly said of maintaining his new beliefs.

The Holy Roman Emperor declared him an outlaw to be captured. But German princes took his side, and Frederick the Wise hid and protected Luther. Why?

Well that remains one of the unanswered questions of history--maybe it was because Frederick was concerned about papal abuses, maybe because Frederick felt Luther couldn't get a fair trial, and maybe because he felt that Luther and the reform movements he was leading would limit Charles's power. Regardless, after Frederick's death, his brother and successor continued to protect Luther and his followers, helping in 1530 to organize the Schmalkaldic League of Protestant Princes to protect the Lutherans, which, I mean, as names go is no Diet of Worms. On the other hand, if Marvel is looking for a new superhero franchise how bout the Schmalkaldic League of Protestant Princes?

Early in the 1520s, Luther wrote tracts outlining his beliefs in greater detail. He also translated the New Testament of the Bible into German--that is, the local language or vernacular instead of elite Latin. And thanks to the printing press, two hundred thousand copies were printed in the 1520s and early 1530s and many more of his other writings went into print.

The Reformation went from being local to being German to being a European-wide movement in large part thanks to the printing press. Meanwhile, many German princes took up the "Lutheran" challenge to the Holy Roman Emperor. If Charles was against reform, many princes would be for it as a way of restraining the Holy Roman Emperor's power.

Luther summoned them to defend German values against the corruption found in Rome. And because of that, Luther is sometimes called the source or father of German nationalism. And then, in 1525, peasants and other village folk across southern Germany began protesting--eventually including an estimated 100,000 rioters who sacked castles as well as religious centers.

The princes and nobility crushed them--they could get behind religious reform, but not mass soci al change. And Luther agreed, slamming the rioters in Against the Rioting Peasants, soon reprinted with the new sensationalist title-- Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants. So, you know, Luther favored some reform, but not, like, equal rights for peasants reform.

All the while, the reform movement spread—and as it did, it developed offspring. Already in 1519, Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss priest, began preaching reform in Zurich. He supported Luther's main criticisms of the papacy, but he disagreed on the Eucharist, or communion, a ritual in which worshipers eat bread and drink wine.

Or don't. Depending on your perspective. Catholic doctrine held that through the miracle of transubstantiation, the bread and wine literally became the body and blood of Jesus Christ; Luther argued for something called consubstantiation, in which the bread and wine are still bread and wine, yet also the body and blood of Christ.

And Zwingli believed Communion only to be a symbolic ritual, in which the bread and wine were just bread and wine. I know this will seem to many of you like an extremely obscure theological argument that can't possibly have been important, but it was--these theological questions were not just a matter of life and death; they were a matter of eternal life and death. Zwingli's preachings eventually turned some of his followers to a more radical interpretation of Christianity.

These people were called Anabaptists, they held that faith was a matter of individual thought and free will. So only a thinking adult could knowingly participate in Christian faith enough to accept Jesus as lord and savior. Sp they argued that baptism, a cleansing ritual that had long been performed on infants, should only be available to adults who've chosen to accept Jesus as savior. [[TV: Luther Married]]

And as reformers increased in number and variety, Luther did something else that was really shocking: in 1525, he got married, even though Catholic clergy were supposed to be celibate. Luther preached that God made two sexes to procreate and that the clergy's celibacy was against the divine plan. So he married Katharina von Bora, a literate young woman who had been in a convent since the age of five, and this was controversial even among his supporters. One of Luther's best friends and admirers lamented that by marrying, Luther "revels and compromises his good reputation precisely at a time when Germany stands in need of his spirit and authority." But Luther wrote a lot about marriage, and sermonized about it too for the princes, nobility, and his growing number of followers. One of these "lectures" refers to the story of Adam and Eve as written about in the book of Genesis in the Bible: "Moreover this designation [woman] carries with it a wonderful and pleasing description of marriage, in which, as the jurist says, the wife shines by reason of her husband's rays." "Whatever the husband has, this the wife has and possesses in its entirety. . . .the result is that the husband differs from the wife in no respect than in sex..." This certainly wasn't equality as we now understand it, what with the wife shining by reason of her husband's rays, but the notion of equity of marital property was heresy piled on top of the heresy of clergy marrying. [[TV: An Appropriate Battle]]

All of this led to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V deciding to put down the pesky Protestant princes of the Schmalkaldic League once and for all in 1546 and 1547 and he almost did so. He had vast resources at his disposal, including tough soldiers from the Spanish armies, who defeated the League and captured some leading Protestant princes. And Catholicism appeared to be making a comeback. But then in 1552, the League suddenly took to the field again, roundly defeating the imperial forces. [[TV: Peace of Augsburg]]

In 1555, the Peace of Augsburg decreed that whoever ruled would determine the religion of his territory. [[TV Window]] And so communities became Catholic or Protestant based on the religion of their prince. Phew. We really dodged a religious war bullet--nope no. The Reformation story was not over. Luther had called Church corruption a "horrid abomination" and its defenders "excrements and vermin"; and those who now entered this titanic religious struggle in other parts of Europe were just as vehement, even though following different plots. The finer points of theology continued to divide people, as did the politics of religion and overseas empire. In short, more bloodshed to follow. We'll take that up next time. Thanks for watching.