Modern European History

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

1. Background

1. Augustinian monk; taught at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony

2. Johann Tetzel was authorized by Pope Leo X to sell indulgences to pay for the building of St. Peter’s cathedral in Rome.

a. Tetzel: “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

B. 95 Theses, Oct 31, 1517

1. Luther criticized the selling of indulgences like others had, but went further when he questioned the scriptural authority of the pope to grant indulgences.

2. Whether Luther actually nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg church door or sent them to his resident bishop is a matter of historical dispute.

3. The printing press facilitated the spread of Luther’s work

C. Luther challenges Church authority

1. Initially, the pope viewed the issue of Luther’s 95 Theses as an insignificant disagreement between Augustinian and Dominican monks.

a. Theological debates among clergy members was not unprecedented

2. In 1518, Luther defied the pope by refusing to stop his crusade.

a. At this point, Luther did not seek to create a new church but rather to reform the existing Catholic Church

3. Luther took part in a debate with Johann Eck (one of the great Catholic theologians) at Leipzig in 1519

a. Luther denied both the infallibility of the pope and the infallibility of a general council

b. Luther claimed that the Church had erred when it executed John Hus for heresy.

4. In 1520, Luther published his theology of reform in three separate works

a. Salvation could be achieved through faith alone

(1). Rejected “good works” as the means to salvation but believed that “good works” followed faith.

b. The Bible was the sole authority

c. Only two sacraments—baptism and communion— were valid

(1). Rejected transubstantiation (wine and bread in the Eucharist transform into the actual blood and body of Christ)

(2). Advocated consubstantiation: the “Real Presence” of God in the bread and wine

d. The church consisted of a “priesthood of all believers,” not a hierarchical structure

(1). Christians were not subject to the pope’s interpretation of the Bible.

(2). The Bible contained all that was needed for a person to lead a Christian life—a church hierarchy of bishops and priests, therefore, was unnecessary.

e. Again, criticized sale of indulgences and simony

f. Encouraged German princes to reform the Church in their states.

g. Rejected Catholic monastic tenets of poverty, chastity and most importantly, obedience.

5. Luther was thus excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1520

a. Luther threw the papal bull that excommunicated him into a fire.

6. Diet of Worms (1521)

a. Tribunal of the Holy Roman Empire with power to outlaw and sentence execution through stake-burning

b. Charles V had promised before his election as Holy Roman Emperor that he would not allow anyone in his empire to be excommunicated unless there was a fair trial.

c. Charles demanded that Luther recant his writings

(1). Luther refused: “Here I stand, I can do no other”

d. Edict of Worms: Luther outlawed as a heretic by the HRE

e. Luther was kidnapped by agents of Elector Frederick III (“the Wise”) of Saxony

f. taken to Frederick’s castle where he was protected and continued to write

D. 1523, Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular, profoundly influencing the development of the modern German language

1. Served to democratize religion as any literate German now had access to Scripture.

E. Peasant’s Revolt of 1524

1. 100,000 people killed in southern Germany while trying to overthrow the gov’t

2. thought Luther would support them; he was sympathetic, but preached against the murdering

3. many Lutherans split and either went back to Catholic Church or joined one of the many other religious sects beginning during the era

F. Confessions of Augsburg (1530)

1. Written by Luther’s friend, Philip Melanchthon

2. This was an attempted compromise statement of religious faith to unite Lutheran and Catholic princes of the HRE

a. Rejected by Catholic princes

3. Became traditional statement of the Lutheran Church

a. Salvation through faith alone

b. Bible is the sole authority

c. “Priesthood of all believers:” Church consists of entire Christian community