Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Honors World Studies II Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Unit 1 – Renaissance and Reformation

The Reformation in Europe Reading

**DIRECTIONS: Read the following handout thoroughly, using a highlighter to highlight any important vocabulary/terms/names/events that you think might be historically important. Be sure to write notes in the margins next to any highlighted text to help you understand and remember the information.**

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*The Protestant Reformation is the name given to the religious reform movement that divided western Christianity into Catholic and Protestant groups. Martin Luther’s bold attempts to reform the Church led to new forms of Christianity. Although Luther did not see himself as a rebel, the spread of Protestantism ignited decades of bloody religious conflict and ended a thousand years of domination by the Catholic Church. The humanist ideas of the Renaissance, in addition to perceived worldly and corrupt practices in the Catholic Church, gave rise to a widespread call for Church reform. The Protestant faith that resulted gave new directions to European history and culture by fragmenting western Christianity and reshaping political power.*

**Christian Humanism**

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the new classical learning that was part of Italian Renaissance humanism spread to northern Europe. From that came a movement called Christian humanism, or Northern Renaissance humanism. The major goal of this movement was the reform of the Catholic Church. The Christian humanists believed in the ability of human beings to reason and improve themselves. They thought that if people read the classics, and especially the fundamental teachings of Christianity in the Bible, they would become more sincerely religious. This religious feeling would bring about a reform of the Church and society.

The best-known Christian humanist was Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus believed that Christianity should show people how to live good lives on a daily basis, not just provide beliefs that might help them be saved. He also thought that the Catholic Church needed to return to the simpler days of early Christianity. Stressing the inwardness of religious feeling, Erasmus thought the external forms of medieval religion, such as pilgrimages, fasts, and relics, were not all that important.

*Portrait of Erasmus, 1523 (oil and egg tempera on panel), Holbein the Younger, Hans (1497/8-1543), Private Collection/Bridgeman Art Library*

Erasmus wanted to educate people in the works of Christianity and worked to criticize the abuses in the Church. In his satire *The Praise of Folly*, written in 1509, Erasmus humorously criticized society’s moral and religious state and called for a simpler, purer faith. In this passage, he satirizes what he views as the folly of clergy who encourage the practice of visiting the shrines of saints:

[They] attribute strange virtues to the shrines and images of saints and martyrs, and so would make their credulous proselytes believe, that if they pay their devotion to St. Christopher in the morning, they shall be guarded and secured the day following from all dangers and misfortunes: if soldiers, when they first take arms, shall come and mumble over such a set prayer before the picture of St. Barbara, they shall return safe from all engagements. —from *The Praise of Folly*

Erasmus sought reform within the Catholic Church. His intention was not to have people break away from it. His ideas, however, prepared the way for the Reformation. As people of his day said, “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.”

**Need for Reform**

Erasmus and the Christian humanists were not the only ones calling for reform. Popular songs and printed images from the era, as well as court records, show that ordinary people, humanists, and some Church leaders were critical of the Church. For example, from 1450 to 1520 a series of Renaissance popes were viewed as more concerned with Italian politics and worldly interests than with the spiritual needs of their people. Church officials were viewed as using their church offices to advance their careers and their wealth. At the same time, many ordinary parish priests appeared to their parishioners as ignorant of their spiritual duties. People wanted to know how to save their souls, but many parish priests appeared unwilling or unable to offer them advice or instruction.

While the leaders of the Church were failing to meet their responsibilities, ordinary people desired meaningful religious expression and assurance of their salvation, or acceptance into Heaven. As a result, for some, the process of obtaining salvation became almost mechanical.



According to Church practice at that time, venerating a relic, such as a scrap of a saint’s clothing, could gain someone an indulgence. An indulgence was a document sold by the Church and signed by the pope or another church official that released the bearer from all or part of the punishment for sin. Making pilgrimages to view relics grew popular as a way to acquire indulgences and, therefore, salvation.

As more people sought certainty of salvation through veneration of relics, collections of such objects grew. Frederick III, also known as Frederick the Wise, Luther’s prince, had amassed more than 5,000 relics. Some people believed the indulgences attached to them could reduce time spent in purgatory by 1,443 years. The Church also sold indulgences.

Other people sought certainty of salvation in the popular mystical movement known as the Modern Devotion. The Modern Devotion downplayed Church practices and stressed the need to follow the teachings of Jesus. This deepening of religious life was done within the Catholic Church. It also helps explain the tremendous impact of Luther’s ideas.

**Martin Luther**

Martin Luther was a monk in the Catholic Church and a professor at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany, where he lectured on the Bible. Through his study of the Bible, Luther arrived at an answer to a problem that had bothered him since he had become a monk. He wanted to know about the certainty of salvation.

Catholic teaching had stressed that faith and good works were needed to gain personal salvation. In Luther’s opinion, human beings were powerless in the sight of an almighty God and could never do enough good works to earn salvation. Through his study of the Bible, Luther came to believe that humans are not saved through their good works but through their faith in God. This idea, called justification by faith alone, became the chief teaching of the Protestant Reformation. Because Luther had arrived at his understanding of salvation by studying the Bible, the Bible became for Luther, as for all later Protestants, the only valid source of religious truth.

**The Ninety-five Theses**

Luther did not see himself as a rebel, but he was greatly upset by the widespread selling of indulgences. Especially offensive in his eyes was the monk Johann Tetzel. The Catholic Church had authorized Tetzel to sell indulgences to raise money to build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Tetzel told the faithful that their purchases would free the souls of their loved ones from purgatory. His slogan was: “As soon as coin in the coffer [money box] rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” This enraged Luther, who believed that indulgences only soothed the conscience. They did not forgive sins.

On October 31, 1517, Luther, angered by the Church’s practices, made his Ninety-five Theses public, perhaps by posting them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The act of posting may be a legend, but posting topics to discuss was a common practice of the time. In any case, his theses were a stunning attack on abuses in the sale of indulgences. Thousands of copies of the Ninety-five Theses were printed and spread to all parts of Germany.