

## Topic Page: [Reformation](#)

Definition: **Reformation** from *Collins English Dictionary*

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**1** a religious and political movement of 16th-century Europe that began as an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the establishment of the Protestant Churches

### Summary Article: **Reformation**

From *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*

While many movements in Christian history have been called ‘Reformations’, the simple term ‘Reformation’ almost invariably denotes the seismic change in western European Christianity in the sixteenth century. That process of change ended the medieval vision of a unitary transnational Church led by the Roman papacy. It divided European Churches and their colonial offshoots between the Catholic Church and the many, diverse strands of Protestantism. It inaugurated fundamental changes in the liturgies and polities of European Christianity, driven by theological principles and imperatives.

Despite putative ‘forerunners’ of the Reformation, the main story begins with the theological struggles and insights of M. Luther, Augustinian eremite and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg in Electoral Saxony. Like many others of his time, Luther wrestled with the theological dilemma of how a righteous God could save sinners, given the demanding example set by Jesus in the NT. In Luther’s case the quest became entangled with a dispute over the Church’s authority to dispense ‘indulgences’. These papal graces remitted the ‘works of satisfaction’ required of the living after sacramental confession; by implication they were also believed to diminish or end the pain suffered by the departed in purgatory. In 1517 Luther issued a set of Latin theses disputing the power of indulgences. These provoked a storm of controversy in a Germany already long used to questioning the spiritual and ethical credibility of the papacy, and their notoriety gave the papal curia little choice but to insist Luther recant his views. Unfortunately for Rome, the agents sent to enforce Luther’s recantation lacked the theological skill to meet him in argument. After private meetings and public debates Luther became convinced that only arguments from Scripture and evident reason could lead him to withdraw his statements. Eventually, confronted with the young and devout emperor Charles V (r. 1519–56) and representatives of the Church hierarchy at Worms in April 1521, Luther steadfastly refused to shift his ground.

During and after the indulgence controversy Luther completed a new understanding of the doctrine of justification, rooted in Paul and Augustine, but with distinctive features. Luther drew a conceptual distinction (made much sharper by his theological followers) between the forgiveness of a sinner that removes the condemnation of God (justification, or ‘deeming righteous’) and the intrinsic process by which a person is made better (sanctification, or ‘making righteous’). Whereas medieval theology typically fused the processes or made one depend on the other, Luther insisted that sinners were forgiven, for Christ’s sake, with a gift of extrinsic or ‘alien’ righteousness apprehended through faith. Divine forgiveness covered sinners *despite* their underlying impurity and unworthiness. This extrinsic justification did not exhaust the process: sinners were also sanctified by the Holy Spirit, made better able to lead lives of charity and self-discipline. However, their intrinsic righteousness was never the formal reason for their acceptance by God.

This insight radically transformed the kind of 'works' appropriate to a Christian life and the ministries required to support them. Since Christianity ceased to be about moral and ritual self-purification, the disciplines of personal penitence, abstinence, asceticism, and monasticism lost their rationale. Since God's forgiveness was not mediated through a ritually separate priesthood in the sacraments, the role of the priest changed into that of preaching the grace of God verbally (in vernacular Scripture) and physically (through baptism and the Eucharist). Churches that drew their spiritual power from the gospel needed no structural link to a 'well of grace' at Rome. These insights would define the mission and vision of the mainstream Churches of the Protestant Reformation, though variously expressed by different writers who were often independent of Luther.

While bequeathing to the Reformation its core theological insights, Luther took personal stances destined to mark off those Churches derived from his personal leadership and example from other Protestants. Luther remained all his life a gradualist and minimalist regarding liturgical change: he postponed reform of the mass until he believed the people were ready to understand a new order and was not inclined to radical iconoclasm. Most significantly, Luther argued that the wording of Scripture demanded confession that Christ's body, not just his spiritual presence, was in the consecrated Eucharistic elements. His insistence on this point at Marburg in 1529 and subsequently helped to isolate his movement from those of other reformers (see Lutheran Theology).

From the early 1520s other religious thinkers reworked and reformulated the basic Reformation ideas on justification and the priority of Scripture over tradition and the Roman hierarchy in their own accents. H. Zwingli, a stipendiary preacher in Zurich, began concrete steps to change the religious life of his community from 1522, and the degree of his dependence on Luther has always been disputed. His sacramentology was marked by a sharp rejection of the principle that any physical rite or physical substance could achieve spiritual effects. Thus, while sacraments might convey a message about the intentions of human beings, they were signs and not what they signified. While this rationalist philosophizing, deeply influenced by humanism, earned Zwingli the interest of Renaissance intellectuals in the Swiss Confederation and southern Germany, it was met by angry disapproval on the part of Luther and his followers. Following his rejection of the material in theology and worship, Zwingli pursued a much more radical, thorough, and speedy reform of Churches and their apparatus than Luther: images were removed entirely from worship spaces, and liturgy was stripped down to its barest essentials. Followers of this simple style boasted that they had recovered the characteristic worship of the primitive Church.

Once the religious imagination was thus liberated, smaller groups emerged with agendas even bolder than those of Luther, Zwingli, and their respective followers. T. Müntzer (ca 1490–1525) believed that the time had come for a sweeping, and, if need be, violent transformation of society. Further south, reforming spirits in Zurich grew impatient of Zwingli's negotiating with the city council and envisaged a gathered community of the self-selected 'godly'. Early in 1525 followers of C. Grebel (ca 1500–26) and his associates began to form Churches defined by adult baptism of believers in the villages of Zurich canton. It is still disputed how far these first 'Anabaptist' brotherhoods helped to inspire the parallel movements that emerged across southern and central Germany in the middle to late 1520s. Meanwhile in spring 1525 nearly all of Germany was convulsed by diverse protest movements representing the rural peasantry and the artisans of small towns. These called for religious reforms as part of a loose package of economic and social change. Initially hesitant, the German princes, spurred on by a visibly panicked Luther, suppressed the movements ferociously. Although 1525 did not end the movements

to establish reformed Churches in towns and principalities, it did bring the period of unrestrained and adventurous pamphleteering to a sudden halt. Lay men and women who had experimented with writing, publishing, and even preaching reformed ideas now retreated to more politically and socially conventional roles, with the significant exception of K. Zell (1497/8–1562) of Strasbourg.

The Reformation was far more than a theological or liturgical event. For its implementation and survival it depended on the ability and will of secular leaders to protect it. Luther in his *To the Christian Nobility* of 1520 supplied the theoretical justification for lay governments to take the management of religious affairs into their own hands without fear of sacrilege. As papacy and empire dithered over how to respond to the Luther affair, magistrates and princes, slowly at first then with greater conviction, took control of the religious establishments and foundations within their states. Leagues took shape between reformers and their opponents, informally first and then with greater coherence, as the political geography of Germany was redrawn. The eventual result was the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, which gave princes and some towns significant autonomy to choose Catholicism or Lutheranism.

Also during the middle decades of the sixteenth century, Rome sought to give a comprehensive response to the doctrinal and ecclesiological challenges of the Lutheran Reformation in particular at the Council of Trent. Yet both the Peace of Augsburg and the Council of Trent failed to take into account important ongoing changes in the religious complexion of Europe. In the mid-1550s the French reformer J. Calvin, a formerly local player in the reformed enterprise, rose to far greater fame, pushing the hitherto barely significant town of Geneva to international prominence. Calvin began his career as a classical scholar in Paris and became a self-taught theologian. Through his many writings (including especially the multiple editions of his *Institute of the Christian Religion*), Calvin brought unprecedented intellectual rigour, exegetical sophistication, rhetorical balance, and verbal economy to the ideas of the Reformation. He adopted the core Reformation message on justification, but discerned a more positive role for the law even for the elect (see Third Use of the Law). He formulated a doctrine of real spiritual presence in the Eucharist that balanced the insights of Lutheran and Zwinglian theologians while avoiding the excesses of either. In liturgy Calvin inclined more to the Zurich model of stark simplicity, and this model rapidly came to be thought of as 'Calvinist' (see Reformed Theology).

Although Calvin's authority in his adopted city of Geneva remained precarious almost to the end of his life, his charisma attracted settlers not only from France but from other regions of Europe, especially during the later 1540s and 1550s. From the 1560s the Genevan models of reformed doctrine, worship, and pastoral discipline found passionate adherents in France, the Low Countries, Scotland, Hungary, Poland, and even in the extreme north-west of the Italian peninsula. In England, which had followed a peculiar course dictated by its monarchs' personal preferences, the dominant reformed theology resembled Calvin's, though in Church politics the English reforming bishops of the 1560s often looked for advice to the Zurich Church led by Zwingli's successor, H. Bullinger (see Anglican Theology). Even in Germany, where Lutheranism was the only legally authorized form of Protestantism, educated princes, led by the Elector Palatine at Heidelberg, adopted Calvin's tastes in worship and doctrine. These ideas were usually mediated through (or disguised as) the 'Philippist' type of Lutheranism associated with Luther's colleague P. Melancthon (1497–1560).

The end of the Reformation is usually associated with the onset of the 'confessional era' and the establishment of Lutheran and Reformed 'orthodoxies' in the late sixteenth century. Following often bitter debates within and between the major reformed traditions, formulae hammered out in precise detail the theological standards of the new 'confessional' Churches: the Second Helvetic Confession

(1566), the Lutheran Book of Concord, the decisions of the Reformed Synod of Dort and others. These formulae often provoked further conflict: in the century or so after 1580 Europe stumbled into a series of bitter wars greatly exacerbated, if not actually caused, by religious divisions and the international alliances linked to confessionalism. However, the fundamental and liberating insight of the Reformation, that people can be freed by unearned divine grace to lead lives of charity without morbid anxiety for the precise state of their souls, would endure beyond the conflicts that its first tumultuous discovery had generated.

See also Bucer; Cranmer.

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