



43: What was the Reformation all about?

It is not possible to provide an all-encompassing explanation of the breakdown of mediaeval Christendom that we call 'the Reformation' in a few words. The invention of printing meant that books were now within the reach of all who could read. The educated questioned why they should not read the Bible for themselves, in their own languages. (The only Bible translation in the West was the Vulgate, in Latin.) The new national states resented the continual outflow of gold, the foundation of their currencies, to an Italian prince, the Pope. The junior clergy resented the disparity between their own condition and that of the religious orders and the senior clergy, some of whom were in nominal charge of several benefices which they never visited. The educated were beginning to question some basic doctrines and practices of the Church. Why should the clergy enjoy a privileged status, compared to the laity? They did not, some of them, appear to lead notably better lives.

These resentments came to a head in 1517. The Pope, Leo X, needed to raise money for the rebuilding of St Peter's church, in Rome. To this end, he issued an Indulgence, the remission of the penalties for unexpiated sins, to all who would contribute. In central Germany, these were marketed by the Dominicans on behalf of the banking house of Fugger who had made a large loan to the Archbishop of Mainz. He had given them the right to sell the indulgences as security for the loan.

The young Professor of Holy Scripture at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, had long had doubts about the whole concept of Papal Indulgences and formalised penance. His studies of the Epistles of Paul had convinced him that the forgiveness of God was available to all, through faith in the saving power of Christ.

On All Saints Eve, 1517, he issued his famous 'Ninety-Five Theses' (arguments) against indulgences, and challenged all comers to debate them with him. This was common practice in academic circles, but Luther had made his challenge public and could not be ignored. Further, through printed copies Luther's Theses became widely

known. The issue was whether anything endorsed by the Pope could be wrong.

Repeated attempts by the official Church to silence Luther were ineffective. He appealed over the head of the Pope to a General Council of the Church. The Prince of Saxony, who had forbidden the sale of the indulgences in his territories, protected him, even after in 1524 Luther was declared an outlaw throughout the Holy Roman Empire (Germany and Austria). He declared that if the Pope would not reform the Church, it was up to those laymen whom God had placed in positions of power to do so. Some of the German Princes and Free Cities put his words into practice. This was the beginning of the Lutheran Church.

The fundamental issue of the Reformation was, then, that of authority: if the traditions of the Church, and the words of Scripture, were in conflict, which was to prevail? The issue is with us still. Luther himself was not consistent. He did not rate all of the Bible as of equal authority. Further, he was, on the whole, willing to tolerate practices that were not clearly contrary to Scripture. Other, later Reformers went further: they would admit only those doctrines and forms of worship that could be shown to be Biblical.

Eventually, in 1545, a General Council of the Church met, at Trent in the Southern Tyrol. It did set about the reform of the Catholic Church. Sadly, by this time, the breach in the unity of the Church had grown too wide to bridge, and the direction of the Council's reforms tended to make it wider. It was not until the Second Vatican Council that an attempt began to be made to close it.