# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

## 1501-1600 C.E., PART 1 (to about 1530)

*July 15, 2026*

*SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY*

**General Development:** New knowledge, perspectives, and discoveries produced new ideas and beliefs about Christianity and the church. These beliefs often broke believers away from the Catholic Church and united them in new groups of Christians. Persecution against such groups ensued, and even between one Protestant group and another.

**Key Questions:** Can the true Church ever be one? Can the Roman Catholic Church be reformed sufficiently? Will the reformers ever agree with each other? Which religious beliefs will control which lands? Can rulers still require their peoples to believe in certain ways?

**Key Places:** Germany and Switzerland, hotbeds of reform

**Key People:** Desiderius Erasmus, Pope Leo X, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Anabaptists

**Key Dates:**
1516 — Erasmus produces his Greek New Testament
1517 — Martin Luther posts his 95 Theses
1521 — The Diet of Worms
1522 — Luther translates the Bible into German
1526 — Tyndale translates the New Testament into English
1530 — The Augsburg Confession

**COMING INTO THE 1500s**

A NEW MINDSET — The Renaissance brought a new emphasis on the individual to European society. The individual person came to be seen less as one saved by taking his rightful, low position in the church and more as an independent person able to pursue his own path. The Renaissance also made Europeans more aware of the world and universe around them: the Americas had recently been discovered, several nations (Spain, Portugal, France, England) were sending out explorers, and Nicolaus Copernicus would soon begin to reveal new wonders about the immense universe beyond the earth.

NEW INFORMATION — When Constantinople fell to the Muslim Turks in 1453, scholars from the East fled to the West and brought many ancient manuscripts with them. Knowledge of Greek became more common in the West, which led scholars to discover differences between the Latin Vulgate and the early Greek New Testament manuscripts. Copyists' errors were also noticed, and a search for the most accurate biblical texts began. Eastern scholars brought ideas that were unfamiliar in the West and that challenged Catholic teaching and practice. A sense was aroused that returning to the teachings of the Bible would bring about the reforms needed in the church's teaching and practice.

THIRST FOR NEW REFORM — The corruption of church leadership at every level was so bad that the poor no longer saw the church as their defender and helper (though some monasteries and churches did still help the poor). Prelates (head bishops) were often powerful landowners, and inequality between the rich and the poor was increasing at this time. There was a spirit of everything becoming new. The New World had just been discovered, new insights and manuscripts had come from the East, travel to the Far East was becoming common, advances were being made in medicine, mathematics, and physics, the theory of the flat earth was disappearing, and the printing press was spreading new ideas rapidly everywhere. It seemed natural that Christianity, too, would be renewed—but how?

**1500-1510**

EARLY 500s — John Colet (ca. 1467-1519), dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London (1505-1519), began to lecture on the literal meaning of Paul's epistles. This was a major shift away from the traditional tendency of theologians to search out allegorical meanings in the text.

1503-1513 — Pope Julius II took the name "Julius" to show his model was not a Christian saint, but Julius Caesar. He promoted the arts; in his time Michelangelo finished painting the Sistine Chapel. His favorite pastime was war; he was known as "the Terrible".

1506 — German scholar John Reuchlin (1455-1522) completed his combined Hebrew grammar and dictionary, Of the Rudiments of Hebrew. It allowed many other scholars to learn how to read the Old Testament in its original language.

**1511-1520**

1510-1511 — MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546) of Germany was shocked at the lack of genuine spirituality amidst the religious formalism he encountered when he visited Rome.

1513-1521 — POPE LEO X was from the super-wealthy Medici family of Florence. He approved the selling of indulgences to raise money for the construction of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. He supposedly said that, since God had given him the papacy, he would "enjoy it." He was a patron of the arts, which were more important to him than his religious or pastoral work. Finishing St. Peter's was his highest goal. His sale of indulgences for this purpose was one of the misdeeds that prompted Martin Luther's protest.

The story behind the indulgences for St. Peter's: A great lord in Germany wanted to become Archbishop of Mainz, the most important church position in Germany. Pope Leo was running low on funds, so he offered to sell the archbishropic to this lord for ten thousand gold ducats, which the pope planned to use to finish building St. Peter's. Germans were urged to buy indulgences to pay that lord, who would then pay the pope. Many educated people were upset both by the superstition behind indulgences (which were said to be even more effective than baptism or the cross of Christ) and, for German nationalists, by the pope taking advantage of Germans for the benefit of his own ambitions.

1514 — Cardinal Ximénez (Francisco Jemines de Cisneros, 1436-1517), Archbishop of Toledo, Spain, founded the University of Alcalá to provide biblical training to clergy. He finished the first printed Greek New Testament in 1514. This was part of a major movement across northern, central, & western Europe to get back to the Bible, to consider the spiritual condition of individuals, and to study human beings from an ethical and religious perspective (biblical humanism).

1516 — DESIDERIUS ERASMUS (ca. 1466-1536), the illegitimate son of a priest and a physician's daughter, grew up in Holland and studied Scripture and early Christian writings at several universities in Europe and England. He became an expert in biblical Greek. He emphasized that obedience to Christ is even more important than having correct doctrine; many priests had all their doctrines right, yet lived scandalous lives. He considered all believers, and not just clergy, to be soldiers of Christ. He said about baptism, "What good is it to be outwardly sprinkled with holy water, if one is filthy within?" In two books of satire (*The Praise of Folly*, ca. 1511; *Familiar Colloquies*, 1518), he described the corruption of the hierarchy of priests and church authorities. He published a Greek New Testament in 1516. This edition of the Greek New Testament was actually released before Cardinal Ximénez's Greek New Testament, because Ximénez had to wait for papal approval. Erasmus's Greek New Testament allowed scholars to make a better comparison between the New Testament church and the current church—which made the current church look very bad. He came to be greatly admired among both Protestants and loyal Catholics. He refused to take sides when the Reformation came about, and he bemoaned the harsh disputing and violence resulting from the conflict.

1517 — On October 31, MARTIN LUTHER published his famous 95 Theses. Luther was born in Germany. He was erudite, studious, uncouth, and sometimes even rude. He was exceedingly sincere in his faith and in his commitment to obey whatever the Lord called believers to do. He was a master of German and Latin, was the first to use the printing press intentionally to spread his ideas, and was prone to exaggeration and to taking extreme positions out of devout passion.

In his youth, his parents had been very harsh and had punished him severely. His early teachers had been the same way. His father prepared him to become a lawyer, but Luther chose to become a monk, instead, probably both to thwart his father's plans and out of a passion for God. He struggled for years with both loving and hating God, who to him was a harsh judge of sin, like his father had been. He always struggled with guilt over his sin and with a sense that he could never confess it all and be right before God.

The change in his faith came after he earned a doctorate in theology, became a priest, and was meditating on Romans 1:17 *("For in the gospel [good news] the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'")*. How could the message of God, which reveals our sin, be "good news"? It finally struck him that our righteousness is not something we do, but is a gift from God: in his goodness, he assigns righteousness to us. Luther began to see in God's justice not a cruel God, but the love of God.

Based on this realization about the nature of God's justice and our righteousness, Luther wrote out his famous "95 Theses" attacking the sale of indulgences and the theological presuppositions supporting them. He probably had not expected that they would grab much attention, but they did. Probably without quite realizing it, Luther was attacking plans for profit sponsored by very powerful rulers in the government and the church.

Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, where he ministered. This day, October 31, 1517, is the traditional date for the start of the Protestant Reformation. The pope and the German emperor were both enraged, but the local prince, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, a just and fair ruler, protected Luther and worked hard to make sure he would not be executed without a genuine trial the way John Hus had been a century earlier. Church authorities sent by the pope pressured Luther to recant his attacks on the church, but Luther refused on the grounds that he could not recant what God had taught in the gospel.

> ***Thesis 51:*** "Christians are to be taught that the pope would and should wish to give of his own money, even though he had to sell the basilica of St. Peter, to many of those from whom certain hawkers of indulgences cajole money."
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> ***Thesis 82:*** "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?"

MORE ON LUTHER'S BELIEFS

Luther was a Bible professor, and as such valued Scripture highly. To the Catholic claim that the Church had assembled the Bible and so had authority even higher than that of Scripture, Luther responded that actually the true Word of God, Jesus himself, has created both the church and Scripture, and so He alone has highest authority over all. Besides, since Scripture is a more faithful witness to Jesus and his teachings than the corrupt church is, Scripture is itself a higher authority than the church, even if the church recognized and assembled the various writings of Scripture and not other writings.

Luther believed the highest revelation of who God is occurred at the cross—not in human imagination of the awesome power, glory, and goodness of God, traits to which humans aspire, but in

Christ's suffering, humility, and sacrifice. He saw in the Law and in the Gospel God's justice and God's grace; God holds accountable, but he also justifies. Even while we are still sinners, he justifies, forgives, and frees us.

Luther believed in the importance of the community of the church (he was not an individualist) and in the priesthood of all believers (not as priests for ourselves, but for each other). He believed that there are only two sacraments, those given by Christ: baptism & communion. Baptism he believed makes us members of the body of Christ through faith, which is necessary for baptism to be valid. He believed infants may be baptized because, though they do not have their own faith yet, they receive faith by the grace of God; faith is not a work, not something we do, for we are not saved by works. With communion, he rejected transubstantiation, though he believed the body & blood of Jesus are in the bread and wine (yet the bread and wine still remain bread and wine). He believed in the separation of the powers of church and state, and that the Christian must submit to both, regardless of whether the ruler of the state is a believer.

1517 — A reasonable marker of the end of the Middle Ages of church history, because Luther's activities launched an entirely different era that shifted the popular understanding of the church as an institution to the church as a body of believers identified by their personal faith in the saving work of Christ.

1518 — ULRICH ZWINGLI (1484-1531), born in a small village in Switzerland, received a Master of Arts degree in 1506, became priest of a small village (1506-1516) and then an abbey (1516-1518), then of Zürich in 1518. By that time he had come to believe much as Luther did, not from hearing Luther's teachings, but based on his own study of the Bible. He was well-respected in Zürich for his education, devotion, and biblical preaching.

1520 — THE CATHOLIC REFORMATION began a little before the Protestant Reformation, but did not call for changes in church doctrine or traditional practices—just improved devotion, morality, and scholarship. In Spain, Queen Isabella was a scholar and pushed for reformation of church practice, though not of traditional doctrines. Under her leadership, the new University of Alcalá near Madrid published the *Complutensian Polyglot*, a parallel-translation of the Bible in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (with some Chaldean). It was published in 1520 and came from a push to affirm the superiority of Scripture over tradition, which was accepted in this case but was condemned when, under Luther a little later, it led to revolts against the Catholic Church.

At the same time, the Inquisition in Spain was placed under the authority of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella by the pope. It was carried out aggressively and led to many deaths, especially of both Jews and Muslims who had been forced to convert to Christianity and who persisted in their previous religion. Reform was desired, but divergence from Roman Catholic authority was punished severely.

**<u>1521-1530</u>**

1521 — THE DIET OF WORMS — Luther was ordered to appear before the Diet (gathering of German lords and the emperor, who was a Catholic) at Worms in April 1521. There, under threat of death, he was asked if he would recant what he had written and published in criticism of the church. He answered that no one should expect him to recant basic Christian doctrine, which was much of what he had written. He also could not recant what he had written about injustices against the German people. He was willing to admit that he may have written too harshly against some of his opponents in matters concerning debated points of doctrine—but while he may have been too harsh, he could not recant the truth of what he had said, unless someone could show him his error. When Luther was asked once more, "Do you recant or do you not?", he responded, "My conscience is a prisoner of God's Word. I cannot and will not recant, for to disobey one's conscience is neither just nor safe. God help me. Amen." Then he returned to his quarters.

Frederick the Wise continued to protect Luther the best he could. Recognizing that the emperor would make the diet condemn Luther, Frederick had Luther kidnapped from his quarters and taken away to a secret location, where Luther stayed for several years, translating the Bible into German and continuing to write and publish. The emperor of Germany (the Holy Roman Empire) and the popes were too busy with political battles with each other, France, and the Turks pressing from the east to be able to focus their attention on stopping Luther. The emperor in particular needed the support of his whole populace, including Luther's followers, to fight off the Turks when they invaded Austria.

1522 — Luther translated the Bible into German.

1522 — ZWINGLI had began to speak out years earlier against the abuses of the papacy, and by 1522 he was ready to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. The government of Zürich supported him.

Luther was willing to maintain all church traditions that did not conflict with Scripture. Zwingli rejected every practice not authorized in Scripture: organs (and the violin, which he played quite well), the requirement that clergy be single, etc. Under his leadership many priests, monks, and nuns in Zürich got married, and for Communion both the bread and the cup were shared with each person.

Catholics in Switzerland began to pressure Protestants. The five Catholic Swiss cantons joined forces and surprise-attacked Protestant Zürich in October 1531. Zwingli joined the initial force that went out to defend the city and was killed in battle. A month later, the Swiss cantons signed a treaty allowing each canton to choose its own religion. People migrated to where their group—Catholic or Protestant—was in power, making the cantons more polarized.

1524-1525 — A major peasant revolt took place in Germany. The peasants largely saw Luther as advocating for them (which he had, though he had also called for peaceful, non-violent protest). The German lords crushed them, killing some 100,000 peasants. This conflict divided reformers (primarily peasants) and Catholics (primarily lords). Catholic moderates like Erasmus found it increasingly difficult not to take sides in the debates and conflicts.

• mid-1520s — ANABAPTISTS, much more than Luther and Zwingli, expected the church to be countercultural, and thought the church had long compromised with society and government far too much. They required a personal decision of faith to become a Christian, and therefore rejected infant baptism ("Anabaptist" means "re-baptizer", because opponents saw them as rebaptizing adults who had already been baptized as infants). Early on, they were strongest in Zürich. They broke away from Zwingli, who was unwilling to go as far as they did in his reforms.

They came to be considered a threat to society because they were mostly pacifists in the early years and refused to go to war even against the Turks threatening Germany or the Catholics threatening Protestants in Switzerland. Their concept of separation of church and state threatened to diminish the power of the state in church affairs, and for this reason too they were often considered subversive. Also, they gave women the same rights as men and (at least in theory) treated the poor the same as the rich.

At first they did not baptize by immersion, but later they did, in an effort to conform to the method of baptism recorded in the New Testament.

From 1525 to 1529, authorities in Switzerland and Germany began to execute Anabaptists under charges of rebaptizing, heresy, and sedition. "The martyrs were many—probably more than those who died during the three centuries of persecution before the time of Constantine. The manner of their death varied from region to region, and even from case to case. With ironic cruelty, many were drowned. Others were burned to death, as had become customary with heretics centuries earlier. Some were tortured to death, or drawn and quartered. The stories of heroism in such difficult circumstances would fill several volumes. And still, the more fiercely it was persecuted, the more the movement grew." *Justo L. Gonzaléz, The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day, pages 56-57* Anabaptists, radicalized by

persecution and now less pacifist than before, took over the city of Münster for a little while, until an army led by a Catholic bishop captured and executed their leaders.

1525 — "In Zurich in 1521 two followers of Zwingli, Felix Manz and Konrad Grebel, announced the following thesis: 'It is necessary to separate oneself from the evil way and found a pure church and communion of the genuine children of God, who have the spirit, and are ruled and led by him.' The church of the Lord, they said, must now, after it has run wild, be gathered completely anew according to the pattern of the New Testament. The true Christian life, continued they, begins with baptism, but only that one who believes can be baptized. Infants cannot believe, [and] therefore cannot be baptized… On January 25, 1525, Manz baptized in Lake Zürich Georg Majakob-Blaurock, former monk of Grisons. Two years later, almost to the day, at the recommendation of Zwingli and at the instruction of the Great Council, Manz was drowned in the Limmat River. The small number of believers scattered." From there New Testament Christians were persecuted by both Roman Catholics and the various Protestant groups (Lutherans, etc.), and many were martyred. The number of New Testament Christians in Europe dwindled over the next 300 years to almost nothing. *Hans Grimm, Tradition and History of the Early Churches of Christ in Central Europe, pages 36-40*

1526 — William Tyndale (ca. 1494-1536) translated the New Testament into English.

1527 — With France and the papacy fighting a war against Germany, the Germans invaded Rome and sacked it. This fight was seen as an attack by Reformers on the Catholic Church and increased division even more.

1530 — THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION — The German nobles granted each German territory the right to choose their own official religion. Many chose Lutheranism. Austria and much of south Germany chose Catholicism. But in 1530 the emperor, returning from wars and pressuring the nobles to oppose Lutheranism, attended the Diet of Augsburg and requested an orderly investigation of each point of Luther's doctrines. Philip Melanchthon wrote up that document, called the "Augsburg Confession". It protested against Catholicism (hence the name "Protestants"). Many princes and leaders signed this confession. Despite pressure from the emperor, these leaders and their peoples refused to back down from their reformed beliefs. Expecting the emperor to attack them, they banded together for mutual defense. But another threat from King Francis in France and also, separately, from the Turks invading again from the east, forced the emperor to negotiate so he could draw together all his people to defend their land. They agreed to assist him, and he granted them freedom to keep their beliefs, as long as they did not add to them.

**OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY REFORMATION**

- Using the Bible became dangerous. People began to view various issues differently and had to decide which differences justified a breaking of Christian fellowship. Such breaks produced different churches and even religious wars.
- Ironically, Christian unity was very important to Catholics and Protestants alike. But Protestants found it necessary to break away from the established unity for a time in order to return to Scripture. They nevertheless hoped efforts could be made toward reestablishing unity under the authority of the Bible.