CHRISTIAN HISTORY

1501-1600 C.E., PART 2 (about 1531-1600)

July 22, 2026

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: The Protestant Reformation continues full force. The Roman Catholic Church, while keeping its doctrines and practices, goes through a major period of reform itself. While most of western and northern Europe turn Protestant, Spain and Portugal, still Catholic, spread Catholicism across the New World and as far as Africa, India, China, and Japan. European nations struggle to decide what form of Christianity each will follow, or whether they will grant their peoples religious freedom (a new concept at this time).

Key Questions: What form of Christianity will each Christian nation or region follow? How many lives is it worth to force everyone to accept their nation's form of Christianity?

Key Places: Germany, heart of the Reformation • Switzerland, where John Calvin ministered • England, with its new Anglican Church • the New World, site of great exploitation and great evangelism

Key People: John Calvin, Menno Simons, England's King Henry VIII, William Tyndale, Popes Paul III and Paul IV

Key Dates:
1525 — Tyndale produces a printed New Testament in English
1534 — King Henry VIII is made head of the Church of England
1535 — the Lutheran Church officially breaks from the Roman Catholic Church; the whole Bible is printed in English
1536 — Calvin publishes his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
1540 — The Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) is formed
1545-1563 — The Council of Trent
1572 — the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day in Paris
1589 — the Orthodox Church in Russia is nationalized

1) CAUSES OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

• The Protestant Reformation took place mostly in western and northern Europe, and generally among middle-class people. Eastern (Orthodox) churches did not participate, nor did the people of the lands of the old Roman Empire (Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc.), which remained predominantly Catholic.

• What was the movement away from the Catholic Church?
  • To Catholic historians, it was a revolt against the universal church.
  • To secular historians, it was a revolution in religious thought.
  • To historians from Protestant or related backgrounds, it was a reformation to bring the church closer to the church of the New Testament in its purity.

• Some causes of the Reformation:
  - the quest to recover the purity of New Testament Christianity, particularly as Christians reading the Bible for themselves saw vast discrepancies between the New Testament church and the Roman Catholic Church, and as they witnessed intense corruption in the leadership of the Catholic Church
  - the problem of indulgences as a corrupt practice
  - papal exploitation of the poor in Germany
  - nation-states beginning to oppose an international authority in the Catholic Church
  - weariness of paying heavy taxes to Rome and of Rome owning property in other lands
  - rise of individualism as personal wealth increased
  - most of all, a desire to follow Christ more faithfully

• The Spanish brought a great deal of wealth from the New World into Europe, which increased inflation. This put economic pressure on the people of Europe, including Germany, where the pope's efforts to extract money from the people was resented all the more because of the high inflation.

2) HOW FREEDOM OF RELIGION CAME TO BE IN EUROPE

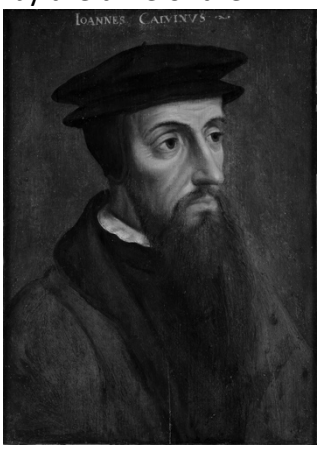
Before the Reformation, and since the time of Constantine (306-337), it had been assumed that, for the security of the nation, all its people must be in religious agreement. Ironically, the Roman rulers *before* Constantine had thought the same, and Christians at that time had argued that they were no threat to the empire. But after Constantine, it was believed that all who lived in a Christian nation must be Christians for the security of the empire. This was part of the reasoning behind many religious wars and crackdowns on non-Christian peoples in Christian lands. As the Reformation expanded, rulers initially tried to force their people to stay religiously unified—perhaps under Catholicism or under Lutheranism or under Calvinism (the Reformed Church). But enforcing conformity became exceedingly costly—financially and politically, and especially in lives. One after another, European nations came to the conclusion that it was better for the nation to grant religious tolerance. This transformation, in turn, led to the modern secular state—a state with no specific religious affiliation.

3) THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IN EUROPE

• GERMANY — Conflict between Protestants and Catholics that had begun with Luther's *95 Theses* continued, with Protestant nobles on one side and Catholic nobles and the Catholic emperor on the other. Eventually German officials permitted limited religious freedom for Catholics, Lutherans, and similar groups, though not for Anabaptists and Reformed churches. Individuals did not choose their own form of Christianity, but were required to follow the form that their local leaders chose. The Lutheran Church officially broke with the Roman Catholic Church in 1535. From 1546 to 1552, the German emperor fought the German Protestants, who had organized into a league for defense. Fighting officially ended with the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, which made Lutheranism legal alongside Catholicism in Germany, at least in that each prince could determine his territory's religion, and any who disagreed with it could emigrate. After Calvinism began in Switzerland, it gained traction with peasants and people in the German middle class.

  • LUTHER'S INFLUENCE — Martin Luther urged his friend Philip Melanchthon, great theologian of the early Protestant movement, to set up an education system for all German children so all might learn to read the Bible. This was the start of compulsory universal education. Luther also brought preaching back to the forefront of the church's assembly and so restored spiritual instruction in church life.

• SWITZERLAND — From the late 1200s, Switzerland was an autonomous land in the middle of the Holy Roman Empire. It had self-governing, democratic cantons; there were thirteen by the time of the Reformation. In the northern, German-speaking areas, Zwingli's style of Protestant Christianity was strongest. In the southern, French-speaking areas, John Calvin's style of Christianity became strongest.



JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564) was the leader of the second generation of reformers. Where Luthe r had emphasized justification by faith, Calvin emphasized the sovereignty of God. Though born and raised in France, he spent most of his adult life in Geneva. He was forced to leave France in 1534 for calling for a biblical reformation like that which Luther had launched in Germany. In 1536, at age 26, he wrote his greatest work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, addressed to the king of France to try to persuade him to accept reformed Christianity (the final edition was published in

1559). Calvin became a teaching minister in Geneva in 1536 and set up a church system there that included ministers, teachers, deacons, and elders, with the state called to step in to enforce severe penalties for sinful conduct when necessary. Calvin's movement led to the Presbyterian Church, the Reformed churches, and the Puritans. Calvin was a strong advocate for education in Geneva and established what is now the University of Geneva. Puritans later brought his emphasis on education to the New World, where they built colleges. Calvin also advocated for representative government, which encouraged the rise of democracies in Europe and the Americas later.

The Basics of Calvin's Theology (as others explained it later): T-U-L-I-P

- **T**otal depravity — our will is totally corrupted, because we all inherit Adam's sin
- **U**nconditional election — God in his sovereignty predestines some to salvation and others to condemnation
- **L**imited atonement — Jesus' sacrifice applies only to those elected for salvation
- **I**rresistible grace — the Holy Spirit draws the elect to Christ, and that draw is ultimately irresistible, regardless of one's initial desire, because God, being sovereign, cannot be thwarted
- **P**erseverance/Preservation of the saints — the elect will never be finally lost

THE ANABAPTISTS, as an extreme branch of the Zwingli wing of the Reformation, grew out of Zürich and spread across Switzerland and into Germany and Holland. They believed each Christian has the right to interpret the Bible for themselves, that it is the final and infallible rule for faith and practice, and that the pure church is to be free (not a state church). Most believed the church and the state must be separate. They taught that believers are to be baptized by immersion and that infant baptism is unscriptural. Many were pacifists, especially at first. They appealed especially to the working and peasant classes, where other Reformers appealed more to the middle class. Mennonites and Baptists today are both descended from the Anabaptists.

• One group of Anabaptists led by Jacob Hutter (1500-1536) lived communally, taking its model from the early church in Acts. It developed among Anabaptist refugees in Moravia. Fleeing persecution, they moved to Hungary and Ukraine, and after 1874 they went to the Dakotas, Manitoba, and Paraguay. Today they are known as Hutterites, and they continue to practice agrarian communalism.

• ENGLAND — In 1534, King Henry VIII (1509-1547) had a problem. For the stability of the nation, he needed a male heir, but he had only one daughter. He asked the Archbishop of Canterbury for permission to divorce his wife so he could marry someone more likely to give him a son. His request was denied—so though he had previously supported the Catholic Church, he had Parliament declare him the head of the English church, thus divorcing it from the Catholic Church and beginning the Anglican Church.

William Tyndale (1494-1536), living in Germany to escape persecution, published a new English New Testament there in 1525, while England was still Catholic. His Bibles were smuggled into England and sold there. In 1536 a friend betrayed him and he was arrested and executed. Miles Coverdale (ca. 1488-1569) published the entire Bible in English in 1535. It was the first printed and complete Bible in English.

WIVES OF HENRY VIII

Catherine of Aragon bore Henry 1 surviving daughter, Mary Tudor; their marriage was annulled by Parliament.

A mistress *bore Henry a son; but that son, being illegitimate, could not take the throne.*

Anne Boleyn, a different mistress of Henry, married him and gave him a daughter, Elizabeth. Anne was accused of adultery and executed.

Jane Seymour gave Henry a son, Edward, and died 12 days later.

Anne of Cleves was married to Henry to form an alliance between England and German Lutherans. But the alliance failed and Henry divorced her.

Catherine Howard fell into disgrace and was beheaded.

Catherine Parr was still married to Henry when he died.

Under Henry's son Edward VI (1547-1553), various religious reforms that were enacted gave the Anglican Church a somewhat Reformed (Calvinistic) feel.

Queen Mary Tudor (1553-1558) was staunchly Catholic. She persecuted Protestants aggressively, including burning almost 300, earning herself the name "Bloody Mary".

Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) again separated the Church of England from the Catholic Church. She persecuted her opponents, though not as aggressively as Mary had. By the end of her reign, Catholics were permitted to worship openly in England, provided that they remained loyal to the queen and to the civil authorities.

PURITANS first appeared as a group aiming to "purify" the Anglican Church, though not to separate from it. They received the nickname "Puritans" after 1560. They wanted to be less Catholic and to return more to the Bible. They began Presbyterianism in England by advocating for elderships (presbyteries) in each diocese. Some went so far as to argue for individual congregational autonomy.

- SCOTLAND — Struggles ensued between reformers and Catholics, with John Knox (1514-1572) as the leading Protestant preacher. Mary Stuart, ruler of Scotland, was devoutly Catholic and was married to the king of France. To resist French influence, Scottish nobles turned away from Mary, and by rule of Parliament they made Catholicism illegal in 1560. The Reformed Church of Scotland, which was much like the later Presbyterian Church, was formed.
- IRELAND — Colonists from England took over much of North Ireland and eventually united with England; in that area Protestantism was strong. But southern Ireland resisted colonization and Protestantism and remained largely Catholic, and also remained independent from England, as it is today.
- FRANCE — Protestantism spread throughout France (with some 400,000 French Protestants around 1550), but Catholicism remained strong, too. For nearly the entire second half of the 1500s, France was beset by religious wars led by the two most powerful French families. The royal family, which started out Catholic, began to support the Protestants in order to gain their support against the other family (the Guise family), which was Catholic. Earlier, Protestants had been exiled from France or persecuted in other ways; now they began to be permitted limited religious freedom.
  THE MASSACRE OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY, August 24, 1572 — Both the Guise family and King Charles IX and his powerful mother began to fear the vast influence of a Protestant leader, Admiral Gaspard de Coligny. Together they plotted his assassination, and on the night of St. Bartholomew's Day he was murdered at his home in Paris. Some 2,000-3,000 more Protestants were slaughtered in Paris, and another 6,000-8,000 were killed in the provinces soon thereafter. In England, Queen Elizabeth dressed in mourning when she heard the news; in Germany, Emperor Maximilian II, a faithful Catholic, was horrified at what had happened; in Rome, Pope Gregory XIII, though he claimed that the bloodshed was terrible, ordered that a hymn of praise to God be sung every year in memory of this glorious deed; and in Spain, King Philip II smiled in public for the first time when he heard about the massacre.
  Frequent fighting between Catholics and Protestants from the nobility continued until the kingship fell to King Henry IV, who was a Protestant, though he had switched his allegiance between Catholicism and Protestantism four times. Convinced that he could not lead still-quite-Catholic France as a Protestant, he re-adopted Catholicism again, but granted Protestants freedom to worship in most parts of France outside of Paris in 1598.
- THE NETHERLANDS (HOLLAND) — The king of Spain controlled the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg. He opposed Protestantism, and tens of thousands of Lutherans, Anabaptists, and others were executed. Resenting the authority he held as a foreigner, the people of these lands, led by William (the Silent) of Orange, rebelled against the Spanish king in the 1560s-1580s. Their fight became a religious one as well as a political one. When the conflict resolved, the Netherlands became Protestant and both Belgium and Luxemburg became Catholic, and the whole region gained independence from Spain. The Dutch Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Churches are descended from the first Dutch Protestants.

— MENNO SIMONS (1496-1561) was a Dutch Catholic priest who became an Anabaptist in 1536. His followers came to be called Mennonites. They were devout pacifists. They believed Christians must not take any oaths or hold positions that require oaths, including participation in military service, for which reason they were often considered subversive; yet they did believe they should obey the government, after Christ. Persecution forced many to emigrate to Russia and North America, then later to South America. Mennonites are the strongest branch of the old Anabaptist movement today.

- DENMARK & NORWAY — In 1536, the Danes abolished Roman Catholicism and seized all Catholic land holdings, dividing them between the king and the nobles. Lutheranism became the state religion of Denmark and Norway (which Denmark controlled) in 1539.
- SWEDEN — Lutheranism became the official religion in 1527. The king had favored the Reformation as a means by which to acquire the vast land holdings of the Catholic church in Sweden. Sweden controlled Finland, and Lutheranism became the religion of the Finns by 1530.
- ICELAND — Lutheranism became the official religion by 1554.
- POLAND — Poland began to turn toward Lutheranism, but Catholicism eventually won out there.
- HUNGARY — Calvin's teachings were quickly adopted among many in Hungary. Persecution against the Magyar Reformed there arose after 1572 and lasted about 200 years.

4) THE CATHOLIC COUNTER-REFORMATION

- The study of church history began at the time of the Protestant Reformation, as both Protestants and Catholics tried to prove the validity of their beliefs through historical analysis.
- JESUITS — The Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) began in 1540 under the leadership of a Spanish monk, Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). They became known for missionary zeal and opposition to the Protestant Reformation. They emphasized purity, poverty, celibacy, education of clergy, and complete obedience to the pope.
- POPES URGE REFORM — Some Catholic leaders began promoting a more spiritual Christianity in the early 1500s, and as the Protestant Reformation gained strength, the Catholic Church and its leaders became more serious about reform. Pope Paul III (1534-1549) in particular moved for reforms. In 1536 he established a commission of cardinals and bishops to list needs for reform, and Paul enacted some of their recommendations—though not in areas that would diminish significant sources of his income. Pope Paul IV (1555-1559) also pursued some reforms, including financial reforms.
- THE COUNCIL OF TRENT met intermittently from 1545 to 1563. It reinforced Catholic doctrines, enacted various reforms, set requirements for education and training of the clergy (no requirements had been set before this time), and also established that the authority of the Catholic Church is equal to that of Scripture. This council marked the birth of the modern Catholic Church.
- SUPPRESSION OF PROTESTANT REFORMS — The Inquisition had been restarted in Spain in 1480 by papal permission, under the control of the Spanish monarchy. It was enlarged under papal authority by Pope Paul III in 1542 (and did not end until 1854) in an attempt to stamp out conversions to a Protestant faith in all Catholic lands. An Index of Prohibited Books was compiled in 1559 (and was finally abolished in 1966) to list those books that Catholics were not permitted to read. The Inquisition forced many Protestants to recant and return to Catholicism, and the Index kept many Catholics from reading Protestant literature or translations of the Bible.

5) CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY IN NEW LANDS

Just as Protestantism was splitting the church apart in Europe in the 1500s, the Catholic Church was expanding faster and further than ever before through exploration and mission work. The 1500s became the greatest period in history for Catholic mission work.

- SPANISH-CONTROLLED LANDS — The popes gave Spain and Portugal near-complete authority over the church in the New World. The church in Spanish lands was almost a state church. Two types of Christian leaders developed there: higher church officials appointed in Spain were essentially political appointees with little connection to the local people. They tended to support Spanish exploitation of the indigenous peoples. But Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit missionaries lived among the people, knew them, and worked hard to defend them against disastrous colonial policies. Many missionaries and priests in the New World and officials back in Spain spoke out against the colonizers' abuses of the natives and the taking of the natives' lands, but laws passed in Spain to protect the natives were often ignored by the settlers in the New World, where those in power did as they pleased. Some Christians exploited the Native Americans, while other Christians courageously defended them.
- BLACK SLAVES were imported into the Caribbean to work in mines and on farms wherever hard forced labor and disease had decimated the native population so that the Spanish needed more workers. Not many in the church objected to the enslavement of Africans.
- FLORIDA — Spanish missionaries accompanied troops who tried several times to colonize Florida. Most of the missionaries' efforts failed because of the violence enacted by the soldiers.
- MEXICO — When Cortez defeated the Aztecs and other local peoples, the natives believed the Christian God must be greater than their own gods, for His people had defeated them. Many rushed to be baptized to get the support of that God, though they still remembered the cruelty of the Spaniards who had slaughtered many of them.
- CENTRAL AMERICA — The Spanish took over Central America hoping to find vast amounts of gold (they did find some, but only a little). One missionary, Franciscan Juan de Estrada Rávago, worked peacefully with the Native Americans of Costa Rica and brought many to Christ. By the end of the 1500s, most Central Americans considered themselves Christians.
- INCAN EMPIRE (Peru, Chile, Argentina, etc.) — The Spanish conquered this area beginning in the 1530s. The region was so wealthy that all the same greed-related vices seen in Europe in previous centuries appeared in the church in this region now, too.
- BRAZIL — Portuguese settlers trading for brazilwood and then farming sugar cane set up settlements, fought and enslaved natives, brought in African slaves, and did little to spread Christianity until Jesuit missionaries came. Mostly the Portuguese converted Native Americans through intimidation.

> *If the Indians had a spiritual life and would acknowledge their Creator and their vassalage to Your Majesty and their obligation to obey Christians…men would have legitimate slaves captured in just wars, and would have also the service and vassalage of the Indians in the missions.* Manoel de Nóbrega, leader of the first Jesuit missionaries in Portugal. Quoted in Justo L. González, The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day, 400

- AFRICA — Portugal established colonies by force on the east coast of Africa, in Mozambique and Mombasa (on the coast of Kenya), primarily in their effort to establish trade routes to east Asia. They did not do much evangelistic work there, but functioned mostly by force. Some missionaries, though, did try to reach Africans in the interior of Africa. Many gave their lives as martyrs, greatly impressing some of the Africans.
- INDIA — Portuguese Jesuits evangelized in India and won many converts in some areas, mostly among the lower castes. The caste system was absolute, and many converts thought that when they were baptized they were being inducted into the Portuguese caste, thus improving their status. Some churches were started among the higher castes, but without the higher and lower mixing. Many European clergy complained that this injustice was unchristian.
- CHINA — Portuguese Jesuits evangelized in China, but it was an extremely slow process because the Chinese were very averse to foreign influence. In the late 1500s, Jesuit Matteo Ricci gained the trust of some Chinese intellectuals by learning their language and culture and sharing scientific and geographic

knowledge from Europe. He slowly brought a small number of people to Christ, and after his death they continued to spread the gospel and won many more believers to the faith.

- JAPAN — Francis Xavier (1506-1552) brought Catholicism to Japan, beginning in Kagoshima in 1549. But the Japanese rulers Hideyoshi (1585-1598) and Ieyasu (1603-1616) persecuted and killed many of the monks there, thinking they were advocating European imperialism.

6) THE EASTERN CHURCH

- In 1589, the Orthodox Church in Russia became a national church, the Russian Orthodox Church. Moscow continued to rise as "the third Rome", after Rome and Constantinople.

7) REFLECTIONS ON THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

- In Europe by the end of the 1500s…
  - Lutherans held the greatest influence in Germany and Scandinavia.
  - Calvinism was strongest in Switzerland, Scotland, Holland, France, Bohemia, and Hungary.
  - England had the Anglican Church.
  - Anabaptists did not establish state churches. They were especially strong in Holland, northern Germany, and Switzerland.

Changes in Christian thinking and in society from the Protestant Reformation:

[A]s far as salvation was concerned, man need not come to God by the sacraments of the Roman Catholic church.

The doctrine of the priesthood of believers struck at the importance of the hierarchical system of mediators between God and man, just as the doctrine of justification by faith had made the sacramental system unnecessary. No mediator was needed, because each believer was a spiritual priest who offered spiritual sacrifices to God.

The assertion of the final authority of the Scriptures marked a repudiation of the authority of the church… Almost all the Reformers themselves or their colleagues translated the bible into the vernacular languages.

The Reformation helped to create a demand for universal elementary education, for if everyone was to interpret the Bible for himself, he must have some knowledge of reading. All the reformers gave considerable attention to the founding of schools based on the three levels of elementary, secondary, and university education. The Reformation also stimulated the rise of empirical science.

Insistence on the spiritual equality of people led to an insistence on their political equality. In this way the Reformation, particularly where Calvinistic doctrines were accepted, promoted the rise of democracy in both the church and the state. Laymen were given a greater share in the government of the church.

The Reformation also stimulated capitalism because the medieval opposition to usury was dropped by most of the Reformers… It is not fair, however, to say that any of the Reformers were responsible for the rise of capitalism because it was in existence long before the Reformation. The modern welfare state, which assumes responsibility for the economic welfare of its citizens, also had its beginnings in the need of the state to provide for those who were dispossessed and impoverished by the confiscation of church property during the Reformation.

The movement also bought [sic] a much-needed revival of preaching. Men such as Luther excelled as preachers of the Word…

The Reformation also had an impact on the Roman Catholic church through the reformation in morals and the clear statement of dogma of the Counter-Reformation at Trent. Earle E. Cairns, Christianity through the Centuries, 351-353