

## F. The Reformation and Religious Wars (1517-1648): The Failure of Religious Unity

1. Even though Europe had evolved into separate kingdoms, which distinctive national identities and enmities, Catholic Christianity was a common denominator binding them together into a community of nations that can be called “Christendom.”
2. Having survived the worst of the Dark Ages, the leaders of Christendom were beginning to feel proud of their emerging civilization. The artistic flourishing known as the “Renaissance” (the rebirth of Greco-Roman ideas and artistic styles) accompanied this political period of stronger monarchies and nations.
3. To celebrate the success of the Catholic Church, Pope Leo X, influenced by Renaissance art all around him, wished to construct a huge church in Rome, called St. Peter’s, that would serve as the symbol of the greatness of Christendom under Catholic leadership.
4. In order to pay for this project, Leo authorized the sale of special “indulgences” to Christians throughout Europe.
  - a) In Christianity, people hold the belief that when you die a part of you, called the “soul,” continues to exist, and this soul may be allowed into a kind of paradise in the afterlife called “heaven.”
  - b) In the Dark Ages, it was also commonly believed that people who had committed certain sins (bad acts) could not get to heaven directly – that they would have to wait for some extended period in a place called “purgatory.”
  - c) By obtaining an indulgence, it was believed that one’s time, (or the time of a loved one) in purgatory could be shortened. In simple terms, an indulgence was a way of getting to heaven more quickly after death.
  - d) To obtain an indulgence, one had to confess one’s sins to a priest and demonstrate that one was truly sorry, and one had to pay a fee to the Church.
5. A monk named Martin Luther, who lived in Wittenberg, Germany and who had dedicated his life to earning his way into heaven by being as perfectly religious as he could, was furious when he heard of the sale of indulgences. To Luther, it appeared that people were being told they could buy their way into heaven.
6. Luther wrote down his objections to the sale of indulgences in an essay that became known as the “Ninety-Five Theses”. (He had ninety-five separate objections!) He posted these objections to the Church door in Wittenberg to make them public on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517.
7. When Pope Leo X heard of the Ninety-Five Theses, he first chose to ignore them, but as word continued to spread, he decided to answer Luther. He sent him an essay explaining that he had detected forty-one mistakes in Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses! Luther burned the pope’s essay in public, and the pope excommunicated him.
8. When the pope recruited the king of Catholic Spain and newly chosen “Holy Roman Emperor,” Charles V, to arrest Luther and crush the nascent community of Lutheranism in Germany, difficulties began to multiply.
9. Starting in 1534, the pope found that his religious authority over England was rejected by King Henry VIII. The pope had refused to grant Henry, whose marriage to Catherine of Aragon had failed to produce an heir, an annulment of his marriage, only to be shocked by the passage of the “Act of Supremacy” by the English parliament, which granted the king primacy over the Church of England and thus gave rise to yet another sect of Christianity, known as “Anglicanism.”
10. To make matters worse for the pope, in 1536, John Calvin, a one-time Lutheran from France, found refuge in the independent-



By the “Act of Supremacy” passed by the English parliament in 1534, king Henry VIII became the head of the *Church of England*.

mindful area of the Holy Roman Empire known at the time as the Swiss Confederacy, where he published a book called the *"Institutes of the Christian Religion,"* which became the basis for yet another major sect known as "Calvinism."

11. From Switzerland, the message of Calvinism was transported down the Rhine river to the bustling commercial marketplace of northern Europe, the Netherlands, which, also, for the time being, was part of the Holy Roman Empire, but which like the Lutheran states of Germany, the Swiss Confederacy, and England were willing to fight for their religious and political independence.
12. Because of Columbus's discovery of America and the creation of colonies from Mexico to Peru (where huge deposits of gold & silver were found) Spain was temporarily the most important nation of Europe, but even it could not impose the will of the pope on many different countries at once.
13. When the Netherlands declared its independence from the Holy Roman Empire, i.e. Catholic Spain, in 1567, the Eighty Years' War ensued (1568-1648). At the same time, Spain assembled a massive fleet known as the "Spanish Armada" for the invasion of England. When the Spanish Armada was defeated in 1588, both England and Netherlands began to build their own fleets to compete with Spain and to create colonial and trading empires in America and Asia.
14. Although Spain continued the fight, Sweden and Denmark were also converted to Lutheranism and lent their armies to support the cause of the Lutherans in Germany. When their combined efforts still weren't quite enough, something remarkable happened: France, which had remained Catholic, intervened with financial aid in support of the Lutherans against the Catholic Holy Roman Empire. The explanation for this is that France's king and religious leaders, including the famous Cardinal Richelieu, had become true nationalists. They viewed the Holy Roman Empire (which combined Spain and so many parts of Germany and Italy) as a combined threat to France's independence, and they decided that nationalism was a more important factor in deciding who to help in the wars of religion than which form of Christianity either side upheld.
15. With Spain finally exhausted, the nations involved in the various wars all sent ambassadors to a peace conference in 1648 where they redrew the map of Europe, in both a political and religious sense.
  - a) Importantly, the Peace of Westphalia saw the official recognition by the rulers of Europe of two new countries: Netherlands and Switzerland. (Both were mainly Calvinist.)
  - b) Within the Holy Roman Empire itself, the Peace of Westphalia applied the idea of "cuius regio, eius religio" (the ruler chooses the religion) to allow for Lutheranism and Calvinism as well as Catholicism. (England was not yet accepted, but would be soon.)
  - c) Perhaps the most dramatic fact concerning the peace was that the pope had no role in it. He was deeply disturbed by it and denounced it, however his disapproval was basically ignored. Though the people of Europe remained Christian, even the Catholic countries no longer accepted the idea that the pope could command their rulers in matters not restricted to religion. A new life was beginning where a single accepted form of Christianity could no longer be a way to unify Europe.