

The Reformation Begins

What factors led to the weakening of the Catholic Church and the beginning of the Reformation?

Introduction

At the height of the Renaissance, western Europe was still Roman Catholic, but this changed with the beginning of the Reformation. This movement led to the start of many new Christian churches that broke away from the Catholic Church.

The Reformation began in the early 1500s and lasted into the 1600s. Until then, all Christians in western Europe were Catholics. However, even before the Reformation, the Church's religious and moral authority was starting to weaken. One reason for the weakening of the Church was the humanism of the Renaissance. Humanists often were secular, or nonreligious, in their thinking, and they believed in free thought and questioned many accepted beliefs.

Problems within the Church added to this spirit of questioning. Many Catholics were dismayed by worldliness and corruption (immoral and dishonest behavior) in the Church. Sometimes, bishops and clergy used questionable practices to raise money. Some popes seemed more concerned with power and wealth than with spiritual matters.

These problems led a number of Catholics to call for reform. They questioned the authority of Church leaders and some of the Church's teachings. Those who broke away from the Church entirely became known as "Protestants" because of their protests against the Catholic Church. The establishment of Protestant churches divided Christians into many separate groups.

In this lesson, you will learn about the factors that weakened the Roman Catholic Church and how a German priest, Martin Luther, ignited a movement that ended the religious unity of Europe. You will also learn about other early reformers and leaders of the Reformation.

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Social Studies Vocabulary

denomination

indulgence

Martin Luther

Protestant

Reformation

simony

1 The Weakening of the Catholic Church

Level: A

2019 Teachers' Curriculum Institute

4.1 THE WEAKENING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By the Late Middle Ages, two major problems were weakening the Roman Catholic Church. The first was worldliness and corruption within the Church, and the second was political conflict between the pope and European monarchs.

Worldliness and Corruption Within the Church During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church united the Christians of western Europe in a single faith. However, the Church was a political and economic institution as well as a religious one. By the 1300s, many Catholics felt that the Church had become too worldly and corrupt.

Too frequently, Church officials failed to live up to their role as spiritual leaders. For example, priests, monks, and nuns made vows, or solemn promises, not to marry or have children, but many broke these vows. Others seemed to ignore Christian values, and Church leaders often behaved like royalty instead of God's servants. For example, the popes, and many cardinals and bishops, were extremely wealthy and powerful.

People were also troubled by the way numerous Church officials raised money to support the church. One method was the practice of selling **indulgences**. An indulgence is a release from punishment for sins.

During the Middle Ages, the Church granted indulgences in exchange for gifts to the Church and good works. People who received indulgences were not required to perform good deeds to make up for their sins. Over time, popes and bishops started selling indulgences as a way of raising money. This practice made it seem that people could buy forgiveness for their sins, an abuse that deeply disturbed many Catholics.

The Church also sold offices, or leadership positions, a practice called **simony**. Instead of being chosen based on their merit and accomplishments, buyers simply paid for their jobs. Buying an office was worthwhile because it could be a source of income. Often, people acquired multiple offices in different locations without actually going there to perform their duties.

People questioned other practices as well. Some clergy charged pilgrims to see holy objects, such as the relics of **saints**.

In addition, all Catholics paid taxes to the Church. Many people resented having to pay taxes to Rome in addition to their own governments.

Political Conflicts with European Rulers In the Middle Ages, the pope became a powerful political figure, as well as a religious leader, and the Church accumulated vast amounts of wealth. Its political and economic power presented a problem for monarchs because the Church claimed that its clergy were independent of political rulers' control.

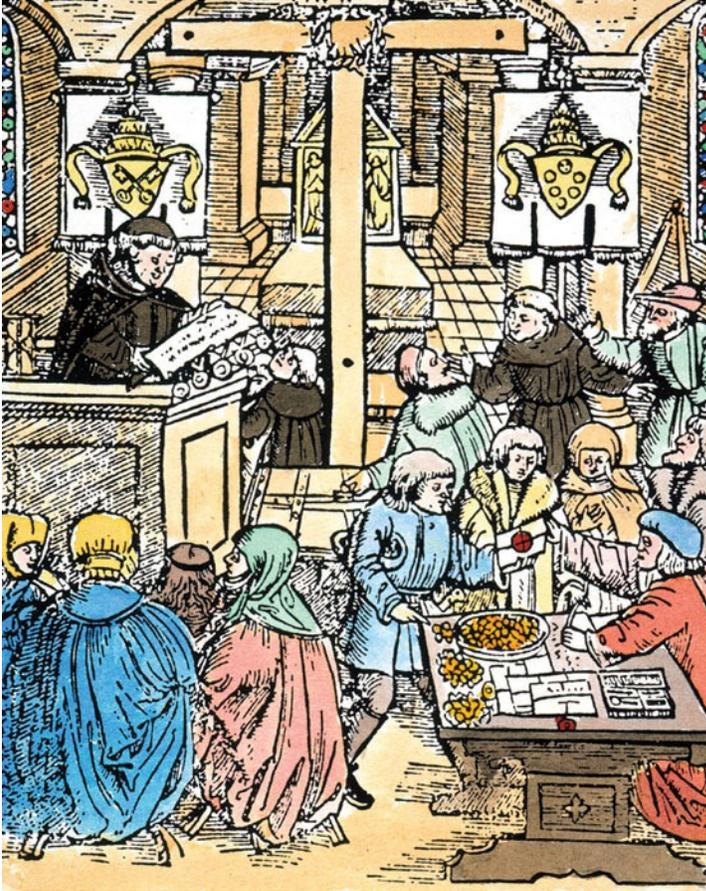
As monarchs attempted to increase their own power, they frequently came into conflict with the pope. They quarreled with the pope over Church property and the right to make appointments to Church offices. In addition, popes became involved in other political conflicts, which prompted many to question the pope's authority and also damaged the Church's reputation.

One dramatic crisis unfolded in France in 1301. When King Philip IV tried to tax the French clergy, the pope threatened to force him out of the Church. In response, soldiers hired by the king kidnapped the pope. The pope was soon released, but he died a few weeks later.

The quarrel with the king ended under Pope Clement V. In 1309, Clement moved his headquarters from Rome to the French city of Avignon. During his reign, he appointed 24 new cardinals, 22 of whom were French. The next six popes also lived in Avignon and named more French cardinals. Many Europeans believed that France's kings now controlled the papacy, or the office of the pope, causing them to lose respect for the pope as the Church's supreme leader.

An even worse crisis developed after Pope Gregory XI returned the papacy to Rome in 1377. When Gregory died in 1378, an Italian was elected pope and refused to move back to Avignon. A group of cardinals, most of them French, left Rome and elected a rival pope, leading the Church to have one pope in Rome and one in Avignon. Later, a Church council elected a third pope. Each pope claimed to be the real head of the Church.

This division in the Church is called the Western Schism. For nearly 40 years, the various lines of popes denounced each other as impostors, which divided and confused Catholics. The Western Schism lessened people's respect for the papacy and sparked calls for reform.





2. Early Calls for Reform

By the 1300s, the Church was beginning to lose some of its moral and religious standing. Many Catholics, including clergy, criticized the corruption and abuses in the Church. They challenged the authority of the pope, questioned Church teachings, and started to develop new forms of Christian faith.

Reformers wanted to purify the Church, not destroy it. By challenging the Church's practices and teachings, however, they helped pave the way for the dramatic changes of the **Reformation**.

John Wycliffe (About 1330-1384) John Wycliffe (WIH-cliff) was an English scholar who challenged the Church's right to money that it demanded from England. When the Western Schism began, he publicly questioned the pope's authority and criticized indulgences and immoral behavior on the part of the clergy.

During the Middle Ages, Church officials attempted to control how the Bible was interpreted. Wycliffe believed that the Bible, not the Church,

was the supreme source of religious authority. Against Church tradition, he had the Bible translated from Latin into English so that common people could read it.

The pope accused Wycliffe of heresy, or opinions that contradict official **doctrine**. Wycliffe's followers were persecuted, and some of them were burned to death as heretics, or people who behave against official teachings. After his death, the Church had Wycliffe's writings burned, too. Despite the Church's opposition, however, Wycliffe's ideas had wide influence.

Jan Hus (About 1370-1415) Jan Hus (huhs) was a priest in Bohemia, which today is in the Czech Republic. He read Wycliffe's writings and agreed with many of his ideas. Hus criticized the Church's vast wealth and spoke out against the pope's authority. The true head of the Church, he said, was Jesus Christ.

Hus sought to purify the Church, return it to the people, and end corruption among the clergy. He wanted both the Bible and mass to be offered in the common language of the people instead of in Latin. Hus was arrested and charged with heresy in 1414 and was burned at the stake in July 1415.

Like Wycliffe, Hus had a major influence on future reformers. Martin Luther would later say that he and his supporters were “all Hussites without knowing it.”

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) Catherine of Siena was a mystic—a person deeply devoted to religion and who has spiritual experiences. Born in the Italian city of Siena, she began having visions of Jesus when she was a child.

Catherine spent many long hours in prayer and wrote numerous letters about spiritual life. In addition, she involved herself in Church affairs. Her pleas helped to convince Pope Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome from Avignon. Later, she traveled to Rome to attempt to end the Western Schism.

In 1461, the Church declared Catherine a saint. Her example showed that people could lead spiritual lives that went beyond the usual customs of the Church. She and other mystics emphasized personal experience of God more than formal observance of Church practices. This approach to faith helped prepare people for the ideas of the Reformation.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) Desiderius Erasmus was a

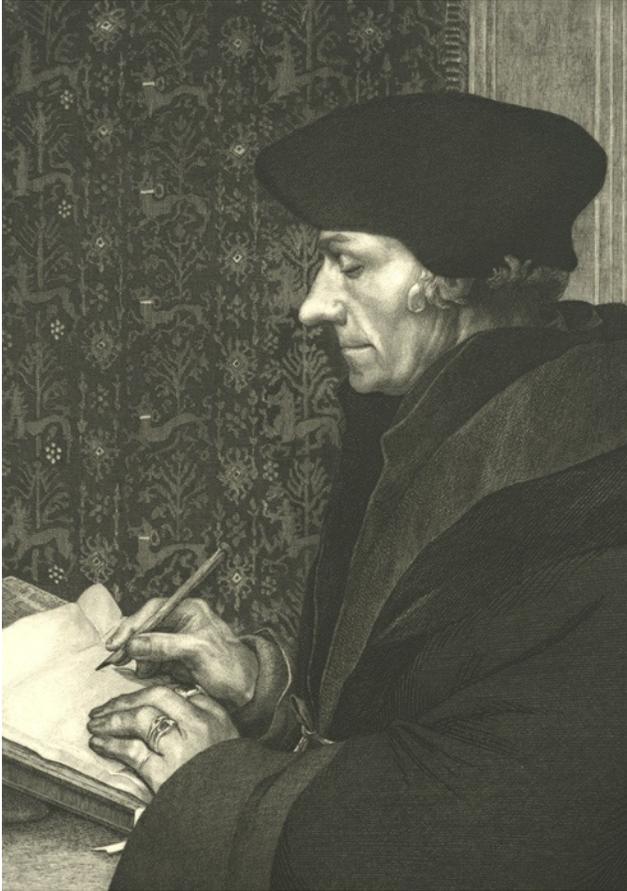
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humanist from Holland. A priest and devoted Catholic, he was one of the most outspoken figures in the call for reform.

In 1509, Erasmus published a book called *The Praise of Folly*. (*Folly* means “foolishness.”) The book was a sharply worded satire of society, including abuses by clergy and Church leaders, that argued for a return to simple Christian goodness.

Erasmus wanted to reform the Church from within and angrily denied that he was a **Protestant** who wanted to break away from the Catholic Church. However, perhaps more than any other individual, he helped to prepare Europe for the Reformation. His attacks on corruption in the Church contributed to many people's desire to leave Catholicism. For this reason, it has frequently been said that “Erasmus laid the egg, and Luther hatched it.”





3. Martin Luther Breaks Away from the Church

In the early 1500s in Germany, then part of the Holy Roman Empire, a priest named **Martin Luther** became involved in a serious dispute with Church authorities. Condemned by the Catholic Church, Luther established the first Protestant church, which started the Reformation.

Luther's Early Life Luther was born in Germany in 1483 and was raised as a devout Catholic. Luther's father wanted him to become a lawyer. As a young man, however, Luther was badly frightened when he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. As lightning flashed around him, he vowed that if he survived he would become a monk.

Luther kept his promise, joined an order of monks, and later became a priest. He studied the Bible thoroughly and developed a reputation as a scholar and teacher.

Luther Pushes for Change in the Catholic Church The Church stressed that keeping the sacraments and living a good life were the keys to salvation. Luther's studies of the Bible led him to a different

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answer. He believed that it was impossible to earn salvation because it was a gift from God that people received in faith. People, he said, were saved by their faith, not by performing good works.

Luther's views brought him into conflict with the Church over indulgences. In 1517, Pope Leo X needed money to finish building St. Peter's Basilica, the grand cathedral in Rome. He sent preachers around Europe to sell indulgences. Buyers were promised pardons of all of their sins and those of friends and family. Luther was outraged because he felt that the Church was selling false salvation to uneducated people.

Luther posted a list of arguments, called **theses**, against indulgences and Church abuses on a church door in the town of Wittenberg. He also sent the list, called the Ninety-Five Theses, to Church leaders.

Luther's theses caused considerable controversy. Many people were excited by his ideas, despite being condemned by the Church. Gradually, he was drawn into more serious disagreements with Church authorities.

In response to critics, Luther published pamphlets that explained his thinking. He argued that the Bible—not the pope or Church leaders—was the ultimate source of religious authority. The only true sacraments, he said, were baptism and the Eucharist. The Church's other five sacraments had no basis in the Bible. Moreover, Luther said that all Christians were priests and, therefore, all should study the Bible for themselves.

In the eyes of Church leaders, Luther was attacking fundamental truths of the Catholic religion. In January 1521, Pope Leo X excommunicated him, which meant he was no longer allowed membership in the Church.

In April 1521, Luther was brought before the Diet, an assembly of state leaders, in the German city of Worms. At the risk of his life, he refused to take back his teachings, prompting the Holy Roman emperor, Charles V, to declare Luther a heretic and forbid the printing or selling of his writings. For a time Luther went into hiding, but the movement he had started continued to spread.

Luther Starts His Own Church Many Germans viewed Luther as a hero. As his popularity grew, he continued to develop his ideas. Soon he was openly organizing a new Christian **denomination** known as Lutheranism, which emphasized studying the Bible. Luther not only translated the Bible into German, but he also wrote a baptism service, a mass, and new hymns (sacred songs) in the language.

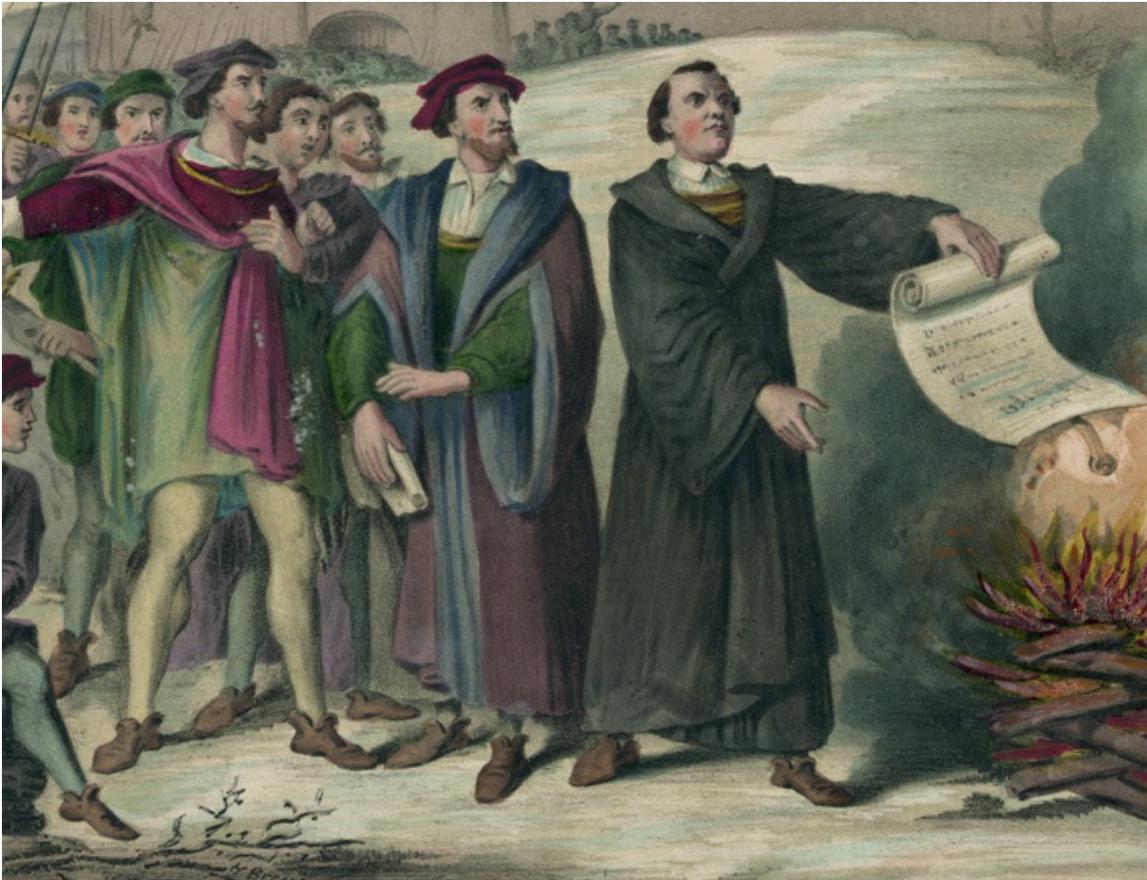
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Having rejected the Church's hierarchy, Luther looked to German princes to support his church. When a peasants' revolt broke out in 1524, the rebels expected Luther to support their demands for social and economic change. Instead, Luther denounced the peasants and sided with the rulers because he needed their help to continue his new church's growth. By the time the uprising was crushed, tens of thousands of peasants had been brutally killed, so many rejected Lutheranism.

Several princes, however, supported Luther, and Lutheranism continued to grow. Over the next 30 years, Lutherans and Catholics were often at war in Germany. These religious wars ended in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg, a **treaty** that permitted each prince within the Holy Roman Empire to determine the religion of his subjects.

The Peace of Augsburg was a major victory for Protestantism. Christian unity was at an end, and not only in Germany. As you will learn next, by this time a number of other Protestant churches had sprung up in northern Europe.





4. Other Leaders of the Reformation

The movement started by Martin Luther swept across much of Europe. Many people who were dismayed by abuses in the Church remained loyal Catholics, whereas others were attracted to new forms of the Christian faith. The printing press helped spread new ideas, as well as translations of the Bible, faster than ever before. In addition, government leaders had learned from Luther's experience that they could win religious independence from the Church. The Reformation succeeded most where rulers embraced Protestant faiths.

Many reformers contributed to the spread of Protestantism. Let's take a look at four leaders of the Reformation.

Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1530) Huldrych Zwingli (HUL-drick ZVING-lee) was a Catholic priest in Zurich, Switzerland who was influenced by both Erasmus and Luther. After reading Luther's work, he persuaded the local government to ban any form of worship that was not based on the Bible. In 1523, Zurich declared its independence from the authority of the local Catholic bishop.

Zwingli wanted Christians to focus solely on the Bible, and he attacked the worship of relics, saints, and images. In the Protestant churches he founded, there were no religious statues or paintings, and services were very simple, without music or singing.

Zwingli carried his ideas to other Swiss cities. In 1530, war broke out between his followers and Swiss Catholics, and Zwingli died during the fighting.

John Calvin (1509-1564) In the late 1530s, John Calvin, a French humanist, established another Protestant group in Geneva, Switzerland. His book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, became one of the most influential works of the Reformation.

Calvin emphasized that salvation came only from God's grace. He said that the "saved" whom God elected, or chose, lived according to strict standards. He believed firmly in hard work and thrift, or the careful use of money. Success in business, he taught, was a sign of God's grace. Calvin tried to establish a Christian state in Geneva that would be ruled by God through the Calvinist Church.

Calvin influenced many other reformers, including John Knox, a Scotsman who lived in Geneva for a time. Knox led the Protestant reform that established the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

King Henry VIII (1491-1547) England's Protestant Reformation was led by King Henry VIII. In 1534, Henry formed the Church of England, also called the Anglican Church, and named himself as its supreme head.

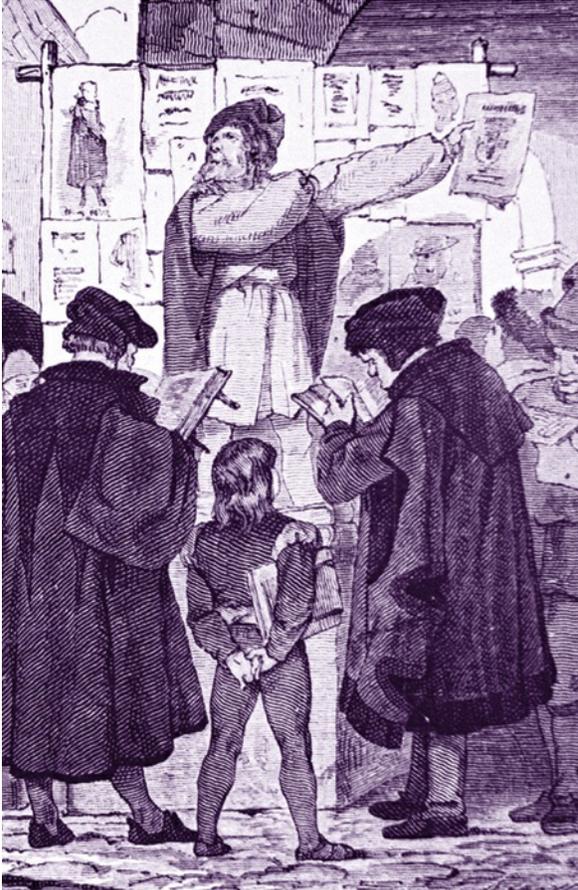
Unlike Luther and Calvin, King Henry did not have major disagreements with Catholic teachings. His reasons for breaking with the Church were personal and political. On a personal level, he wanted to end his first marriage, but the pope had denied him a divorce. On a political level, he no longer wanted to share power and wealth with the Church. In 1536, Henry closed down Catholic monasteries in England and took their riches.

William Tyndale was an English priest, scholar, and writer who traveled to Germany and met Martin Luther. As his views became increasingly Protestant, he attacked corruption in the Catholic Church and defended the English Reformation. After being arrested by Catholic authorities in the city of Antwerp, in present-day Belgium, he spent over a year in prison and was burned at the stake in 1536.

Tyndale is especially important to the Reformation because of his

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translations of the Bible. To spread knowledge of the Bible, he translated the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament into English. In the early 1600s, his work was used in the preparation of the King James, or Authorized, Version of the Bible. Famed for its beautiful language, the King James Bible had an enormous influence on English worship, language, and literature.





Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about the Reformation, which began in the early 1500s. This movement led to the founding of many new Christian denominations in Europe.

The Weakening of the Catholic Church By the Late Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was weakened by corruption, political struggles, and humanist ideas. Many Catholics were dismayed by worldliness and immorality in the Church, including the sale of indulgences and the practice of simony.

Early Calls for Reform A number of Catholics began to call for reform, including John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Catherine of Siena, and Erasmus. They questioned the practices of Church leaders and some of the Church's teachings.

Martin Luther Breaks Away From the Church In the early 1500s, German priest Martin Luther became involved in a major dispute with the Church over indulgences and other practices. Excommunicated,

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Luther established the first Protestant church, which started the Reformation.

Other Leaders of the Reformation Other Protestant reformers began to separate from the Catholic Church. The printing press helped to spread their ideas. Zwingli and Calvin began churches in Switzerland. William Tyndale translated the Bible into English. Henry VIII became the supreme head of the new Church of England.

