THE REFORMATION

The Roman Catholic Church was a central part of everyday life in medieval Europe. It exercised authority over people's spiritual lives and had real political power.

In October 1517 Martin Luther, a German monk and scholar, began to question publicly many of the teachings and practices of the Church. His actions sparked a revolution that divided Europe and changed the course of history. Luther's initial attack focussed on the practice of selling indulgences. These were granted by the Pope for the full or partial remission of the sins of souls in purgatory. People buying indulgences thought they were buying a ticket into heaven for themselves or their relatives. On 31 October 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses against indulgences on the church door at Wittenberg in northern Germany.

News of Luther and his challenge to the Church spread rapidly throughout Europe. The recent invention of the printing press played a central role in the circulation of his radical ideas. These were taken up by a range of different people from English radicals like scholar William Tyndale, to royal rogues like Henry VIII. The reform started by Luther would have profound consequences in England, triggering centuries of religious upheaval, conflict and suppression.

ROYAL ROGUE

HENRY VIII (1491-1547) is most famous for having six wives, whom he married in a desperate attempt to produce male heirs. His father, Henry VII, had seized the English throne from Richard III in 1485, and Henry wanted a son to ensure the Tudor dynasty.

After the Pope refused to allow a divorce from his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, Henry made himself head of the English Church in order to divorce Katherine and marry Anne Boleyn. Between 1529 and 1534, Henry ended Papal influence in England and then destroyed the monasteries, which were an important and wealthy part of the medieval Church. The money and power of the Catholic Church in England now rested in Henry's hands.

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THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

At this time, the sacraments of the medieval Catholic Church were at the heart of everyone's lives, and it was important to perform them in order to get into heaven. Luther argued that only some of these sacraments were actually in the bible, and later, most Protestant Churches only had two sacraments: baptism and the eucharist.

BAPTISM

A rite of admission to the Church, usually performed on newborn babies, based on the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan.

CONFIRMATION

This is a further initiation rite, which happens after baptism, generally when the child is old enough to understand it.

EUCHARIST

Called the ‘Mass’ in the Catholic Church, this was a ceremony based on the Last Supper, when bread and wine turned into the body and blood of Jesus, known as ‘transubstantiation’.

CONFESSION

The confession of sins, and the ability of a priest to absolve people’s sins, was a central feature of the medieval Church. People believed that the forgiveness of sins reduced their time in purgatory - a temporary store of souls before entrance to heaven.

EXTREME UNCTION

Also known as the Last Rites, the confession of sins on your death bed and the absolution from a priest helped your passage to heaven and reduced the time you spent in purgatory.

ORDINATION

This was the sacrament of creating a priest. In the medieval Church, priests were a channel between God and the faithful.

MATRIMONY

Catholics believed marriage was a sacred rite of the Church. In context, many Protestants argued it was just a contract between a man and woman, and so divorce was possible. The Church of England maintained a more conservative view, despite the initial approval of Henry's divorce.

RELIGIOUS RENEGADE

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546) was professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, northern Germany. He soon expanded his 1517 attack to include other accepted practices of the Church such as the eucharist, baptism and penance. He argued that the only way to heaven was through faith in God and reading the bible.

The Pope declared Luther a heretic, and in 1521 the Holy Roman Emperor outlawed him. He was able to escape arrest and execution with the support and protection of his local ruler, Frederick III, Elector of Saxony.

From his base in Wittenberg, Luther exploited the relatively new technology of printing to promote his message across Germany and Europe. He was able to communicate complex ideas in a way that could be read and understood by many.

The years of struggle, against the Catholic Church and amongst his fellow reformers, took their toll and Luther suffered from periods of depression and ill health. He died at the age of 62 in Eisleben, Saxony, the city where he was born.

Luther's ideas led to the creation of Protestant Churches throughout Europe, sparking centuries of conflict between Catholic and Protestant states. Modern European identities were fundamentally shaped by the religious anathema set in motion by Martin Luther.

THE THREE SOLAS

At the heart of Martin Luther's attack on the Catholic Church, was a very simple and powerful idea: faith alone is the source of salvation. Over the next century, Protestantism splintered into lots of different sects but they all inherited three key religious principles. These were established by the early reformers in opposition to the traditions of the Catholic Church.

SOLA FIDE (BY FAITH ALONE)

This is the idea that faith in God alone leads to salvation and a place in heaven. The ceremonies and rituals of the Catholic Church, good deeds and indulgences could not get you into heaven.

SOLA SCRIPTURA (BY SCRIPTURE ALONE)

Christians believe the bible is the Word of God. Protestants claimed the bible was the supreme source of religious authority, rather than the Pope.

SOLA GRATIA (BY GRACE ALONE)

Luther argued that salvation was the result of divine grace, a gift from God which could not be earned by the Christian believer.