

## **Theological debate in the Reformation**

The impact of Martin Luther's attack on the Catholic Church was cataclysmic. In the short term, Christendom was shook to its foundations and so too were the social and political structures which had been built upon it. Even in the long term, present-day Northern Ireland illustrates how religious disagreements between Protestants and Catholics can still reach murderous proportions. The severity of these short- and long-term effects highlights the depth of the theological divisions between the two camps who, despite the desperate efforts of Emperor Charles V, could not reach an acceptable compromise on what they considered to be key tenets of the Christian faith. An understanding of these tenets is therefore crucial to an understanding of the topic as a whole.

### **1. Justification**

Lutherans and Catholics agreed that to enter heaven a soul must 'justify' itself before God. Once justified the soul enters into a State of Grace and entered the gates of paradise. Both groups also agreed that the process of justification was no easy matter, because all of us are tainted with the Original Sin stemming from The Fall from Grace of Adam and Eve. They also agreed that Christ's death on the cross created a 'store' of Grace which God used to save people from the flames of hell. The key disagreement was over how God chose to use that store of Grace.

#### **The Catholic View: Free Will / Justification by Works**

The Catholic view was that God puts the store of Grace at our disposal. We earn Grace by showing our faith to the world with unquestioning obedience to the Church and by doing 'good works' – for example by giving to charity and going on pilgrimages. In other words, God gives us Free Will to make our own way to heaven or hell. A connected idea was that the Saints, by virtue of their unblemished lives, went into heaven with a surplus of Grace which they could dish out to deserving souls as they saw fit. From this came Catholic devotion to particular saints – most notably to the Virgin Mary, but also in the form of pilgrimages to shrines such as that of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury. This bounty of Grace was also at the disposal of the Pope, who could grant 'indulgences' (documents absolving sin) to members of his Church. Even after death, Catholics could continue doing 'Good Works' by leaving money to Chantries, which spent their time praying for the souls of their benefactors to help them get into heaven more quickly. Henry VII of England left a small fortune to Chantries in this way.

There was a lot to be said for this theory of justification: it provided a clear and stable framework for an uneducated and illiterate population and stressed the free will of all men to control their destinies. Nevertheless, whilst the Church stressed that Good Works were meaningless without real faith, some people nevertheless adopted a ritualistic observance of religion and took the view that the rich could almost buy their way into heaven – a view which was hardly challenged by some of the more corrupt Popes of the early sixteenth century such as Alexander VI.

#### **Lutherans: Predestination / Justification by Faith Alone ("Sola Fide")**

The Lutheran view was a reaction against the Catholic stress on Good Works which was felt to have led to the ritualisation of religion and seriously detracted from the centrality of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Luther believed that God did not put the store of Grace created by that sacrifice at our disposal. Instead, he had already used it to predestine a random proportion of mankind ('The Elect') to be saved, whilst the rest of us ('The Damned') would deservedly perish in the flames of hell. No amount of Good Works could change the fate which God had already decreed for us, and the purpose of our lives should therefore be to search within ourselves for the faith in God's teachings which is the hallmark of The Elect. Superficially, this seems to absolve us of all moral responsibility – why bother leading a virtuous life if we don't get rewarded for it? Luther's response was that only The Damned would think in such cynical terms - Good Works might not bestow Grace in themselves, but they were the natural product of someone who possessed true faith. In other words, good deeds were the hallmark of The Elect, whilst sin was the hallmark of The Damned.

On the one hand, the Lutheran view of justification ingeniously encouraged introspection and virtuous living whilst simultaneously denying the Free Will at the heart of

Catholicism. On the other hand, the stress on personal piety and inner reflection as opposed to unquestioning obedience to the Pope threatened to fragment the entire church and, by implication, all of the political and social structures built upon it.

## 2. The Bible

### **Catholics: Latin Vulgate**

The Catholic emphasis on collective conformity and obedience to the Pope necessitated one centrally controlled Biblical text. This text, called the Vulgate, was in Latin—partly because this was the *lingua franca* of the medieval world, but also because this ensured that it could not be read by lay people. The Papacy argued that this was crucial to avoid misinterpretations and confusion, although critics suggested that it was merely a way of preserving the power of the Church by preventing people from thinking for themselves.

### **Lutherans: Vernacular versions**

The Lutheran stress on individual reflection led to the production of Bibles in the Vernacular (the language of the people). Only by reference to scripture alone ('Sola Scriptura') could each person learn for themselves whether they had faith and were therefore among The Elect. The downside was that people often reached different interpretations of what the Bible meant on key issues, whilst those who could not read were left feeling lost and abandoned as different preachers told them different things. Ultimately, spiritualists such as Caspar von Schwenkfeld and Andreas von Karlstadt rejected the Bible altogether as a "Paper Pope" and instead advocated direct communication with God through prayer.

## 3. The Clergy

### **Catholics - Separate, Centralised Episcopacy.**

For Catholics, the importance of the Clergy could not be overstated. Grace was earned by the stable framework of Good Works defined by the Church through a standard Latin Bible: it therefore followed that the priesthood needed to be a highly educated elite that could read Latin, understand the complexities of Church beliefs and express them clearly and accurately to the people and the Princes within a unified Christendom. With their exclusive access to the Bible, the Priesthood guided their flock through their lives and alone had the authority to administer the sacraments which provided 'cradle to the grave' spiritual healthcare. Priests were therefore "special" – a halfway house between God and the people. From this premise came the idea of a celibate clergy and monasteries where holy men could cut themselves off from the corruption of the everyday world. It also entailed a complex church hierarchy including a Pope, Cardinals, Bishops and Vicars. Whilst this provided stability and order to society, it also created tension: priests could easily abuse their power for selfish ends, and charges of nepotism, simony, pluralism and absenteeism grew increasingly vociferous as time wore on.

### **Lutherans - decentralised "Priesthood of all Believers".**

The Lutheran stress on individual reflection, using a vernacular Bible, made much of the episcopacy redundant and made a mockery of the claim that it had a special role to play in saving souls. Luther instead advocated a "Priesthood of all Believers" - no-one knows or can influence who is Damned and who is Saved, so all men are equal and have the potential to become Priests. The implications of this were enormous. If the clergy was just as likely to be Damned as the rest of us, then monasteries and clerical celibacy were an irrelevance, the Pope himself was a fraud and the unity of Christendom itself was therefore doomed.

Luther, like Zwingli, attempted to moderate the implications of these teachings by supporting a "Magisterial Reformation": a process of change led by the ruling class rather than the mob. Nevertheless, radical reformers such as Thomas Müntzer spearheaded a "Popular Reformation", arguing that if we are all equal before God then there is no divine reason why the peasants should be trodden on – indeed, they should be the real leaders of the movement. Luther was appalled by this extension of his religious ideas into the social sphere and came out strongly against the resulting Peasants' War with his notorious pamphlet "Against the Murdering, Thieving Hordes" - but by this time the genie was well and truly out of the bottle, with tragic consequences.

#### 4. Ceremonies and Appearances

##### **Catholics**

With its structured beliefs, focusing on outward conformity, a strict hierarchy and physical and material expressions of faith, the Church became a vast, wealthy, tactile, awe-inspiring edifice. Within the body of a Catholic church, one would expect to see a breathtaking array of visual aids designed to inspire and to teach - images of the Virgin Mary; murals of heaven, hell and purgatory; stories from the lives of those saints who might be persuaded to give us some of their Grace. Catholic devotion to the saints, combined with the doctrine of Good Works, also led to the building of shrines at certain holy sites which quickly attracted pilgrims from far and wide. The more visually inspiring they were, the greater the number of pilgrims who visited and donated to its 'upkeep'. The shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury was so laden with treasures that Henry VIII had to use scores of wagons to bring the loot to London. Central to the ritual and theatre of the Catholic Church, however, were the seven sacraments: Baptism, Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination and the Last Rites. These provided a framework for life that Catholics found deeply reassuring, and also reinforced the status of the 'elite' clergy in two clear ways. Firstly, ordination into the (celibate) priesthood was only for the chosen few, whilst marriage was for the many. Secondly, whilst the priest could participate in the Eucharist "in both kinds" (i.e. both the bread and the wine), the congregation could only partake of the Eucharist "in one kind" (bread only).

##### **Lutherans**

For Lutherans, the solemn rituals and visual magnificence of the Catholic Church was so much hocus-pocus which distracted attention from the sacrifice of Christ and the centrality of The Word. Getting into heaven would require a soul to have faith; the only way to discover that faith was through The Bible; and anything that detracted from The Word was therefore to be discouraged. On one level, this emphasis on inward reflection regarding God's message meant that Lutheran Churches were plain and simple. Nothing was to distract from The Word, the centrality of the preacher, the essential Evangelism (i.e. "Bible-based" nature) of the faith. Icons, vestments and rood screens were irrelevant at best, a deliberate smokescreen at worst. More fundamentally, anything with no Biblical basis could not hold a central place in the rituals of the Church. As a result, only three sacraments (Baptism, Penance and Eucharist) were to be kept. Even they were to be interpreted in humanistic terms – the sacrament of Penance should emphasise "being penitent" (Justification by Faith) rather than "doing penance" (Justification by Works). The sacrament of the Eucharist needed to involve the congregation partaking of both the bread and the wine (Priesthood of all Believers).

##### **Zwinglians**

However, it was also over the issue of the Eucharist that the deepest divisions between Luther and Zwingli emerged. Luther was prepared to preserve those aspects of the Church which were not specifically contradicted by The Bible, regarding them as *adiophora* (matters indifferent). Zwingli, in contrast, felt that the Church had to be purged of anything not specifically sanctioned by the Bible. This difference of outlook produced an explosive clash at the Colloquy of Marburg (1529). Luther and Zwingli agreed on the main aspects of their faith but nevertheless found themselves deeply divided over the issue of the Eucharist. The Catholic Church insisted that the bread and wine physically became the body and blood of Christ when the priest conducted the sacrament of the eucharist. Both Luther and Zwingli rejected this, but could not agree on an alternative interpretation. Luther insisted that there remained a spiritual presence in the sacrament: a red-hot poker remains made of iron, but has absorbed the heat of the fire; similarly, the bread and wine remain physically the same, but have absorbed the spirit of Christ. Zwingli dismissed this as pure hokum, insisting that the service was purely commemorative and accusing Luther of letting his sentimental attachment to the service cloud his humanistic interpretation of the Bible. For Zwingli, the words "this is my body" meant "this signifies my body"; for Luther, this was an unforgivable example of a fellow reformer twisting the words of the Bible to suit his own ends. The meeting broke down in an atmosphere of mutual recrimination, with Luther at one point carving the words "hic corpus est" ("here is my body") into the table in a desperate attempt to convince Zwingli that the issue was as clear-cut as could be.

Whilst the theological argument was a subtle one, its results were dramatic – Zwingli's Swiss Cantons were unable to form an alliance with the German Lutheran Princes



and faced a precarious existence against the first wave of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Moreover, Radical Reformers such as Caspar Schwenkfeld were able to seize the moral high ground by arguing that the sacrament be suspended altogether until agreement was reached.

## **Radicals**

### **Ceremonies: The Swiss Brethren**

Nevertheless, whilst the Radical Reformers were able to make some capital out of debates regarding the Eucharist, it was the issue of Baptism which separated them most clearly from the "Magisterial" reformers such as Luther and Zwingli. Following through the idea of Sola Scriptura to its literal conclusion, the Anabaptists rejected the idea of child baptism altogether. After all, they argued, there were no examples of children being baptised in the Bible; therefore, God only wants adults - making an informed choice - to be members of his Church. The Swiss Brethren of Anabaptists therefore ceremonially re-baptised George Blaurock in 1525.

Zwingli regarded this development with alarm. Purifying the Eucharist was one thing, allowing people to opt out of the Church (and therefore the state) quite another. His fear that these people were promoting anarchy was confirmed when the Brethren proceeded to renounce the swearing of oaths and the concept of military service. The seamless cloak of Christ had already been torn asunder by Luther's protest; now the Radicals wanted to turn it into dishrags.

Reprisals against the Anabaptists were swift and brutal. Zurich Council passed the death sentence against them in 1526, even going so far as to specify that they be drowned (they seemed keen on dipping their heads in water, after all). The Holy Roman Emperor backed this judgement up two years later with an Imperial Edict.

### **Appearances: The Iconoclasts under Karlstadt**

While the Swiss Brethren clashed with the Magisterial Reformers over the ceremonies of the Church, other Radicals offended moderate sensibilities with their views about the physical appearance of the Church. In particular, Luther came out strongly against the iconoclasts, who argued that images should be forcibly removed and destroyed from Churches as they were idolatrous and reprehensible, even if this spiralled into riots and civil disorder. For Luther, images were undesirable but their removal was hardly of pressing importance, and he made this point forcibly in his *Invocavit Sermons* which he delivered in response to the vandalism being promoted and carried out by the Zwickau Prophets and the followers of Andreas von Karlstadt.

## **Conclusion**

For Luther, the Catholic notion of Free Will meant little more than the Free Will to mindlessly follow the teachings of the Catholic Church or to burn in hell. The reflection and intellectual vitality which had characterised the early Church had, for Luther, been replaced by intellectual vegetation and ritualism. Luther saw the necessity of introspection and individual belief, but to do this he would have to reject Justification by Works and, by implication, Free Will. Ironically, only by denying Free Will and stressing predestination could he encourage people to look within themselves and examine their consciences in an attempt to discover if they were one of The Elect. The tragedy of both the Catholic and the Protestant faiths was that they had to deal in absolutes, with the result that their disagreements soon appeared in surmountable and the only thing they appeared to share in common was intolerance – not only of each other, but of the Radical movement, which was attacked with a vehemence out of all proportion to its size and influence.

**Theological debate in the Reformation: Worksheet**

Use the article to complete this worksheet.

	<b>Catholics</b>	<b>Luther / Zwingli</b>	<b>Radicals</b>
<b>Justification</b>	<b>Good Works</b>	<b>Sola Fide ("Faith Alone")</b>	
<b>Scripture</b>	<b>The Vulgate</b>	<b>Centrality of The Word: Sola Scriptura</b>	<b>Rejection of The Word: Spiritualism</b> <b>Examples: Schwenkfeld, Karlstadt</b>
<b>Priesthood</b>	<b>Religious Hierarchy</b>	<b>Religious Equality (Priesthood of All Believers)</b> <b>- Magisterial Reformation</b>	<b>Religious and Social Equality</b> <b>- Popular Reformation</b> <b>Examples: Muntzer, King Jan Buekels</b>
<b>Ceremonies</b>	<b>Seven Sacraments</b>	<b>Child baptism</b>	<b>Adult baptism (Anabaptism)</b> <b>Example: Swiss Brethren</b>
<b>Appearances</b>	<b>Images = Important</b>	<b>Images = Adiophora (unimportant)</b>	<b>Images = Iconoclasm</b> <b>Example: Zwickau Prophets</b>