

THE REFORMATION (PART 1)

Objective

The children learn that during the Reformation there were men who endeavoured earnestly to recognize God's will.

Contents

- The forerunners of the Reformation.
- The life and teachings of the reformer Martin Luther.
- We want to grow in the knowledge of God.



Introductory Remarks

1 **The Roman Catholic Church in the late Middle Ages (from the twelfth to the early sixteenth century)**

During the late Middle Ages, the call for total church reform arose again and again. The following were especially criticized:

- misdirected religiousness (e.g., terrible fear, the obsession with miracles, superstition, and the veneration of relics and saints);
- the clergy's desire for wealth and their materialistic attitude;
- the preference given to the nobility when high positions in the church had to be filled;
- the hoarding of wealth for the church by the clergy;
- the poverty and lack of education of the ordinary clergy.

Critics of these conditions were bitterly persecuted. Nevertheless, in several countries in Europe, there were endeavours whose objective was to renew the church according to the fundamentals of the gospel. Each of the reform movements prior to 1500 was restricted to a limited geographical region. However, movements launched by reformers Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin in the sixteenth century resulted in considerable influence on people's faith life and the church. Some of the forerunners of the Reformation will be dealt with below.

2 **Important forerunners of the Reformation**

Peter Waldo (twelfth century)

Peter Waldo was a merchant from Lyon, France. Impressed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, Peter Waldo distributed his goods among the poor. He openly criticized the secularisation of the higher clergy, calling for modesty in their lifestyle. Peter Waldo disputed the Pope's authority and rejected confession. Inspired by his guiding principles, people in southern France, Switzerland, and northern Italy gathered together and formed congregations. By commission of the Pope, Peter Waldo's followers, the Waldensians, were vigorously persecuted. The Waldensians renounced oaths and put forward the (false) claim that only a worthy priest could authoritatively dispense the sacraments. Moreover, some of them practised re-baptism (i.e., baptizing adults again that had already been baptized as children). In the sixteenth century, they accepted the teaching of reformer John Calvin.

John Wycliffe (1330–1384)

The Englishman John Wycliffe, a professor of theology, compared his church to the early church. The differences he found prompted him to sharply criticize his church. He advocated a church based exclusively on the Bible, whose clergy were to be examples in following Christ. He disputed the Pope's claim to political power and—like the Waldensians—the validity of the sacraments dispensed by unworthy clergy. Although Wycliffe's views were very well received among the English people and at the English court, he did not found any congregations.

Jan Hus (1370–1415)

Wycliffe's writings also became well-known outside of England, particularly in Bohemia, the present-day Czech Republic. There were close ties between the University of Oxford in England and the University of Prague, the capital of Bohemia. Jan Hus, a preacher in Prague, took up Wycliffe's teachings and disseminated them in his homeland of Bohemia. He advocated a life without possessions for the clergy and fought for a renewal of the church.

At the Council of Constance (1414–1418), Jan Hus was condemned to death for heresy. A cruel war (1419–1436) flared up against his followers, the Hussites, and various schools of thought developed within the Hussite movement, which fought against each other.

3 Reformation

The term "reformation" means renewal. Since the seventeenth century, the term has been more narrowly applied to the reform movement launched by Luther and the Swiss reformers. The reformers did not want to found separate churches. Their intention was rather to once again put the importance within the church on the gospel.

4 The breach between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church

From an early age, Martin Luther sought an answer to the question as to how he would be able to secure God's grace. As a priest and a monk he intensively searched the Holy Scriptures. From the letter to the Romans he gathered that only through the grace of Christ and faith in him, can the triune God be recognized and the righteousness valid before God achieved. Among other things, this was inconsistent with the Roman Catholic practise of selling indulgences.

According to Roman Catholic doctrine, through sin, man not only becomes indebted before God; every sin also results in punishment. Even if the sin has been effaced, penance must still be done. The release from such punishment is referred to as an indulgence. A believer could obtain an indulgence under certain conditions. The indulgence could

provide partial or full freedom from the punishment, and could benefit the living or the dead.

In the fifteenth century the clergy frequently abused indulgences as a source of income. Time and again the faithful were urged to purchase letters of indulgence.

On 13 October 1517 in Wittenberg, Martin Luther published his Ninety-Five Theses in order to prompt a discussion among theologians about the conditions in the church and doctrinal theories, such as indulgences, for example. Luther's Theses led to an unexpectedly broad disputation within Germany. The church was shaken to its very foundation. In 1521 Martin Luther was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church and thereby expelled from the fellowship of the faithful.

By that time, Luther's theses and writings had already been widely circulated and had attracted a broad following. Several German princes encouraged this development. Subsequently, large regions of Germany adopted the Lutheran confession of faith and seceded from the Roman Catholic Church. This is how the Reformation began in Germany.

5 Consequences of the Reformation

The Reformation of Martin Luther and that of other reformers had great consequences in Europe.

- Protestant national churches and other Protestant communities came into being as a result of the Reformation.
- The entire Bible was translated into German. Also in other countries the Bible was translated into the respective national language.
- In Protestant regions, monasteries and convents were abolished.
- In the time that followed, the Reformation also caused the Catholic Church to remedy abuses.

Lesson Plan

Lead-In

Workbook, Theme Picture

Question Prompt

Discussion

The children look at the theme picture.

Who is Martin Luther?

Ask the children what they know about him.

Question Prompt	What do the terms “reform” and “reformation” mean for you?
Discussion	<p>Explain or supplement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reform comes from Latin, meaning to restore. ■ Reformation is a sixteenth century movement whose objective was church renewal. ■ Well-known reformers include Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. ■ etc.
Implementation	
Workbook, Exercise 1	<p>The children work on the exercise individually.</p> <p>Compare and discuss the results.</p>
Discussion	<p>After studying the Bible intensively, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and Jan Hus became convinced that much had to change in the Roman Catholic Church. They called for, among other things,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ following the Bible closely, and ■ the clergy to relinquish their possessions and temporal power.
Teacher’s Presentation	<p>With their assertions, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and Jan Hus were forerunners of the Reformation, and are therefore also called pre-reformers. Their common concern was to have abuses by the church remedied.</p> <p>In Germany Martin Luther publicly opposed abuses by the church for the first time in 1517.</p> <p>Such abuses were above all evidenced by the following facts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Popes and cardinals led luxurious lives at the expense of the faithful. ■ The higher clergy were of aristocratic origin; nepotism and the amassment of great wealth were the norm among them.

- For the ordinary clergy there was poverty and a lack of education.
- The religiousness being promoted (such as terrible fear, the obsession with miracles, and superstition) had less and less to do with the gospel of Christ.
- The Roman Catholic Church persecuted all who deviated from church doctrine as heretics. To this end, the Holy Inquisition, a church judiciary, was established. Those who were convicted were turned over to a state judiciary which decided on the punishment. These trials often involved the use of torture—as was customary at the time—to extort confessions. The imposition and execution of the death penalty was not uncommon.
- To obtain money for the church, for example, to construct St Peter's Basilica in Rome, itinerant preachers promoted the purchase of letters of indulgence, especially at the time of Luther.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences implies that through sin, man not only becomes indebted before God, but every sin also results in punishment. Even if the sin has been effaced, penance must still be done. The release from such punishment is referred to as an indulgence, which could provide partial or full freedom from the punishment. Indulgences can benefit the living or the dead. The faithful can bring about indulgences through prayer, alms, and other acts of piety. In the late Middle Ages, the sale of indulgences became a business, which often was severely abused.

Workbook, Text

The children read part 1 of the text entitled "Martin Luther". Then discuss the following:

Discussion

Martin Luther

- sought an answer to the question as to how he would be able to secure God's grace already as a young man.
- sought to fathom God's will through an intensive study of the Holy Bible.
- was prepared to rigorously support and justify his convictions.
- was moved to write his Ninety-Five Theses on account of the sale of indulgences.
- posted his Ninety-Five Theses in order to start a debate among theologians about necessary church reforms.

Teacher's Presentation

From today's perspective, Martin Luther's publication of the Ninety-Five Theses in the year 1517 is considered the beginning of the Reformation in Germany.

Luther had disapproved of the indulgence preachers. They travelled around, instilling fear into the people through exaggerated descriptions of the punishments for sin, thereby pressing the faithful to buy letters of indulgence.

One of the most renowned indulgence preachers was a monk named John Tetzel, who appeared in the vicinity of the city of Wittenberg in April 1517, where Luther taught as a university professor.

Question Prompt

What convictions did Martin Luther hold?

Discussion

Luther had realized that

- righteousness before God cannot be achieved through money or good works,
- only God's grace grants man salvation,
- through faith, mankind is able to attain righteousness before God.

Workbook, Text

The children read part II of the text.

Teacher's Presentation

Luther's publication of the Ninety-Five Theses initiated a development during which, over many years, there were vehement disputes about theological and church principles.

For Luther's supporters, the term "evangelical" became generally accepted, since Luther described his views as being evangelical, which means "in accordance with the gospel". Today, religious denominations professing the principles of Reformation are mostly referred to as Protestant. This concept was derived at the Imperial Diet of Speyer, Germany, in 1529, when the Evangelical Christians "protested" against Emperor Charles V wanting to curtail their rights. Charles V reigned over vast regions of Europe as well as parts of the Americas.

By that time, many princes and thereby also their subjects had embraced Luther's beliefs.

Eventually, even in the Roman Catholic Church, processes were started to remedy wrongs. In this manner, for example, the selling of letters of indulgence was restricted.

What the pre-reformers and Luther had in common, was an earnest striving to recognize God's will. We too want to increase our knowledge of God.

- Reading the Bible helps to promote our understanding.
- An important source of knowledge is the proclamation of God's word. However, it is not enough to merely hear the word; we must occupy ourselves intensively with what we have heard.
- Religious Instruction imparts knowledge and understanding to us.
- Studying the Catechism also helps us to grow in knowledge and understanding.

The children do the quiz.

Notes

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