Protestant Reformation And Counter-Reformation Essay, Research Paper

In the first half of the sixteenth century Western Europe experienced a wide range of social, artistic, political changes as the result of a conflict within the Catholic church. This conflict is called the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic response to it is called the Counter-Reformation.

The Reformation began when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five theses against the indulgences of the Church. These indulgences included if you did a good dead, this reduced the amount of punishment which you deserved for your bad deeds, and which God would make you suffer after your death before letting you into Heaven. Giving money to the Church was considered a good dead. If you wanted to you could pay for the indulgences of a friend or relative that had already died and is undergoing punishment so he could be let into heaven without suffering as much. Luther believed that God would be merciful to anyone who honestly believed and tried to do his best. Obviously any good Christian would pray, would go to Church, would be kind to other people, and would perform good works, but he would do these deeds because he had faith. The effect of his theses was more than Luther or anyone else expected. The Ninety-Five Theses was copied, taken to printers and sent all over Germany. For years people had been becoming more and more irritated with the Church, with its unceasing demands for money and its claims for privileges. Whether he intended it or not Luther’s challenge make him a champion of Germany.

Luther became famous at once. The leaders of the Church decided that he must withdraw his Ninety-Five theses. Luther refused. Luther was summoned to an imperial Diet in Augsburg in 1518. Luther was told to change his ideas, which he refused to do. The Diet declared him an outlaw and told him to go home where he could possibly be arrested and even killed. On his way home he disappeared. What had started as a furious attempt to reform the church overnight turned into a project of building a new church independent of the Catholic Church.

While Germany struggled under the political and religious consequences of Luther’s reform movement, the movement itself quickly spilled out of the German borders into neighboring Switzerland. At the time, Switzerland was not a single country but a confederacy of thirteen city-states called cantons. When Luther’s ideas began to pour over the border, several of the cantons broke from the Catholic church and became Protestant while other cantons remained firmly Catholic. Of the cantons that adopted Luther’s new movement, the most important and powerful was the city-state of Zurich under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli. He was popular in Zurich for his opposition to Swiss mercenary service in foreign wars and his attacks on indulgences; he was, as significant a player in the critique of indulgences as Luther himself.

Zwingli rose through the ranks of the Catholic Church until he was appointed “People’s Priest” in 1519, the most powerful ecclesiastical position in the city. In 1523, the city officially adopted Zwingli’s central ecclesiastical reforms and became the first Protestant state outside of Germany. From there the Protestant revolution would sweep across the map of Switzerland. Zwingli’s theology and morality were based on a single principle that if the Old or New Testament did not say something explicitly and literally, then no Christian should believe or practice it. Zwingli soon joined Luther to try to expand the ideas of the Protestant’s but they both didn’t have the same believes. The disagreement between Luther and Zwingli, was viewed as a political crisis of the highest order. As leaders of the Protestant movement in two separate countries, Luther and Zwingli threatened any kind of political alliance between the two countries. In October of 1529, Philip of Hesse invited both Luther and Zwingli to his castle in Marburg to discuss their differences. The two men, however, had very little in common, and their discussions ended in failure. Luther, for his part, thought Zwingli was crazy, and was a religious fanatic who had lost touch with common sense. After Marburg, unification of the various Protestant movements became impossible, and the new church, which Luther believed would become another, divided into a thousand separate churches. Zwingli was killed and Switzerland became partially Protestant and partially Catholic.

John Calvin then introduced the idea or Protestantism in Geneva. The main idea of Calvinism was predestination. Which meant whatever happens, happens because it was planned before. Calvin believed that God was the almighty and that the individual had no power to change his destiny. He was dedicated to reform of the church and he got his chance to build a reformed church when the citizens of Geneva revolted against their rulers in the 1520’s. The Genevans, however, unlike the citizens of Zurich, Bern, Basel, and other cities that became Protestant in the 1520’s, didn’t speak German, but mostly French-speakers. Because of their language difference, they did not have close cultural ties with the reformed churches in Germany and Switzerland. His most important work involved the organization of the church and the social organization of the church and the city. He was, the first major political thinker to model social organization entirely on the Bible.

By the mid-1550’s, Geneva was thoroughly Calvinist in thought and structure. It became the most important Protestant center of Europe in the sixteenth century, for Protestants had been driven out of their native countries of France, England, Scotland, and the Netherlands all came to Geneva to live.

The Catholic Church was not surprised by the results of the Reformation. It had been steadily battling opposition, and resistance for over four hundred years. Much of the opposition against the church throughout the fifteenth century involved issues that were closely related to those splitting the church in half during the early Reformation. In answer to the growth of the Protestant movement, the Catholic Church instituted its own series of reforms that balanced real reform with a strident and conservative reaction to Protestantism. This movement was called the Counter-Reformation.

Other aspects were conservative reactions to the criticisms against the church by Protestants and Reformers. The most important of the movements was the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the 1530’s. The basis of the Jesuits was a return to the strictest and most uncompromising obedience to the authority of the church. At the start, the Jesuit movement was a small movement. The original Society of Jesus had only ten members. By 1630, it had over fifteen thousand members all over the world. the chaotic evolution of the Counter-Reformation finally forced Pope Paul III in 1545 to convene a council in order to define the church doctrines once and for all. This council, was called the Council of Trent.

The reforms were very bold in many respects, but they were too little and too late. The new Protestant churches were the wave of the future, and Catholicism although it would remain a major religion, would in a few centuries cease to be the majority religion in the Western world.

In spite of religious controversies the Reformation is a period of economic revolution, as mercantilism and commercial capitalism gains strength. Science and mathematics come to influence nearly every fact of life. The unity of Christianity was now broken up into the Protestants and the Catholics. Protestantism was the religious background for nationalism and, each nation became independent and the power of the rulers was increased.