

The Reformation

Roman Catholic Objections:

1. God would not have left Christians as orphans until 1500, Martin Luther, and the printing press. He gave the Church which never taught major error.
2. The papacy goes to Peter and the early church did Eucharist, seven sacraments, prayed to Mary and saints, purgatory, indulgences.
3. The Bible is obscure and hard to understand (Peter says so) and so God gave us the church to explain it to us.
4. We can pray to the dead because of the communion of the saints and Jesus says God is the God of the living not the dead.
5. The sacraments are real (this is my body) and impart grace.
6. The abuse of indulgences wasn't worth leaving the church over.
7. The current Catholic Church teaches the same soteriology as evangelicals.

Martin Luther began to doubt the Roman Catholic Church through a combination of personal spiritual crisis, doctrinal reflection, and exposure to Scripture—especially in its original languages. Like Calvin, his break was not immediate, but the result of a deepening conflict between what he read in the Bible and what he saw in the Church.

Here are the key factors that led Luther to doubt—and eventually reject—the authority and teachings of the Roman Church:

1. His Personal Struggle with Guilt and the Question of Righteousness

Luther entered the Augustinian monastery in 1505, driven by fear of God's judgment and a desire to save his soul. But monastic life did not give him peace. He was tormented by guilt and the fear of damnation, despite intense efforts in confession, penance, fasting, and prayer.

The turning point came when he began studying Romans 1:17:

"The righteous shall live by faith."

Luther later described this as a moment of spiritual breakthrough:

"I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise."

This led to his conviction that justification is by faith alone, not by works, a doctrine fundamentally at odds with the Church's teaching at the time.

2. His Study of Scripture and the Early Church

Luther's training in theology, especially under the influence of humanism (*ad fontes*, "back to the sources"), led him to study the Bible in Greek and Hebrew, rather than relying solely on the Latin Vulgate or Church tradition.

He began to notice significant discrepancies between Scripture and the doctrines and practices of the Roman Church—particularly indulgences, penance, and papal authority.

3. The Selling of Indulgences (1517)

The immediate trigger of Luther's public opposition was the scandal of indulgence-selling, especially by Johann Tetzel, who promised full remission of sins in exchange for money to fund the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica.

This led Luther to write the 95 Theses, in which he challenged the theology behind indulgences and called for a scholarly debate. Key among the theses was the idea that true repentance is internal and spiritual, and that forgiveness comes from God alone, not from a papal indulgence.

4. His Realization of the Church's Resistance to Reform

Initially, Luther hoped the Church would correct abuses. But Rome responded with condemnation, culminating in his excommunication in 1521.

In debates (notably with Cardinal Cajetan and Johann Eck), Luther came to question:

- Papal infallibility
- The authority of Church councils
- The sacramental system

By 1520, in writings like *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther had concluded that the Roman system had enslaved the gospel under human authority.

5. The Formal Break

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, when pressed to recant, Luther famously declared:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason... I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other."

This was the culmination of his doubt and his definitive break with Roman Catholicism.

From the 95 Theses

(Originally intended as an invitation to academic debate, but quickly became a rallying cry for reform)

Thesis 1 – The whole Christian life is one of repentance

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Luther’s Point: Repentance isn’t a ritual or transaction (as in buying indulgences) but a lifelong turning of the heart to God. This challenged the sacramental system of penance.

Thesis 27 – Indulgences are not true spiritual goods

“They preach human folly who pretend that as soon as money in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Luther’s Point: He ridiculed the popular slogan of indulgence-sellers like Tetzel, exposing the commercial corruption of salvation.

Thesis 62 – The true treasure of the Church is the gospel

“The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

Luther’s Point: He contrasted the sale of indulgences with the actual riches of the Church—namely, the grace found in Christ.

From *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520)

(A more systematic and theological critique of Rome’s sacramental system)

On the Church’s captivity:

“The Church has been deprived of its liberty and subjected to the tyranny of the pope and his ministers, and that in three ways: in respect to the sacrament of the bread, the sacrament of baptism, and the sacrament of penance.”

Luther’s Point: The Church was in “Babylonian captivity” because it had distorted the sacraments to enslave Christians, much like ancient Israel was once enslaved in Babylon.

On the Mass as sacrifice:

“The mass became a good work and a sacrifice... through which grace and merit are obtained. Hence the monstrous idea that the mass is a sacrifice... and the source of grace for the living and the dead.”

Luther’s Point: He rejected the Mass as a repeated sacrifice of Christ, calling it a distortion of the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:10–14).

On justification:

“Christ has died once for all, and has thereby taken away the sin of many. It is enough that the sacrament be received in faith. The mass is not a sacrifice but a testament and promise.”

Luther’s Point: Salvation comes by faith in Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, not through repeated sacramental rituals.

John Calvin

John Calvin began to doubt the Roman Catholic Church as a result of both theological conviction and personal exposure to humanist and reforming ideas. There was no single dramatic moment, but rather a gradual process influenced by several key factors:

1. Humanist Education and the Return to Sources (Ad Fontes)

Calvin was deeply influenced by Renaissance humanism, especially the call to return to the original sources of Scripture and the Church Fathers. He studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and read early Christian writers like Augustine. Humanism emphasized reading the Bible for oneself, in the original languages, rather than relying on medieval scholastic summaries.

This raised a serious question: *Was the Church of Calvin’s day still aligned with the teaching of Scripture and the early church?* Increasingly, Calvin came to believe it was not.

2. Exposure to Reformers and Protestant Ideas

While in France, Calvin came into contact with Protestant thinkers and Reformation literature, particularly the works of Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon. These writings challenged the authority of the pope, questioned the sacramental system, and emphasized justification by faith.

Though Calvin was initially reluctant, by his own admission, to break from Rome, he eventually became convinced that the core teachings of the Roman Church were contrary to the gospel.

3. Doctrinal Corruption in the Roman Church

Calvin became increasingly troubled by what he saw as doctrinal and moral corruption in the Roman Catholic Church, including:

- The abuse of indulgences
- The veneration of relics and saints
- The Mass as a re-sacrifice of Christ
- Papal authority over Scripture
- The lack of biblical teaching on justification

These practices were, in his view, man-made traditions that obscured the truth of the gospel and enslaved consciences.

4. Calvin's Own Testimony

In the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin gives a brief autobiographical sketch. He writes:

"God, by a sudden conversion, subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame... Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein..."

This indicates that it was not just rational critique, but a personal encounter with the grace of God through Scripture that compelled him to break with Rome.

Summary:

Calvin's doubts about the Roman Catholic Church emerged from:

- A humanist rediscovery of Scripture and the early Church
- Exposure to Protestant critiques
- Deep concern over doctrinal error and ecclesiastical corruption
- A personal conversion rooted in the gospel of grace

His final conviction was that the Roman Church had obscured the gospel, and that reform was not only necessary, it was a matter of faithfulness to Christ.

Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.2.1:

"They take it as an axiom not to be disputed that the church cannot err, for it is governed by the Holy Spirit. But they falsely assume what they must prove: that they themselves are the church. And though they have for a long time usurped the name of church, they have nothing of the reality. They boast of being the church while oppressing the gospel, banishing Christ, and extinguishing the light of true doctrine. And we, because we strive to renew the church to its ancient purity, are falsely accused of being schismatics."

The Second Reformation in England and Scotland refers broadly to the wave of reforms in the 16th and 17th centuries that went beyond initial Protestant changes and aimed to purify and further reform the Church, especially in terms of worship, church government, and personal piety. While the term is more often used in relation to Scotland (especially in the 1638–1650 period), many of its core ideas shaped both English and Scottish Presbyterian identity.

The Second Reformation

Here are the core ideas behind the Second Reformation:

1. Return to the Bible as the Sole Authority (Sola Scriptura)

The Second Reformation emphasized a stricter adherence to Scripture than earlier reforms had achieved. Reformers wanted all church practices to have explicit biblical warrant, especially in worship and church government.

"What is not commanded in Scripture is forbidden in worship" (the Regulative Principle of Worship)

2. Rejection of Episcopal Hierarchy

In both England and Scotland, reformers increasingly opposed the episcopal system (church government by bishops) as unbiblical. They favored Presbyterian polity, government by elected elders and ministers, as more consistent with the New Testament.

Bishops were viewed not only as a continuation of Roman Catholic structure, but as vehicles of political corruption and spiritual abuse.

3. Purity of Worship

This was central to the Second Reformation. Reformers sought to remove all remaining ceremonies, vestments, holidays, and liturgical forms that were seen as remnants of Roman Catholicism.

- No more kneeling at communion
- No crossing oneself
- No celebration of Christmas or other non-Sabbath holy days
- Exclusive use of psalm singing (in Scotland especially)
- Elimination of organs and images in worship

Worship must be simple, scriptural, and spiritual—free from human inventions.

4. National Covenants

In Scotland, the Second Reformation was inseparably tied to the National Covenant (1638) and the Solemn League and Covenant (1643). These covenants were solemn oaths binding the nation to reform religion according to the Word of God.

These were political-theological documents that aimed to unite the kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland in a uniform, Reformed religion.

5. Moral and Personal Piety

The Second Reformation emphasized holy living, not just correct doctrine. Ministers were to model godliness, and church discipline was to be enforced.

The Church must be a disciplined, visible community of saints, not just a state institution.

6. Christ's Kingship over Church and State

This was a hallmark of Scottish Presbyterianism: Christ alone is the head of the Church, not the king, not the pope.

- The Church must be free from civil control in spiritual matters.
- Yet, the state has a duty to uphold and protect the true religion.

"No king but King Jesus" became a rallying cry in later Presbyterian resistance movements.

7. Anti-Erastianism

Erastianism is the view that the state should control the church in all but strictly spiritual matters. Second Reformation thinkers (especially in Scotland) rejected this, asserting the spiritual independence of the church.

Key Figures and Documents:

- **Scotland:** Andrew Melville, Samuel Rutherford (*Lex, Rex*), David Dickson
- **England:** Westminster Divines (e.g., George Gillespie, William Gouge)
- **Documents:**
 - *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646)
 - *Directory for Public Worship*
 - *Solemn League and Covenant*