

Protest Reformation Video Script Model

I. Establishing Historical Context for the Reformation

For almost a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire in 410 A.D., the Catholic Church dominated Europe. Soaring cathedrals were built as monuments to the power of the faith. Catholic Church officials governed the life of every European from baptism to death. Popes exerted authority over political as well as religious matters. Kings owed their legitimacy to divine authority. As one pope declared:

“The Church is independent of any earthly power, not merely in regard to her lawful end and purpose, but also in regard to whatever means she may deem suitable and necessary to attain them.”

As the church had gained more power, it became corrupt. The 15th and 16th century popes were the wealthiest men in the world. They and their cardinals added to their wealth by taxes on the faithful and by selling holy offices. In fact, Alexander VI himself became pope in 1492 by paying his rivals to withdraw their names. One of his successors, Pope Leo X, wrote to his brother: “God has given us the papacy. Let us enjoy it.”

But as the Renaissance flowered, the authority of the church was challenged by new ideas in science and philosophy. However, the greatest challenge came from within the church itself, and foremost among those challengers was the monk and religion professor, Martin Luther. The result would be a splintering of Christianity into Catholics and Protestants, known today as the Reformation. This separation led to tremendous unrest in European society. Wars of religion raged across Europe for the next 100 years as Protestants and Catholics fought for dominance. Millions of people would die. Was such upheaval justified? Did the Reformation lead to a better society for 16th century Europeans?

Charles V, king of the powerful Spanish empire, was elected Holy Roman Emperor just two years after Luther began his protests. He would argue that the Reformation did not improve society. Charles saw himself as the defender of Catholicism and believed his destiny was to unite all of Christendom under a single ruler. He quickly came to view Luther’s words and actions as threats to a stable and good society.

II. The Reformation Begins

Luther’s protest against the church grew from Pope Leo X’s decision to hold a special sale of indulgences—church forgiveness for sins-- to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The church claimed that one could even buy indulgences for relatives suffering in purgatory. The friar Johann Tetzel, the pope’s agent for the sale of indulgences in Germany, stated: “As soon as the coin rings in the bowl, the soul for whom it is paid will fly out of purgatory and straight to heaven.”

On October 31, 1517, Luther published his 95 Theses criticizing the sale of indulgences and disputing the power of the pope to grant forgiveness to the dead in purgatory. Luther was

summoned to Rome to answer for his questioning of papal authority. However, Luther declined repeated summons, and Frederick the Wise, prince of Saxony, protected him from extradition.

During the next three years, Luther continued to publicly criticize church corruption, and he attracted followers across Europe.

“The papacy,” he wrote, “is the devil’s church.” Finally, he claimed that unless Rome changed: “There will be no remedy left except” to “girt about with force of arms . . . and settle the matter no longer with words but by the sword . . . If we strike . . . heretics with fire, why do we not much more attack in arms these masters of perdition, these cardinals, these popes . . . which has without end corrupted the Church of God, and wash our hands in their blood?”

In August 1520, the pope excommunicated Luther. All Christians were forbidden to associate with him. He was declared a fugitive from the Church, and rulers were commanded to banish him or deliver him to Rome. In reply, Luther proclaimed that any man who refused to renounce the authority of the pope would be denied salvation. He called for expelling the pope’s representatives and the establishment of an independent national German church.

III. Luther Defends his Position/ Charles V Responds

[Historical Re-enactment]

Introduction: After repeated appeals for Luther’s arrest, Charles V declared that Luther would be tried at a hearing in Worms, Germany in 1521. At the hearing, Luther was ordered to retract the heresies in his published works.

Johan Eck, the inquisitor for the Church: “How can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than all of them? . . . You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith . . . defined by the Church . . . and which we are forbidden by the Pope and the Emperor to discuss . . . Do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?”

Luther: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason —I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other— my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

Conclusion: Appalled that Luther would defy both the pope and the emperor, Charles was determined to put down the danger to public order he believed Luther presented. After the trial, he declared to his princes:

"This devil in the habit of a monk has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle, and has invented new ones. He . . . encourages the laity to wash their hands in the blood of the clergy. His teaching makes for rebellion, division, war, murder, robbery,

arson, and the collapse of Christendom . . . I will proceed against him as a notorious heretic.”

IV. Conclusion

In the meantime, Luther had disappeared and was hidden away in a remote castle under a disguise and an assumed name. Before Charles could see to Luther’s capture, his attention was distracted by a war with France. Luther survived and his movement grew.

Charles’ fears of disorder would be prophetic. Weeks after Luther’s trial, mayhem spread across Germany. Mobs demolished Church property and killed worshipers, priests, and university scholars. As the Protestant movement spread, it splintered into numerous sects. Each regional prince decided what sect his subjects would follow, and each sect worked to eradicate the others. Within four years of the trial at Worms almost a quarter-million Germans had been killed or executed in religious wars. Three years after Worms, German peasants rose up in rebellion against the nobility. Before the peasant revolt collapsed almost 100,000 peasants had been killed.

Luther would argue that he challenged only the corruption of religion, not the political order of the state. In fact, he condemned the peasant revolt against the nobles:

“Rebellion is not simply murder, but is like a great fire, which kindles and devastates a country; it fills the land with murder and bloodshed . . . Therefore, whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab . . . there is nothing more poisonous, pernicious, and devilish than a rebel . . . I will not oppose a ruler who . . . will smite and punish these peasants.”

However, from Charles’ perspective, it was Luther’s urging that Germans “wash their hands in the blood of the clergy” that had caused the disrespect for all authority and the violence that erupted across the land. He believed no good society could come from such chaos. In fact, Charles feared that the German princes would use the religious unrest to expand their political independence, causing continual fighting among Germans and destroying his goal of creating a stronger, more unified Empire.

Wars with the French and then the Turks prevented Charles from confronting the growing religious turmoil at home for almost twenty years. When those wars at last came to an end, he turned his full attention toward defeating Protestantism inside his empire. He declared:

“To settle this matter (heresy), I am determined to use my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood, my life and my soul.”

Charles would fight in vain for the rest of his reign to put down this rebellion. As he turned his empire over to his son, he passed on this warning about the dangers that challenges to Church authority created for society in general:

“Exterminate heresy, lest it take root and overturn the state and social order.”