

10.10 Challenges to Church Authority

Background: Starting in 1517, when a German monk named Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in Saxony, the Protestant Reformation challenged the religious and temporal authority of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. Theological disputes were interwoven with political intrigues and military campaigns as European monarchies battled for control over European territories and global colonial empires. Religious warfare officially ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, but continued for the rest of the 17th century. The two documents in this activity illustrate some of the conflict of this period.

Martin Luther's Address the Christian Nobility of the German Nation (1520)

Source: <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Luther.html>

Instructions: This is an edited version of Martin Luther's 1520 address to the nobility of the various German principalities. In this statement, Luther challenges the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Read the passages and answer questions 1 – 2.

Questions

1. What does Luther claim in this statement?
2. In your opinion, why might this statement appeal to the rulers of the German states and other temporal authorities?

A. The Romanists [the Roman Catholic Church] have drawn three walls round themselves, with which they have protected themselves, so that no one could reform them, and all Christendom has suffered terribly. First, if pressed by the temporal power, they have affirmed and maintained that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but on the contrary, that the spiritual power is above the temporal. Secondly, if it were proposed to admonish them with the Scriptures, they objected that no one may interpret the Scriptures but the Pope. Thirdly, if they are threatened with a council, they invented the notion that no one may call a council but the Pope.

B. There has been a fiction by which the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the 'spiritual estate'; princes, lords, artisans, and peasants are the 'temporal estate.' This is an artful lie and hypocritical invention. All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office. If a little company of pious Christian laymen were taken prisoners and carried away to a desert, and had not among them a priest consecrated by a bishop, and were there to agree to elect one of them and were to order him to baptize, to celebrate the mass, to absolve and to preach, this man would as truly be a priest, as if all the bishops and all the popes had consecrated him. That is why, in cases of necessity, every man can baptize and absolve, which would not be possible if we were not all priests.

The English Act of Supremacy (1534)

Source: <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/ActSupremacy.html>

Instructions: When the Roman Catholic Pope would not annul the marriage between King Henry VIII of England and Catherine of Aragon, the English Parliament declared that the King of England, not the Pope, was the head of the English Church. This is an edited version of the Act of Supremacy. Read the excerpt and answer questions 1 – 2.

Questions

1. What does Parliament decide with this Act of Supremacy?
2. In your opinion, what is the relationship between the British Act of Supremacy and Martin Luther's appeal to the rulers of the German states and other temporal authorities?

The king's Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England. Be it enacted, by authority of this present Parliament, that the king, our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors shall be accepted the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called Anglicans Ecclesia; and shall have and enjoy full power and authority from time to time to visit, repress, redress, record, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offenses, contempts, and enormities, whatsoever they be, which by any manner of spiritual authority or jurisdiction ought or may lawfully be reformed, repressed, ordered, redressed, corrected, restrained, or amended, most to the pleasure of Almighty God, the increase of virtue in Christ's religion, and for the conservation of the peace, unity, and tranquility of this realm.