

Unit 2: Age of Reformation

Unit 2 covers the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic response. It moves from Martin Luther's challenge to the Church, through the reformers who followed him, into the religious wars that tore Europe apart, and ends with the Catholic Reformation and the art and anxieties of a divided continent.

AP European History

Age of Reformation

About 15 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the unit tells a story. Luther's theology creates the break, the other reformers widen it, politics turns theology into war, and the Catholic Church answers with reform of its own. Exam questions rarely ask about one figure alone. They ask you to compare reformers, to connect a war to the theology behind it, or to tell one peace settlement from another.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the comparison table to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. The Age of Reformation is about 10 to 15 percent of the AP European History exam. Its real payoff is cumulative. The religious divisions made here explain the wars of Unit 3 and the state-building that follows, because the Peace of Westphalia settlement reshaped what sovereignty meant.

2.2 Luther and the Protestant Reformation

The **Protestant Reformation** began as an argument inside the Catholic Church. **Martin Luther**, a German monk, objected to the sale of **indulgences**, pardons sold by the Church that reduced punishment for sin. In 1517 he circulated his **Ninety-five Theses**, a list of arguments against indulgences and Church corruption. The document is widely treated as the spark of the Reformation, though Luther himself was calling for debate and reform, not founding a new church.

Luther's central doctrine was **justification by faith**, the claim that salvation comes through faith alone, not through good works or the Church's sacraments. This is the theological point that made reconciliation impossible. If faith alone saves, then the Church's system of sacraments, pilgrimages, and indulgences is not just corrupt but unnecessary. **Lutheranism**, the tradition that followed his teachings, became a major confession in Germany and Scandinavia.

Two forces carried Luther's ideas past Wittenberg. The printing press spread his writings faster than any earlier dissent could travel, and the **vernacular Bible**, translations of scripture into everyday languages including Luther's own German New Testament, let ordinary people read the text themselves instead of receiving it through priests. Lay access to scripture was itself a challenge to clerical authority.

The **Protestant work ethic** belongs to the story's afterlife. It is the notion, developed by the sociologist Max Weber, that some Protestant groups treated disciplined work and wealth accumulation as signs of God's favor. It is an interpretation of Protestantism's effects, not a doctrine Luther preached.

Trap. An indulgence was not a ticket to heaven. It reduced punishment for sin, and the scandal was the sale of spiritual benefits, not the doctrine of forgiveness itself. Exam questions test whether you know what an indulgence actually was.

Trap. Luther did not set out to start Protestantism. He was a Catholic monk arguing for reform who ended up excommunicated after defending his views. Saying "Luther founded a new church" skips the decade of failed reconciliation that made the break permanent.

Trap. The Protestant work ethic is Weber's argument from 1905, not Luther's teaching. If a question asks what Luther himself taught, the answer is justification by faith, not anything about wealth and hard work.

2.3 Protestant Reform Continues

John Calvin, a French reformer who built his church in Geneva, became the second great architect of Protestantism. His theology centered on **predestination**, the doctrine that God has predetermined who will be saved and who will be damned. **Calvinism**, the tradition following his theology, spread from Switzerland to France, the Netherlands, and Scotland, carried by disciplined congregations and a model of church government that appealed to urban merchants.

Ulrich Zwingli shows that reform went beyond Luther and Calvin. Preaching in Zurich in the 1520s, he developed his own reformed theology and broke with Luther publicly, most famously over the Eucharist. His presence on the exam reminds you that the Reformation was a family of movements, not a single doctrine.

The **Anabaptists** were the radicals. They rejected infant baptism entirely and baptized only adults who could choose the faith for themselves. Both Catholics and other Protestants persecuted them, which tells you something important. The reformers agreed on less than the word Protestant suggests.

England's story was different. **Henry VIII** broke with Rome over his marriage, seeking an annulment the pope would not grant, and Parliament's Act of Supremacy in 1534 made the monarch head of the **Church of England**, the nation's new Protestant church. The break was political before it was theological, and under Henry the church kept most Catholic doctrine and practice.

The **Huguenots** were France's Calvinist Protestants, a large and often noble minority in a Catholic kingdom. Their persecution is the thread that connects the theology of this topic to the wars of the next one.

Trap. Do not mix up Luther and Calvin. Luther taught that faith alone saves. Calvin taught that God already decided who is saved, so faith is evidence of election, not its cause. A question that describes predestination is describing Calvin, never Luther.

Trap. Henry VIII did not become a Protestant out of conviction. His church kept the mass, clerical celibacy, and most Catholic teaching. The English Reformation was a change of authority, with the king replacing the pope, not a change of theology.

2.4 Wars of Religion

The **Wars of Religion** were the 16th- and 17th-century conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, and they show how theology became politics. In France, the **French Wars of Religion** (1562-1598) pitted the Catholic crown and nobility against the Huguenots in a series of civil wars where religious reform sharpened the existing struggle between monarchy and nobility. The **St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre** in August 1572, when thousands of Huguenots were killed in Paris, was the most notorious episode. The wars ended when Henry IV, himself a former Huguenot turned Catholic king, issued the **Edict of Nantes** in 1598, granting limited religious toleration to French Protestants.

The conflict crossed borders. The **Spanish Armada** of 1588 was Philip II of Spain's failed naval invasion of Protestant England, an attempt to crush Elizabeth I and return England to Catholicism that ended in disaster for Spain.

The **Thirty Years' War** (1618-1648) was the catastrophe. It began in Central Europe as a Catholic-Protestant struggle and drew in most of the major European powers, becoming a war about territory and dominance as much as about faith. It ended with the **Peace of Westphalia** in 1648, which recognized the sovereignty of states and the right of rulers to determine their territory's religion, and which finally recognized Calvinism as a legal confession alongside Lutheranism and Catholicism.

Trap. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 recognized only Lutherans and Catholics. Calvinists were left out and had to wait nearly a century for Westphalia. Any question contrasting the two settlements is testing whether you know who was included when.

Trap. The Edict of Nantes granted limited toleration, not religious freedom. Huguenots got the right to worship in specified places and kept fortified towns for protection. It was a political truce, and it was revoked in 1685.

2.5 The Catholic Reformation

The **Catholic Reformation**, often called the Counter-Reformation, was the Catholic Church's 16th-century movement to reform itself and answer Protestantism. It worked through three instruments at once: doctrinal clarity, new religious orders, and discipline.

The **Council of Trent** met in three sessions between 1545 and 1563 and did two jobs. It reaffirmed Catholic doctrine against Protestant claims, holding that salvation requires faith plus good works, that all seven sacraments are valid, and that scripture and Church tradition carry equal authority. And it enacted genuine internal reform, requiring bishops to live in their dioceses, establishing seminaries to train priests, and curbing the sale of offices and other abuses.

The **Jesuits**, formally the Society of Jesus and recognized by the pope in 1540, were the order that carried the reformed Church outward. Founded by **Ignatius of Loyola**, a Spanish soldier turned priest, they spread Catholicism through schools and missionary work across Europe and around the world.

The **Inquisition** was the disciplinary arm, church courts that prosecuted heresy. It belongs in the same unit as the Jesuits because the Catholic response combined persuasion and punishment.

Trap. The name Counter-Reformation makes the movement sound purely defensive, but the Catholic Reformation included real reform that began before Luther and continued independently of him. Trent fixed genuine abuses while reaffirming doctrine. Questions that call it only a reaction miss half the story.

2.6 16th-Century Society and Politics

The **witch hunts** were the prosecution and execution of alleged witches, the large majority of them women. They reflected the social tensions and religious anxieties of a continent divided by faith, where both Catholic and Protestant authorities saw the devil's work in their neighbors.

Trap. The witch hunts peaked in the 16th and 17th centuries, during the Reformation era, not in the Middle Ages. Placing them in the medieval period is one of the most common errors on this topic.

2.7 Art of the 16th Century: Mannerism and Baroque Art

Mannerism was an artistic style marked by elongated forms and artificial elegance, a bridge between the balance of the Renaissance and what came next. **El Greco** (1541-1614), a Greek-born painter working in Toledo, Spain, is its defining figure. His stretched figures, unnatural colors, and distorted space create spiritual intensity rather than realism, in religious commissions that served Counter-Reformation Catholic Spain.

Baroque art was the dramatic, emotional style the Catholic Church embraced to inspire faith during the Counter-Reformation. **Gian Lorenzo Bernini** (1598-1680), the Italian Baroque sculptor and architect, made works like the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa and the colonnade of St. Peter's Square that used movement and grandeur to project the power of the papacy.

Trap. Baroque art is Counter-Reformation art. Its drama and emotion were deliberate tools to move worshippers and assert Catholic triumph. If a question ties an art style to the Catholic response to Protestantism, the answer is Baroque, not Mannerism.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Justification by faith vs predestination	Luther: faith alone saves, and the believer can trust in it. Calvin: God already decided the elect, so assurance comes from seeing signs of election in a disciplined life. Different reformers, different doctrines.
Peace of Augsburg (1555) vs Peace of Westphalia (1648)	Augsburg recognized Lutherans and Catholics only, and applied the ruler's religion to his territory. Westphalia added Calvinism, recognized state sovereignty more fully, and ended the Thirty Years' War.
Edict of Nantes vs full toleration	Nantes (1598) gave Huguenots limited rights to worship in specified places. It was a truce between armed camps, not a principle of religious freedom, and it was revoked in 1685.
Catholic Reformation vs Counter-Reformation	Same movement, two names. "Catholic Reformation" stresses genuine internal reform. "Counter-Reformation" stresses opposition to Protestantism. The exam uses both, and both halves were real.
Mannerism vs Baroque	Mannerism: elongated forms, artificial elegance, spiritual distortion, El Greco. Baroque: dramatic movement, emotional intensity, grandeur in service of the Church, Bernini.
Henry VIII vs Luther and Calvin	Luther and Calvin broke over theology. Henry broke over marriage and authority, and his church kept most Catholic doctrine. England's reformation was political first.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

- 1.** Martin Luther's central theological claim was that
 - A. salvation comes through faith alone, not through good works or sacraments
 - B. God has predetermined who will be saved and who will be damned
 - C. Christians should reject infant baptism and be baptized only as adults
 - D. the pope has no authority to sell indulgences for any purpose

- 2.** The Peace of Westphalia (1648) differed from the Peace of Augsburg (1555) most importantly in that Westphalia
 - A. granted full religious freedom to every individual in Europe
 - B. recognized Calvinism as a legal religion alongside Lutheranism and Catholicism
 - C. ended the French Wars of Religion
 - D. dissolved the Holy Roman Empire

- 3.** The English Reformation under Henry VIII differed from the movements led by Luther and Calvin mainly in that
 - A. it was driven by the king's political aims rather than by theological conviction
 - B. it rejected all seven Catholic sacraments
 - C. it was organized by John Calvin from Geneva
 - D. it began with the translation of the Bible into English

- 4.** A church commissions a sculpture full of movement, dramatic lighting, and intense emotion, meant to overwhelm worshippers with the glory of the faith. This best reflects
 - A. Mannerism, with its elongated forms and artificial elegance
 - B. Baroque art in the service of the Catholic Counter-Reformation
 - C. Renaissance classicism with its balance and restraint
 - D. medieval Gothic art with its vertical lines and stained glass

Answer Key

1. A. Justification by faith, salvation through faith alone, was Luther's central doctrine and the point that made reconciliation with Rome impossible. B is Calvin's predestination, the classic Luther-Calvin confusion this unit tests. C is the Anabaptist position on baptism, a radical view Luther himself opposed. D is true about Luther's criticism of indulgences but describes his objection to a Church practice, not his central theological claim.

2. B. Augsburg recognized only Lutherans and Catholics. Westphalia added Calvinism as a third legal confession and more fully recognized state sovereignty. A is wrong because neither settlement granted individual religious freedom; toleration applied to rulers and recognized confessions. C is wrong because the French Wars of Religion ended with the Edict of Nantes in 1598, half a century earlier. D is wrong because the Holy Roman Empire survived Westphalia, weakened, and lasted until 1806.

3. A. Henry broke with Rome to get his marriage annulled and made himself head of the church. The break was about authority and politics, and his church kept most Catholic doctrine. B is wrong because Henry retained the sacraments and most Catholic teaching. C is wrong because Calvin worked from Geneva and had no part in England's break. D is wrong because English Bible translation predated the break and was not its cause.

4. B. Baroque art used drama, movement, and emotional intensity deliberately, and the Catholic Church embraced it to inspire faith and project triumph during the Counter-Reformation. A describes Mannerism, which favors artificial elegance and elongated forms over emotional overwhelm. C describes the earlier Renaissance style, defined by balance and restraint rather than drama. D belongs to the medieval period, centuries before the Reformation.

One-Page Recall Check

- Explain what an indulgence was and why their sale provoked Luther's Ninety-five Theses.
- State Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and explain how it challenged Catholic teaching.
- Explain how the printing press and the vernacular Bible spread the Reformation.
- Distinguish Luther's justification by faith from Calvin's predestination.
- Describe the Anabaptists and explain why other reformers persecuted them.
- Explain why Henry VIII broke with Rome and what the Act of Supremacy did.
- Describe who the Huguenots were and what happened on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572.
- Explain what the Edict of Nantes did and what it did not do.
- Summarize the Thirty Years' War: how it started, who was drawn in, and how it ended.
- State what the Peace of Westphalia settled and how it differed from the Peace of Augsburg.
- Describe the Council of Trent's two jobs: reaffirming doctrine and enacting reform.
- Explain the Jesuits' role in the Catholic Reformation and name their founder.
- Explain why the witch hunts belong to this period rather than the Middle Ages.
- Contrast Mannerism and Baroque art, naming one artist for each.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP European History deck. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Indulgences, Martin Luther, Protestant Reformation, Protestant work ethic, Justification by faith, Lutheranism, Ninety-five Theses, Vernacular Bible, Anabaptists, Henry VIII, John Calvin, Predestination, Calvinism, Church of England (Anglican Church), Huguenots, Ulrich Zwingli, Edict of Nantes, French Wars of Religion, Peace of Westphalia (1648), Thirty Years' War, Wars of Religion, Spanish Armada, St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Catholic Reformation (Counter-Reformation), Council of Trent, Jesuits (Society of Jesus), Ignatius of Loyola, Inquisition, Witch hunts, Baroque art, Mannerism, El Greco, Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

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