

**Church History 101**  
**Lesson 21**  
**A World in Transition**

**Key Concepts:** The late 15<sup>th</sup> Century was a watershed moment for Western Civilization and for the church, after which neither would ever be the same again. Significant factors that changed the West were the rise of humanism, desires for local political autonomy, the invention of the printing press, the corruption of the church and the discovery of the New World.

**The Story:** The rise of humanism, meaning the appreciation of the genius of man and the ability of the human mind, began during the Renaissance. Scholars began to find and study the works of Greek and Roman philosophers, which had been either lost or suppressed by the church. By so doing they began to recognize the value of the individual, rather than seeing people as simply members of a particular class (serfs, etc.). This can be seen in both literature and art where paintings and stories moved away from Biblical themes to everyday people and events. This meant that the church was no longer at the center of the literary and cultural universe.

The Holy Roman Empire, which had been created with the crowning of Charlemagne in 800 by Pope Leo III. This was an attempt to recreate the old Roman Empire and bring stability to Europe (which would be beneficial for the church). During the late 15<sup>th</sup> century many of the Germanic rulers were resisting the power of both the Emperor and the church. In addition the Low Countries (Netherlands) were striving to throw off the rule of the Spanish and French. Thus the time was ripe for rebellion against church and Emperor.

The invention of the printing press changed the west by allowing the wide dissemination of scientific, philosophical and religious texts. When all manuscripts had to be hand written, it meant that only a small number of people could be fully educated and that the flow of information could be controlled. The printing press changed this by allowing the printing of the Bible in native tongues and the spread of non-Catholic beliefs and theology, both of which were opposed by the church in Rome because they threatened its control over the populace.

The corruption of the church was extensive by this period of time. A significant number of the Popes had engaged in activities (political, sexual and military) which brought disrepute upon the church. In addition the church had grown fabulously wealthy and whenever it needed additional funds it would allow the sale of Indulgences. Indulgences were Papal guarantees that insured forgiveness of sins and less time, if any, spent in purgatory after death. People would purchase them as spiritual insurance against acts past, present and future. Large segments of the populace began to resent the disparity between what the church preached, poverty and humility and how the church lived its life, seeking wealth and power.

It would be difficult for us to understand the emotional and spiritual ripples that flowed through Europe with the discovery of the new world. The late 15<sup>th</sup> century had been a depressing era. The plagues had decimated Europe's population, wars had destroyed much of its economic capacity and the feudal order was collapsing. The west saw itself at a dead end. Then with the discovery of an area of land larger than people could comprehend, it was as if the collective imagination of Europe went into overdrive. It unleashed the likes of Magellan, da Gama, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Durer, Copernicus, Erasmus and Luther. The medieval church was no match for the fresh winds that were blowing...and religious revolt was simply a matter of time.

**Questions:**

1. We exist in a period of great change. What changes do you see in the world today?
2. How do you see the church responding to our changing culture?
3. What role do you believe the church ought to play in the world today?