

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

RLJ-2080

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AUGUST 16, 2026

PART 11: THE SOCIETY OF THE REFORMATION

THE CLERGY

The clergy of the Holy Roman Empire were not only religious leaders, but many were also landholders, political rulers, judges, diplomats, educators, and imperial officials. That is one reason the Reformation became so explosive, because attacking church corruption also meant attacking a major part of the empire's political structure.

Deuteronomy 1:13

The church hierarchy was divided into ranks:

- ❖ Archbishops: Senior bishops over important church provinces; some were also prince-electors.
- ❖ Bishops: Oversaw dioceses, clergy, church courts, and church property.
- ❖ Priests: Served local parishes, preached, administered sacraments, and cared for souls.
- ❖ Monks and friars: Lived under religious vows; worked in monasteries, schools, preaching, scholarship, and charity.
- ❖ Abbots and abbesses: Led monasteries or convents; some ruled territories as imperial princes.
- ❖ Canons: Clergy attached to cathedrals or collegiate churches; often wealthy and influential.

Princely Clergy

Many bishops and abbots were also territorial rulers inside the empire. They were called prince-bishops, prince-abbots, and ecclesiastical princes. They ruled land, collected taxes, held courts, commanded troops, and participated in imperial politics.

Three of the archbishops were prince-electors, effectively making them some of the most powerful people in the empire. When Luther challenged Rome and indulgences, he was also challenging a system where church leaders wielded enormous political power.

Massive Wealth

Church institutions owned large amounts of land. Monasteries, bishoprics, cathedral chapters, and abbeys could possess villages, farms, vineyards, forests, mills, and toll rights. The derived wealth came from land donations, tithes, rents, fees, pilgrimage income, indulgence campaigns, relic devotion, church courts, and inherited privileges. This created resentment when common people saw church leaders living lavishly while preaching poverty, penance, and obedience.



Tithes

Peasants and townspeople often owed tithes to the church. A tithe was usually a required portion of produce, livestock, or income. Tithes were supposed to support clergy, worship, poor relief, and church maintenance. Many people complained that tithes instead enriched distant churchmen or monasteries while local pastors remained poorly supported.

Education

One of the real problems prior to the Reformation was the uneven quality of parish clergy. Some priests were sincere and capable. Others were badly trained, barely literate in theology, or more focused on performing rituals than preaching from the Bible. Many people attended church and heard the Mass in Latin, but received little clear biblical instruction. Luther and other reformers argued that pastors should preach the Word of God clearly and teach the basics of the faith. That is one reason Luther later wrote the *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*.

While many of the lower clergy were poorly educated, the upper clergy were often among the most educated and socially powerful men in the Holy Roman Empire. They were proficient in Latin, and often also knew Greek and sometimes Hebrew. Men like Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, Sylvester Prierias, Johann Eck, and Johannes Cochlaeus were trained theologians, scholars, and well versed in debate. Luther's dispute with Rome was not simply an educated monk attacking fools. He was arguing against a learned religious establishment entangled in wealth, political power, church office-holding, papal authority, indulgence finance, and theological systems which obscured the Gospel.

The Renaissance slogan was "ad fontes," meaning "back to the sources," which pushed scholars to study Greek and Hebrew, not just the Latin Vulgate. This mattered deeply in the Reformation because Luther, Erasmus, Melanchthon, and others argued from Scripture in the original languages.

Clerical Abuse

Criticism of the clergy did not begin with Luther as there had been complaints about clerical corruption for generations.

- ❖ Buying or selling church offices.
- ❖ Holding multiple church offices at once.
- ❖ Receiving income from a church office while not actually serving there.
- ❖ Clergy living with women or visiting whores despite vows of celibacy.
- ❖ Giving offices to relatives.
- ❖ High clergy living like nobles.
- ❖ Connecting spiritual benefits to money (as with indulgences).

Albert of Brandenburg held multiple church offices and was tied to the indulgence campaign involving Johann Tetzel. That is why Luther's protest struck directly at both theology and corruption.

Monasteries

Monasteries and convents played a major role in the empire. They were centers of prayer, learning, manuscript preservation, land management, poor relief, education, hospitality, and political influence. But by Luther's time, many monasteries were also criticized for wealth, lax discipline, forced vows, and spiritual pride.

Luther was an Augustinian monk and his attack on monastic vows came from personal experience. He argued that monasticism could trap consciences by making people think vows were a higher spiritual path than ordinary Christian life.

Spiritual Life

Before the Reformation, most Christians encountered the church through the clergy as they administered baptism, confession, absolution, Mass, marriage, burial, penance, church discipline, feast days, relic devotion, pilgrimages, and indulgences. This gave the clergy enormous influence over daily life. Birth, marriage, sin, death, burial, and fear of purgatory were all tied to church authority and this was the reason why Tetzel's indulgence preaching exerted such power because it touched on fear of judgment and concern for dead loved ones.

Luther did not merely say, "Some priests are corrupt," but challenged the deeper structure. He rejected the idea that priests were a spiritually higher class of Christian. He taught the priesthood of all believers, meaning all Christians have direct access to God through Christ.

That did not mean Luther rejected pastors. He believed pastors were necessary. But he denied that priests possessed a higher spiritual status that made them mediators between God and man.

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5)

GERMAN SOCIETY

German society in Luther's era was layered and unequal with different social groups, especially in the towns and countryside of the Holy Roman Empire.

Patricians

Patricians were the wealthy ruling families of many German cities. They were usually merchants, financiers, landowners, or old elite families who controlled city councils and local politics.

They often had wealth from trade or banking, seats on town councils, marriage ties to other elite families, influence over guilds and markets, and sometimes noble-like status.

In cities such as Nuremberg, Augsburg, Cologne, and Frankfurt, patrician families could be extremely powerful. They were not always nobles, but they often lived and ruled like an urban nobility.

Burghers

Burghers were citizens of a town or city. The word comes from “burg,” meaning a fortified town. A burgher was not just someone who lived in a town; he usually had recognized civic rights.

Burghers included merchants, shopkeepers, master craftsmen, guild members, property owners, professionals, and prosperous tradesmen.¹

They were below the patricians, but above the urban poor. Many burghers were literate, economically active, and interested in reform because they resented clerical privilege, church taxes, and outside control from bishops or princes. They were basically treated as a labor force without any political power.

Plebeians

Plebeians were the lower urban classes.² They lived in towns and cities, but usually lacked the full wealth, power, and civic status of patricians or established burghers.

They included day laborers, servants, apprentices, journeymen, poor artisans, wage workers, migrants, and the urban poor.

They were more vulnerable to famine, unemployment, debt, and political exclusion. In many cities, plebeians resented the patricians and wealthy burghers because city government was often controlled by a narrow elite.

Peasants

Peasants were the rural majority. Most people in German society were peasants. They worked the land, raised animals, paid rents and dues, and lived under the authority of lords, monasteries, bishops, or princes.

Peasants could vary widely. Some were relatively free farmers. Others lived under serf-like obligations. They often owed rent, taxes, church tithes, labor services, inheritance fees, marriage fees, milling or baking fees, and obedience to local courts.

No peasant could hunt, fish, or chop wood freely because the lords had taken control of common lands which ordinary villagers could use collectively, even though they did not own them as individuals. Common lands such as pastures, forests, meadows, streams and ponds, and open fields after harvest helped peasants survive beyond what their own small plots could produce.

When the peasants complained about losing access to forests, rivers, grazing lands, and hunting rights, they were talking about food, fuel, animals, and survival. This became a major source of conflict as nobles, monasteries, bishops, and landlords restricted these lands. It was a theft of customary freedoms and this helps explain the subsequent peasant uprising because they were being crushed by economic burdens and deprived of older customary rights.

In many places, a dependent peasant needed the lord's permission to marry, especially if the marriage affected labor, inheritance, residence, or the lord's control over the

¹ A guild was a trade organization that regulated work, protected its members, trained workers, and often gave craftsmen and merchants political influence in the city.

² In ancient Rome, a plebeian was a citizen who was not part of the patrician aristocracy.

household. But this was not uniform everywhere in the Holy Roman Empire. Peasant obligations varied by region, estate, and legal status. A freer peasant had fewer restrictions; a heavily dependent tenant had more.

There was often a marriage fee or tax associated with nuptials. This was also called a marriage fine, marriage due, or permission fee. If a peasant married, especially outside the lord's estate, the lord might lose labor, dues, future children's service, or control over inheritance and this was the reason for the fee and/or approval.

In many areas of the Holy Roman Empire, when a dependent peasant died, the lord often received something from the estate before the family could fully inherit. This was commonly called a death due, inheritance due, or heriot. The exact practice varied by region and by the peasant's legal status.

The idea was that the peasant did not hold the land as a fully independent private owner. He held it under obligations to the lord. When he died, the lord could demand a payment or item as part of transferring the holding to the heir. This was one reason peasants resented the feudal system. A family could lose its strongest animal or a valuable possession at the very moment it was already weakened by the death of the household head.

The justice system was usually local, unequal, and controlled by the same people who profited from peasant labor. That does not mean every judgment was corrupt, but the structure heavily favored lords, nobles, monasteries, bishops, and territorial rulers.

How could a peasant receive justice when his lord often had authority over the court, and the peasant's dispute was often against that same lord or his officials?

Punishments varied, but peasants could face fines, seizure of animals or goods, imprisonment, forced labor, corporal punishment, loss of landholding, expulsion, and execution for serious crimes or rebellion. Fines were especially burdensome because poor families had little margin. A fine that seemed small to a lord could ruin a peasant household.

The justice system contributed to peasant resentment because the lord made the rules, collected the dues, controlled the court, and benefited from the judgment. There was no redress for the peasants in such a system.

