**Enrichment Resource**

The Protestant Reformation had many far-reaching effects. One important impact was on people’s thinking about the problems of government.

More than 250 years after Martin Luther began the Reformation, the American Revolution created the first modern democracy. At that time, many European monarchs still claimed an absolute right to rule. America’s founders adopted a different idea. They believed that government was based on an agreement among free people. That is why the U.S. Constitution begins with the words “We, the people.” In return for the benefits of government, the founders believed, people willingly gave up some of their natural freedom. The government’s right to rule was therefore based on the consent of the governed.

The authors of the Constitution also created modern federalism. In a federal system, smaller units of government (such as states) share power with a central government. The smaller units govern local affairs. The central government serves common needs, such as national defense. Citizens are bound to obey both the local and the central government.

The ideas behind the Constitution grew out of many influences. One of these influences was the Reformation. The beliefs and practices of early Protestants helped plant the seeds of modern democracy and federalism. Let’s look at how.

**Individual Liberty and Equality**

Individual liberty and equality are basic ideas in modern democracy. One source of these ideas was the Reformation.

The medieval Catholic Church was strongly hierarchical in its organization. At the bottom of the hierarchy were ordinary church members, or laypeople. Above them were priests. Priests had a special role to play in guiding believers and administering the sacraments. Bishops had authority over priests and laypeople alike. At the top of the hierarchy was the pope, who had the greatest authority of all.

The authority of church officials included the power to interpret the Bible and God’s will. The church stressed the duty of Catholics to obey its authority.

Martin Luther rebelled against this hierarchical structure. He prized the liberty of individual conscience and preached “the priesthood of all believers.” In a famous sentence, he declared, “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.” In other words, no Christian had a special, God-given authority over others. At the same time, all Christians had a duty to love and care for one another. In place of priests, Luther called for ministers who served the church with the consent of Christian believers.

The liberty and equality of Christian believers became a basic part of Protestantism. Later these ideas would find their place in people’s thinking about government.

**New Forms of Church Government**

Protestants, as we have seen, rejected the Catholic hierarchy. Consequently, they had to create their own forms of church government. This meant finding a structure for their churches that fit Protestant beliefs.

Three main forms of Protestant church government emerged. In all of them, laypeople played a greater role than in the medieval Catholic Church.

The first type is *Episcopal,* which means “government by bishops.” The Anglican Church, for example, rejected the pope but kept the office of bishop. As in the Catholic Church, bishops ordain (formally appoint) the clergy. Laypeople, however, have a role in helping to govern the church. Some other Protestant churches also have an Episcopal organization, with bishops who are elected by church members.

The second type of church organization is *Presbyterian*. The word *presbyter* means “elder” or “leader.” In Presbyterian churches, local congregations elect leaders called *presbyters*. The presbyters may be laypeople as well as clergy. A *presbytery* coordinates and governs the actions of the congregations in a particular area. The presbytery is made up of the local pastors and elders. It is the presbytery that ordains clergy. Other representative groups above the presbytery exercise authority over wider areas.

The third type of church organization is *congregational*. In this system, every congregation is independent and self-governing. Each chooses and ordains its own ministers. Similar congregations also work together in larger associations.

In these ideas, you can see elements of democracy and federalism. Believers are treated as equals. The old separation between clergy and laypeople is reduced or eliminated. Church members elect their own leaders, and local government is combined with larger associations.

These ideas eventually influenced thinking about government outside the church. For example, the Pilgrims who settled in New England were Congregationalists. When they wrote the Mayflower Compact to describe how their colony would be governed, they based it on their style of church government.

**Government Based on Agreement of the Governed**

The Mayflower Compact illustrates another Protestant idea that influenced democratic thinking. This was the idea that the authority of governments rests on *covenants*, or solemn agreements.

The idea of covenants is rooted in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God is said to form a covenant with the Hebrew (Jewish) people. Both God and the Hebrews enter this covenant by their own choosing. In turn, covenants unite the different tribes of Hebrews under God’s laws. To some Protestants–including many early Americans–the ancient Hebrew covenants were an early example of federalism.

Many Protestants, especially Congregationalists, saw their churches as based on covenants that people entered into freely. From there, it is a short step to the idea that governments, too, are formed by the free choice of people to join together for their common good. And that means that a government’s right to rule is based on the consent of the governed.

In the 1600s and 1700s, some thinkers argued for similar ideas without basing them on religion. But there is no doubt that the Reformation helped plant the seeds of ideas that proved to be truly revolutionary.

**Enrichment Activity**

Discuss these questions with a partner, in a small group, or with your class.

1. According to America’s founders, what is the basis of government?

2. What is a “federal system”?

3. How are Luther’s beliefs in liberty and equality for all Christians similar to the ideas of America’s founders?

4. The Protestant Reformation helped plant the seeds of democratic and federalist ideas. How did each of the concepts in the matrix below reflect democratic or federalist ideas?

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|  | **Democratic Ideas** | **Federalist Ideas** |
| Episcopal Church Organization |  |  |
| Presbyterian Church Organization |  |  |
| Congregational Church Organization |  |  |
| Covenants |  |  |