Question: What does “Protestant” mean? When and where did this begin? Who started it?

Big Picture: Protestantism became the major religious movement in the early American colonies and still continues to this day.

Martin Luther (1483-1546): Religious Revolutionary

*Who was he*?: Martin Luther was a German priest that began to notice much sin and corruption in the Catholic Church of Germany.

*What types of corruption*?: Numerous priests had wives, children, and even mistresses. Many were alcoholics and put very little effort into their sermons. The church was getting very rich by buying a lot of land and charging the poor to live on it. Also, the Church was still performing sermons in Latin, a language that very few Germans understood. Worst of all was the selling of indulgences. Indulgences were “free passes to Heaven” written on paper and signed by priests. These were sold to people that were afraid that they or loved ones, whether alive or dead, would not get into heaven. This practice throughout Europe was earning the Catholic Church millions of dollars.

Martin Luther decided to expose the Church’s immoral activities. Many Germans already frustrated with the Catholics became very angry at the things that Luther was accusing the Church of. The Pope in Rome, Italy ordered Luther to stop. Luther refused until the Church admitted its mistakes and promised to change them. The Church again threatened Luther to stop his actions. By this time, many Germans were refusing to attend Church services and protested in the streets. The Pope had endured enough.

Luther is summoned to Rome for a meeting with the Pope. Luther’s friends warn him that it is a trap and that the Pope would have him executed. Luther took a chance and went anyway, yet he and several friends had an escape plan in case they tried to kill him. In Rome, in front of the most powerful men in the Catholic Church, Luther was ordered to recant (take back) all he had said about the Church. Luther refused. The Pope, having already set up a plan to kill Luther, ordered him back to Germany. Luther’s friends were able to get him out of Italy safely.

Back in Germany, the movement to protest the Catholic Church had grown very large. Luther has the Bible printed in German for the first time and questions the entire existence of the Catholic faith. These “protestors” of the Catholic Church became known as “Protestants”. The Protestants began their own type of Christianity, one without Popes, priests, saints, or idols, and which followed only what was in the Bible and nothing else. This movement spread throughout Europe, eventually ending up in the American colonies with the Pilgrims and the Puritans and is now a very large and powerful religion in the United States.