Tumultuous centuries preceded the onset of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. It was a period in church history when the simple faith and the true Gospel of Christ were hidden within a maze of falsehood and idolatry. The earnest hope and the fervent love of the early New Testament church were nowhere to be seen inside the ruling Roman Catholic church. It was a grim picture and the condition of the church was disgraceful – laden with immorality, greed and corruption.

Superstition stood out with the acceptance of the doctrine of indulgences, purgatory, church relics and Mary worship. For one to be saved, faith in Christ and His saving work on the cross were no longer enough. It must be augmented by these beliefs and by doing good works.

People were blindly following the false teachings and traditions of Romanism without consulting whether they were in harmony with the Scriptures. Forgiveness of sins could be bought through indulgence tickets. Catholic masses for the living and the dead could purportedly deliver souls from an imaginary place called “purgatory”. The mediation of Mary and the so-called Catholic saints were also required for deliverance. All ways and means for the forgiveness of sins and salvation of souls were said to be dispensed only by the Roman Catholic church.

With these developments, the leadership in the Roman Catholic church became very powerful and moved towards becoming very abusive and corrupt. Those who opposed her unbiblical teachings and practices were handed over to church tribunals to be punished and had their properties confiscated. Not a few were imprisoned, tortured, and some eventually died by being burnt at the stake. This was the period when the popes asserted absolute power and authority over all phases of life in medieval Europe.

The situation was not unlike the one spoken of by Isaiah the prophet in the first fifteen verses of chapter 59. “Yea, truth faileth…” indeed (Isaiah 59:15a).

However, the abuse of such power would soon result in an uprising as opposition steadily grew inside and outside the Catholic church. The same power would cause infighting all the way to the top of the Catholic hierarchy as several factions would grapple for the papacy. Just as the night is darkest before dawn, so was the church in thick darkness before the dawning of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation.

Aside from the departure of Roman Catholicism from Biblical Christianity, several events contributed to the inevitability of the Protestant Reformation. When we consider the circumstances of the pre-Reformation era, we can see how marvellously the providence of...
God orchestrated that great historical revival in the Christian church.

**Catholic and chaotic**

The Great Schism (1378-1417) and the Catholic Reforming Councils (1409-1449)

A period known as the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Roman church came about when the papacy became French and the seat of power moved from Rome to Avignon in France. It centred on unmistakable extravagance in Avignon until finally Gregory XI, the last of the Avignon popes, returned the papacy to Rome before he died. The College of Cardinals met, and under pressure from the Roman people who wanted a pope in Rome again, they elected an Italian to serve as pope. But as soon as most of these cardinals (who were French) got out of Rome, they annulled that election and elected another pope in Avignon.

For nearly 40 years, there were two popes in bitter rivalry – one in Rome and one in Avignon. This was one of the greatest scandals in the history of the papacy which is known as the Great Schism. The problem was that each pope would excommunicate the other pope and then place all the people who were following that pope under an interdict. This meant that eventually everybody in Christendom was excommunicated! It was a tragedy for the people in Europe and for Christianity in general.

The Council of Constance (1414-1418) was finally called by Sigismund, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and John XXIII, the reigning pope in Pisa. It carried a threefold purpose: 1) to end the Great Schism, 2) to quell the alleged heresies of the pre-reformers and order the execution of John Huss, and 3) to reform the church from the head to the members.

During this council, Gregory XII (Rome) resigned; Benedict XIII (Avignon) and John XXIII (Pisa) were deposed after a year amidst much negotiation. Martin V was elected the new pope by the council. With this, the papacy was reestablished solely in the Roman Catholic church which has since continued to the present.

The Council of Basel (1431-1449) was brought about by the unrest in Bohemia as a result of John Huss’s martyrdom, and the need for continued reform within the church. However, it was met with opposition from the reigning pope, Eugenius IV, whom it deposed from the papacy. Eugenius called his own council in Florence and proceeded to declare the seven sacraments to be accepted by the Roman church; it was promulgated by Eugenius IV himself in a papal bull. These were the very same sacraments called into question by those who clamoured for internal church reform.
The 16th-Century Protestant Reformation

The Council of Basel later acknowledged defeat and gave up the movement to reform the church by dissolving itself in 1449. Thus the attempt to reform the Roman church leadership came to an end and the papacy reverted to the system of papal despotism which had been in practice for many centuries. From this time, the Protestant Reformation was inevitable. All the internal squabbles of the papacy were just a preview of the rising tide of opposition that would soon shake Christianity in the centuries that followed.

Artistic and aesthetic

The Golden Age of the Renaissance (ca. 1350-1650)

The onset of the Renaissance and the age of Humanism also hastened the coming of the Reformation. "Renaissance" is a word that means "rebirth of learning". It is a movement that began in Italy in the 14th century and later influenced northern Europe in the 16th century. It was a period of great learning characterized by a renewed interest in the classics – literature, arts, music and even science.

Classics were the old writings of the Greeks and Romans, which include the writings of the Scriptures. The people during this period emphasized the importance of reading these writings in the original languages. So the study of Hebrew, Greek and ancient classical Latin became very important to the men of the Renaissance. This opened up the people’s mindset to new philosophies and ideas that were once so enslaved to the teachings of the medieval religion of Romanism. The Renaissance contributed largely to the coming of the Reformation in these areas:

Biblical humanism – Humanism refers to the study of languages which includes the study of the Scriptures as well as the classics in the original languages. This branch of learning is what is now more generally known as “liberal arts”. Some of the important biblical humanists among others include:

Reuchlin (1455-1522) who made a scientific study on the Old Testament and produced a combined Hebrew grammar and dictionary called Of the Rudiments of Hebrew. This work, completed in 1506, helped others become familiar with the biblical Hebrew language and to study the Old Testament in the original language.

Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536) whose most important work was the first printed Greek New Testament published in 1516. The influence of this work was tremendous because scholars were then able to make a comparison between the church at that time and the church in the NT times based on the Scriptures. He also wrote the books In Praise of Folly (1511) and Familiar Colloquies (1518) to expose the abuses of the Roman Catholic church and denounce the ignorance, idleness and immorality of the monks.

John Colet (ca. 1466-1519) was part of the group in England known as the Oxford reformers. He began to develop the literal meaning of the Pauline Epistles in his lectures. Before this, theologians had been more interested in allegorizing the Scriptures than in bringing out their literal interpretation.

Invention of printing – In the 1450’s, a man named Johann Gutenberg discovered how to mould movable metal type for
printing. This invention in the 15th century began to revolutionize the dissemination of knowledge. Printing increased the quantity of books, helped eliminate errors and gave scholars identical texts to work with. For the first time, printers could mass-produce literary works. Bibles and books became more accessible and affordable; they were being distributed all over Europe as their prices plummeted. On the other hand, the new printing press was also reportedly responsible for the mass-production of indulgence tickets for the church to sell.

Rise of universities – The Renaissance brought an important phenomenon in the rapid growth of universities and learning institutions. It provided education for a greater number of people, reducing ignorance and promoting literacy in general. This provided a means whereby the leaders of the new generation could be reached with Reformation principles, wherein they could be trained to promulgate them.

Arts and architecture – The onset of the Renaissance also fostered the love for aesthetics. Men like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo became famous for their works of art. In 1508, Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Julius II to decorate the famous Sistine Chapel in Vatican which was constructed between 1472 and 1481 by the architect Giovanni de Dolci. The Sistine Chapel is the pope’s own private chapel, where important papal ceremonies are held and where, upon the death of a pontiff, the College of Cardinals gathers to elect his successor.

Did arts and architecture influence the Reformation in any way? Yes, and very significantly, too. Certain popes were great patrons of arts and architecture, so much so that they would not hesitate to flaunt extravagance in building and beautifying their cathedrals. Thus, the Roman Catholic church’s coffer was depleted rapidly by such extravagance. This became a major factor later on when Pope Leo X sanctioned the sale of indulgences. This was done in order to finance the lavish construction of what is now the magnificent St Peter’s Cathedral in Rome which is the official residence and throne of the papacy.

The selling of indulgence tickets would soon raise howls of protests from the reformers, most notably and perhaps, most loudly, from Martin Luther’s 95 theses. It is interesting to know that the outcry for reformation did not only come from without, but more remarkably, it came from within the Roman Catholic church. Not a few of the Protestant reformers were either Catholic monks or priests, Luther included.

Thus several factors of political, economic, intellectual, moral, social and theological natures worked together providentially and contributed largely to the cause of the Reformation. These factors heightened the clamour for changes in the corrupt medieval church. With these factors in place, the conditions were ripe for the onset of the historic 16th-century Protestant Reformation.

ENDNOTES
1. An interdict is a ban imposed by a pope, church council, or bishop that excludes a person, group, or nation from the sacraments of the Roman Catholic church. In the past, the interdict was used to enforce obedience to church superiors.