

9. The English Reformation, from Henry to Elizabeth

Introduction

In our survey of church history there are places where we'll go really fast and places where we'll slow right down. For example, we spent a couple of sessions on Calvinism and the Reformed churches. And we're going to spend a bit more time on the Reformation in England and on the Puritans.

Why? Three reasons: (1) We're going to focus in on those bits of the family tree which is global Christianity that most explain WHO WE ARE and WHERE WE ARE today. (2) This period includes "our" heroes, those part of our own Christian family sub-tree to whom we are intimately connected: martyrs like Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, Hooper, Bradford, whose sacrifices we are called to emulate and learn from. (3) This period will greatly help us – especially those of us called to church leadership – as we together work out "where do we go from here?" in the face of current challenges in our own denomination and culture.

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Let's listen to a fitting scripture before we pray and begin:

"And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result..." (Genesis 50:20)

1. Henry VIII (b1491 - r1509 - d1547)

(a) The "problem" of Henry VIII's "Reformation"

First, Henry's reformation presents us with a historical problem. Historians argue bitterly over this question: was the Reformation in England "from the top down" (i.e. at the instigation of kings and the nation's leading men) or was it "from the bottom up" (i.e. was it a popular Protestant uprising)?

Second, there's a moral problem. A notorious adulterer, lecher, and murderer started the Reformation in England. What are we to make of this? King Henry VIII rightly deserves history's harsh judgment as one of England's most reprehensible monarchs. He took multiple wives, and the fortunate ones he merely dismissed and divorced, while having two others put to death. Yet it was this same scoundrel who defied the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and laid the foundation for the Reformation to begin in the English Church.

As Christians, we need not shy away from these unsavoury facts. Scripture and history bear numerous examples of God bringing good results out of humanity's wicked actions. Genesis 50:20 is a great Bible summary of this truth. It means we can condemn sin anywhere that we see it, but also truth that the Lord is in control and can *use* wickedness to bring about great good.

(b) The break with Rome (1533-34): English Catholicism, but with no pope

What's the story of **the birth of the Church of England**? It begins in 1509 when Henry married Catherine of Aragon. She was the wife of his dead brother, Arthur. At the time such a union was thought immoral, and it required special dispensation from the pope. Only one child was born, a girl named Mary; crucially, there was no son.

Henry sought to have his marriage annulled – or cancelled – by the pope. Why? First, he wanted to maintain his dynasty and he needed a son (remember: the Tudor dynasty had only been established in 1485 when Henry's father gained the throne at the Battle of Bosworth). Second, it seems Henry had genuine conscientious qualms about his marriage to Catherine and feared that it contravened God's law in Leviticus 20:21. Third, he was infatuated with Anne Boleyn.

Pope Clement VII refused, mainly because he feared Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V whose soldiers had just sacked Rome and imprisoned Clement.

Henry's response was to rid England of the authority of the Roman Catholic church. He used the universities, parliament and his archbishop Thomas Cranmer to oppose the Roman church and find in his favour. In May 1533 Cranmer annulled the marriage, which (from one perspective) was just as well, since four months earlier Henry had married the pregnant Anne Boleyn.

How we think of ourselves as a nation, to some extent, owes itself to this period. It was stated that "this realm of England is an Empire" – with no external ruler or authority.¹

Henry's changes were to do with authority. There was now to be one ruler, over both spiritual and temporal affairs. And in the 1534 Act of Supremacy the crown was given total power over the church, and the Church of England was born. Here is just a portion of the Act, showing just how radical it was:

Our said sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall have full power and authority from time to time to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offences, contempts, and enormities, whatsoever they be, which by any manner spiritual authority or jurisdiction ought or may lawfully be reformed, repressed, ordered, redressed, corrected, restrained, or amended, most to the pleasure of Almighty God, the increase of virtue in Christ's religion, and for the conservation of the peace, unity, and tranquility of this realm.

Almost no change was made to the doctrine of the church. At this stage there was an English Catholicism, without the pope. There was nothing distinctively Protestant. Indeed, in 1521 Henry had written a work denouncing Luther and asserting the Catholic dogma of the seven sacraments. And in 1538 Henry called a very abrupt halt to the minor reforms that he had enacted. Why? HE was irritated by pressure from Lutherans on matters of doctrine, and he was worried by a coalition against him of France and the Empire. However, these changes to authority structures did make future reformation easier.

Another huge feature of this period was **the dissolution of the monasteries**. It wasn't driven by doctrine but by greed. Henry's great administrator, Thomas Cromwell, had performed an audit

¹ From the preamble to the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals.

and discovered that the total annual income of the monasteries was three times larger than the income from the Crown's estates.

It began with minor monasteries in 1536 and spread to major monastic houses in 1539. Within a decade around two thirds of monastic lands had been sold to pay for wars.

The policy was not pursued for pure motives. But it did pave the way for later Protestant reform.

Another key feature was the move towards **an English Bible**. Tragically, William Tyndale was persecuted for pursuing his own un-authorised translation of the Bible. He completed it in 1525. By the standards of the day, his version was a model of accuracy and elegance, such that 100 years later the King James Version would use 90% of Tyndale's text. Tyndale was murdered while in hiding in Antwerp in October 1536.

These English Bibles began to make their way back to England and became so widely used that by 1537 Edward Fox, Bishop of Hereford told his fellow priests: "Make not yourselves the laughingstock of the world; light has sprung up, and is scattering all the clouds. The lay people know the Scriptures better than many of us."

Under Thomas Cromwell's patronage the "Great Bible" was produced in 1539. It was a translation by Miles Coverdale. At Henry's order the Bible placed in every church in the land.

As for Henry himself, his own marital misery continued, as he married and either divorced or killed four more wives until his own death in 1547.

(c) Where did pressure for change come from?

We've already noted some pretty base motives within Henry VIII's heart! But what of other factors?

There was some level of popular-anti-clericalism, though historians argue about how much the general public was dissatisfied with their Roman Catholic clergy. A few faithful ministers preached sermons blaming clergy for the general spiritual state of the country.² There were objections raised to the practice of pluralism, whereby one man would be the priest to multiple parishes simply so he could claim the vast tax revenues that were attached. Cardinal Wolsey was particularly the focus of protest – for his vast power and even greater wealth.

But it's not a straightforward picture: there was also some evidence for a resurgence of popular Roman Catholic piety.

Thomas Cromwell's motivation is not clear – he may have, quietly, followed the new Protestant doctrines or it may be simply that he was a "humanist" keen to throw off Medieval excesses and return to the original sources of the Christian faith.

Thomas Cranmer was quietly at work behind the Bible scheme, and other minor reforms. He was a clear Protestant but unable to pursue reform in all out fashion.

² E.g. John Colet, Dean of St Paul's, sermon before the Canterbury Convocation in 1511.

Followers of John Wycliffe, known as Lollards, remained in a few areas and were sometimes subject to trials and execution.

Lutheran doctrine, wonderfully, began to creep into Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In 1520 an Oxford bookseller was burned for selling 12 of Luther's works. At the White Horse Inn in Cambridge began a covert gathering known as "Little Germany"; it was led by Robert Barnes, and many future heroes of faith gathered to learn and discuss new Protestant doctrine: William Tyndale, Miles Coverdale, Thomas Bilney, John Frith, Hugh Latimer, and Thomas Cranmer.

Something should encourage us here. Consider the fruit that the Lord often produces when believers gather together for a specific purpose. Church history bears countless examples of great movements of evangelism, intellectual life, or social reform that grew out of small gatherings of Christians for prayer, fellowship, and discussion around a common purpose. The Lord does not necessarily call all of us to massive, world-changing revolutions, but it could be we are called to think and pray deliberately with others about workplace evangelism, starting a new ministry, studying a particular idea. How can we "stimulate one another to...good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24)?

2. Edward VI (b1537 – r1547 – d1553)

After Henry's death (1547), his 9-year old son Edward assumed the throne. He was the son of Henry's 3rd wife, Jane Seymour.

One of the mysteries of history is that Henry had permitted his son to have clearly Protestant tutors. And it seems clear that he was himself a convinced and sincere protestant. He was likened by some to Josiah, the faithful boy king of Judah. When John Hooper was installed as Bishop of Gloucester, Edward noticed that reference was made to the "company of the saints"; he himself intervened to strike out the offending words – aged just 13!

Two adult advisors known as "Protectors" led the council that ruled on his behalf. They were clear protestants, and it was during the short 6 years of Edward's reign that the Church of England was established as a Protestant church.

There was an influx of preachers from the continent. They included Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr Vermigli who Cranmer appointed as regius professors of theology respectively at Cambridge and Oxford. Notably, they were all Reformed or Calvinistic. This meant that when Cranmer wrote and revised his prayer book his theological consultants were Calvinists; the Church of England is aboriginally Calvinist though there was a later muddying of prayer book doctrine.

Henry VIII's pro-Catholic heresy laws were repealed. New bishops were appointed – including godly men like Ridley, Hooper, Coverdale. Many images were removed from the churches, and priests were allowed to marry.

In 1547 the Chantries were dissolved. There were more than 2,000 of these institutions that existed solely to say Masses for the souls of the dead.

In 1549 came the publication of the first edition of the Book of Common Prayer, written by Thomas Cranmer. With this book Cranmer began to move the Anglican Church away from Catholic doctrines on communion, steps continued by a second edition published in 1552. This edition showed Bucer's influence. Gone was the language of altar, mass and priest – instead we read of

the table, communion and ministers. Clerical vestments were banned. The adoration of the bread and wine was condemned specifically as idolatry. Prayers for the dead were forbidden.

In 1552 Cranmer introduced the 42 Articles. In time, and with some revision, these would become what we know as the 39 Articles of Religion. These remain the foundation of the denomination, though for long years have now been ignored by most in authority.

The six years of Edward's reign represent a time of tremendous flourishing for English Protestantism. There was resistance to the new religion: in Cornwall some objected (possibly because they were Cornish speakers who didn't want an English language liturgy). Some in Norfolk resisted because they wanted a greater level of reform. There was also great popular enthusiasm for the new movement in some regions.

Overall, the Church of England was more thoroughly reformed in 1553 than at any other time before... or since.

In one of the Lord's strange acts of providence King Edward VI died in 1553, ushering in the reign of the aptly named Bloody Mary.

3. Mary Tudor "Bloody Mary" (b1516 - r1553 - d1558)

Times can quickly change. In 1553, the 16-year old Edward died with no heir to his throne.

According to J.C. Ryle, the young king's dying prayer was "O Lord God, defend this realm from papistry, and maintain Thy true religion." Edward knew that his half-sister Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was next in line for the throne. Edward used what legal means he could to pass the succession to Lady Jane Grey. She was a sincere Protestant believer, but the victim of some bad planning and unwise politics. She was queen for nine days, before she was deposed and later beheaded.

Mary reigned for a little over five years, and did all she could to bring England back under the authority of the Pope. She had Parliament repeal all of the Edwardian laws, banished the Book of Common Prayer, restored the feast days of the saints, and ordered married clergy to dismiss their wives.

In November of 1554, Reginald Pole became new Archbishop of Canterbury and papal representative. Pole absolved England of schism and welcomed her back into the embrace of Rome. Pole had a personal grudge against Protestants, as Henry VIII had murdered his mother.

Many Protestants, fearing reprisal for their refusal to submit to the Pope, fled to the Continent. This no doubt spared many their lives.

One particular focus was attendance at the Catholic Mass. This was one very public means of demonstrating loyalty to the old religion. Consider for a moment that you had become a Protestant Christian and now were required to attend Mass under the new Queen Mary. What would you do? That's one reason why John Bradford wrote from prison a powerful word of encouragement to fearful Protestants entitled *The hurt of hearing Mass*. It was a call to stand firm, not compromise.

Consider for a moment how fleeting is earthly security. The freedom and prosperity that Protestants enjoyed under Edward were snatched away and replaced by grievous trials – and all in a matter of weeks. We must thank God for freedom and peace, but not assume that it will endure for ever. Our hope is set on another country altogether (see Hebrews 11).

Mary began her infamous burnings early in 1555, targeting faithful Protestants who would not recant. In all, some 300 people were executed at the Queen's direction. Most of the martyrs were common people – farmers, smiths, and merchants. They include our own William Hunter, burned to death on the Ingrave Road in the centre of Brentwood for reading the Bible and denying the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Bishops Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer had been among the most famous and influential figures in bringing the reformed faith to England; Ridley as Bishop of London and a brilliant theological mind, Latimer as an extraordinary and beloved preacher. They soon incurred the wrath of Mary, who sentenced them to be burned together at the stake in Oxford on October 16, 1555. While imprisoned and pondering their awaiting fate, Latimer sent a moving letter to Ridley:

There is no remedy...but patience. Better it is to suffer what cruelty they will put upon us, than to incur God's high indignation. Wherefore... be of good cheer in the Lord, with due consideration what he requireth of you, and what he doth promise you. Our common enemy shall do no more than God will permit him. God is faithful, which will not suffer us to be tempted above our strength...

They kept their resolve until the very end. As the executioner tied Latimer and Ridley to the stake and brought the torch near, Latimer turned to his friend and uttered his last:

Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out.

As heirs to this legacy of faith, may we be worthy of their example.

Mary's murderous rampage was not yet through. Thomas Cranmer, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and father of English church reform, had been imprisoned for not swearing allegiance to Rome, and had watched his friends Ridley and Latimer go to the stake. Queen Mary may have also had a personal vendetta against Cranmer, as he had sought the annulment of her mother Catherine's marriage to King Henry. Not content to merely imprison or even martyr Cranmer, the Queen sought to make an example of this prominent leader by forcing him to recant his Protestant convictions. Under extreme duress and for uncertain reasons, Cranmer finally signed a recantation, which Mary's realm gleefully published and circulated throughout England, and which reportedly caused great distress to many Protestants. This hardly spared the poor Bishop's life, however, as he still received a death sentence.

The old and courageous churchman was not yet through, however. Before his execution, which took place at St. Mary's Church in Oxford, just a stone's throw from where Ridley and Latimer had died, Cranmer was called on to speak. After confessing his own sins and weaknesses, he repented of his recantation:

[My words] were written contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and written for fear of death, to save my life if it might be...And forasmuch as I have written many things contrary to what

I believe in my heart, my hand shall first be punished; for if I may come to the fire it shall first be burned. As for the Pope, I refuse him, for Christ's enemy and antichrist, with all his false doctrine.

His conscience clear and his honor restored, Cranmer turned to face his fate. As the flames crept towards him, he extended his offending hand and held it steady until the fire consumed it.

As JC Ryle considered Cranmer's life, his great accomplishments and significant failings, Ryle concluded "nothing, in short, in all his life became him so well as the manner of his leaving it. Greatly he had sinned, but greatly he had repented."

4. Elizabeth (b1533, r1558, d1603)

This Catholic resurgence was dramatic, intense, and brief. A childless and unhappy Mary never enjoyed good health, and she died in 1558, after a reign of just five years. In the wings waited Elizabeth, second daughter of Henry VIII and first of Anne Boelyn, and half-sister of Mary. The Emperor Charles V on the continent had repeatedly urged Mary to have Elizabeth killed and thus removed as heir to the throne, but even Bloody Mary had not gone that far.

Following Elizabeth's coronation the Act of Supremacy was re-enacted, the Pope repudiated, and with the Act of Uniformity, Cranmer's Second Prayer Book was reinstated as the standard for the English Church. Joyous Protestants began to return to England from their European exile.

Some of them had taken refuge in Frankfurt. What had happened in exile turned out to be a microcosm of what would happen in the church under Elizabeth.

In Frankfurt the exiles had divided into two camps: the Knoxians and the Coxians. The followers of John Knox wanted to pursue further and deeper reform, especially of the liturgy. The followers of Richard Cox wanted to stick with the liturgy of King Edward.

Elizabeth now appointed a series of new bishops when all but 1 of Mary's bishops resigned. Out of 25 bishops 17 were returning exiles. But very few were Knoxians. The new bishops were largely Coxians.

This gives a little glimpse into Elizabeth's rather ambiguous religious views. On the one hand she had told the Spanish ambassador that she wanted the restoration of Henry's religion. On the other hand she probably was a moderate Protestant. She was raised in an evangelical and humanist atmosphere in the home of Catherine Parr (Henry's last wife) and read the New Testament in Greek every day. She once chose to walk out of church when the minister elevated the bread and wine in a Catholic gesture.

Overall, she was reluctant to take her Protestantism very far. The 39 Articles of Religion were ratified in 1571 – never again to be amended, either by Elizabeth or her heirs and successors. Almost certainly this would have horrified Cranmer who saw them as a necessary next step along the Reformation road, but not the end of that road. Certainly, the Puritans and later followers of the Puritans would wish for the development and clarification of the Articles. The contrast with the later Westminster Confession of Faith is stark.

But Elizabeth's main priority was restoring and maintaining national unity. She once remarked, famously, that:

There is only one Christ, Jesus, one faith all else is a dispute over trifles... I have no desire to make windows into men's souls.

She gave to us the “Elizabethan Settlement” in which the Reformation process within the Church of England was essentially frozen. Sometimes it’s known as the “via media,” or “middle way” in which doctrinal questions and disputes were not to be settled in as distinctively Reformed a way as would be the case in the Reformed churches on the continent.

To some extent this remains the essence of Anglicanism to this day (e.g. in its toleration of candles, priestly robes, and its willingness to live with slight doctrinal ambiguities even within the 39 Articles of Religion).

(b) Opposition to the Elizabeth settlement

Opposition came from two quarters: Catholicism and the growing Puritan movement.

During the earlier years of her almost half century reign, Elizabeth had some **Catholics** put to death for their dissent from the throne and loyalty to the Pope. In a sad commentary on human nature and the dark side of church history, some Protestants saw fit to respond in kind to the persecution they had suffered at the hands of Catholics.

Mary Queen of Scots was the focus of many catholic plots until her execution in 1587. There is evidence of covert and popular Roman Catholicism continuing in some areas.

In 1570 the Pope excommunicated Elizabeth in his papal bull *Regnans in excelsis*. This is a key date in the history of Roman Catholic reaction to Protestant England. From here on English Catholics were required to oppose Elizabeth and seek her removal. They had to choose whether to be a good Catholic, but with is also be a traitor. From here grew the strong sense among “ordinary” English people that there was something unsound about their Catholic neighbours.

This was reinforced by events like the failed attack of the Spanish Armada in July 1588. The English fleet aided by the weather destroyed the invaders. This event was regularly celebrated, like Elizabeth’s own coronation, and helped to form a new anti-Catholic consensus.

Opposition also grew among **the Puritans**. We’re going to spend some time on the Puritan movement in subsequent weeks. Here we’ll only touch on them.

The Puritans are a much maligned movement. They are not a bunch of self-righteous killjoys! Some have described them more fairly as the “hotter sort of Protestants.” Overall, they were frustrated by the halfly-Reformed church of the Elizabethan settlement. We’ll note two key moments in the early Puritan movement:

Firstly, the 1560s controversy over vestments. Elizabeth wanted a return to Roman clergy dress and insisted that Archbishop Parker enforce this. Many clergy refused and lost their livings. Elizabeth asserted that matters like clerical vestments were *adiaphora* or secondary. The Puritans, rightly, responded that if such matters were at best peripheral how could they legitimately be made the subject of church laws.

This was a little glimpse that, for the Puritans, the Elizabethan settlement was a start and not the end of further reform. Specifically, it also illustrates one enduring difference between Anglicanism and Reformed thought: in matters of adiaphora the Reformed sought to leave maximum room for freedom of conscience, whereas Anglicanism has no principled problem with binding men's consciences even in areas where Scripture does not speak.

Secondly, in the 1570s demands were made for a two-fold church government, i.e. with no bishops. In East Anglia some early Presbyterian separatists emerged. They were treated harshly since separatism seemed to strike at the unity of the nation.

It's important to note that, at this stage, both sides were still Calvinists. Arminianism and Laudianism still lay in the future. Puritanism quieted down during the latter years of Elizabeth's reign. Largely it sought reform from below and for a while was less revolutionary. This would change in the 1600s during the reigns of James I and Charles I.