

CHURCH HISTORY III

WEEK 3: THE ENGLISH REFORMATION & THE 16TH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION¹

A notorious adulterer, womanizer and murderer started the Reformation in England. 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.

There were considerable costs of bringing reform to England, not least in human lives. Besides their common faith in the biblical God, many heroes of the English reformation shared a common fate: martyrdom. Tyndale, Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, and many others went to the stake for their convictions.

This week and in the two previous weeks our class has focused in on the historic events of the Reformation in the 16th century. This focus comes in part from the apparent quickening of God's action during this time in history. But this also marks a point of departure in our own timeline. Up until now our narrative has tried to cover the entirety of church history from the beginning through the 16th century. From now, church history takes off in numerous directions.

THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

- a. The first thing to remember about the Reformation is that it did not spring entirely from Martin Luther. The Roman Catholic Church did not confine its corruptions and errors to Luther's Germany; neither did movements for reform come only from Germany.
- b. Luther stands as a towering figure of singular importance, of course, but as we saw last week and will see again today, movements for reformation arose *simultaneously* in other areas of Europe. Nothing occurs in a vacuum and Luther's ideas did influence many other reformers.
- c. The Reformation represents a rare coming together of courageous Christians in several different lands all striving to recover the Gospel and reform the Church.

¹ <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/class-6-martin-luther-the-protestant-reformation/>

- a. They soon came to see that they were not alone. They then began to encourage each other, influence each other, often joining together and sometimes splitting apart.
- d. Though the Reformation was not without its excesses and errors, I believe we can still see it as one of the clearest moments of the hand of God acting in human history – in places like Wittenberg, Zurich, Geneva – and England.
- e. We talked about John Wycliffe in Church History II and his followers, the *Lollards*.
 - a. This started the murmurings of reform of the church in England by the end of the 1300s. This same century, the English parliament passed a series of laws intended to give the king authority over papal decisions in England.
 - b. Though these measures were employed only sporadically and with little effect, Henry VIII would resurrect them two centuries later in his own feud with Rome.
- f. Meanwhile, by the early 1500s, a small group of English theologians and pastors at Cambridge University began to discuss reforming the church.
- g. By 1520, these meetings gathered energy and urgency when this group encountered Luther’s writings, which though declared illegal had still been filtering into England.
- h. The Cambridge gatherings centered on a pub called the White Horse Inn, which soon became known throughout the city as “Little Germany” because of the Luther enthusiasts meeting there.
- i. Future heroes of the English Reformation such as Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer and Tyndale all spent time together at Cambridge during these days, frequenting the White Horse Inn.
- j. These same decades brought the further development of the English Bible, an effort led by William Tyndale. Tyndale received his degree from Magdalen College, Oxford and then studied at Cambridge.
 - a. He became convinced of the need for an accurate translation of the Scriptures into English from the original Hebrew and Greek. Not only had Wycliffe’s version of 120 years earlier been banned in England, but it was also imprecise or even inaccurate in some places, since it had been translated from the Latin Vulgate, which was the only version permitted by the Catholic Church.
- k. Tyndale realized that the people needed to read an accurate version of the Bible in their own language. The Church authorities forbade this, and so Tyndale sought exile on the European continent to do his translation, which he completed in 1525.
 - a. To find a hospitable environment, he traveled to the free cities of Europe—Hamburg, Wittenberg, Cologne, and finally to the Lutheran city of Worms.
 - b. There, in 1525, his New Testament emerged: the first translation from Greek into English.
 - c. It was quickly smuggled into England, where it received a less-than-enthusiastic response from the authorities. King Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey, and Sir Thomas More, among others, were furious.

- d. It was, said More, "*not worthy to be called Christ's testament, but either Tyndale's own testament or the testament of his master Antichrist.*"²
 - e. His translations, it would turn out, became decisive in the history of the English Bible and of the English language. Nearly a century later, when translators of the Authorized, or King James Version, debated how to translate the original languages, eight of ten times, they agreed that Tyndale had it best to begin with.
- l. As these English Bibles made their way back to England they became so widely used that by 1537 Edward Fox, Bishop of Hereford told his fellow priests:
- a. *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.*
- m. Tyndale paid the ultimate price for his efforts. An historian describes this courageous man's violent end, while he lived in exile in Belgium:
- a. *In May 1535 Tyndale...was tempted by the squalid betrayer Henry Phillips (who posed as one of his converts) to pass outside the immunity of the English House in Antwerp. At once he was seized by agents of the [Catholic crown] and imprisoned...After long disputations he was condemned in August 1536 for obstinate heresy and in the following October strangled, his body being consigned to the flames.[1]*
- n. Amidst these efforts at reform, the English struggled with many of the same problems in the church that plagued Germany and elsewhere.
- a. Many priests and monks were licentious and corrupt, and neglected their religious duties.

The Reformation of Henry VIII

- a. Such was the situation when a frustrated English king (Henry VIII's) began to experience serious marital problems. He had married Catherine when her first husband, Henry's older brother had died, and the family had attained a special dispensation from the Pope for Henry to marry his older brother's widow, which was otherwise a violation of church law.
- b. The politically-savvy Pope granted permission, but then Henry VIII and Catherine encountered further problems. While they had five children, all but one died in infancy, and only Mary survived.
- c. Though Henry had already fathered an illegitimate son with one of his mistresses, he desperately wanted his queen to bear a son in order to produce an heir to his throne.

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/scholarsandscientists/william-tyndale.html>

- d. He decided the solution was to annul the marriage to Catherine and marry instead Anne Boelyn, who had already caught Henry's eye.
 - a. He petitioned Rome to annul his marriage to Catherine, arguing that the former dispensation allowing them to marry in the first place was invalid because it had violated the biblical command in Leviticus 20:21.
 - b. The pope refused to grant the annulment, partly because of a reluctance to reverse the decision of his predecessor and partly because the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who had invaded and captured Rome, also happened to be Catherine's nephew and did not want his aunt to be so disgraced.
 - c. In 1528, Henry, frustrated that he could not secure a better result from Rome, had Parliament charge bishop Wolsey with a slew of offences. Wolsey surprisingly consented and was deposed, giving Henry his first victory over church authorities. He desired more.
- e. By this time, Henry had impregnated his mistress Anne Boelyn, and desperately needed an out.
- f. Parliament did its part by passing a resolution declaring that the pope had had no power to grant the dispensation for Henry to marry Catherine in the first place.
- g. Thomas Cranmer, the new Archbishop of York and head of the church in England, granted the annulment and agreed to perform the marriage ceremony of Henry and Anne Boelyn.
 - a. A devout, godly man who had been part of the Cambridge crowd of reformers decades earlier, Cranmer had a much nobler agenda beyond helping a lustful monarch.
 - b. He saw this as an opportunity to free the English Church from the authority of Rome and bring about much needed reform.
- h. The next year in 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, a sweeping measure of tremendous consequence which gave the king absolute authority over the English church.
 - a. Parliament had declared that Henry VIII is "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England." At that same time, an assembly of clergy stated that according to Scripture, the bishop of Rome has "no greater jurisdiction in England than any other foreign bishop." Consequently, the English monasteries, which had been around since the 6th century, were closed by 1540, and their funds were taken by King Henry to use as he willed.
 - b. During this time, as a reflection of Lutheran influence, the vernacular "Great Bible" appeared, and a copy of the Bible was placed in every parish church.
 - i. The first pages of the Great Bible were printed in Paris in 1538. However shortly thereafter a rift began to develop between England and France, and soon France found herself in the middle of an Inquisition by the Roman Catholic Church. To the Catholic Church, the only valid Bible was the Latin Vulgate; it dealt harshly with publishers of other versions or

translations. If the newly-printed pages of the Great Bible were found, they would be destroyed and the printers would be imprisoned. There was no way that work could continue in such an environment. So everything was shipped and/or smuggled from France back to England — the presses, the type, the already-printed pages, even the printers themselves. And work just picked up in England right where it left off in France. At last in April, 1539 the Great Bible was finally released.³

i. The breach with Rome was complete.

- j. The people of England would have noticed little change in their worship or church life. Henry still considered himself a loyal Catholic on matters of doctrine; it was just Rome's authority that he rejected.
- k. He continued to attend the Mass, and even earlier he had written a book against the theology of Martin Luther. Parliament passed further measures largely affirming Catholic doctrines.
- l. Henry's own marital misery continued, as he married and either divorced or killed four more wives until his own death in 1547.
- m. During these years, however, Archbishop Cranmer quietly and persistently placed English Bibles in the churches, helped appoint reform-minded bishops and spread orthodox notions throughout the land.

Edward VI (1547-1553)

- a. After Henry's death (1547), his 9-year old son Edward (Son of Henry's 3rd wife, Jane Seymour) assumed the crown. Now that the king was gone and his Protestant-educated son had come to throne, Protestantism could go forth.
- b. Though the boy-king seems to have held his faith sincerely, he was also quite young, and two adult advisors known as "Protectors" helped implement the shift toward Protestantism.
- c. Parliament repealed its laws establishing Catholic doctrine, many images were removed from the churches and priests were allowed to marry.
- d. 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.
 - a. The "altar" was called "the table," "priests" were referred to as "ministers," and Christians were told in communion to "feed on Christ in thy heart with faith by thanksgiving" – in contrast to the Roman view of transubstantiation.

³ <https://earlyenglishbibles.com/earlyversions/GreatFull5b.html>

- b. The next year, Cranmer authored the 42 Articles, which would eventually, with some revisions, become the 39 Articles, the foundational confession for the Anglican Church. The six years of Edward's reign represent a time of tremendous flourishing for English Protestantism.

Mary Tudor “Bloody Mary” (1553 – 1558)

- a. In 1553, the 16-year old Edward died with no heir to his throne.
 - a. 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.”^[4]
 - b. No doubt Edward knew that his half-sister Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was next in line for the throne.
 - c. This prospect horrified English Protestants, and for good reason. The Catholic Queen Mary took the throne determined to restore Catholicism as the religion of the land by any means necessary, and she soon embarked on a rampage that earned her the dubious nickname “Bloody Mary.”
- b. Mary reigned for a little over 5 years and sought to bring England back under the authority of the Pope.
 - a. 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.
 - b. In November of 1554, Reginald Pole arrived England as the new Archbishop of Canterbury and papal representative.
 - c. Pole absolved England of schism and welcomed her back into the embrace of Rome.
 - d. Pole also had a personal grudge against Protestants, as Henry VIII had murdered his mother.
 - e. The Marian exiles were English Protestants who fled to Continental Europe during the 1553–1558 reign of the Roman Catholic Queen Mary I and King Philip.
 - i. They settled chiefly in Protestant countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany, and also in France, Italy and Poland.
 - ii. How suddenly did the freedom and prosperity that Protestants enjoyed under Edward get snatched away and trials come. In just weeks, they found their world turned upside down.
- c. 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.
- d. Most of the martyrs were common people – farmers, smiths, and merchants. Some eminent church leaders went to the stake as well.
 - a. 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.

- b. 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:
- i. *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...*
- c. 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:
- i. *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.[5]*
- e. Mary's murderous rampage was not yet through.
- f. 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 looked favorably on the annulment of her mother Catherine's marriage to King Henry.
- g. 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.
- a. 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.
 - b. This hardly spared the poor Bishop's life, however, as he still received a death sentence.
- h. 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:
- a. *[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.[6]*
- i. 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.

- a. 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.*^[7]

Elizabeth (1558 – 1603)

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. As Queen, Elizabeth moved immediately to reverse the policies of her sister. She seems to have adopted Protestantism as much from political expediency as from conviction; after all, if she embraced Catholicism, she would also have to concede that her own birth was illegitimate and her crown invalid, since her mother Anne Boelyn had only become queen after Henry successfully defied the Pope.
- d. Raised largely by her step-mother, Catherine Parr in a warmly evangelical and humanist atmosphere, Elizabeth read the NT in Greek every day.
- e. Elizabeth began to restore Protestantism to England. The Act of Supremacy was reenacted, the Pope repudiated, and with the Act of Uniformity, Cranmer's Second Prayer Book was reinstalled as the standard for the English Church. *Joyous Protestants began to return to England from their European exile.*
- f. The new Queen hesitated to take her Protestantism very far. Her main priority was restoring and maintaining national unity and she sought to create a theologically broad and inclusive national church, at least by the standards of the day.
- g. Her policies, known as the Elizabethan Settlement, sought to chart a "middle way" between doctrinal questions, an ethos that characterizes much of Anglicanism to this day.
 - a. Some scholars have described the church she encouraged as "Protestant in doctrine, Catholic in ritual," as it still included candles, priestly robes, kneeling during communion, etc.
- h. 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.
- i. Towards the end of her reign, Elizabeth and the remaining English Catholics agreed on distinguishing between their religious loyalty to the Pope and their civil loyalty to their English Queen.
- j. **This anticipated one of the Reformation's eventual legacies, the development of religious toleration.**
- k. Meanwhile, by later in the 16th century, some English Protestants sought to purify the Anglican Church and restore it more completely to biblical roots.

- a. **They were the Puritans**, and of them we will hear much more next week.

Conclusion

- a. We considered at the beginning of our class the fact that God used an evil man, Henry VIII, to bring about a good result – reform in the English Church. We also see that the Lord allowed good men – Tyndale, Ridley, Latimer, Cranmer, and many others – to suffer evil, in order to reform the church. In both cases, the Lord of history accomplishes His eternal purposes.
- b. We, in turn, can best understand and appreciate this from an eternal perspective. Another martyr of the English Reformation put it best. While John Hooper was being led to the stake, an old friend approached him and begged him to recant his faith and thus spare his own life. The distraught friend reminded Hooper that “life was sweet, and death was bitter.” The courageous Hooper held firm, responding to his friend that “eternal life was more sweet, and eternal death was more bitter.”^[8]

[1] A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 1991), 95.

[2] Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the 16th Century* (Boston: Beacon Press 1952), 184.

[3] Quoted in Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1997), 178.

[4] J.C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust 1999), 6.

[5] quoted in Ryle, 18.

[6] Quoted in Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2* (New York: Harper Collins 1985), 78.

[7] Ryle, 22.

[8] Quoted in Ryle, 12.