

THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

As with many events which shaped the course of the Christian Church, the English Reformation resulted from a complex convergence of events which can only be ascribed to providence. Longstanding social and economic pressures arose which established a new middle class in England, challenging established institutions and authorities, and fostering a new egalitarianism which was fertile ground for reformation. In addition, nationalism and the writings of reformers such as Luther swept through the intellectual and ecclesial institutions, raising new questions and challenges to Roman authority. Finally, Henry VIII inadvertently made way for a new church in England by challenging the authority of the pope. This break with Rome would have a profound impact on the practice of Christianity in England.

As monarchies arose which sought to consolidate power and limit the influence of the landed class, the economic system of feudalism came to an end. In addition to creating a new middle class, the demise of feudalism helped bring about rise of nationalism. The unified church, which benefited from the dominance of the Holy Roman Empire, was now under threat. A unified church, under a single head, depends on an absolute allegiance to that head above all others. For the Roman Church, that head was the pope. With the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, a new sentiment swept through England and other European nations that was suspicious of foreign influence.

As the "dark ages" faded into history, many sought to undo the errors that led the church and society to such ignorance and corruption. Reformers such as Erasmus sought the reformation of the Christian church through a return to Scripture and early Christian literature. Such reform would be a poison pill to a church which depended on the religious ignorance of the masses. A new emphasis on Scripture, aided by a bible in the English vernacular produced by Wycliffe, Tyndale, and Coverdale, provided the foundation upon which later Lutheran reformers would build. Wycliffe advocated the establishment of a national church, and in a relatively short period of time his wish would be realized.

Luther's theology, his emphasis on Scripture as the Word of God, his focus on justification by faith instead of works, and his criticisms of the church's corruption had a great influence in England. Ecclesial corruption was widespread in England, as it was elsewhere in Europe. Organizationally, this corruption took the form of absenteeism, pluralism, simony, and nepotism. On the individual level, it manifested itself in adultery, illegitimate children, debauchery, greed, and gluttony. Even priests and monastics who wished to be faithful found it hard to do so in such circumstances. In England this corruption manifested itself most clearly in the person of Cardinal Wolsey, who was hated by the populace for his dishonesty, and who left a greatly weakened church in the land.

As the sale of indulgences was the spark of the Reformation in Germany, it was the "King's Great Matter" which precipitated the Reformation in England. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Henry VII of England arranged for the marriage of his son and heir, Arthur, to Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Unfortunately, Arthur died four months later, and so Arthur's younger brother Henry, in order to retain the friendship of Spain, married Catherine. Because of canon laws prohibiting a man's marriage with his brother's widow, a papal dispensation was sought and obtained.

Catherine provided Henry with a daughter, Mary Tudor, but no male heir. Henry sought to annul the marriage, but because Catherine was the aunt of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, the pope was hesitant to grant such a request. Thus began Henry's dispute with Rome, which would eventually lead to a break with the Catholic church. He established policies which limited the power of the pope, including a ban on clerical appeals to Rome and a law forbidding the payment of *annates* and other contributions to Rome. Henry's marriage to Catherine was declared invalid by Parliament, and Henry was made "supreme head of the Church of England" by the Act of Supremacy, in open defiance of Rome.

Henry VIII was no religious reformer, but only sought to increase the power of his monarchy. He was religiously conservative, and at one time was given the title "defender of the faith" for his treatise against Luther. It was without his support, and sometimes against his wishes, that reformation spread throughout England. True reform would come through the reign of his offspring, Edward VI and Elizabeth.

Once his marriage with Catherine was nullified, Henry regularized his secret marriage with Anne Boleyn. Unfortunately for Henry, Anne gave him no male heir, but another daughter, Elizabeth. Anne was accused of adultery and executed, freeing Henry to marry his third wife, Jane Seymour, who produced his

son and future king, Edward. After Jane's death, Henry married Anne of Cleves, in order to establish an alliance with German Lutherans against Charles V and Francis I of France. He later divorced Anne, and married Catherine Howard, who supported the religious conservatives. Catherine fell into disfavor and was beheaded, making way for Henry's sixth and last wife, Catherine Parr, who was a proponent of reformation.

With Henry's death and the succession of his son, Edward VI, religious reformation began in earnest in England. During his reign, the cup in communion was restored to the laity, members of the clergy were allowed to marry, images were withdrawn from the church, and most importantly, the *Book of Common Prayer* of 1549 was published. It was under the tutelage of the Duke of Somerset, a Protestant, that this last work was published. The *Book of Common Prayer* was a landmark achievement of the English reformers. It established that the monarch was the head of the church, it spoke of "communion tables" rather than "altars", removed restrictions on bibles, used English instead of Latin, dissolved chantries, and ended the doctrine of purgatory and masses for the dead.

The *Book of Common Prayer* and the forty-two articles of 1552 went even further toward reformation. They abolished the term "mass," referred to communion as the "Lord's Table," and adopted language which suggested a symbolical rather than metaphysical meaning for communion. It represented true reform, and understandably it outraged Catholics. The creed of 1552 went further, by adopting Lutheran justification by faith and a Calvinistic approach to predestination.

When Edward VI died at a young age, he was succeeded by his half-sister Mary Tudor. Mary, always a Catholic, challenged the reformation out of conviction and political necessity. If Henry VIII had been correct in declaring himself head of the church, then his marriage to Catherine was null and void, making Mary a bastard child. With the support of her cousin, Charles V, and a number of conservative bishops, she set out to restore Roman Catholicism in England. She began a series of repressive assaults against the Protestants, who came to refer to her as "Bloody Mary." Thomas Cranmer, author of the first *Book of Common Prayer*, was condemned as a heretic, and burned.

Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth. As Mary was Catholic for personal and political reasons, so was Elizabeth Protestant. It was under her reign that the Church of England emerged. She made a clean break with Rome, but her aspirations were more toward a unification

of the English church than real religious reform. In 1559 her Act of Supremacy made her the “only supreme governor” of the church (as opposed to “head”). Her Act of Uniformity resulted in a new edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* which sought some measure of compromise between the Catholic and Protestant elements in the land, including a symbolical and metaphysical interpretation of communion. A Church of England arose which was Catholic in ritual, Calvinist in doctrine, and Episcopal in polity.

The Church of England was formed, and the break with Rome was complete. It began unintentionally under Henry VIII, was furthered greatly under Edward VI, was suppressed under Mary Tudor, and was established firmly under Elizabeth. For the English people it meant a Bible in their own vernacular, full participation in communion, the end the most egregious church corruption, and a new theology which emphasized faith and the sovereignty of God. What began as a power struggle between the English monarch and the pope resulted in a new church in England, truly reformed in theology and practice.