

Reformation Church History

Session 6—The English Reformation

Introduction—"If the Lutheran reformation began in a monastic cell, the Anabaptist reformation in a prayer meeting, and the Calvinistic reformation at a scholar's desk, then the English reformation began in the affairs of state, specifically with the problem of succession to the royal throne."¹

- The significance of England at this time is due to her emergence as an imperial power. As her empire would spread around the world, her religion would follow.
- There were really two reformations in England. The first a political reformation under Henry and a century later, a theological reformation under the Puritans.²

I. Background to the 16th C. English Reformation

- A. Wycliffe—responsible for translating the Scriptures into English; sent out itinerant preachers (Lollards); challenged papal authority.
- B. During the period of the Hundred Years' War relations between England and Rome were strained. England passed laws forbidding papal appointments and the payment of annates³ to Rome.
- C. Under Henry VII and Henry VIII the English monarchy was strengthening, while the strongest days of the papacy (Innocent III) were long past.
- D. William Tyndale (1490-1536) translated NT from Erasmus' Greek text. Did his work on the continent because of persecution. His work was suppressed in England, but still spread. Betrayed and

¹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain English*, Nelson, Nashville, 1995, p. 264.

² Ibid.

³ The first year's revenue of a see, an abbacy or a minor benefice, paid to the pope.

arrested in Antwerp in 1535. Strangled and burned as a heretic, 1536.

- E. His work was carried on by Miles Coverdale and appeared as the “Matthew Bible” in 1537 from John Rogers. It was essentially a well edited compilation of Tyndale and Coverdale’s work. At the request of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, Henry VIII authorized it as the “Great Bible” and distributed it throughout England.

II. Henry VIII

- A. Although not a Protestant, he became the main vehicle for change in England. Roman Catholic in doctrine with one important difference—he did not believe in the authority of the pope.
- B. Henry and divorce/matrimony; the desire for a male heir.
- C. The Act of Supremacy (1534) declared Henry supreme head of the Church of England; political break with Rome.
- D. Not a victory for Protestantism, but a victory for Henry.
- E. However, the Six Articles (1539) reaffirmed RC dogma on transubstantiation, celibacy, auricular confession, etc.

III. Edward VI (by third wife of Henry, Jane Seymour)

- A. Upon his ascension to the throne in 1547, England immediately moved from RC to Protestant, with the repeal of the Six Articles.
- B. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury
 - 1. Appointed Martin Bucer as Regius professor of divinity at Cambridge, 1549. He died 1551.

2. Appointed Peter (Martyr) Vermigli as Regius professor at Oxford. They trained a significant generation of ministers.
3. Book of Common Prayer was produced (1549). A second edition followed with the help of Bucer (1552) which is more Protestant and Calvinistic.
4. Cranmer is significant in the development of the 42 Articles (later amended to 39) of the Church of England.

IV. “Bloody” Mary Tudor (daughter of Catherine of Aragon) became Queen of England following the death of Edward (1553-1558).

A. At first she ruled with some leniency toward her Protestant opponents but proscribed their religion.

B. Under Archbishop Reginald Pole, the country returned to Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. He restored the Bishop’s Courts and heresy laws (1554). Marian persecution followed. Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, Hooper and hundreds of others were martyred 1555-7. Many fled to the continent.

[Reading from J.C., Ryle *Light from Old Times*, Evangelical Press, Hertfordshire, 1890, 1980, pp. 157-164.]

C. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563) dates from this time.

V. Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn (1533-1603)

A. *Via Media*—England would be Protestant in doctrine (which was Elizabeth’s basic inclination) and Catholic in liturgy (including vestments, incense, etc.) as a matter of political expediency.

B. “The country as a whole was still predominantly Catholic, though with a strong Calvinistic undercurrent. Elizabeth disliked the former because it denied her legitimacy, and the

latter because it abolished episcopacy, which she held to be essential for the safety of kings. She aimed at a compromise between the Lutheran political theory, with its emphasis on the prerogatives of the temporal ruler, and the episcopal organization of Catholicism, many of whose institutions, such as the celibacy of the clergy and the use of crucifixes and statues, she wished to retain.”⁴

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, F.L. Cross, Ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 453.