

Three weeks ago we began our look at the Reformation.

Today, we look at the English Reformation.

No reformation has more facets to it than the English Reformation, and for England, geography played a major role.

Personalities loom large - John Wycliff, Henry VIII, William Tyndall, Thomas Cromwell, Thomas Cranmer, Martin Bucer and others.

Beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a new player on the stage, universities, contributed.

The remoteness of England from the center of religious power was critical, whether it was Rome, Avignon or Wittenberg, Communications were difficult; travel was difficult; language was difficult.

Because it was somewhat remote, the British Isles were an afterthought in Christianity for many centuries.

When he arrived in 597, the papal missionary Augustine of Canterbury was shocked to find a booming pervasive Christianity.

The Celtic form of Christianity had been growing for at least four centuries, but who knew?

The Synod of Whitby in 672 changed more toward Roman practice, but it incorporated Celtic ideas.

Over time, the Roman practices became the norm and of course, the invasion of England by William the Conqueror in 1066 brought with it a dominance of Roman practice.

Two new universities in England began to attract scholars, and they training the best of British minds.

Oxford was started around 1167; Cambridge was started by 1209.

An Oxford trained scholar, John Wycliff, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century created a considerable controversy when Wycliff advised his local lord, John of Gaunt, to tell Parliament not to comply when the Pope demanded financial support from England.

He argued that the church was already too wealthy and that Christ called his disciples to poverty, not wealth.

Such opinions got Wycliff into big trouble.

He deepened his study of Scripture and wrote more about his conflicts with official church teaching.

He wrote against the doctrine of transubstantiation.

He challenged indulgences.

He repudiated the confessional.

He reiterated the biblical teaching on faith.

Believing that every Christian should have access to Scripture,  
he began translating the Bible into English.

The church bitterly opposed it saying:

"By this translation, the Scriptures have become vulgar,  
and they are more available to lay,  
and even to women who can read,  
than they were to learned scholars,  
who have a high intelligence.

So the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden  
underfoot by swine."

Wycliff replied, "Englishmen learn Christ's law best in English.

Wycliff's followers, called Lollards, were driven underground,  
but they remained a persistent irritant to Catholic authorities  
until the English Reformation made their views the norm.

It was during Wycliff's life that the papacy moved  
from Rome to Avignon.

The French were dominating the church,  
and England and France were in the midst of their 100 year war.

King Henry II was in no way interested in assisting the Pope  
or paying taxes to him.

He wanted to keep the money in England. He had a war to finance.

Meanwhile by the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century,  
the Renaissance was taking root.

Art, culture, scholarship and new ideas  
were taking shape all over Europe.

Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo are producing  
their masterpieces;

Morality plays were the rage of the stage.

And in reaction to the Renaissance, the church banned all books  
opposing the authority of the church.

The Dean of St. Paul's in London in 1509, John Colet,

began to lecture on the letters of Paul.

Rather than using an allegorical interpretation of the text.

He said to look for the literal message of the text.

This was revolutionary.

The English Kings began to look to another source of funds - the church.

The church owed large tracts of land

and operated many monasteries.

The noble class and the developing middle class was resentful

that their money was going to support the church

which ostensibly was controlled by the Pope in Avignon.

Parliament limited the assignment of priests and bishops

without a vote of the clergy and consent of the king.

It also banned referring court cases to the papal courts.

All of this directly challenged church authority.

The growing middle class threw their weight behind a new King,

Henry VIII, in 1508 as he was challenging the church's

control of funds.

He needed money to fight yet another war.

This time against Spain.

A little wrinkle in the issue was Henry's marriage

to Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Isabella and Ferdinand

of Spain and aunt to the king of the Holy Roman Empire

Charles V who subsequently added to his title King of Spain.

Scholars were hard at work producing translations

of the Bible in English.

William Tyndall published two editions of his New Testament.

Miles Coverdale published an entire Bible in English in 1535.

The Bible threatened the status quo.

The church no longer could tell people what it said.

The people could read it for themselves!

Henry, a scholar himself, was not enamored

with the Lutheran theological arguments.

Pope Leo X was so pleased with Henry that he named Henry

“Defender of the Faith” in 1521.

Little did the pope know that Henry rather fancied the title and took it to heart.

By 1532 Henry decided to seize church property.

Henry claimed that he was supreme in all ecclesiastical affairs.

Henry was excommunicated from the church in 1533.

His marriage annulled, he married Ann Boleyn and named Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury.

In 1534 Henry declares that he has the title

“the Only Supreme Head in Earth of the Church of England,”  
the *Anglicana Ecclesai*. [Eccles -i- ay]

He requires all subjects to sign an oath of succession recognizing Elizabeth as legitimate heir to the throne.

Devout Catholics refuse to sign or acknowledge Henry as head of the church.

Two years later, Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer begin writing drafts of the Articles of Faith for the new English Church.

In 1538 Henry decrees that a Bible in English must be present in all English churches.

(By the way they are chained to the pulpit lest someone try to steal them.)

The so called Great Bible is Miles Coverdale’s English translation from the Latin Vulgate and the Matthew’s Bible in English based on Tyndall’s translation with excerpts from Coverdale.

By the way, the Psalms in our Book of Common Prayer are from Miles Coverdale with some modern language corrections.

By 1544 Thomas Cranmer begins translating the liturgy into English.

In 1547, pulpits are installed in English churches, and in 1550 a Table replaces the Altar.

And Henry VIII dies.

Henry had been faced with a problem of all hereditary monarchs.

He needed a son but had none after 23 years of marriage.

You know the story of Henry and his many wives.

It has been a running narrative in many forms  
on TV for many years. Most of the story lines are true.  
His only surviving children were a daughter from Catherine named  
Mary, and another daughter from Ann Boleyn named Elizabeth.  
Finally, a son Edward from Jane Seymore who died in childbirth.  
Nine year old Edward VI became King upon Henry's death..  
Henry's will did not provide for a Protector for Edward to help him  
govern instead he entrusted the government of the realm to a  
Regency Council that would rule collectively  
during his son's minority .

The council was dominated by religious reformers.  
The next year Edward decreed that all saints images  
were to be removed from English churches.  
The man Edward trusted most, Thomas Cranmer, introduced  
a series of religious reforms that revolutionized the English church  
from one that rejected papal supremacy yet remained  
essentially Catholic to one that was institutionally Protestant.  
The confiscation of church property resumed under Edward to the great  
monetary advantage of the crown  
and the new owners of the seized property.

Church reform was therefore as much a political as a religious policy.  
By the end of Edward's reign, the church had been financially  
ruined, with much of the property of the bishops transferred into  
lay hands.

Reformed doctrines were made official, such as justification by faith  
alone and communion for laity of both bread and wine.

In 1549 the first Book of Common Prayer is produced and published.

It was a compromise between Protestant and Catholic liturgy,  
which means it was not accepted by either group.

It fixed the frequency of Communion at three times per year  
and dictated that parishioners must receive Communion  
at least three times per year.

It no longer required that wine and water be mixed in consecration,  
and it omitted a confession from morning and evening prayer.

The Ordinal of 1550 replaced the divine ordination of priests

with a government-run appointment system.

After 1551, the Reformation advanced further,  
with the approval and encouragement of Edward,  
as Supreme Head of the church.

The new changes were also a response to criticism from reformers  
who prompted the king to oppose kneeling at communion.  
Cranmer was also influenced by the views of the continental reformers,  
Martin Bucer, a favorite of Parliament,  
who died in England in 1551,  
and by Peter Martyr, who was teaching at Oxford,  
and by other foreign theologians.

The progress of the Reformation was further speeded by the  
consecration of more reformers as bishops.

In the winter of 1551–52, Cranmer rewrote the Book of Common Prayer  
in more reformist terms, revised canon law,  
and prepared the Articles of Religion,  
to clarify the practice of the reformed religion.

Cranmer's formulation divested the communion service  
of any notion of the real presence of God in the bread and wine,  
effectively abolished the mass as a sacrifice.

The publication of Cranmer's revised prayer book in 1552,  
"marked the arrival of the English Church at protestantism."

Under the influence of Bucer and at the insistence  
of the Parliament, it included the "black rubric,"  
having to do with kneeling and veneration of the sacraments  
which was considered to be "popish"  
and adds the Prayer of General Confession.

Edward VI died at age 15.

Thus creating a huge crisis in the kingdom.

Edward VI had nominated his cousin, Lady Jane Grey to be Queen,  
and the Privy Council agreed.

On the same day, they received a message from Mary,  
the daughter of Catherine, Henry VIII first wife,  
asserting her "right and title" to the throne  
and commanding that the Council proclaim her queen,

as she had already proclaimed herself.

The Council replied that Jane was queen by Edward's authority and that Mary, by contrast, was illegitimate and supported only by "a few lewd, base people."

The Council soon realized that they had miscalculated drastically by failing to arrest Mary before Edward's death.

Although many of those who rallied to Mary were conservatives hoping for the defeat of Protestantism.

Her supporters included many who thought she had a legitimate claim to the throne which overrode religious considerations.

The nervous Council in London launched an unplanned pursuit of Mary into East Anglia, from where news was arriving of her growing support by a number of nobles and gentlemen

and "innumerable companies of the common people."

The Council's army marched out of London with three thousand men, reaching Cambridge the next day;

meanwhile, Mary rallied her forces of nearly twenty thousand at Framlingham Castle in Suffolk.

It dawned on the Privy Council that it had made a terrible mistake.

So July 19th the Council publicly proclaimed Mary as queen; Jane's nine-day reign came to an end.

The proclamation triggered wild rejoicing throughout London.

Mary repealed the BCP and replaced it with the Catholic Latin Rite.

She committed Protestants, including Thomas Cranmer, to the stake.

But just five years later, she died on November 1558, during an influenza epidemic.

Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth I,

the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Bolyen.

Elizabeth reverses course, restores the BCP with minor changes and inaugurates what we call the "via media."

In the so-called Elizabethan Settlement,

she doesn't care if the Puritans don't like the new BCP or that the Catholics don't like it, as long as they both use it.

The new book eliminated the black rubric and restored some practices.

The bottom line to this tortured history of the English Reformation is that the true roots of the reformation was not Henry's love affairs but the attention paid to people being able to read the Bible in English.

Two books shaped the church, first, the Bible as it began to be widely read and understood, and second the BCP, an ordering of worship in English which was distinctively English.

### Sources

Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.

William Gilbert, *Renaissance and Reformation*, unpublished, accessed October 4-6, 2017, [http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie\\_books/gilbert/00acknowledgements.html](http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/00acknowledgements.html)

Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996.

Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Susan Lynn Peterson, *Timeline Charts of the Western Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.

Preached by The Rev. Perry W. Polk  
Grace Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CA  
October 29, 2017