

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 60

The Church of England and the Anglican Separation

We have already explored many changes to the Roman Catholic Church that occurred in Germany, Switzerland, and France in the early 1500's: Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, the Anabaptists, and Calvin. These changes, however, were not limited to continental Europe. In England, changes were occurring in their own particular way. To best understand the English changes, we will first review their historical context. Then, we will focus on the changes Henry VIII and his successors brought.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

We are unsure how and when Christianity first came to the British Isles. By 200 A.D., Tertullian was writing against the Jews and he mentions the church in Britain, giving us the first written reference showing the spread of faith that far. We know by 314, three English Bishops were present at the Council of Arles. Furthermore, in our studies on Augustine (See lessons 24-25), we saw that a central catalyst for several of his major writings were responses to the heretic Pelagius. Pelagius was a monk who had come to Italy from Britain.

The Church continued in Britain as we saw in our lesson on St. Patrick (Lesson 27), who left Britain to convert the people of Ireland. While the church grew in Ireland, it suffered in the Eastern part of England because of the invasions of Jutes, Angles, and Saxons in the mid-400's. There was very little Christian practice or faith in this portion of Britain for 150 years. It was not until the late 500's and early 600's that faith returned through the mission efforts of another man named Augustine, whom Pope Gregory the Great (Lesson 24-25) sent to convert the British island. It was this Saint Augustine who founded the See of Canterbury in 597 and was its first Archbishop.

By the time of the Norman Conquest (William the Conqueror, 1066), the church was somewhat stagnant but still present throughout most of England. William was supported in his English conquest by the pope, but choose to rule very independently. At a time when the popes were significantly increasing their powers and authorities over ruling powers, William appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury Lanfranc, the mentor of Anselm (See Lesson 43).

William and Lanfranc worked together to effectuate distance between the Church in England and papal control. Three particular laws stripped Rome of much of its power in England. First, the law was changed mandating that no one could be

excommunicated without the king of England signing off on the excommunication. Second, no Bishop was allowed to leave England without the king's permission. Third, the king was to read any letter sent by the pope to anyone in England prior to its delivery to the recipient.

Over the centuries to follow, the relationship between the king of England and the pope went through times of closeness and distance. Archbishops like Anselm stressed a papal sovereignty over the country and king. Others asserted the king was God's sovereign appointment to rule the Christian kingdom (which inherently included the church).

KING HENRY VIII

With this background, we come to 1509 when King Henry VIII took the throne of England at the ripe young age of 17. By all accounts, even at his young age, Henry was quite clever, handsome, athletic, artistic, smart (fluent in Latin, English and Spanish), well read, and an accomplished musician. In short, he was a renaissance man leading a country through the Renaissance. Henry had read and could discuss Thomas Aquinas with any theologian. Moreover, Henry was devout in his Catholic faith.

Henry was in his late 20's when Luther began making his church disturbances in Germany. Henry responded by writing a response to Luther's views on the sacraments, taking issue with Luther. The pope and the Church viewed Henry as a staunch defender of the faith.

Meanwhile at home, Henry's had a serious problem – no male heir to the throne. The same year Henry acceded to the throne (1509), Henry had married Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his now deceased older brother. The pope himself granted a "papal dispensation" (meaning an exemption from church law) allowing the marriage of the two in spite of the previous "in-law" relationship. Catherine had given birth to three sons and 2 daughters, but all had died as infants, except one daughter (Mary).

By 1527, Henry was convinced that Catherine was too old and would not be producing a male heir for his throne. To make matters worse, Henry had fallen in love with a young lady-in-waiting to the queen named Anne Boleyn. Henry sought an annulment of his marriage to Catherine to enable a subsequent marriage to Anne. Henry had Cardinal Woolsey seek the annulment from the pope, but there were at least two significant impediments to the pope granting the annulment. First, the ground used to justify the annulment was the "in-law" relationship of Catherine and Henry that pre-existed their marriage. Since an earlier pope had already cleared the way for the marriage, however, those grounds

were shaky at best. The second impediment was less legal but more political. Queen Catherine's nephew was Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (and nemesis of Luther!), a man the pope could not afford to offend. So, the pope's response to the requested annulment was to ignore it for several years.

Henry began to use his political power to get what he was unable to secure through the church. Henry began purging the church of the Cardinals that supported the pope, starting with Woolsey himself. Henry took the title "Supreme Head" of the Church in England, and had Parliament pass a number of laws that distanced the Church of England from the pope's power and control. The first such law drastically reduced the money that flowed back from the Church of England to Rome. A following law changed appeals in church matters from going to Rome to being heard in English church courts. In the preamble to this law, the affirmative statement is made that England is an independent and sovereign state, an "Empire." It set into legal terms a principle that allowed Henry to proceed with the approval of the Archbishop of Canterbury as final word on ecclesiastical matters rather than the pope.

Following this act, the recently installed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, declared Henry's marriage to Catherine null and void, thus clearing the way for Henry to marry Anne Boleyn.

Parliament and King Henry, however, were not done with the Roman Church. A number of additional laws were passed that continued to curtail the Church's influence. One act referred to the pope as merely, "the Bishop of Rome, otherwise called the pope." Another act gave the authority to grant dispensations and licenses to the Archbishop of Canterbury rather than the pope. Parliament set up new methods for determining successors to the various bishoprics. Most symbolically, if not most importantly, Parliament passed the *Supreme Head Act* which not only made Henry's title as Supreme Head of the Church of England official, but it also gave Henry the power to define doctrine and punish heresy.

In a short three-year period through a series of legal transactions, Henry removed the Church of England from its position under the Roman pope. As scholar J.R.H. Moorman notes, it is "no exaggeration to say that the English Reformation, at any rate in its earlier stages, was a 'parliamentary transaction,' or an 'act of state.'" There was very little role that the Church itself (or even religion for that matter) played in the process. On matters of faith and practice, Henry himself was still quite orthodox. He never became a fan of Luther and the reformation ongoing on the European continent, even though many of the clergy Henry put in place were sympathetic to Luther and the reforms.

It is likely that many of the Church's leaders who supported and endorsed Henry's efforts would have never done so had not their own views of church and faith been altered by the continental reformation. While Henry continued to follow Catholic law and practice (as he redefined it), the English Church's clergy began to institute a number of "Protestant" ideas and practices. For example, in spite of the Church's position on clerical celibacy, even the Archbishop of Canterbury (Cranmer) married. A number of churches began saying Mass in English (also an "illegal" practice under Roman Canon law).

During the rest of his reign, Henry used his power to effectuate a number of other changes to the Church, many of them economic in nature. Henry began seizing various church houses and structures claiming they were rife with corruption. He seized and closed most every monastery and sold the properties and possessions. Henry also passed laws mandating various official doctrines of the church. Failure to subscribe to these doctrinal laws made doubt (or heresy) an actual crime.

Yet with all these changes, the church on a local level for the ordinary person changed very little. The buildings looked the same, inside and out. The services changed little (save the few that used an occasional English Mass), and the clergy still operated in much the same fashion.

HENRY VIII'S SUCCESSORS

Anne Boleyn never produced a living male heir for Henry. She was beheaded May 17, 1536 (just four months after her most recent miscarriage). The only child that survived the marriage was the daughter Princess Elizabeth. Henry waited a full ten days after Anne's death before he remarried. His third wife, Queen Jane, gave Henry his eagerly awaited son and male heir, Prince Edward in 1537. Later that same year, Jane died from illness. By the time Henry died on January 28, 1547, he had six marriages in all.

Upon Henry's death, Edward assumed the throne of England as Edward VI at the early age of nine! Because Edward was a minor, a council was put together to oversee his "decisions" as King and guide him in his growth and development. From a religious perspective, the decision makers who advised and helped rear the young king on religious matters were by and large reformers in their own beliefs. Even though Henry VIII had kept his own views very Roman Catholic on most matters, it is understandable that the church authorities in England that most readily supported Henry's policies of independence from Rome were themselves reformation minded. Hence, once Henry passed away, these "Protestants at heart" had their way with young Edward!

Within just a few months of Henry's death, England became what most scholars term a "protestant" nation. Matters like justification by faith, celibacy, the meaning and manner of communion, the dress of priests and adornments of the churches were areas where the church made markedly protestant moves. Laws were passed in Parliament setting aside a number of Henry's doctrinal positions in favor of more Protestant ones.

The changes were not limited this time to Parliament and politics. The changes were evident in the churches and common practices as well. It was during this time that the Latin Mass was mocked by a new phrase. The Latin Eucharist holds as most sacred the words *Hoc est corpus meum* meaning literally, "This is my body." The phrase, however, was mocked by those who shortened it into merely saying "Hoc us Pocus."¹ From this time onward in the English language, *hocus pocus* became a phrase to reference a superstition.

The council advising Edward also chose to purge the churches of their Catholic vestments and accessories. At this time throughout England, the auction houses were busy with church wares, from candlesticks to plates. In place of the older masses, new emphasis was placed on preaching and edification. Many churches began having protestant style sermons rather than a mere recitation of the centuries old masses and liturgies. In 1549, a new prayer book was issued for use. This was a mandatory practice in churches. While it was a major departure from the Catholic liturgy previously used, it is apparent from the introduction that the church did not view itself a break off from Catholicism. Rather, the church considered itself the apostolic and Catholic Church of England, although not subservient to the Bishop of Rome.

The evident changes to everyday church life centered on five areas: (1) a simpler liturgy set out in the prayer book; (2) an increase in congregational participation of the worship service; (3) a useful liturgy in the everyday English language rather than Latin; (4) the Lord's Supper administered with the congregants getting both bread and wine rather than the Catholic practice of just bread;² and (5) the increased usage of sermons and scripture readings to edify and educate the congregation.

History might have been radically different had Edward lived long. He died, however, when only 16 years old. Needless to say, Edward had not left any heirs, so the line of succession went backwards rather than forwards. The new ruler was

¹ Archbishop of Canterbury Tillotson set out this view in a sermon in the late 1690's.

² In the 1552 follow up edition of the prayer book, more changes were made in the area of communion. The major doctrinal shift was effectuated where communion was seen as a commemoration rather than a sacrifice and real presence of Jesus.

Mary, the long forgotten first daughter of Henry VII through his first wife Catherine of Aragon, a died-in-the-wool, mega-conservative Catholic. The effect on the church was not too unlike water sloshing from side to side in the bathtub! England rapidly shifted from the Protestant extremes that had quickly taken root back to a staunch Roman Catholicism!

History has given Mary the nickname “Bloody Mary” because of her manner of purging the anti-Catholics in England. Mary had nearly 300 religious dissenters executed. Mary immediately set about restoring Catholicism in England. In her first legislative action, Mary had Parliament retroactively proclaim Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon valid. Mary wed Philip, King of Spain in hopes of producing an heir that would take the throne upon her death. Absent an heir, the throne was set to go to Elizabeth, Henry VIII’s child through Anne Boleyn. Philip never seemed too enamored with Mary and quit co-habiting with her after less than two years, returning to his rule in Spain. Mary never did get her offspring and died from ovarian cancer only five years after her reign started.

During those five years, Mary had the reform minded Archbishop of Canterbury (Thomas Cranmer) executed and the relationship with Rome restored. Mary appointed Reginald Pole as the new Archbishop and he assisted in drafting and overseeing the abolition of most every religious law passed during the reign of Edward VI. Mary also had Parliament repeal a number of the laws Henry VIII enacted, including the removal of the title “Supreme Head of the Church of England” from the titles of the monarch.

After Mary died, the throne passed to Elizabeth, the daughter of Henry VIII through Anne Boleyn. At this point, there were three distinct groups of thought among the religious leaders in England. There were the staunch Roman Catholic supporters in power through the acts of Queen Mary. There were still a number of Protestants who had grown even stronger in their beliefs after many fled to Geneva and protestant Europe during the short reign and purge of Mary (followers of Calvin in England claimed the title “Puritans” for their pure approach to scripture and church). There were also a number who fell into a third camp of British loyalist who feared and objected to England becoming a vassal of either Rome and the Roman church or Geneva and the Reformed movement. It was to this third camp that Elizabeth ultimately attached herself.

Elizabeth reigned for a solid 45 years and restored religious stability to England. This era became known as the “Elizabethan era” and was the golden age of renaissance England. She never married and was termed the “Virgin Queen,” after whom the state of Virginia was named. She was a highly intelligent, well-educated woman, speaking and reading six languages (she read the Bible in Greek as well as Latin!).

Elizabeth required the use of the Protestant Book of Common Prayer. She took the title of “Supreme Governor of the Church of England” instead of the older title her father had assumed (“Supreme Head”). Rome eventually excommunicated Elizabeth in a papal bull of 1570 that marked the final separation of the Church of England from Rome.

While Elizabeth oversaw many Protestant reforms, she never embraced Calvin’s Presbyterian form of Church governance. Rather than committees of elders or shepherds overseeing the church, Elizabeth and England maintained the Episcopal governance in place since the inception of the church in England. Still today, the Anglican Church claims and traces its line of Bishops back to the Apostles of the first church. The church sees itself as part of the Catholic Church, even though it repudiates papal jurisdiction.

Elizabeth maintained her middle ground in spite of opposition from both papal powers and the Puritans. The pope sponsored Mary Queen of Scots for the British throne in rebellion against Elizabeth, and The Spanish armada was sent to provide military backing for the rebellion. However, Elizabeth’s navy and internal forces quickly brought both rebellious advances to a decisive end (The Armada was defeated and Mary was beheaded!).

In the years since, the Anglican Church has spawned the Episcopal Church in America (technically, *The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America*), taking that name after the revolutionary war that separated America from England in more ways than one! The church is still seen by many as a middle ground between Protestant and Catholic churches. The worship services themselves are typically much closer to Catholicism than more evangelical protestant services. Still, the theology removes the Anglican and Episcopal churches from mainstream Roman Catholicism.

POINTS FOR HOME

So, is this Sunday School Bible Class a mere history lesson? Is there something we should take home from this beyond historical data? Absolutely!

1. God is beyond our human government. Kings and Queens have claimed divine right since Constantine.³ This “right” is not without scriptural support. Paul notes in Romans 12 that, “there is no authority except that

³ This is true in Christian circles. If you go back to the Old Testament, the claim of divine authority begins with Israel’s first king, Saul.

which God has established” and “he who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted” (12:1-2). Yet, that does not mean that governing authorities become God’s representatives on earth for purposes of our relationship with God. In the New Testament, church was never contemplated as an institution that superceded the role of Jesus in the life of a Christian. The church is the expression of Christ on earth, and in that sense his body, but it never trumped Jesus or the Holy Spirit. The Church and government draw their power and existence from God, but God’s call for humanity is into a personal relationship. So, we pray for governing authorities and we honor them, but they never take our allegiance we owe first to Jesus and his instructions in righteousness.

2. Remember Charles V? He is referenced in this lesson as the Holy Roman Emperor who exerted political pressure on the pope to stop any annulment of his Aunt Caroline of Aragon’s marriage to Henry VIII. Yet you might remember him for the Reformation lessons as putting his foot down against reformers and holding up Catholic doctrine. Both Charles and Henry held the same theology with conviction. Yet they were able to set aside their beliefs when their personal agendas trumped their theology. We should be wary to make sure our faith drives our lives 24/7, and not merely when the two do not conflict.
3. Governments come and go, kingdoms come and go, but the Word of God and his kingdom last forever (“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever.” Isaiah 40:8). It is to that Word and kingdom we should cling come what may. Let’s commit to a whole-hearted embracing of God through Jesus and his word.
4. Throughout history, we come where we are through the errors and misappropriations of many in the past. We are no doubt a bit too arrogant
5. If we assume that now we have it all figured out, then we have no reason to continue to grow and change on our own.