

## **Lighting a Candle: The English Reformation**

One of the great books of prayer and worship was largely written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. It was called the *Book of Common Prayer*. It has been used, and is still used, in the worship of the Church of England and among Anglicans and Episcopalians around the world. As we study the English Reformation and study the life of Thomas Cranmer, I will begin with a prayer by Cranmer. Let us pray together.

*“O Lord Jesus Christ, You are the sun of the world, evermore arising, and never going down, which by Your most welcome appearing and sight, brings forth, preserves, nourishes, and refreshes all things, as well that are in heaven as also that are on earth. We beg You mercifully and faithfully to shine in our hearts so that the night and darkness of sins and the mist of errors on every side may be driven away. With You brightly shining in our hearts we may all our life go without stumbling or offense, and may decently and seemly walk as in the day time, being pure and clean from the works of darkness, and abounding in all good works which God has prepared us to walk in; You who with the Father and with the Holy Ghost live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.”*

Dr. J. I. Packer was lecturing on the Church of England recently, and he began with the comment that the Church of England, Anglicanism, was the result of a series of accidents. One of the accidents, or events, that made up the early history of the Church of England was a king, Henry VIII, and his succession problem. In a famous painting, Henry VIII towers over the English Reformation, and he is shown as a bold, confident, and forthright leader. One older book on this period of church history described Henry VIII as a man of whom we may say, “He was the king, the whole king, and nothing but the king, but he wished to be, with regard to the Church of England, the pope, the whole pope, and something more than the pope.” Thus I will have to talk about kings and queens, because the early beginnings of the Reformation in England focus so much on who was reigning and what the particular religious conviction of that person was.

If we know anything about Henry VIII, we know that he had six wives. They were Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. He also had three children. We also know that his wives suffered greatly in their marriage to Henry. The way to remember what happened to his wives is to remember this sequence of words: divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived. The BBC produced dramatizations of the lives of the six wives of Henry VIII through “Masterpiece Theater,” which were well done and good history.

The issue that precipitated the Reformation in England was the divorce issue. In 1527, after he had been married for 17 years to the Spanish Catherine, Henry decided he wanted to divorce her because she had produced no male heir. She had only given him a daughter, named Mary. Henry hoped that England would not repeat the period of the War of the Roses that his father and grandfather had to deal with. So he attempted to divorce Catherine. There were two problems with that plan. One was the canonical problem, which was that church law did not allow such a divorce unless he could get special dispensation from the pope. He had actually received special dispensation from the pope to marry Catherine in the first place. The other problem Henry faced was the political problem. The greatest and strongest ruler in all of Europe was Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and nephew of Catherine.

For a number of years, Henry attempted to work through church and political channels to bring about a divorce that would be acceptable to the church. After about six years of dispute, however, he lost patience and took matters into his own hands. He named himself the only supreme head on earth of the

Church of England. Thus he did not have to worry about the pope anymore. Whatever Henry said would be fine. So Henry VIII gave Henry VIII permission to divorce.

There were two important figures in connection with these events, both with the name Thomas. One was Thomas More, who was the Lord Chancellor. Most people went along with Henry's decision to break with Rome. The Roman church was not very popular anyway in England. Quite a few people were glad to see the English church to be rid of the pope and the papacy. Thomas More, however, was a strong and true Catholic. He refused to acknowledge the Supremacy Act by which Henry VIII became head of the church in England. More said he could not "...conform [his] conscience to the counsel of one realm against the general counsel of Christendom." In other words, he could not bring himself to agree with Henry against all the rest of the church elsewhere.

It was not a good idea to disagree with Henry. Thomas More was executed. The play and movie, *A Man for All Seasons*, by Robert Bolt describes the story of Thomas More as an historic figure who took a stand for conscience against a manipulative king. There was that heroic side to Thomas More. Yet there was another side to Thomas More as well, and we should not view him completely as a hero. At the same time that he objected to Henry's action, Thomas More was very much involved in persecuting those who had already become Protestants, including William Tyndale the great Bible translator. This is one case that shows that we should not get all of our history from movies.

The other Thomas that I want to talk about is Thomas Cromwell. He was a Protestant Lutheran sympathizer. He was also the chief advisor to the king in ecclesiastical matters. Thomas Cromwell also eventually fell out of favor with Henry, and he too was beheaded by Henry's orders, even though he was a Protestant. It is not altogether clear what Henry was, whether he was a Protestant, a Catholic, a bit of both, or neither. The same day that Thomas Cromwell was executed, two other Protestants were burned, and three Catholic priests were hanged. All that happened according to the decision of the king. A foreigner who happened to be in London when that happened threw up his hands and said, "What a country England is. They hang papists and they burn anti-papists."

When Henry died, he was succeeded by his son Edward. Edward was Henry's son by his third wife, Jane Seymour. Edward was a boy of only 10 when he became king. Understandably, he was perplexed by what was going on around him. Under Protestant protectors, Edward was moved to embrace the Protestant faith. The Protestant Reformation that began under Henry but did not make much progress began to make much progress during the short six-year reign of Edward VI. Not only did the Protestant Reformation move in a Protestant direction, but it also moved in a Reformed direction. The earlier influence was more Lutheran. By the reign of the boy-king Edward VI, the Reformed influence was felt strongly in England. Edward received advice from Protestant leaders, including letters from John Calvin and others who encouraged this young man to take a strong stand for the Protestant faith. He did so. His advisors did so also. Unfortunately for Protestantism, Edward did not live very long. He died when he was 16 years old.

Protestants wanted to continue a Protestant succession in England. The Protestant Lady Jane Gray was briefly made queen in England. Yet the sympathy among the people was not with her. She was soon executed and the queen became Mary, daughter of King Henry VII and his first wife, the Spanish Catherine of Aragon. She was, of course, strongly Catholic. The pendulum swung back from the Protestant side to the Catholic side in England.

That swing produced many exiles. Many people realized that if Mary was queen, then it would be best for them to leave England. One of those people was John Knox, whom I will talk about in the next

lesson. There were others who fled. Perhaps 800 leaders from the English church fled to the continent to avoid persecution and death through the reign of Mary. Many did die. Perhaps 300 or more died because of their Protestant faith. That is why this Mary is known in history as “Bloody Mary,” because of her persecution of Protestants and the death of many Protestants. An article called “The Captivity Epistles of the English Reformation” tells the story of some of these men and women who were put into prison. Those people wrote letters to friends, expressing their faith in the Lord and their determination to stand true despite the cost and even with the prospect of facing death.

Out of this same period came one of the most famous books in English history, which was written by the contemporary John Foxe. We usually refer to that book as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, although its actual title is *Acts and Monuments*. John Foxe tells the story of many of the Marian martyrs. He also goes back and tells the story of martyrdom since the beginning. He saw the martyrs under Bloody Mary as continuing a great succession of faithful people since the days of the early church. This book is probably next to the English Bible, and alongside of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* as the three most important books in English church history and the most formative influences shaping England’s Protestantism. Some of the martyrs were famous people, but most were very ordinary people. Many were women. Some were very young people who died through the persecution during the days of Bloody Mary.

Fortunately for the Protestants, Mary died. She reigned only six years. The next ruler, another child of Henry VIII, was Elizabeth, daughter of his second wife, Ann Boleyn. Elizabeth I reigned a long time, 45 years. She was a brilliant ruler, a competent queen, and a Protestant. People still try to determine how fervently she held her Protestant convictions, but she was a Protestant, whether from expediency, conviction, or both. She certainly took the Protestant side of things. As I will explain later, however, she was not a Puritan.

The English church then had a leader, because the king or queen of England was the head of the church, not the pope. England had a leader committed to the Protestant faith. During the long reign of Elizabeth, the Protestant church was strongly established in England. It would continue, despite threats from Catholicism, all the way to the present.

It was a rather violent period of history in England. For a person living during that time, it must have been rather dismaying to pass through all of those sudden shifts. How did people cope with that? We know that some people coped by going into exile. Some died. Perhaps quite a few English people were like the famous village of Bray, a village in the Berkshires. The vicar of Bray served under Henry VII, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth. First he served as a Catholic, then as a Protestant, then as a Catholic again, and then as a Protestant again. Someone criticized him for that, saying he lacked conviction. The vicar of Bray replied, “I have always kept my principle, which is this: to live and to die the vicar of Bray.” So one way to cope with the changes in England was simply to shift a bit and to compromise enough to stay in favor with whoever was in control.

As one English church historian has said, “Even though the English Reformation is emphatically a political revolution [which is why I have to talk about kings and queens] that is not all it is. It is also a religious reformation.” I described the kings and queens and the role that they played. Now I will turn to the Reformers in the history of the English Reformation. I want to go all the way back to the fourteenth century and mention John Wycliffe, the great pre-reformer of the Protestant Reformation, and his followers who were called Lollards. For almost 150 years the Lollards had been preaching and presenting the Bible to people in English. The Bible had been translated by Wycliffe. Thus there was an indigenous pre-Protestant movement that began to bear fruit during this time.

The second important influence was Luther. Luther's writings were brought into England. We know that a study group met at the White Horse Inn in Cambridge from about 1520. The White Horse Inn is no longer in Cambridge, but there is a sign there marking where it was. It was a very important moment in English Protestant history, because people were meeting at the White Horse Inn to study the Bible and to pray and work for reformation. Soon that group, and the White Horse Inn, became known in Cambridge and beyond as "little Germany." The reason it was known as "little Germany," of course, is that so many books were coming into that place from Germany, which were Luther's books. The books were smuggled into England, hidden in bales of cloth coming in from Holland. One scholar has described the scene as a "forbidden book-of-the-month club" in Cambridge.

Some of the English leaders whom I would like to say something about were Cranmer, Latimer, and Tyndale. I spoke a little bit at the beginning of the lesson about Thomas Cranmer. He was the first archbishop of Canterbury, from 1533. One of his greatest contributions was the *Book of Common Prayer*. That book, which marks the worship of the English church from that time all the way to the present, was certainly impressive. Its loyalty to Scripture is clear. Someone has said, "It could almost be said that the *Book of Common Prayer* is the Bible arranged and paraphrased for devotional use." We can use the *Book of Common Prayer* in our own devotions. Even Presbyterians can use it, even though at certain points in Presbyterian history the *Book of Common Prayer* has been viewed as something oppressive and not something that Presbyterians rejoice for. Yet we can rejoice for it, because it is a wonderful book of public and private worship. Not only is it loyal to Scripture, but it also preserves the richness of medieval worship without adding or preserving some of the things that the Reformers were so opposed to.

Cranmer was a great soul. He was not a courageous man. He tended to be rather timid. He could back down rather quickly, and he always did what Henry said to do. In that way, he was able to stay in favor with the king. The king died before Cranmer did. Henry VIII died with his hand in the hand of Thomas Cranmer. One report says that as the king was dying Cranmer asked him, "Do you really trust in Christ as Savior? If you do, squeeze my hand." We do not know what happened, because Cranmer did not say. Until the very end he was preaching the Gospel in a gentle way to this king whom he had served so faithfully for so many years.

When Mary was on the throne, however, it was a different story. Cranmer was viewed as the arch-heretic, and he was burned at the stake in 1556 in Oxford. This was despite the fact that he had recanted. He had recanted a number of times, much to the delight of the Catholics. Then he had recanted his recantation, much to the dismay of the Catholics. Then he was burned anyway. There is a famous story about Cranmer's execution. He thrust his hand into the flames first, saying, "This hand which signed the cursed document [of his recantation] will be the first to suffer." Then he stepped into the flames himself and died.

Hugh Latimer was one of the great preachers of English history. He described himself as "as obstinate a papist as any was in England." That was until he met a man named Thomas Bilney in Cambridge. Bilney was called "Little Bilney," because he was a very small man. Yet he was a man of conviction and courage. One day Latimer was preaching a very anti-Protestant sermon, attacking Philip Melancthon and Lutheran doctrine. Bilney, who was a lovable and gentle sort of person, approached Latimer after the sermon and asked Latimer to hear his confession. Latimer the priest heard Bilney's confession, but he really heard the Gospel in that confession. Bilney not only confessed his sins, but he also confessed God's grace, the truth of the Bible, and justification by faith that Luther had been teaching. Bilney confessed everything Latimer needed to know to be saved. So the confessor heard the Gospel and never

forgot it. Latimer said that he heard more that day and learned more that day than he had learned in many years. Latimer said, "From that time forward I began to smell the Word of God and forsook the schoolmasters and such fooleries." There are many ways to witness, and that was the way God used to bring Latimer to Himself. Latimer became the best-known preacher of the English Reformation. One of the most famous sermons in English history is Latimer's "Sermon on the Plowers."

Latimer was also burned at the stake in Oxford in 1555. He preached until the very end. His last sermon was to Nicholas Ridley, a fellow Protestant who was to be burned with Latimer. Latimer could tell, as the time got close for the awful experience of dying in the flames, that Ridley was losing heart. Who would not lose heart at a time like that? Latimer encouraged him by saying, "Be of good Comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as I trust shall never be put out." There was a little humor there, despite the seriousness of what was about to happen. Latimer and Ridley died in the flames in Oxford.

William Tyndale is also someone I need to talk about, because Tyndale was responsible, after Wycliffe, for our Bible in English. Tyndale was educated at Oxford and Cambridge. He studied the Greek New Testament, the one that Erasmus had edited. He had a burning passion to translate the Bible into English directly from the Greek and the Hebrew. Wycliffe had translated his English Bible from the Latin Vulgate. In debating with Catholic clergy, they said that people were better off without the Bible in English. Tyndale was dismayed, distressed, and disturbed by that comment. His famous reply was, "I defy the pope and all his laws [against the Bible in the vernacular]. If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost," and he added, "than the pope does."

His goal was that the simple people of England would be able to know and love the Bible. That sounds like a wonderful thing for Tyndale to want to do, but it was still dangerous to do such a thing. Thomas More and others set out to oppose Tyndale. They believed that if he started translating the Bible, then he would start writing notes about it, which would sound just like Luther. Then the Protestant movement would overcome England.

Tyndale had to flee to the continent. He worked there for some time, translating the New Testament, which he completed in 1526. He translated almost half of the Old Testament by 1536, when he died. Single-handedly, in quite difficult circumstances, he translated two thirds of the Bible into English. Those books were published on the continent and then smuggled back into England. Tyndale was sought by the Catholics, betrayed, imprisoned, and finally executed by strangling. His dying prayer was, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." Henry was still king at the time. It was not long, only seven years after Tyndale died, that Henry gave permission for what is called in English history the *Great Bible* to be distributed throughout England. The *Great Bible* was largely based on Tyndale's work, although Miles Coverdale edited it and completed it, but it was mostly Tyndale. Henry gave the *Great Bible* to Cranmer and to Cromwell, his two associates, and then on the cover page they gave it to the people of England.

We know that before too many more years passed a new Bible was translated, called the *Authorized Version* in England. It is generally called the *King James Version* in America. It was published in 1611. Fifty leading scholars worked on this famous translation. Yet 90% of it came from one man, Tyndale, who by himself in trying times translated the Bible into English. There are many Tyndale translations that are still preserved through the history of the English Bible, such as "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." Others are "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." "In Him we live and move and have our being." "Where two or three are gathered together in my name." I could

continue in words that are very familiar to us, because they are words that go all the way back to the Bible translator William Tyndale. His translations were so good because of their creativity, nobility of language, accuracy, rhythm, freshness. He was a man whom God gifted with knowledge of the languages, including English, so he could bring out of the Greek and Hebrew the nuances of the meaning of God's Word. It was like what Lefevre did with French and what Luther did with German. So we have the wonderful work of William Tyndale in English.

I will end this lesson with a benediction from John Foxe of *Foxes Book of Martyrs*. He was a man who lived through this period and preserved many of these stories for us. We are grateful to God for him. This is his prayer, "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you in all your studious readings, that by reading you may learn daily to know that which may profit your soul, may teach you experience, may arm you with patience, and instruct you in spiritual knowledge more and more to your perpetual comfort and salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord: to whom be glory in all ages. Amen."

You might wonder how England viewed a 10-year-old king when Edward took the throne. Succession was so important that it did not matter who the person was, man or woman, or what age, as long as the succession was authentic. It was clear according to English law that the oldest son succeeded first, followed by the daughters. The other factor that has to be remembered was that Edward was really a figurehead. There were very strong protectors for him—two of them. In essence there was somebody else running the country. Edward was merely sitting on the throne, but others were telling him what to do or say. The feeling I have about Edward is that he was a rather precocious boy, and he began to understand what he was being told. He read the letters from John Calvin, and he was impressed with what his teachers were telling him. So there was not a strain between this little-boy king, this teenage king, and the powers behind the throne. Always in English history, and probably any other country, when there was a juvenile on the throne there were potential problems. It just so happened that they did not take place during Edward's reign. He only lived six years while on the throne, however, and if he had lived longer there may have been some uprising against him.

One question that is asked is about the substance of Cranmer's recantations. He tried to be very cautious in what he said. He did not deny the Gospel, but he acknowledged that the pope was right and the English church was wrong in breaking with the pope. He was forced to accept transubstantiation and some of the other Catholic doctrines that he had earlier repudiated. I believe Cranmer realized that, in effect, he was denying the Gospel. As people would understand what he had done, they would view him as going back to Rome. Cranmer struggled because there were two allegiances in his life. One was the sovereign, and the other was God. Sometimes he got them mixed up, not often, but sometimes. At the end we find him in a great moment coming back to what he deeply knew was true.

One might wonder about the political situation in England at this time. England had gone through the Hundred Years War with France, which had been a difficult time. Then it had its own civil war called the War of the Roses, which was between the house of Lancaster and the house of York. Out of that war had come Henry VII, who had been able to unite the kingdom. The Tudor reign, of Henry VII and Henry VIII through Elizabeth I, was a period in which England was solidified after several hundred years of political disturbance. It solidified rather quickly. Henry VIII was such a strong-willed absolute monarch that England was politically in far better shape by the end of his reign than it had been in a long time. Thus by the middle of the reign of Henry VIII, England was unified as were France and Spain. Germany and Italy were quite different. After Spain and France, England was the great world power.

Another question that gets asked is how the King James Version of the Bible was received in 1611. It was received like any new thing. People objected to the new Bible, the modern edition. They liked the

old ones better, particularly the *Geneva Bible*. I did not mention the *Geneva Bible*, but it was produced by the Puritans in Geneva in about 1560. It took several generations for the *Authorized Version* to overcome those objections. That is since many people today think of the *Authorized Version* as the only Bible, and they do not like new translations. At one point in history, however, the King James Bible was the new translation, and there were plenty of people who wanted to continue using the older versions.

Another question I will deal with is whether there was persecution of Catholics when the Protestants were in power. The answer is yes. It did not happen until Elizabeth's time, at least not much. It became clear during her time that England was going to become a Protestant country. There were many Catholic plots, including a plot to blow up Parliament. People expected a Jesuit everywhere to be hiding in the bushes. Sometimes Catholics were brought out and executed, including Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots. The persecution went both ways. We do not gain anything by saying that Catholics killed more than the Protestants. The tally does not matter. If anybody killed anybody, which certainly did happen, then both sides were guilty.

For a while, Catholics tried to insist that *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* was an exaggeration. They said that most of his stories were made up and the things did not happen and he was a poor historian. More recent studies have shown that Foxe was relying upon authentic records. C. S. Lewis, for instance, said about Foxe, "If he was not a great historian, he was an honest man." We can trust *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, and when we repeat those stories we are not saying things that probably did not happen. They probably did happen, and I think that most Catholic scholars would not deny them. They would say that Protestants killed Catholics too, which was true and continued to be true for a long time.

You may want to know what Thomas More's writing in theology was like. It was quite scholastic, quite medieval and traditional. There was a writing that went out under the name of Henry VII, called *A Defense of the Seven Sacraments*, which was an attack upon Luther. Henry may have written that, but probably not. It was probably Thomas More. Luther was not very impressed with it. He said, "Either a fool wrote it or a fool let it go out under his name." That was an insult against the king of England either way, but Luther was safe in Wittenberg. London was a long way away. The pope rather liked the writing, however, and he gave Henry a title. Henry had wanted a title from the pope for a long time. Due to the tension over the divorce issue, Henry did not receive a title until the book was published. The title was "The Defender of the Faith," which meant the Catholic faith. The present queen of England is also the Defender of the Faith, because the title continued to be passed down through history. So, one of the titles of the sovereign of England is Defender of the Faith, but it is a different faith. It is the faith of the Church of England.