

## Reformation in England

### Henry VIII's marital problems separate the English church from Rome: but the England Reformation doesn't end there

Reformation fever crossed the English Channel within 15 years of its outbreak in Europe. In 1534, King Henry VIII (1491-1547), broke with the Church of Rome for personal reasons and assumed control over the Church of England—with himself as its temporal head and the Archbishop of Canterbury as ecclesiastical leader. But Henry was a conservative. Before the break with Rome the Pope had honored the English king with the title "Defender of the Faith" because of Henry's writings against Lutheran theology. Henry was no Protestant, and during his rule the Mass continued to be celebrated in Latin and Parliament approved "Six Articles" that imposed Catholic doctrines on the church. Henry's only concession to Protestant reformers was a decree that every church had to make one copy of an English-language Bible available to laypeople.



Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and architect of the English Reformation, died a martyr's death during the reign of Queen Mary.

The situation changed with Henry's death in 1547. The next ruler, Edward VI, was a pious and studious youth who believed in the Reformation. During his brief six-year reign, Lutheran and Reformed theology invaded the kingdom. One of the most important vehicles for Protestant influence was the Book of Common Prayer—authored principally by Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer. It replaced the Latin Mass as the official liturgy of the Church of England. Apart from its theological achievement as a book that harmonized Catholic liturgy with Reformed doctrine, the Book of Common Prayer set high standards for spiritual expression which influenced the liturgical reforms of American Protestants in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Book of Common Prayer was also second only to the King James Bible in its impact on the development of the English language.

But Edward's Reformation ended abruptly when the young king died in 1553. His success was his embittered half-sister Mary Tudor. Her five-year reign was marred by a bloody campaign to restore the Roman Catholic Church. Bishops, priests and laypeople who refused to renounce their Protestant faith were imprisoned, exiled or executed. Cranmer was deposed from office and burned at the stake. Over 800 dissenters fled to the Continent where they absorbed the teachings of John Calvin and other radical reformers.

The English Parliament was more than ready to abandon Mary's experiment in Roman Catholic restoration when the Queen died in 1558. Her Protestant half-sister, Elizabeth (1558-1603), came to the throne. Elizabeth reestablished the Protestant Church of England but it was—by the standards of the time—a more inclusive and tolerant church. The Latin Mass again gave way to the Book of Common Prayer—this time for good. Moderate scholars who defended the Anglican Church as a "middle way" between the Roman and Reformed churches were appointed as bishops. Elizabeth's aim was to unify the kingdom and end the religious conflict between her Protestant and Catholic subjects. But more radical Protestants—returning from Geneva and other centers of the Reformed faith—wanted the religious revolution to continue. Their goal was to "purify" the church of doctrines and practices they believed were still tainted by Roman Catholicism. These "Puritans," as their opponents named them in 1563, criticized Anglican liturgy and the state church's lack of spiritual discipline.

The Puritans laid the theological foundations for the later separatist movement of Congregationalism. But for the time being, they remained in the Church of England as an influential faction, gaining adherents among the rising middle class.

What did the Puritans believe? They were visionaries whose Reformed faith centered on the sovereignty of God. This God was in confrontation with humanity, and every church had to submit to his will as revealed in the Bible (and interpreted by the Puritans). The Church of England would never be purified until it abandoned all traditions—like the office of bishop and Catholic ceremonies that survived in the Book of Common Prayer—which

the Puritans abhorred as the idolatrous remnants of "Popery." Puritan zeal conflicted sharply with the established church. Bishops were afraid of losing control, and Elizabeth's conservative government wanted to stabilize society after years of exhausting religious conflict.

Elizabeth had no heir, so England turned to the ruling Stuart family in Scotland to find its next king. The Scottish Reformation had been strongly influenced by Calvinism, so the Puritans expected great things from the new monarchs. But they were disappointed. The first ruler in the Stuart line, James I, continued Elizabeth's moderate policies, defended the institution of bishop and demanded conformity to the Book of Common Prayer. He was, like Elizabeth, a religious conservative who disliked radical reform and believed bishops were needed to maintain control over the church. But there was one great advance for the Reformation during his reign—publication of the "King James Bible" translated by the best Bible scholars of the day, and, along with the Book of Common Prayer, a decisive influence on the development of the English language.

But the radical Puritans were no closer to their goals than they had been when Elizabeth was ruler. They were by now a divided though still influential movement. Most chose to remain in the Church of England. But a minority now decided that reform of the established church was a lost cause, and began to organize their own illegal congregations. Among these "Separatists" were congregations that later were evolved into movements we know today as Quakers, Baptists, and Congregationalists.

Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth was the high-water mark of Puritan influence in England. But after the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, Puritans began to look towards New England as the place where their experiment could continue.

## Temporary ascendancy of Puritanism



Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth was the high-water mark of Puritan influence in England. But after the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, Puritans began to look towards New England as the place where their experiment could continue.

Then, during the reign of the second Stuart king, Charles I (1625-49), there was a sudden reversal of fortunes. Charles attempted to suppress the fractious Puritans and impose uniformity in the established church. But this was a mistake. The Puritans were essentially a middle-class movement and therefore influential in Parliament. Rival armies were now organized by Parliament and the King. The parliamentary forces led by Oliver Cromwell triumphed and captured the king. Charles was beheaded—an act of "regicide" that horrified the ruling classes throughout Europe and prefigured the violence of later revolutions. Parliament declared England a "Commonwealth" and Cromwell its "Lord Protector." He ruled England from 1649 to 1660 as "Lord Protector." These were 11 years of intolerance and excessive zeal. The office of bishop was abolished and the Book of Common Prayer replaced with a Directory of Worship. When Cromwell died, even Parliament had had enough. They petitioned the exiled son of Charles—Charles II—who returned on condition that the former Church of England with its bishops and liturgy was restored.

Cromwell had favored the emerging "Congregational" faction in Puritanism but never established Congregationalism as the state church. The "Congregational Way" can probably trace its birth to 1567 when a group of Separatists, calling themselves "The Privye Church," began to worship in London's Plumbers' Hall. They were persecuted severely and their leaders killed. But Congregationalists continued to worship secretly in fields and private homes—always at the risk of detection and arrest. The persecution continued through the reigns of the Stuart kings, with a brief respite only during Cromwell's Commonwealth.

## Churches bound together by covenants

Robert Browne, an Anglican priest, was the first conspicuous advocate of Congregationalism in England. By gathering in 1581 a congregation in Norwich, Brown expressed his conviction that the only true church was a local

body of believers who experienced the Christian life together—united to Christ and one another by a voluntary "covenant" or solemn agreement. Christ, not the temporal ruler, was the head of the church. Congregations were autonomous and elected their own pastors, teachers, elders and deacons according to the authority of the New Testament. But these autonomous churches were bound to each other by mutual covenants and would meet together in "synods" to settle questions about faith and practice. Browne was imprisoned 32 times and finally fled to the Netherlands. He retained his beliefs but did not remain a Congregationalist; he returned from exile in Holland to pastor a small Anglican parish in England.

One of the early Separatists during the reign of James I was William Brewster, a merchant and lay preacher who became the future spiritual leader of the Pilgrims. His home at Scrooby Manor was a secret Separatist meeting place. John Robinson was teacher of the small congregation and Brewster was ruling elder. In 1607 the illegal church was discovered and its members imprisoned or forced into exile. Those who escaped arrest fled first to Amsterdam and then to Leiden, Holland, where Robinson became their leader.

## Pilgrims and Puritans arrive in the New World

Holland was a Reformed country and its cities welcomed the Separatists and other persecuted Protestant refugees from England and France. But here some of the exiles began to realize that if they remained, their children would inevitably be assimilated into the language and culture of their host country. They could not return safely to England, but perhaps in North America they could build a new life. They decided to risk the long journey across the Atlantic. Joining with several families from the French Huguenot church in Leiden, they called themselves "Pilgrims." John Robinson, their beloved pastor who remained in Leiden, counseled the departing exiles to build a "civil community" obedient to God but bound together by love. Beware of a "touchy humor" that "easily" took offense at others, he warned. "Your intended course of civil community will minister continual occasion of offense, and will be as fuel for that fire, except you diligently quench it with brotherly forbearance." And in words that have inspired members of the United Church of Christ to this day, he counselled the Pilgrims not to fear change but to be open to the revelation of new truth in God's word:

*Brethren, we are now erelong to part asunder, and the Lord knoweth whether I shall live ever to see your faces more. But whether the Lord hath appointed it or not, I charge you before God and His blessed angels to follow me no farther than I have followed Christ. If God should reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth of my ministry; for I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy word.*

The Pilgrims set sail on the Mayflower and dropped anchor off the coast of Cape Cod in 1620. Arriving at Plymouth, their leaders realized that their survival in an uncharted wilderness rested on the formation of strong religious and political ties. So the colonists drew up and signed an "Association and Agreement"—the Mayflower Compact—modelled on Robinson's teachings. From the first the small colony was to be a "Civil Body Politic" governed by a solemn covenant.

The Separatists were not the only group of English radicals to leave their homeland while the Stuarts continued to crack down on religious dissent. In 1630, John Winthrop and his Puritan followers left aboard the ship *Arabella*. Their destination was Massachusetts Bay not far from the original Pilgrim settlement. At about the same time, a covenanting Puritan congregation arrived from England under the leadership of John Endecott and settled in Salem, across Massachusetts Bay and north of Boston. They sent a letter to the Separatist Church at Plymouth to ask for guidance. Commissioned delegates from Plymouth extended to the Salem Church "the right hand of fellowship." The Congregational principle of mutual covenant between local congregations was already taking root in New England.



Dwellings at Plimoth Plantation, a recreation of the original Pilgrim colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts  
Pilgrims and Puritans arrive in the New World

Source: <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/england.htm>  
Used With Permission