

Church History: “The Reformation” 1500 -1900

(Part 5)

“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.

“In a sense England had two reformations: a constitutional one under King Henry VIII (1509-1547) and a theological one under the Puritans almost a century later. Under Henry nothing changed doctrinally. England simply rejected the authority of Rome.

“How could such a thing happen? Why did England, even without any great theological issue, overthrow the longstanding authority of the Church of Rome?”
“Church History” Bruce L Shelley p. 275

“Henry had been granted permission by the Pope to marry Catherine of Aragon after the death of his brother Arthur, her previous husband, but as his love for Catherine waned, especially after her failure to give birth to a living son and heir to the king – two sons had died in infancy – he requested another Pope to annul the marriage. To state the matter more exactly, Henry asked the Pope to declare that the papal permission given him to marry Catherine was contrary to the law of God, and that, in consequence, he had not been married to Catherine in any true sense at all. Hence he was free to marry another. Pope Clement VII did not actually refuse Henry’s request, but deliberately prolonged negotiations, never intending to reach a decision favorable to the king. The Emperor Charles V, who had presided over Luther’s trial at the Diet of Worms in 1521, was Catherine’s nephew, and the Pope could not afford to displease him; he was the most powerful monarch of his time.

“Henry wanted to marry Anne Boleyn, lady-in-waiting at the court, and finally, in desperation, he broke with the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. The King then declared himself head of the Church of England. He beheaded two principle men opposed to his actions, persuaded Parliament to pass Acts making the new arrangements in Church and State lawful, and dissolved the numerous monasteries. The monasteries were strongholds of the Papacy. By these measure the king brought about the political Reformation.

“But, as has been said already, Henry was never a Protestant. He continued to defend the principal teachings of the Roman Catholic church, required all people in England and Wales to adhere to the Roman creed, and was quite willing to put to death men and women who opposed his will by embracing Protest doctrine.”
“Sketches of Church History” S.M. Houghton p.112

“When the Pope countered Henry’s move by excommunicating him, Henry realized that papal authority in England had to be overthrown. He discovered an old fourteenth-century law prohibiting dealings with foreign

powers and used it to insist that the English clergy stop their dealings with the pope. A year later, 1534, the Act of Supremacy declared, “ The king’s majesty justly and rightly is and ought to be and shall be reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England.

“Only two serious changes marked the new way within the Church of England. The first was the suppression of the monasteries; the second was the publication of the English Bible for use in the churches. Henry used the monastic properties – almost one-tenth of the national wealth – to replenish the royal coffers and to gain support from favored barons and gentry who were given or purchased the property.

“The second change in the Church of England occurred when Henry ordered that an English Bible be installed in all the churches.”

“Church History” Bruce L Shelley p. 278

William Tyndale

“William Tyndale was born in the 1490’s on the Welsh border. He was educated at Magdalen Hall, Oxford and later at Cambridge. Tyndale experienced at first hand the ignorance of the clergy: to one cleric he is reported to have declared that *‘if God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost’*. This task became Tyndale’s life work.

The only English translation of the Bible at this time was the Wycliffe Bible. This was available only in manuscript form and was inaccurate, having been translated from the Latin Vulgate. Tyndale’s aim was to make a new accurate translation from the original Hebrew and Greek. But the bishops were more concerned to prevent the spread of Luther’s ideas to England than to promote the study of the Bible, and they refused to support Tyndale.

England was no safe place to be translating the Bible so Tyndale left for Germany in 1524, never to return. By early 1525 the New Testament was ready for the press. It was being printed in Cologne when the authorities were alerted and raided the press. Tyndale managed to escape in time, taking with him some of the printed leaves. He went to Worms, where the first complete English New Testament was printed in 1526. Tyndale’s New Testament was smuggled into England – and copies were ceremonially burnt at St. Paul’s Cross.

“Tyndale’s translation has had an immense influence and has rightly earned him the title of ‘the father of the English Bible’. Some 90 percent of his words passed into the King James Version and about 75 per cent into the Revised Standard Version.

Tyndale planned to translate the entire Old Testament. But in 1535 he was betrayed by a fellow Englishman at Antwerp and arrested. The following year he was strangled and then burnt at Brussels. It is reported that his final words were: ‘Lord, open the king of England’s eyes’. Henry VIII, permitted the publication of English translations of the Bible from 1535, all drawing heavily on Tyndale. These helped to prepare ground for the introduction of Protestant ideas in the reign of Edward VI.

“Chirstian Thought” Tony Lane p.154

