

The English Reformation

Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy, Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer, the Oxford Martyrs, and Elizabeth's settlement — the birth of Anglican Christianity • 1527–1603

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 7

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Where this fits: Lesson 18 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — Noll's seventh turning point. The English Reformation begins thirteen years after **Luther at Worms (Lesson 15)**, runs parallel to **Calvin at Geneva (Lesson 16)**, and produces the Anglican tradition from which the American Puritans, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians all eventually descend. This is also the lesson most directly connected to **our English Bible story (Lesson 13)**. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

The English Reformation is unlike the German or Swiss Reformations in one decisive respect: it was *started* by a king. Martin Luther began with a pastor's conscience; Zwingli began with a humanist's Bible; John Calvin began with a scholar's conversion. **Henry VIII** began with a divorce. The English church broke with Rome in 1534 not because an English theologian had studied Romans and come back transformed, but because an English king wanted a new wife and an heir and needed the Pope's cooperation to get them. The Pope refused. Henry declared himself head of the Church of England and granted the annulment himself.

The initial break was political. But something extraordinary happened inside the new national church in the thirty years that followed. A careful, liturgical, biblically trained Archbishop of

Canterbury named **Thomas Cranmer** produced the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549, revised 1552), one of the single most consequential books of English prose ever written. The **Great Bible** was ordered placed in every parish church (1539). The **Thirty-Nine Articles** emerged as the doctrinal basis. And a stream of **martyrs** — under both Catholic and Protestant monarchs — watered the ground.

The Anglican tradition that resulted is today the third-largest Christian communion on earth (after Catholic and Orthodox), with about 85 million members. But its ripples reach well beyond Anglicanism. Every Methodist descends from an Anglican (John Wesley was an Anglican priest until his death). Every American Episcopalian is a direct heir. Every English-speaking Baptist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian tradition was shaped by the Puritan reaction *inside* the Church of England. The Pilgrims and the Puritans both walked to America out of English Reformation history — disagreeing, respectively, with and within it.

*Greek NT (1 Pet 2:13–17): ὑποτάγητε πάσῃ ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει δια τὸ ἔν κύριον...
το ἔν θεο ἔν φοβεῖσθε, το ἔν βασιλέα τιμᾶτε.*

1 Peter 2:13–17 (ESV): “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution... Fear God. Honor the emperor.”

Every figure in this lesson had to decide what those two imperatives meant when Caesar claimed the church.

PART 1 — THE ENGLISH CHURCH BEFORE HENRY

In 1500 the Church of England was a well-organized, moderately wealthy, and broadly loyal branch of Western Catholic Christianity. A century earlier it had survived the Wycliffe and Lollard agitation (see **Lesson 13 Parts 2–3**) with heavy-handed repression; Lollard convictions still survived in pockets across the Midlands but the institutional church was intact. English abbeys and cathedrals held roughly a quarter of all cultivated land in the kingdom. English clergy were, by and large, conventionally Catholic.

The humanist current. By 1520 a small circle of English scholars — led by **John Colet** (Dean of St. Paul’s), **Erasmus** (who had taught at Cambridge 1511–1514), and their friend **Thomas More** — was producing serious biblical scholarship and moderate reform proposals.

They read the Greek New Testament. They preached expositively on Paul. They criticized monastic corruption. None of them wanted a break with Rome.

Young Henry and Luther. When Martin Luther's writings appeared, the 30-year-old King Henry VIII, a theologically trained Catholic, joined the attack. In 1521 he published (with help from More and others) the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* — the *Defense of the Seven Sacraments* — a Latin refutation of Luther's *Babylonian Captivity*. Pope Leo X, delighted, granted Henry the title *Fidei Defensor* — “Defender of the Faith.” (The initials F.D. still appear on British coins today, though the faith being defended is now Protestant Anglican, not Roman Catholic — a historical irony no one missed then or since.)

No one in 1521 could have imagined that this papally commended Defender of the Faith would, thirteen years later, make himself head of the Church of England.

PART 2 — THE KING'S GREAT MATTER (1527–1533)

Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547)

SECOND SON OF HENRY VII TUDOR • ACCEDED 1509 AT 17 • MARRIED SIX TIMES • DIED 28 JANUARY 1547 AT 55

Defender of the Faith

Supreme Head

In 1509 the eighteen-year-old Henry married **Catherine of Aragon**, the widow of his older brother Arthur (who had died at 15 after only five months of marriage). Pope Julius II had issued a special dispensation to permit the marriage, since canon law forbade marrying a deceased brother's wife (Leviticus 18:16, 20:21). The marriage produced six children of whom only one, the future Queen Mary, survived infancy. By 1525, Catherine was 40; no male heir had been born; Henry was in love with Anne Boleyn, a young English noblewoman; and Henry was increasingly convinced that his lack of a son was divine punishment for marrying his brother's widow.

1527 • Henry asks his chancellor **Cardinal Wolsey** to secure an annulment from Pope Clement VII. Wolsey tries, but Clement is a political prisoner of Emperor Charles V —

Catherine's nephew — and cannot annul the marriage without offending Catherine's family.

1529 • The legatine court at Blackfriars. Cardinal Campeggio, sent by Rome, adjourns the case indefinitely. Wolsey falls from favor; dies of illness the next year on his way to face treason charges.

1529–1536 • The “*Reformation Parliament*.” Summoned originally for ordinary business, it ends up passing every major piece of Reformation legislation.

1532 • **Thomas Cromwell** becomes Henry's chief minister. A brilliant, ruthless lawyer and parliamentary manager, Cromwell will engineer the legal separation of the English church from Rome.

January 1533 • Anne Boleyn is pregnant. Henry secretly marries her. **Thomas Cranmer**, newly returned from an ambassadorial mission in Germany (where he has secretly married a Lutheran woman), is appointed Archbishop of Canterbury and consecrated in March.

April 1533 • Parliament passes the **Act in Restraint of Appeals**, Cromwell's masterpiece. Its preamble famously declares: “This realm of England is an Empire... governed by one Supreme Head and King.” It forbids appeals to Rome on any ecclesiastical or marriage matter.

May 1533 • Cranmer's special court at Dunstable declares Catherine's marriage void from the beginning. Anne Boleyn is publicly declared queen.

September 1533 • Anne gives birth to a healthy daughter — Elizabeth, who will one day be the greatest Tudor monarch. Henry is furious; he needed a son.

In November 1534, the Reformation Parliament passed the most important piece of legislation in English religious history since Magna Carta: the **Act of Supremacy**. Its text was brief and breathtaking:

THE ACT OF SUPREMACY • NOVEMBER 1534

“Albeit the King’s Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England... be it enacted by authority of this present Parliament that the King our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called Anglicana Ecclesia; and shall have and enjoy, annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm, as well the title and style thereof, as all honors, dignities, preeminences, jurisdictions, privileges, authorities, immunities, profits, and commodities to the said dignity of supreme head of the same Church belonging and appertaining.”

In a single sentence, a thousand years of English papal allegiance ended. The Pope’s name was to be removed from English service books. All appeals to Rome were forbidden. Clerics had to swear an oath acknowledging the king’s supremacy on pain of treason. Papal first-fruits and taxes were redirected to the crown.

Thomas More (1478–1535)

LORD CHANCELLOR 1529–1532 • CATHOLIC HUMANIST • AUTHOR OF *UTOPIA* • EXECUTED 6 JULY 1535

Martyr

Catholic conscience

Thomas More, Henry’s closest intellectual friend, refused to swear the oath. So did Bishop John Fisher of Rochester. Both were tried for treason under the new Treason Act (1534), which made denying Henry’s supremacy a capital crime.

More was beheaded on Tower Hill on 6 July 1535. His last reported words have become one of the great lines in English moral history:

“The King’s good servant, but God’s first.”

— **Thomas More, 6 July 1535 (traditional form from the earliest biographies)**

The Roman Catholic Church canonized him in 1935 — four centuries later, to the year.

PART 4 — CROMWELL, THE DISSOLUTION, AND THE GREAT BIBLE (1535–1540)

Between 1535 and 1540, Cromwell as Henry's Vice-Gerent in spiritual affairs oversaw the most sweeping transformation of English religious life in six hundred years.

1536–1541 • The Dissolution of the Monasteries. Starting with smaller houses (1536) and ending with the large abbeys (1539–41), Cromwell systematically closed every monastic establishment in England and confiscated their lands and treasures for the crown. About 900 monasteries, convents, and friaries were dissolved. The crown, briefly the richest monarchy in Europe, sold the lands off cheaply to the gentry, creating a class of Protestant landowners with a permanent financial interest in never reverting to Rome.

The cost of the Dissolution. Monasteries had been England's hospitals, schools, libraries, poor-relief systems, and liturgical performance-halls for a thousand years. Their dissolution produced genuine reform — there had been real corruption — and genuine catastrophe for the poor, the sick, and the landscape itself. The Pilgrimage of Grace (1536), a massive popular uprising in the North, showed the depth of resistance. Henry's army crushed it; roughly 200 participants, including the monk-leader Robert Aske, were executed.

1536 • Anne Boleyn is beheaded at the Tower. Henry marries Jane Seymour within days. William Tyndale is executed at Vilvoorde (see **Lesson 13 Part 4**).

1537 • Matthew's Bible — Tyndale's translation circulated under John Rogers's pseudonym — is licensed for use in England. Tyndale's prayer at Vilvoorde has been

answered: Henry's eyes have been opened.

1539 • The **Great Bible**, Coverdale's folio revision of Matthew's Bible, is placed in every parish church in England by royal injunction. Every English adult can now hear Scripture read in their own tongue on Sunday.

1540 • Cromwell falls. Henry's disastrous marriage to Anne of Cleves (arranged by Cromwell) has angered the king; conservative enemies exploit the moment. Cromwell is executed without trial on 28 July 1540 — the same day Henry marries his fifth wife, Catherine Howard.

Henry's theological ambiguity. Henry himself never became a Protestant. The Act of Six Articles (1539) reaffirmed transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, and other Catholic doctrines under penalty of death for deniers. Protestants were burned at Smithfield on the same days Catholics were hanged for denying the supremacy. Henry's England was a Catholic country without a pope — theologically unstable ground that would not hold after his death.

PART 5 — EDWARD VI & CRANMER'S REFORMATION (1547–1553)

Henry died on 28 January 1547. His nine-year-old son **Edward VI** (by Jane Seymour) inherited the throne. Edward had been raised by Protestant tutors; his two successive regents — the Duke of Somerset, then the Duke of Northumberland — were committed Protestants. For six years England was, for the first time, a Protestant country in doctrine as well as polity.

Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556)

CAMBRIDGE FELLOW • ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY 1533–1556 •
ARCHITECT OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION • BURNED AT OXFORD 21
MARCH 1556

Book of Common Prayer

Archbishop

Martyr

Thomas Cranmer was a cautious, careful, scholarly Cambridge don who had caught Henry VIII's attention in 1529 by suggesting that the king's annulment question should be tested in the universities rather than Rome. Made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533, he served Henry loyally for the next fourteen years while quietly moving toward Protestant convictions himself. Under Edward VI, he had the freedom to put those convictions into the church's liturgy and doctrine. The result was the *Book of Common Prayer* — arguably the single most influential work of English prose after the King James Bible.

Cranmer's reforms under Edward:

1547 • *Book of Homilies* — a collection of twelve sermons to be read from every pulpit, covering justification by faith, Scripture, salvation, and charity. One of the twelve is Cranmer's own *Homily on the Salvation of Mankind*, a beautifully compressed statement of Protestant soteriology.

1549 • **First Book of Common Prayer**. The entire English liturgy — Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, the Communion Service, baptism, marriage, burial — rendered into a single English-language volume. Still partly Catholic in tone (prayers for the dead survived; vestments remained); but in English, for the first time.

1552 • **Second Book of Common Prayer** — substantially revised toward Reformed theology. The words of institution at Communion are carefully chosen to exclude transubstantiation. "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving."

1553 • Cranmer produces the **Forty-Two Articles** of religion — the first doctrinal standard of the English church. Under Elizabeth these will be revised to the **Thirty-Nine Articles** (1563) still binding on Anglican clergy today.

Edward's death. On 6 July 1553, Edward VI died of tuberculosis at 15, having reigned only six years. The attempt by Northumberland to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne failed within nine days. Henry's elder daughter Mary — Catherine of Aragon's child, and a devout Catholic — took the crown.

Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* deserves its own section. It is the single most consequential liturgical book of the Reformation and, alongside the King James Bible, the most influential work of English prose in history. Five features made it enduring:

1. Comprehensive. All worship — daily prayer, Sunday service, Communion, baptism, marriage, burial, ordination — in one volume any parish priest could hold.

2. Vernacular. English throughout — the congregation could understand and participate.

3. Biblical. The daily Office prescribed reading the entire Old Testament once and the New Testament three times each year, plus the Psalms every month. Just reading the Morning and Evening Prayer lections would carry the worshipper through the whole Bible annually.

4. Prosaic genius. Cranmer's English — balanced, measured, capable of both intimacy and majesty — became one of the defining voices of the language itself.

5. Traditional continuity. The structure preserved ancient Christian patterns of daily prayer, the liturgical year, and catholic sacramental life while translating them into a Protestant theological key.

Enduring phrases. Many lines you have heard all your life come directly from the BCP (quotations here from the 1662 edition, which is the classical form still used by most Anglican churches):

CRANMER'S LANGUAGE • STILL IN YOUR MEMORY

"We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts." (General Confession, Morning Prayer)

“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit.” (Collect for Purity)

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God... to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony... till death us do part.” (Marriage Service)

“In the midst of life we are in death... ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.” (Burial Service)

“Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.” (Collect at Evening Prayer)

The 1549, 1552, 1559, and 1662 editions successively refined the text. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer is the version still read in traditional Anglican services around the world today.

PART 7 — MARY I & THE OXFORD MARTYRS (1553–1558)

Mary I (r. 1553–1558), Henry’s 37-year-old eldest daughter, came to the throne determined to reverse her father’s and her brother’s reforms and restore England to Rome. Within a year she had:

- **Restored Catholic worship.** The 1552 Prayer Book was abolished; the Latin Mass was reinstated.
- **Married Philip II of Spain** (July 1554), to England’s horror.
- **Formally returned England to papal obedience** in November 1554, with Cardinal Reginald Pole restored as Archbishop of Canterbury after Cranmer’s arrest.

• **Begun burning Protestants** under the revived medieval heresy statutes. From February 1555 through November 1558, ~**290 Protestants** were burned at the stake across England. The policy was intended to terrify; it produced a generation of martyrs whose stories, collected in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, would shape English Protestant identity for centuries.

The most famous martyrs:

4 February 1555 • John Rogers (translator of **Matthew's Bible, 1537**) is burned at Smithfield — the first Marian martyr.

16 October 1555 • Hugh Latimer, former Bishop of Worcester, and **Nicholas Ridley**, Bishop of London, are burned together outside Balliol College, Oxford. Latimer's farewell to Ridley is among the most famous sentences in the English language:

“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.”

— **Hugh Latimer to Nicholas Ridley, Oxford, 16 October 1555**

21 March 1556 • Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, is burned at the same spot in Oxford. Under prolonged psychological pressure in prison, he had signed multiple recantations; but at the stake, in front of the crowd, he denounced his recantations, declared the Pope Antichrist, and (according to every eyewitness account) thrust his right hand — the hand that had signed the recantations — into the flames first, holding it steady as it burned. He is reported to have cried “This hand hath offended” as the fire consumed it, and then “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” as the flames took the rest of him.

The Marian Exiles. Some 800 English Protestants fled to continental Protestant cities during Mary's reign — Strasbourg, Frankfurt, Zurich, and above all **Geneva**, where they sat under Calvin and his successor Beza. Among them were Miles Coverdale, John Knox, and the translators of the Geneva Bible (1560). When they returned in 1559 under Queen Elizabeth, they brought Calvinist theology home in force. They would become the founders of English Puritanism.

Mary's death. On 17 November 1558, without having produced an heir, after five years of increasingly desperate reign, Mary died of what was probably uterine cancer. Cardinal Pole died the same day. England passed to her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth.

PART 8 — ELIZABETH'S SETTLEMENT (1559)

Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603)

ANNE BOLEYN'S DAUGHTER • 25 YEARS OLD AT ACCESSION • REIGNED 44 YEARS • DIED A VIRGIN, 24 MARCH 1603

Supreme Governor

Via media

Settlement

Elizabeth inherited a country divided by twenty-five years of religious convulsion. Her genius — political more than theological — was to construct a settlement moderate enough that most Englishmen could live with it. Her doctrinal instincts were broadly Protestant, with traces of old-fashioned piety (she kept candles and a crucifix in her private chapel). Her parliament was Protestant and firmly in control. The result was a compromise called the **Elizabethan Settlement** — a deliberately middle way, a *via media*, between Rome and Geneva.

April 1559 • The **Act of Supremacy** is renewed. But Elizabeth's title is *Supreme Governor* (not Supreme Head — a nod to conservatives who preferred not to give a woman authority over a church that Christ alone heads). All clergy must swear.

April 1559 • The **Act of Uniformity** imposes a new Book of Common Prayer — a revised version of Cranmer's 1552 text, softened with language from 1549 at the administration of communion so that both Protestants and traditionalists can conscientiously receive. Attendance at parish church on Sunday is compulsory; refusal is a fineable offense.

1563 (ratified by Parliament 1571) • The **Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion** are promulgated. Broadly Protestant and Reformed, but with moderate concessions to

traditionalists. Every Anglican clergyman since has been bound to them (in various senses).

1570 • Pope Pius V issues the bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, excommunicating Elizabeth and absolving her subjects from allegiance. English Catholics are now theoretically required by their religion to plot against their queen. Elizabeth's response is a steady tightening of anti-Catholic laws and, from the 1580s, the execution of about 130 Catholic priests and 60 laypeople under treason statutes.

1588 • The Spanish Armada is defeated. For English Protestants, the victory is a providential vindication of the Reformation.

1603 • Elizabeth dies on 24 March, ending the Tudor dynasty. James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England. The Hampton Court Conference and the **King James Bible** follow within eight years.

What Elizabeth produced. The Church of England as it stands today: episcopal in polity, Protestant in doctrine, traditional in worship, comprehensively national. The monarch as Supreme Governor. Thirty-Nine Articles. Book of Common Prayer. Cathedrals still staffed, bishops still consecrated, parishes still ordered. A national church deliberately broad enough to contain Calvinists and high-church liturgists, though not always without pain.

PART 9 — THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES & ANGLICAN IDENTITY

The **Thirty-Nine Articles** (1563/1571) are the doctrinal backbone of Anglican Christianity. They deliberately avoid the sharp edges of both Lutheran and Reformed confessions. A quick tour of their main claims:

- **Articles 1–5 — On God.** Trinitarian, Chalcedonian Christology (see **Lesson 8**), affirming the full creeds of the ancient church.

• **Article 6 — Holy Scripture.** Scripture contains everything necessary for salvation; the Apocrypha is edifying but not canonical for doctrine. This is the Protestant canon.

• **Articles 9–18 — Sin, salvation, and grace.** Original sin, justification by faith alone (Article 11), predestination (Article 17 — “full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort” for believers), works as the fruit of faith. Broadly Reformed but carefully worded to avoid the Lutheran/Reformed debate over the nature of predestination’s object.

• **Article 19 — The Church.** “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered.” Classic Protestant definition.

• **Articles 25–31 — The sacraments.** Two only — baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Transubstantiation explicitly rejected (Article 28) but the real presence is affirmed in a manner closer to Calvin than Zwingli.

• **Articles 32–36 — Practical matters.** Clergy may marry. Excommunication is binding. The English ordinal (form of ordination) is lawful and valid. The Books of Homilies are good and wholesome reading.

• **Articles 37–39 — Civil matters.** The Queen’s supremacy over the English church. Lawful Christians may bear arms and take oaths.

The Anglican genius. The Articles are neither Lutheran nor Reformed nor Catholic. They are carefully, deliberately English — a compromise document comprehensive enough to live inside, specific enough to exclude the obvious heresies on both sides. This is the Anglican *via media* — not a “middle way” between truth and error (as later critics complained) but between the extreme parties of the 16th century. The tradition’s great modern defense of this approach is Richard Hooker’s *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (8 books, 1594–1662), which became the classic statement of Anglican method: Scripture, tradition, and reason together (the so-called “three-legged stool” of Anglican authority).

PART 10 — PURITANS, SEPARATISTS, AND THE ROAD TO AMERICA

Not everyone in Elizabethan England was satisfied with the settlement. The Marian exiles who had sat at Calvin's feet in Geneva wanted further reform — a removal of bishops, vestments, and lingering Catholic ceremonies. They came to be called the **Puritans**, after their desire to “purify” the Church of England.

- **Puritans (broadly, 1560s onward)**. Worked for reform *within* the Church of England. Objected to clerical vestments, kneeling at communion, organ music in worship, the wedding ring, godparents at baptism, the sign of the cross, and saints' days. Most remained conforming Anglicans hoping for continued reform. Figures like Thomas Cartwright and later John Owen and Richard Baxter are their theologians.

- **Presbyterians** (within Puritanism). Wanted to replace bishops with elder-run synods on the Scottish Presbyterian model. Dominant in the Westminster Assembly (1643–1649), which produced the Westminster Confession.

- **Separatists (from 1580s)**. Concluded the Church of England was past reforming and withdrew entirely to form independent gathered churches. Robert Browne (c. 1550–1633) is an early figure; the **Pilgrim** congregation at Scrooby under John Robinson fled to Holland (1608), then to Plymouth (*Mayflower*, 1620). Congregationalism is their descendant.

- **Baptists** (from 1609). The English Separatist **John Smyth** in Amsterdam, influenced by the Dutch Mennonites, rejected infant baptism and founded the first English Baptist congregation in 1609. His colleague **Thomas Helwys** brought the movement back to England in 1611. Through **Roger Williams** (Providence, 1636) and **Isaac Backus** (New England, 1700s), Baptist principles flow into the American constitutional conviction on religious liberty (see [our Founders study](#)).

- **The Great Migration (1630s).** The Massachusetts Bay Colony of **John Winthrop** (1630) and the roughly 20,000 Puritans who crossed the Atlantic in the 1630s founded the Protestant commonwealth of colonial New England. Their theology was Calvinist; their polity was Congregational; their cultural influence on American Protestant Christianity is nearly beyond measure.

Every major English-speaking Protestant tradition today descends, in one form or another, from the English Reformation: Anglican/Episcopalian directly, Methodist through John Wesley's eighteenth-century revival within the Church of England, Baptists through Smyth and Williams, Congregationalists through Browne and Winthrop, Presbyterians through Westminster, Quakers (through George Fox, 1650s) through the same Puritan matrix. When an American evangelical gathers to sing hymns on Sunday, she is — whether she knows it or not — a very late daughter of the Elizabethan Settlement.

WHY NOLL CALLS THIS A TURNING POINT

Noll titles this chapter *A New Europe: The English Act of Supremacy (1534)*. The Act of Supremacy is his seventh turning point because it established the pattern by which a Protestant *national* church could be formed — by royal and parliamentary action, with a national liturgy, a national bishop, and a national confession. The same pattern was followed in Denmark (1536), Sweden (1593), Scotland (1560), and, more loosely, in the various Protestant German princedoms. The English Reformation is the template for every Protestant national church.

Noll also emphasizes the ironies:

- A Reformation started by a king's lust produced Cranmer's liturgy, the best prose the English language ever wrote.
- A Reformation that burned Tyndale for translating the Bible ended by placing his translation in every parish church in England.

- A Reformation conducted under Catholic and Protestant monarchs alike produced martyrs on both sides — More for Rome, Cranmer for Canterbury — both of them deeply serious Christians.

- A Reformation that became the Church of England eventually produced, by long and winding roads, the most religiously plural nation (America) the Christian world has ever known.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

- **God does not need clean motives to produce clean work.** Henry VIII's motive was lust and dynastic anxiety. Out of it came Cranmer's prayer book, the Great Bible in every parish, and eventually the Protestant tradition that shaped our own congregation. God's providence is never limited to the worthiness of the instruments. Our own pastoral work is not bound by our own ambiguous hearts either.

- **Liturgy carries theology.** Cranmer's genius was to pour Protestant theology into a shape a medieval English peasant could receive — the same rhythm of morning and evening prayer, the same annual cycle, the same vernacular rendering of the old prayers. How we worship shapes what we believe more than what we say we believe shapes how we worship. The Book of Common Prayer is the most powerful argument for that claim in Protestant history.

- **Martyrs sanctify the ground.** The English Reformation has saints on both sides. Thomas More and Thomas Cranmer died for the same Christ. We dishonor both if we refuse to notice that. The church is richer for their costly refusals — Catholic and Protestant alike — than it would be without them.

• **Settlements are better than purity campaigns.** Elizabeth's comprehension was not heroic; it was, in fact, somewhat cynical. But it stopped the burnings. A church that can hold Reformed convictions in a conservative liturgical form, that can let a Puritan and a conforming Anglican kneel at the same rail, is a church that has learned something about charity the 16th century paid high prices to discover.

Greek NT (Acts 5:29): πειθαρχεῖν δεῖ θεῷ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀνθρώποις.

Acts 5:29 (ESV): "We must obey God rather than men."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Henry VIII began the English Reformation for reasons that would embarrass any pastor. Is that troubling — or is it evidence of God's providence working through bad motives?

2. Thomas More said he was the king's good servant but God's first. How do Christians today decide which side of that line we're on in our own country?

3. Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer gave ordinary English Christians a Scripture-saturated pattern of daily and weekly worship. What would it look like for our congregation to adopt something like that discipline, whatever tradition we come from?

4. Thomas Cranmer was broken in prison — he signed recantations. At the stake he repented and thrust his hand into the flames first. What does his story teach us about failure, repentance, and the long obedience of faith?

5. Elizabeth's settlement was deliberately comprehensive, stretching to include Calvinists and traditionalists under one communion. Where would the modern American

evangelical tendency land on that — and what would be gained or lost by imitating her?

6. The Puritan-Separatist-Baptist trajectory out of the English Reformation produced every modern American free-church tradition. Does our congregation remember how recent, expensive, and fragile our inheritance of religious liberty actually is?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, we thank you for the English Reformation, even as we grieve its tangled beginnings. Thank you for Cranmer in his scholar's study, Latimer at the stake, Ridley beside him, More walking up Tower Hill with humor intact. Thank you for the Book of Common Prayer, whose words we say half without noticing. Thank you for every parish Bible placed on a chained desk so a plowman could read it. Forgive us the times we have confused our own preferences with your kingdom. Teach us Cranmer's steady liturgy, Elizabeth's patient comprehension, the Puritans' biblical fire, the Separatists' costly conscience, and More's final refusal. Make us, in every tradition we inherit, your good servants — but yours first. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources:

- *Book of Common Prayer* (1549, 1552, 1559, 1662) — the definitive modern edition of the 1662 is the 2021 International Edition (Anglican House).
- *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (1563/1571).
- *First and Second Books of Homilies* (1547, 1571).

- Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533); Act of Supremacy (1534); Act of Uniformity (1559).
- Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594–1662).
- John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (“Book of Martyrs”, 1563–1583).
- Thomas Cranmer’s *Homily on the Salvation of Mankind*; his sermon at the stake (21 March 1556).
- Thomas More, *Utopia*; the scaffold speech as recorded by William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield.

Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll**, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 7: “A New Europe: The English Act of Supremacy (1534).”
- Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580* (2nd ed., 2005) — the great modern revisionist account, sympathetic to the Catholic side.
- Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (1996) — the definitive biography.
- Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (2003) — the best one-volume overview of the whole movement.
- Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible* (2001).
- G. W. Bernard, *The King’s Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (2005).
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