

**Church History**

**Core Seminar**

**The English Reformation, 16th Century**

*“And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result…”*

*Genesis 50:20*

A notorious adulterer, lecher, and murderer started the Reformation in England.  What are we to make of this?  King Henry VIII rightly deserves history’s harsh judgment as one of England’s most reprehensible monarchs.  He took multiple wives, and the fortunate ones he merely dismissed and divorced, while having two others put to death.  Yet it was this same scoundrel who defied the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and laid the foundation for the Reformation to begin in the English Church.

As Christians, we need not shy away from these unsavory facts.  Scripture and history bear numerous examples of God bringing good results out of humanity’s wicked actions.  Not for nothing does Romans 8:28 promise us that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”  Look carefully – Paul does not say here that “all things are good” but that God causes “all things to work for good.”  And so with our theme verse today, where Joseph points out to his brothers how their evil actions in selling him into slavery were used by God to accomplish His good purposes.  How liberating this is for us as Christians: we can condemn evil actions for what they are, while still trusting that the Lord’s sovereign work in history will prevail for good.

We will see the same today, as we consider how God used King Henry’s sinful actions to accomplish God’s righteous purposes.

We will also see the considerable costs of bringing reform to England, not least in human lives.  Besides their *common faith* in the biblical God, many heroes of the English reformation shared a *common fate*: martyrdom.  Tyndale, Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, and many others went to the stake for their convictions.

I should also comment on our timeline.  As you may have noticed, in this week and in the two previous weeks our class has focused in on the momentous events of the Reformation in the 16th century.  This focus comes in part from the apparent quickening of God’s action during this time in history.  But this also marks a point of departure in our own timeline.  Up until now our narrative has tried to cover the entirety of church history from the beginning through the 16th century.  From now, church history takes off in numerous directions.  Our class will focus on those strands of history leading into our own particular tradition, and eventually into our own local church.  Consider it as a “family tree” of sorts; since we will be tracing the lineage of present-day Capitol Hill Baptist, we just will not be able to follow the countless second, third, and fourth cousins, and long lost eccentric aunts and uncles, who branch off in different directions from our same roots centuries ago.  As even a cursory glance at our bookstall will reveal, let alone attendance at one of our worship services, our church descends directly from the English Reformation, particularly English Puritanism.

#### ENGLAND’S OWN REFORMATION

The first thing to remember about the Reformation is that it did not spring entirely from Martin Luther.  The Roman Catholic Church did not confine its corruptions and errors to Luther’s Germany; neither did movements for reform come only from Germany.  Luther stands as a towering figure of singular importance, of course, but as we saw last week and will see again today, movements for reformation arose somewhat *independently*, somewhat *spontaneously*, and somewhat *simultaneously* in other areas of Europe.  I qualify all of these with “somewhat” because nothing occurs in a vacuum, and Luther’s ideas did influence many other reformers.  The Reformation represents a rare confluence of courageous Christians in several different lands all striving to recover the Gospel and reform the Church.  They soon came to see that they were not alone.  They then began to encourage each other, influence each other, often join together and sometimes split apart.  Though the Reformation was not without its excesses and errors, I believe we can still see it as one of the clearest moments of the hand of God acting in human history – in places like Wittenberg, Zurich, Geneva – and England.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago with John Wycliffe and his followers, the “Lollards,” the church in England had begun to experience murmurings of its own reform by the end of the 1300s.  This same century, the English parliament passed a series of laws intended to give the king authority over papal decisions in England.  Though these measures were employed only sporadically and with little effect, Henry VIII would resurrect them two centuries later in his own feud with Rome.

Meanwhile, by the early 1500s, a small group of English theologians and pastors at Cambridge University began to discuss reforming the church.  By 1520, these meetings gathered energy and urgency when this group encountered Luther’s writings, which though declared illegal had still been filtering into England.  The Cambridge gatherings centered on a pub called the White Horse Inn, which soon became known throughout the city as “Little Germany” because of the Luther aficionados meeting there.  Future heroes of the English Reformation such as Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer and Tyndale all spent time together at Cambridge during these days, and likely frequented the White Horse Inn.

Something should encourage us here. Consider the fruit that the Lord often produces when believers gather together for a specific purpose.  Church history bears countless examples of great movements of evangelism, intellectual life, or social reform that grew out of small gatherings of Christians for prayer, fellowship, and discussion around a common purpose. We should think of ways that we might gather intentionally with a small group of believers and “stimulate one another to…good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).  The Lord does not necessarily call all of us to massive, world-changing revolutions, but it could be we are called to think and pray deliberately with others about improving the tone of our workplace, sharing the Gospel in our neighborhood, studying a particular idea, or starting a small new ministry to those in need.

These same decades brought the further development of the English Bible, an effort led by William Tyndale.  Tyndale received his degree from Magdalen College, Oxford [same as CS Lewis] and then studied at Cambridge.  He became convinced of the need for an accurate translation of the Scriptures into English from the original Hebrew and Greek.  Not only had Wycliffe’s version of 120 years earlier been banned in England, but it was also imprecise or even inaccurate in some places, since it had been translated from the Latin Vulgate, which was the only version permitted by the Catholic Church.  And inaccurate translation could pose serious theological problems.  The most notorious example comes from the Vulgate’s rendering of Matthew 4:17, which has Jesus say “Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”  As both Luther and Tyndale discovered in the original Greek text, the most accurate translation of this is “Repent, ….”  One can see easily how this one change in word had tremendous consequences; now believers learned that Christ offered forgiveness for those who “repent and believe” rather than for those who try to atone for their sins through doing works of penance.

For such reasons, Tyndale realized that the people needed to read an accurate version of the Bible in their own language.  The Church authorities forbade this, and so Tyndale sought exile on the European continent to do his translation, which he completed in 1525.  By the standards of the day, his version was a model of accuracy and elegance, such that 100 years later the King James Version would use 90% of Tyndale’s text.  Meanwhile, these English Bibles began to make their way back to England and became so widely used that by 1537 Edward Fox, Bishop of Hereford told his fellow priests

Make not yourselves the laughingstock of the world; light has sprung up, and is scattering all the clouds.  The lay people know the Scriptures better than many of us.

Tyndale paid the ultimate price for his efforts.  An eminent historian describes this courageous man’s violent end, while he lived in exile in Belgium.  “In May 1535 Tyndale…was tempted by the squalid betrayer Henry Phillips (who posed as one of his converts) to pass outside the immunity of the English House in Antwerp.  At once he was seized by agents of the [Catholic crown] and imprisoned…After long disputations he was condemned in August 1536 for obstinate heresy and in the following October strangled, his body being consigned to the flames.”[[1]](#_ftn1)

Amidst these efforts at reform, the English struggled with many of the same problems in the church that plagued Germany and elsewhere.  Many priests and monks were licentious and corrupt, and neglected their religious duties.  The reign of Cardinal Wolsey exacerbated these resentments.  Appointed by the Pope, Wolsey held unprecedented powers in England, in both church and state.  As one scholar describes it, Wolsey “combined in his own person the Church of England, the Church of Rome, and the Kingdom of England – for he was the Archbishop of York, a cardinal and legate of the pope, and chancellor of the realm.”[[2]](#_ftn2)  In our day, this is like the same man being Vice President of the United States, the Catholic Cardinal of Washington – and the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church.  Wolsey could appoint or depose bishops, grant degrees in theology, arts and medicine, dispense with barriers to holy orders, and absolve a person from excommunication.  The English recoiled from this spectacular display of authority, but even more from Wolsey’s opulent and indulgent lifestyle.  As the most notorious symbol of Rome, Wolsey became the target for much of the anticlerical sentiment in the country.

#### THE REFORMATION OF HENRY VIII

 Such was the situation when a frustrated English king began to experience serious marital problems…  Henry VIII’s family complications went a long way back.  He had married Catherine when her first husband, Henry’s older brother had died, and the family had attained a special dispensation from the Pope for Henry to marry his older brother’s widow, which was otherwise a violation of church law.  The politically-savvy Pope granted permission, but then Henry VIII and Catherine encountered further problems.  While they had five children, all but one died in infancy, and only the Mary survived.  Though Henry had already fathered an illegitimate son with one of his mistresses, he desperately wanted his queen to bear a son, in order to produce an heir to his throne.

              He decided the solution was to annul the marriage to Catherine and marry instead Anne Boelyn, who had already caught Henry’s eye.  He petitioned Rome to annul his marriage to Catherine, arguing that the former dispensation allowing them to marry in the first place was invalid because it had violated the biblical command in Leviticus 20:21.  The pope refused to grant the annulment, partly because of a reluctance to reverse the decision of his predecessor and partly because the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who had invaded and captured Rome, also happened to be Catherine’s nephew and did not want his aunt to be so disgraced.  In 1528, Henry, frustrated that Cardinal Wolsey could not secure a better result from Rome, had Parliament charge Wolsey with a slew of offences.  Wolsey surprisingly acquiesced and was deposed, giving Henry his first victory over church authorities.  He desired more.

              By this time, Henry had impregnated his mistress Anne Boelyn, and desperately needed an out.  Parliament did its part by passing a resolution declaring that the pope had had no power to grant the dispensation for Henry to marry Catherine in the first place.  And Thomas Cranmer, the new Archbishop of York and head of the church in England granted the annulment and agreed to perform the marriage ceremony of Henry and Anne Boelyn.  A devout, godly man who had been part of the Cambridge crowd of reformers decades earlier, Cranmer had a much nobler agenda beyond helping a lascivious monarch.  He saw this as an opportunity to free the English Church from the authority of Rome and bring about much needed reform.

The next year in 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, a sweeping measure of tremendous consequence which gave the king absolute authority over the English church.  Here is just a portion of the Act, showing just how radical it was:

Our said sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall have full power and authority from time to time to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offences, contempts, and enormities, whatsoever they be, which by any manner spiritual authority or jurisdiction ought or may lawfully be reformed, repressed, ordered, redressed, corrected, restrained, or amended, most to the pleasure of Almighty God, the increase of virtue in Christ’s religion, and for the conservation of the peace, unity, and tranquility of this realm.[[3]](#_ftn3)

The breach with Rome was complete.

What did this mean?  This far into the Reformation, the people of England would have noticed little if any change in their worship or church life.  Henry still considered himself a loyal Catholic on matters of doctrine; it was just Rome’s final authority that he rejected.  He continued to attend the Mass, and even earlier he had written a book against the theology of Martin Luther.  Parliament passed further measures largely affirming Catholic doctrines.  Henry’s own marital misery continued, as he married and either divorced or killed four more wives until his own death in 1547.  During these years, however, Archbishop Cranmer quietly and persistently placed English Bibles in the churches, helped appoint reform-minded bishops, and spread orthodox notions throughout the land.

#### EDWARD VI (1547 – 1553)

After Henry’s death (1547), his 9-year old son Edward (Son of Henry’s 3rd wife, Jane Seymour) assumed the crown.  Now that the king was gone and his Protestant-educated son had come to throne, Protestantism could go forth.  Though the boy-king seems to have held his faith sincerely, he was also quite young, and two adult advisors known as “Protectors” helped implement the shift toward Protestantism.  Parliament repealed its laws establishing Catholic doctrine, many images were removed from the churches, and priests were allowed to marry.  In 1549 came the publication of the first edition of the Book of Common Prayer, written by Thomas Cranmer.  With this book Cranmer began to move the Anglican Church away from Catholic doctrines on communion, steps continued by a second edition published in 1552.  The “altar” was called “the table,” “priests” were referred to as “ministers,” and Christians were told in communion to “feed on [Christ] in thy heart with faith by thanksgiving” – in contrast to the Roman view of transubstantiation, where the elements literally become the body and blood of Christ.  The next year, Cranmer authored the 42 Articles, which would eventually, with some revisions, become the 39 Articles, the foundational confession for the Anglican Church.  The six years of Edward’s reign represent a time of tremendous flourishing for English Protestantism.

#### Mary Tudor “Bloody Mary” (1553-1558)

Times can quickly change.  In 1553, the 16-year old Edward died with no heir to his throne.  According to the English historian and theologian J.C. Ryle, the young king’s dying prayer was “O Lord God, defend this realm from papistry, and maintain Thy true religion.”[[4]](#_ftn4) No doubt Edward knew that his half-sister Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was next in line for the throne.  This prospect horrified English Protestants, and for good reason. The Catholic Queen Mary took the throne determined to restore Catholicism as the religion of the land by any means necessary, and she soon embarked on a rampage that earned her the dubious nickname “Bloody Mary.”

              Mary reigned for a little over five years, and did all she could to bring England back under the authority of the Pope.  She had Parliament repealed all of the Edwardian laws, banished the Book of Common Prayer, restored the feast days of the saints, and ordered married clergy to dismiss their wives.  In November of 1554, Reginald Pole arrived England as the new Archbishop of Canterbury and papal representative.  Pole absolved England of schism and welcomed her back into the embrace of Rome.  Pole also had a personal grudge against Protestants, as Henry VIII had murdered his mother.  Many Protestants, fearing reprisal for their refusal to submit to the Pope, fled to the Continent.  This no doubt spared many their lives.

              We should reflect for a moment on the transience of earthly security.  How suddenly did the freedom and prosperity that Protestants enjoyed under Edward get snatched away, and how quickly did trials come.  In a matter of weeks, they found their world turned upside down.  As Christians, we should always be thankful for the blessings of freedom, peace, and prosperity, yet we must hold them loosely and realize they may not last.  This seems in part what Paul meant when he wrote in Philipians 4:11-13 “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.  I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.  I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

These words probably encouraged many English Protestants during the coming trials.  Mary began her infamous burnings early in 1555, targeting faithful Protestants who would not recant.  In all, some 300 people were executed at the Queen’s direction.  Most of the martyrs were common people – farmers, smiths, and merchants.  Some eminent church leaders went to the stake as well.  Bishops Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer had been among the most famous and influential figures in bringing the reformed faith to England; Ridley as Bishop of London and a brilliant theological mind, Latimer as an extraordinary and beloved preacher.  They soon incurred the wrath of Mary, who sentenced them to be burned together at the stake in Oxford on October 16, 1555.  While imprisoned and pondering their awaiting fate, Latimer sent a moving letter to Ridley:

There is no remedy…but patience.  Better it is to suffer what cruelty they will put upon us, than to incur God’s high indignation.  Wherefore… be of good cheer in the Lord, with due consideration what he requireth of you, and what he doth promise you.  Our common enemy shall do no more than God will permit him.  God is faithful, which will not suffer us to be tempted above our strength…

They kept their resolve until the very end.  As the executioner tied Latimer and Ridley to the stake and brought the torch near, Latimer turned to his friend and uttered his last:

Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God’s grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out.[[5]](#_ftn5)

As heirs to this legacy of faith, may we be worthy of their example.

Mary’s murderous rampage was not yet through.  Thomas Cranmer, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and father of English church reform, had been imprisoned for not swearing allegiance to Rome, and had watched his friends Ridley and Latimer go to the stake.  Queen Mary may have also had a personal vendetta against Cranmer, as he had looked favorably on the annulment of her mother Catherine’s marriage to King Henry.  Not content to merely imprison or even martyr Cranmer, the Queen sought to make an example of this prominent leader by forcing him to recant his Protestant convictions.  Under extreme duress and for uncertain reasons, Cranmer finally signed a recantation, which Mary’s realm gleefully published and circulated throughout England, and which reportedly caused great distress to many Protestants.  This hardly spared the poor Bishop’s life, however, as he still received a death sentence.

The old and courageous churchman was not yet through, however.  Before his execution, which took place at St. Mary’s Church in Oxford, just a stone’s throw from where Ridley and Latimer had died, Cranmer was called on to speak.  After confessing his own sins and weaknesses, he repented of his recantation:

[My words] were written contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and written for fear of death, to save my life if it might be…And forasmuch as I have written many things contrary to what I believe in my heart, my hand shall first be punished; for if I may come to the fire it shall first be burned.  As for the Pope, I refuse him, for Christ’s enemy and antichrist, with all his false doctrine.[[6]](#_ftn6)

 His conscience clear and his honor restored, Cranmer turned to face his fate.  As the flames crept towards him, he extended his offending hand and held it steady until the fire consumed it.  This may be one of the few instances in church history where a Christian took literally Christ’s warning in Matthew 5:30 that “if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell.”  As JC Ryle considered Cranmer’s life, his great accomplishments and significant failings, Ryle concluded “nothing, in short, in all his life became him so well as the manner of his leaving it.  Greatly he had sinned, but greatly he had repented.”[7]

#### ELIZABETH (1558-1603)

This Catholic resurgence was dramatic, intense, and brief.  A childless and unhappy Mary never enjoyed good health, and she died in 1558, after a reign of just five years.  In the wings waited Elizabeth, second daughter of Henry VIII and first of Anne Boelyn, and half-sister of Mary.  The Emperor Charles V on the continent had repeatedly urged Mary to have Elizabeth killed and thus removed as heir to the throne, but even Bloody Mary had not gone that far.

As Queen, Elizabeth moved immediately to reverse the policies of her sister.  She seems to have adopted Protestantism as much from political expediency as from conviction; after all, if she embraced Catholicism, she would also have to concede that her own birth was illegitimate and her crown invalid, since her mother Anne Boelyn had only become queen after Henry successfully defied the Pope.  But conviction may also have been present. Raised largely by her step-mother, Catherine Parr (Henry’s last wife) in a warmly evangelical and humanist atmosphere, Elizabeth read the NT in Greek every day. And so, whatever the complex motivations, Elizabeth began to restore Protestantism to England.  And so, Elizabeth began to restore Protestantism to England.  The Act of Supremacy was reenacted, the Pope repudiated, and with the Act of Uniformity, Cranmer’s Second Prayer Book was reinstalled as the standard for the English Church.  Joyous Protestants began to return to England from their European exile.

The new Queen hesitated to take her Protestantism very far, however.  Her main priority was restoring and maintaining national unity, and she sought to create a theologically broad and inclusive national church, at least by the standards of the day.  Her policies, known as the Elizabethan Settlement, sought to chart a “via media,” or “middle way” between doctrinal questions, an ethos that characterizes much of Anglicanism to this day.  Some scholars have described the church she encouraged as “Protestant in doctrine, Catholic in ritual,” as it still included candles, priestly robes, kneeling during communion, etc.

During the earlier years of her almost half century reign, Elizabeth had some Catholics put to death for their dissent from the throne and loyalty to the Pope.  In a sad commentary on human nature and the dark side of church history, some Protestants saw fit to respond in kind to the persecution they had suffered at the hands of Catholics.  Towards the end of her reign, Elizabeth and the remaining English Catholics seem to have agreed on distinguishing between their religious loyalty to the Pope and their civil loyalty to their English Queen.  This anticipated one of the Reformation’s eventual legacies, the development of religious toleration.  Meanwhile, by later in the 16th century, some English Protestants sought to purify the Anglican Church and restore it more completely to biblical roots.  They were the Puritans, and of them we will hear much more next week.

#### CONCLUSION

              We considered at the beginning of our class the fact that God used an evil man, Henry VIII, to bring about a good result – reform in the English Church.  We also see that the Lord allowed good men – Tyndale, Ridley, Latimer, Cranmer, and many others – to suffer evil, in order to reform the church.  In both cases, the Lord of history accomplishes His eternal purposes.  We, in turn, can best understand and appreciate this from an eternal perspective.  Another martyr of the English Reformation put it best.  While John Hooper was being led to the stake, an old friend approached him and begged him to recant his faith and thus spare his own life.  The distraught friend reminded Hooper that “life was sweet, and death was bitter.”   The courageous Hooper held firm, responding to his friend that “eternal life was more sweet, and eternal death was more bitter.”[[8]](#_ftn8)

[[1]](#_ftnref1) A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 1991), 95.

[[2]](#_ftnref2) Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the 16th Century* (Boston: Beacon Press 1952), 184.

[[3]](#_ftnref3) Quoted in Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1997), 178.

[[4]](#_ftnref4) J.C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust 1999), 6.

[[5]](#_ftnref5) quoted in Ryle, 18.

[[6]](#_ftnref6) Quoted in Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2* (New York: Harper Collins 1985), 78.

[[7]](#_ftnref7) Ryle, 22.

[[8]](#_ftnref8) Quoted in Ryle, 12.