

The Church of England – Reformation

Although there were some significant reforms under Henry VIII, it was not until his death in 1547 that the English church really came into its own. Under Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of



Thomas
Cranmer

Canterbury 1533-56, the Church of England asserted independence from Rome, authorized clergy to marry, and issued the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer's masterful transformation of the Latin liturgy into English.

The 1549 prayer book contained an order for "Mattyns" and one for "Euensong," and Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer remain two hallmark Anglican services to this day. It was revised in 1552 by a book including the "Letany," or Great Litany, which included the petition, "From all seditiō and privie conspiracy, from the tyranny of the Bishop of Rome and all his detestable enormities, from all false doctrine, from hardness of heart, and

contempt of thy word and commandment, good Lord, deliver us." Cranmer was serious about disavowing the authority of the pope, but also interested in simplifying a complex liturgy, using vernacular language, involving the people in the worship, and conforming to patristic evidence (or Christian writings up to about the fifth century).

The boy-king Edward VI died in 1553, and was succeeded by his eldest sister, Mary (daughter of Henry VIII and Katharine of Aragon). She promptly reversed all of the reforms, returning to Latin liturgy, requiring clergy celibacy, and professing allegiance to the pope. She had almost 300 religious dissenters burned at the stake, including Thomas Cranmer. For this, a cocktail known as "Bloody Mary" was named for her. She died in 1558, and was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth (daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn). Elizabeth promptly reinstated the reforms, and a third prayer book was issued in 1559.

Just imagine what it was like: you went to church for Easter in 1549, and the service was in Latin. When you showed up for Whitsunday (or Pentecost), just fifty days later, the service was suddenly in English, the pope was called a heretic, and your priest was introducing his wife. Then, just four years later, it was back to Latin, the pope, and no wife. And again, a few years after that, in English again, and the wife suddenly reappeared. No wonder legends accused Thomas Cranmer of keeping his wife hidden in a trunk!



Elizabeth I

When Elizabeth ascended the throne, the country was in a most unhappy state. Mary's counter-reformation had been outwardly successful, but tyranny and brutality had bred much dissatisfaction. Elizabeth's first Parliament, in 1559, passed the *Act of Supremacy* and the *Act of Uniformity*. The former abolished the jurisdiction of any "foreign prince, person, prelate, state or potentate, spiritual temporal" over the English monarch. The latter established the new prayer book of 1559, which was itself a compromise between the more Catholic book of 1549 and the more Protestant one of 1552. The Ornaments Rubric of this book stated that "Such Ornaments of the Church, and of Ministers thereof at all times of their Ministratiō, shall be retained, and be in use, as were in this Church of England, by the authority of Parliament, in the second year of the reign of King Edward the Sixth." This allowed for Catholic copes and chasubles, as well as Protestant preaching gowns.

The so-called Elizabethan Settlement thus established middle way for the Church of England, between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and ultra-Protestantism. Thus, from our beginnings, we Anglicans have believed in religious toleration, and that the fullest expression of the Christian faith contains elements that are both Catholic and Protestant. Elizabeth said, "There is only one Christ, Jesus, one faith.... All else is a dispute over trifles." She also declared that she had "no desire to make windows into men's souls," indicating that what we believe in our hearts is between us and God—our own personal business, not something with which the church interferes.

The Church of England was, as the title-page to the first Prayer Book had implied, a part of the catholic church, even though it repudiated papal jurisdiction. It was catholic, but it was also reformed. Its roots ran back to the primitive church, but certain customs and ideas which had clung to it in the Middle Ages had now been cut away. The fundamental doctrines and constitution of the Church remained the same, but a number of genuine reforms had been carried out, such as the vernacular liturgy, the administration of the Sacrament in both kinds, and permission for the clergy to marry.¹

A man named Richard Hooker was a prominent theologian under Elizabeth, providing a philosophical and logical basis for what was essentially a political compromise. He articulated the notion of the *via media*, or middle way, for the English church. From Hooker, we also derive the folksy notion of Anglicanism's "three-legged stool," based on his assertion of the authority of Scripture, tradition, and reason. As he put it in *On the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, "What Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience are due; the next whereunto, is what any man can necessarily conclude by force of Reason; after this, the voice of the church succeedeth." Hooker thus placed human reason in the center of a polarity between Scripture (Protestantism) and tradition (Catholicism)—a spectrum that has defined Anglicanism to this day.



Richard Hooker

¹ Moorman, *History*, 212.