



? The Reformation (Short Overview)

(Terms in ***bold italics*** are explained further in the Glossary, terms underlined have their own articles)

Introduction – Catholics and Protestants

At the start of the sixteenth century England was an entirely Christian country. There were no other religious groups and everyone followed the version of Christianity that is called ***Catholicism***. The Catholic Church was led by the Pope who was based in Rome. All of the religious services were carried out in Latin.

Most people in England attended church regularly and believed in Christianity. The Church was a central point in the community where people came together for births, marriages and funerals. In many areas the church provided support to the poor, access to basic medicine and guidance with problems. Many people could not read or write and what they were told in Church they believed.

However, for some people the ***Catholic*** Church was considered 'old fashioned' and out of date with what people wanted. Some thought that the Church did things that were corrupt, that misled people and took advantage of their belief in God.

The people who did not want the ***Catholic*** Church anymore still believed in Christianity but they wanted a version that more people could understand. They wanted services to be in English with an ***English bible***. The people who wanted the changes to the Catholic Church were called ***Protestants***.

Even though ***Catholics*** and ***Protestants*** were all Christians and believed in God, the Bible and that Jesus Christ was the son of God their disagreements made them enemies. The two different types of Christian were prepared to kill each other over their disagreements.

Henry VIII



Henry VIII (after Holbein)
© Victoria Art Gallery, Bath
(via www.vads.ac.uk)

Henry VIII became King in 1509. He married ***Catherine of Aragon*** the same year. He was a committed ***Catholic*** and wrote an attack on a leading ***Protestant***, Martin Luther. For attacking Protestantism he was given the title 'Defender of the Faith' by the Pope.

However, after 18 years of marriage Henry did not have a legitimate son or male heir to be king after he died. He did not want to have a daughter to follow him. He believed that his wife, Catherine, was now too old for any more children and he wanted to marry someone else.



13th century mural of St. Catherine of Alexandria, Hailes Church, Gloucestershire
(© Art History Images)

In 1527 he asked the Pope for a divorce. At that time divorce was very rare and the **Catholic** Church did not allow them except in the most unusual cases. To get a divorce the Pope had to believe that there was a religious reason for it.

The Pope did not want to give Henry VIII a divorce from Catherine, despite lots of pressure from England. Henry VIII was desperate to marry someone else.

Some of Henry's advisors were secretly **Protestants** and they convinced him to ignore the Pope and that he had good reasons to divorce Catherine. They convinced him that if he broke with the **Catholic** Church he would be more powerful and could make his own decisions about marriage and about how the Church was run in England.



*Thomas Cromwell, one of Henry's closest Protestant advisors
(© Palace of Westminster)*

In 1529 the Reformation Parliament opened. It was not called that at the time but its purpose was to help Henry VIII to get the divorce that he wanted.

Henry used the Parliament to attack the **Catholic** Church in England, claiming it was loyal to the Pope and not to the King of England. The Church was fined.

Many of the MPs in Parliament were loyal to the **Catholic** Church but they also did not want to upset the king or lose any of their power. Other key members of the Parliament were already **Protestants** and wanted the king to break England away from the Pope's control and to change the church to their beliefs.

The Pope did not want to give Henry his divorce and in the end Henry appointed his own church leaders in England that would permit him to divorce and to marry someone else. The new church leaders in England were **Protestants** and with them and the support of Parliament Henry introduced a series of laws that changed the Church in England.

Henry VIII's new wife **Anne Boleyn** was also a **Protestant** and she helped to influence some of the changes that were made.



*Henry VIII shown with his foot on the Pope, from 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs' (16th Century)
(© the Trustees of the British Museum)*

Henry and Parliament passed the **Act of Supremacy**. That appointed the King as the leader of the Church of England. He permitted the creation and printing of a bible in English. The Pope was to no longer have any power or influence over religion in England. Church leaders who opposed the changes were removed and some were killed, others fled to countries away from England.

Henry realised that an advantage of changing England from **Catholic** to **Protestant** was that he was able to order the closure of lots of the religious buildings. The religious buildings, such as monasteries and convents, were loyal to the Pope, but most importantly they often owned lots of land and had important collections of religious objects. In the main the land and objects became the property of the crown – the king – once they had been closed down.

For the **Protestants** the religious objects were evidence of superstition rather than real belief and should be destroyed. But for Henry and some of his supporters the objects were valuable that could be used to raise money.

Some of the MPs in Parliament agreed to the changes made because they were able to buy or be given the land taken from the church. Others approved of the changes because they believed in them or because they were afraid of the King and his supporters.

For many normal people the changes made to religion were a disaster. They did not care about what language the bible was in as they could not read well anyway. What they now missed was the charitable elements of the church such as relief for the poor, the medicine and schools and the monasteries etc. often employed local people. Religious services did not change very much.



The ruins of Whalley Abbey, Lancashire (© David Dixon)

Henry VIII's new marriage was a short one as **Anne Boleyn** was accused and found guilty of treason. She was executed. Henry went on to marry four more times before he died.

It is believed that in terms of religious belief he was not committed to **Protestant** beliefs but he was committed to having his own way and he enjoyed the power that changing England to Protestantism had given him.

Edward VI

In 1547 Henry VIII died and his son Edward VI became king. Edward had been brought up to be a committed **Protestant**. He was only nine years old when he became King and had a **Lord Protector** (first the Duke of Somerset, then the Duke of Northumberland) to help him. By then there were many Protestants in Parliament.



*Edward VI
(© Palace of
Westminster)*

Edward introduced more **Protestant** reforms. In 1549, Parliament ruled that priests could get married (in the **Catholic** Church they are not been allowed to). An **Act of Uniformity** was passed, which meant that all churches had to use the Protestant **Book of Common Prayer** and hold services in English, not Latin.

Edward was still young when he died in 1552 and had not married. His successor was declared to be his cousin **Lady Jane Grey**. It is not known if Edward wanted her to be Queen or if it was his **Lord Protector** whose daughter-in-law she was. Edward was strongly anti-**Catholic** and may not have wanted his older sister Mary (a Catholic) to be Queen in case she overturned all of his reforms.

However, the English people did not want **Lady Jane Grey** and demanded that Mary, who was the daughter of Henry VIII and **Catherine of Aragon**, be made Queen. It is not known if the people wanted her because she was a **Catholic** or if they felt as Henry VIII's daughter she should be Queen.

The Duke of Northumberland, his son and **Lady Jane Grey** were all executed under the orders of Queen Mary I.



Mary I and her sister Elizabeth arriving in London to claim the throne, 1553
(© Palace of Westminster)

Queen Mary I (Tudor)

Queen Mary was a **Catholic** and she wished to return England to the Catholic Church. Mary's first Parliament passed the first **Act of Repeal** that undid all of her brother's religious laws, such as allowing priests to marry or for church services in English. Yet Mary had to be careful because she needed the support of people that had benefitted from the religious changes. Some committed **Protestants** fled abroad.



Philip of Spain
(© Palace of Westminster)

Parliament was just as concerned about her plans to marry as it was about the changes she wanted to make. She wanted to marry King **Philip of Spain**, who was unpopular in England. In November 1553 a deputation of MPs petitioned her to marry an Englishman. She married King Philip of Spain anyway.

In 1554 the Pope agreed that the **Catholic** Church would not demand the land returned that it had lost during the religious changes. This meant that many MPs did not object to England once more becoming Catholic. Parliament repealed the **Act of Supremacy** and the Pope became leader of the Church in England again.

The original **heresy** laws were brought back and Mary used these to persecute **Protestants**. In total 229 men and 51 women were burnt at the stake, most in the South East and East Anglia. Because of this Mary has been remembered as 'Bloody Mary'.

Parliament did oppose some of Mary's changes – MPs did not want Church taxes to go to Rome. Instead of making this part of the new church Mary had to collect the money and then send it on to the Pope herself.

Mary did not have any children and when she died she named her sister Elizabeth as her heir.

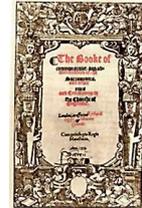
Queen Elizabeth I

Elizabeth became Queen in 1558. She was the daughter of Henry VIII and **Anne Boleyn**. She had been raised as a **Protestant** but she wanted the country's religious problems to calm down.

Elizabeth called a Parliament soon after becoming Queen. It only lasted a short time but it passed a **religious settlement**, one that is still the basis for the Church of England today.

Elizabeth and Parliament reformed the church to create a compromise. The **Act of Supremacy**, made Elizabeth the '**Supreme Governor**' rather than the '**Supreme Head**' of the English church. The Pope, once again, had no say over the Church of England.

The **Act of Uniformity** re-introduced the **Book of Common Prayer**, based largely on Edward VI's version.



The front page of the
1559 Book of
Common Prayer

The Church of England very unusual - it was not **Catholic** but was also unlike other **Protestant** churches across Europe. Services were in English, not Latin, and priests were allowed to marry. However, some more traditional aspects remained, such as church music. The compromise was challenged many times. Catholics still felt that Elizabeth's changes went too far, but some Protestants felt she did not go far enough.

Some **Protestants** became **Puritans** – they wanted anything to do with **Catholicism** stopped including church music.



Elizabeth I in Parliament

Elizabeth stood up to the **Protestants** and the **Catholics** in her Parliament and refused to allow England to be led in either direction.

This second Parliament passed the *Act for Assurance of the Queen's Power*, which meant that anyone working for the government had to swear to the **Oath of Supremacy**. This meant that if anyone worked for the government they had to recognise Elizabeth, and not the Pope, as the head of the church, which many **Catholics** would not do. From 1563 Catholics could not sit in Parliament and from 1570 they risked losing their jobs in local government as well.

Many **Protestants** continued to push for further changes but Elizabeth refused to be forced into religious changes that she thought would upset too much of the country.

In 1570 Pope Pius V **excommunicated** Elizabeth. That meant that England would remain broken from the **Catholic** Church. It also meant that Catholics were supposed to oppose Elizabeth in any way they could.

The Elizabethan court and Parliament became convinced that there were **Catholic** plots everywhere. 1585 Elizabeth's officials uncovered the **Babington Plot** and named Queen Mary of Scotland (**Mary Queen of Scots**), a Catholic as plotting to kill the Queen and take over. Mary was already under arrest in England. The Sixth Parliament (1586 – 1587) was created to examine the plot and certain MPs pushed Elizabeth to have Mary executed for treason.

After she was executed the Spanish sent an **Armada** to invade England, it was famously defeated.

Elizabeth never married and therefore had no children. She named **Mary Queen of Scots'** son as her successor – King James I (VI of Scotland).



The Armada medal, given after the English victory

To this day the monarch (King or Queen) of England must be a member of the Church of England and cannot be **Catholic**.

Elizabeth tried to end the religious problems created by her father, but conflict and prejudice amongst **Protestants** and **Catholics** remained across England and Wales for centuries.

Rebellion

Pilgrimage of Grace – the largest and most significant rebellion against Tudor rule. In response to Henry VIII's religious changes and rumours of more changes to the church, in 1536 a rising in Lincolnshire spread throughout the North (see also Knaresborough, Yorkshire). It primarily aimed to stop the **dissolution of the monasteries**, although there were other religious, political and economic causes. After initially accepting the rebels' demands, Henry later executed over 200 of them.



A depiction of the Pilgrimage of Grace

Prayer Book Rebellion or 'Western rebellion' – A 1549 rising in Devon and Cornwall against Edward VI's changes to the church and the new **Prayer book**. Over 4000 rebels were killed at Stampford Courtenay as the government restored order (see Bodmin, Cornwall)

Wyatt's rebellion – the son of the poet and ambassador (who was also called Thomas Wyatt), Wyatt was responsible for leading a rebellion against Mary I in Kent in 1554. He stated the rebellion was against Mary I's proposed marriage to **Philip of Spain**, but historians believe there were also economic, political and religious motives. Over 20,000 men joined him in Kent, but after marching to London most rebels dispersed and Wyatt admitted defeat. He was executed for high treason.