

# The Elizabethan Settlement of Religion

## **Overview**

When Elizabeth Tudor became Queen of England, one of her first big problems was what to do about the state religion. Her father, Henry VIII, had split the Church of England from Rome in order to get a divorce so he could marry her mother, Anne Boleyn. Henry's church was Catholic in ceremony, but English in governance. Edward VI made the church more protestant, changing the liturgy to English and issuing the Book of Common Prayer in 1549. When Mary came to the throne in 1553, she tried to restore everything to the old ways. The people of England did not like her sudden return to the catholic church any more than they liked her foreign marriage. Elizabeth had to make the Church of England protestant, and she wanted to control the church to increase her political control of the country. However, Elizabeth did not have any strong protestant ideology. She "did not desire a window into men's souls, but that they should obey the law". So the question was not to be catholic or protestant, but how protestant to be. Should she restore Edward's Book of Common Prayer? If so, which version? Should she follow her Puritan advisors? The decisions she made secured her throne, and set the foundation for the Anglican, Episcopal, and Methodist churches of today.

## **Background**

To understand Elizabeth's actions, we must remember what had happened before. Naturally, we will start with her parents.

It is easy to say that Henry VIII split the Church of England away from the Pope's control so that he could get a divorce. Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. From 1525 through 1532 Henry lobbied the successive Popes to be released from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, but her nephew Charles, the Holy Roman Emperor, had more influence. The English nobility shared the common people's dislike of foreigners, and wanted their church to be governed by Englishmen, not Italians. They especially didn't like their money being sent to Rome.

To accomplish his goals, Henry turned to the House of Commons, who gladly helped him. The common people were tired of clerical privilege, clerical immunity from prosecution, and foreign rule of their church. One result was increased prestige and independence for the Commons. In 1534, Parliament passed an Act of Supremacy, declaring the king to be the "supreme head" of the church in England.

Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer to the conveniently vacant office of Archbishop of Canterbury. It was no surprise that Cranmer declared Henry's marriage to Catherine to be void, and married Henry to Anne Boleyn. Of course, the Pope didn't like this. Because Rome considered the Boleyn marriage to be invalid, Anne's daughter Elizabeth was considered to be illegitimate and ineligible to inherit the throne.

The churches and monasteries in England had amassed great wealth, and were a tempting prize for a King whose appetites were always greater than his purse. When Henry was named “Supreme Head” of the church, he created a commission for closing monasteries and selling their land. He wasn’t the only one to profit from monastic property. Many of the nobility also did well, and did not allow Mary to even discuss the return of lands when she rejoined with Rome.

Henry made no attempt to change the services or beliefs. He considered himself to be a catholic, and did not agree with Martin Luther or John Calvin. However, the councilors he named for Edward were protestant reformers.

When Catherine Parr established the “royal nursery” in July 1544, Edward began his studies there. Richard Cox from Oxford and John Cheke from Cambridge were his tutors, assisted by Anthony Cooke and Roger Ascham. These men, like Catherine, were as protestant as they could be at the time. They favored reforms such as prayer in the common language, but did not do anything to risk Henry’s disfavor.

Edward VI was 9 when he became King on January 28, 1547, and 16 when he died in 1553. John Cheke remained his tutor, and had much influence over Edward. Cheke was the leader of a group of friends from St. John’s College, Cambridge known as the Athenians for their interest in Greek. This group included William Cecil, Nicholas Bacon, Thomas Smith, Thomas Gresham, Richard Goodrich, Walter Mildmay, Henry Pickering, Nicholas Throckmorton, and Anthony Cooke. All of these men held offices for Edward and Elizabeth, and were protestants.

Edward, led by his protestant council, issued the Book of Common Prayer in 1549, and revised it in 1552. This was a more dramatic change and more visible to the people than anything Henry did. It was a new service of worship, in English, replacing the latin mass. To further define the new church, Archbishop Cranmer published his 39 articles of faith. A royal commission was created to visit each church and remove all symbols of idolatry and papistry. This had the effect of destroying many works of art and damaging many church buildings.

Queen Mary repealed the acts reforming religion, and returned to the Roman Catholic mass and jurisdiction. This was also done by statute, and had a hard time passing parliament. This was generally accepted, but many protestants went into exile. Others, including Archbishop Cranmer, stayed and were burned at the stake for heresy. The strict enforcement of the heresy laws was not popular. People called the Queen “Bloody Mary”, and John Foxe wrote a book on martyrs that sold well.

When Mary died on November 17, 1558, England was at war with France. The fighting was over, and peace negotiations had begun. Mary got into the war because her husband, King Phillip of Spain, wanted English help, and for her trouble she lost Calais to France. Armagil Waad summarized the distresses of the commonwealth as: “The Queen poor, the realm exhausted, the nobility poor and decayed. Want of good captains and soldiers. The people out of order. Justice not executed. All things dear. Excess in meat, drink, and

apparel. Divisions among ourselves. Wars with France and Scotland. The French king bestriding the realm, having one foot in Calais and the other in Scotland. Steadfast enmity but no steadfast friendship abroad.” By “Divisions among ourselves” he meant differences in religion.

There were then four types of Christians living in England: Henrican catholics, Papists, Protestants, and “Nulla Fidiants” or those who had no real preference. The last was the best politically. As the Marquis of Winchester said, “to survive one had to be more like the willow than the oak”. Henrican catholics were those people who agreed that the King or Queen should lead the church, but preferred the traditional latin mass.

One thing that helped Elizabeth during the debates in Parliament was the lack of leadership in the Catholic party. Cardinal Pole, Archbishop of Canterbury, died on the same day as Mary. He left 10 of the 26 bishop’s offices vacant. Since there were only 34 peers in the House of Lords, these 10 vacancies were significant.

### ***The Settlement***

Elizabeth received three letters at the beginning of her reign recommending courses of action on religion. Richard Goodrich advised that no action be taken in the first parliament, and that no hints of the plans be let out until the government was ready to act. The anonymous “The device for alteration of religion in the first year of Queen Elizabeth” advised a quick change by statute. This paper was so close to what actually happened that many historians have assumed that it was written by someone on the privy council, perhaps Cecil.

However, the third letter, written by Armagil Waad, was closest to the plan Elizabeth had. Waad advised reformation by stages, little by little. He wrote “I wish that you would proceed to the reformation having respect to quiet at home, the affairs you have in hand with foreign princes, the greatness of the Pope, and how dangerous it is to make alteration in religion, specially in the beginning of a prince’s reign. Glasses with small necks, if you pour into them any liquor suddenly or violently, will not be so filled, but refuse to receive that same that you would pour into them. Howbeit, if you instil water into them by a little and little, they are soon replenished.”

The Act of Supremacy was introduced to the commons on February 13, 1559. The original act was similar to the one that was eventually passed, giving the Queen authority over the church but not making changes to the service. This was all Elizabeth planned for this first parliament. The Commons wanted more. They added clauses returning the service to Edward’s prayer book, and passed it amended, but the Lords rejected it. The final version passed the Commons on February 21<sup>st</sup>. This bill was first read in Lords on February 28<sup>th</sup>, debated starting March 13<sup>th</sup>, and passed on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. Elizabeth wanted parliament to adjourn before Easter, and since her plan was complete everyone expected it to happen.

However, some time on Good Friday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, Elizabeth changed her mind. When she went to parliament on March 25<sup>th</sup> she recessed parliament for Easter instead of

adjourning it. She had intended to save the Uniformity bill for another time, after the Catholic bishops had been replaced. Apparently, she realized that this parliament wanted to change religion, and she could capitalize on that desire.

Elizabeth called a conference to debate the religious issues. William Cecil wrote: “The Queen’s most excellent Majesty, having heard of Diversity of opinions in certain matters of religion amongst sundry of her loving subjects and being very desirous to have the same reduced to some Godly and Christian concord, thought it best by the advice of the Lords and others of her Privy Council, as well for the satisfaction of persons doubtful as also for the knowledge of the very truth in certain matters of difference, to have a convenient chosen number of the best learned of either part and to confer together their opinions and reasons and thereby to come to some good and charitable agreement.” The conference was held during the parliamentary recess, but quickly broke down in arguments over the rules of the debate. It was clear to most people that the purpose of this conference was not debate, but to win popular support for the Queen’s position.

On April 11<sup>th</sup>, a third supremacy bill was introduced in the commons, where it passed quickly. For their disagreement with the Queen in the conference, Bishops White and Watson were sent to the tower for contempt. Abbot Feckenham of Westminster was mysteriously absent from the final vote on April 28<sup>th</sup>. It passed the House of Lords by 3 votes.

The 1534 Act of Supremacy includes: “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”. The 1559 act uses the term “supreme governor”. This was done for two reasons. First, most people would not accept a woman as supreme head of the church. Second, compromising on the language helped some reluctant Catholics to be able to swear the oath while retaining their allegiance to Rome. Later Anglican apologists argued that only Christ was the supreme head and no human could claim that title, but this does not appear to have been the reason for the change.

For some reason, they did not consider the issue of clerical vestments. The clause granting the queen the power to decide the issue seems to be an afterthought. This became a problem in the late 1560’s.

The purpose of the uniformity act was to change the national service of worship. There was no freedom of religion, and the Puritan groups that tried to use their own service were persecuted as severely as Catholic recusants. The Act of Uniformity had more difficulty getting passed, but we don’t know the details of the debate. It reestablished the 1552 Book of Common Prayer as the service of worship, with a few modifications.

In 1552, the issue of Transubstantiation was hotly debated. The Roman Catholic church held that the bread and wine were physically transformed during the Eucharist service into the body and blood of Christ. Each protestant group had a different interpretation. The 1549 book used the traditional wording “The body of our lord Jesus Christ, which

was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul into everlasting life”. The 1552 book used “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, feed on him in thine heart by faith with thanksgiving”. By 1559 the issue was settled. To emphasize that the service was more than a memorial, the Elizabethan book used both phrases. John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury, wrote “We ... most assuredly believe that the body and blood of Christ doth in like manner feed our souls, as bread and wine doth feed our bodies.”

### ***Implementing the Settlement***

Jewel’s “An Apology of the Church of England” written in 1561 helped define the Anglican Church. It built on Thomas Cranmer’s 39 articles of faith to instruct the clergy and people on what the official doctrine was.

The act of supremacy also required an oath:

“And for the better observation and maintenance of this Act, may it please your highness that it may be further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that all and every arch-bishop, bishop, and all and every other ecclesiastical person, and other ecclesiastical officer and minister; of what estate, dignity, pre-eminence, or degree soever he or they be or shall be, and all and every temporal judge, justice, mayor, and other lay or temporal officer and minister, and every other person having your highness's fee or wages, within this realm, or any your highness's dominions, shall make, take, and receive a corporal oath upon the evangelist, before such person or persons as shall please your highness, your heirs or successors, under the great seal of England to assign and name, to accept and to take the same according to the tenor and effect hereafter following, that is to say:

I, A. B., do utterly testify and declare in my conscience, that the queen's highness is the only supreme governor of this realm, and of all other her highness's dominions and countries, as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes, as temporal, and that no foreign prince, person, prelate, state or potentate, has, or ought to have, any jurisdiction, power, superiority, pre-eminence, or authority ecclesiastical or spiritual, within this realm; and therefore I do utterly renounce and forsake all foreign jurisdictions, powers, superiorities, and authorities, and do promise that from henceforth I shall bear faith and true allegiance to the queen's highness, her heirs and lawful successors, and to my power shall assist and defend all jurisdictions, pre-eminences, privileges, and authorities granted or belonging to the queen's highness, her heirs and successors, or united and annexed to the imperial crown of this realm. So help me God, and by the contents of this book.”

By 1563, this oath was also required of members of parliament. The penalty for the first refusal of the oath was a fine, and for the second forfeiture of all lands and goods. Refusing a third time was the same as high treason. Elizabeth forbade anyone to administer the oath a second time without her express permission. Only Richard Bonner, former Bishop of London, was convicted of twice refusing the oath. He died in prison before they decided what to do with him.

## **Conclusion**

The Elizabethan settlement of religion was based on two things: the reaffirmation of royal supremacy and the 1552 Edwardian prayer book.

## **Sources**

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Todd Marsh  
Llywelyn@Elfsea.net