

The Reformation in England

Over the centuries as the mainstream church moved away in some respects from Biblical teaching and elements of it became spiritually and morally corrupt, there were those who sought to reform it. However, the label Reformation is applied to a far-reaching movement in the 16th century which emphasised grace rather than works as the basis of salvation, re-established the Bible as supreme authority and taught the priesthood of all believers.

Disquiet over the state of the church was ignited in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his protest on the door of a church in Wittenburg in Germany. He and others originally intended to reform the established church from within, but four years later Luther was excommunicated. The movement was first dubbed Protestant in 1529, by which time it had begun to spread to other parts of Europe. In England there had been reformers in the Mediaeval church, with anti-papal stirrings in the 13th century and protest in the 14th century under John Wycliffe, whose followers, the Lollards, survived despite persecution. In the 16th century English Bibles and Luther's writings were smuggled into England and fuelled desire for change.

But the religious movement became entangled with politics and with the personal life of Henry VIII, who quarrelled with the Pope over his refusal to sanction the annulment of Henry's marriage to allow him to marry Anne Boleyn. In 1534 Henry proclaimed himself head of the church in England, but although he was excommunicated by the Pope he remained a Catholic in doctrine and practice. In fact the title Defender of the Faith still held by British monarchs was conferred on Henry by the Pope for a book he wrote against Luther in 1521.

Initially the sympathies of the mass of the people were with Henry's discarded wife, but gradually support for Henry grew as the English church became independent of Rome, the privileges and power of the clergy were reduced and the monasteries suppressed. Reform did take place and religious practice became more accessible to ordinary people as English took over from Latin as the language used in church services and for the Bible. However, this was not universal, and in the north and south-west of the country in particular there was considerable resistance to change.

A leading figure was Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who sought to restore the historic faith and reform his own jurisdiction of Canterbury. He vacillated as he struggled with doctrine and pressures, but eventually became a convinced Protestant. He recanted when faced with being burned at the stake but then withdrew his recantation and died in the flames in 1556.

Progress was not straightforward, as Henry VIII backtracked on some of his reforms later in his reign and persecuted Protestants. His successor, Edward VI, accelerated change, but was followed by Mary I who sought to re-establish Catholicism. Elizabeth I then restored Protestantism, taking the title Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and introduced the Book of Common Prayer for use in churches.

Of course the Roman Catholic church survived in England, and there was also resistance from the other end of the doctrinal spectrum, as for strict Protestants the reforms did not go far enough and they wanted to rid the church of religious ceremony, liturgy and hierarchy seen to be remnants of Catholicism. Most of these Puritans, as they came to be called, stayed within the Church of England, but some left, were persecuted and in many cases fled abroad.

So we see new breakaway movements which came to be labelled 'non-conformist', as adverse to the 'orthodox' Anglicans, and in which we in Baptist churches have our roots – and that is another story for another time.