

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from the Story of the Church

Perillous Dayes

“I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marvelled with great amazement.”

Revelation 17:6

Henry VIII was succeeded by Edward VI, his son by his third wife Jane Seymore. King Henry had ensured that Edward, who was only nine years old at the time of his coronation, had been raised by Protestant tutors and the lad was sincerely devoted to the Protestant faith as were the two nobles who ruled on his behalf: the Duke of Somerset and the Duke of Northumberland. Under their rule Cranmer and the other evangelical bishops were free to transform the Anglican Church.

Edward VI: The Young Josiah

During the seven years of Edward's reign (1547 – 1553) — he died of tuberculosis at the age of sixteen — many Protestant refugees fled to England from Continental Europe. Interestingly, there were no Lutheran theologians among them. The chief influence from outside England was Reformed and that played a significant part in determining the future direction of the English Church, particularly in so far as its doctrine was concerned.

The most obvious changes in Edward's years were in the realm of public worship. A wave of government-sponsored iconoclasm saw the removal of images of saints, the whitewashing of church walls to cover pictures and stone altars being replaced by simple wooden tables. The Book of Common Prayer, first introduced by Cranmer in 1549 and revised in 1552 was a thoroughly Protestant liturgy. It was the first to incorporate what was a practice of the early Church: vocal participation by the laity in the service of worship.

The 1552 Prayer Book contained 42 Articles of Religion which amounted to an aggressively Protestant confession of faith. Since reduced to 39, the Articles still remain the Anglican Creed.

Blood Mary

Edward's older sister Mary, daughter of Catherine of Aragon and an ardent Roman Catholic, became queen after his death. The Duke of Northumberland and others, encouraged by the dying Edward, had attempted to put Lady Jane Grey on the throne. Jane, a Protestant, was fourth in line to the throne. When the plot failed Northumberland was executed as was the sixteen year old Jane Grey who had been queen for nine days.

Mary was not long in power before she set about undoing the Reformation. She brought the church back under the authority of the pope and restored traditional Roman Catholic worship in Latin. She also married king Philip of Spain, the son of Emperor Charles V and the greatest enemy of Protestantism in all of Europe.

Many Protestants were forced to flee to Germany and Switzerland. Those who stayed faced arrest and trial for heresy. Between 1555 and 1558 more than 300 Protestants were burnt at the stake and another 100 died in prison. Most were ordinary men and women but many of England's Protestant leaders also perished including Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer.

Ridley and Latimer were burnt together in Oxford. As they were led to the stake Latimer made the most often quoted remark of the English Reformation: “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; for we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”

After his arrest Cranmer had succumbed to the pressure placed upon him to renounce Protestantism. Mary decided to make an example of him and burn him anyway but, at the place of execution Cranmer refused to read out his recantation, vigorously reaffirmed his Protestant faith, repented of his cowardice in ever having renounced it and denounced the pope as the Antichrist. As the flames rose around him he held out the hand which had signed the document of recantation so that it was the first part of his body to be burnt.

Mary's actions and the courage of the Protestant martyrs turned many against her. By the time of her death in 1558 there had begun to develop in England a widespread hatred of Roman Catholicism as a foreign religion which murdered brave and honest Englishmen.

The Elizabethan Settlement

Mary's death brought Elizabeth, the 25 year old Protestant daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn to the throne. Protestant exiles flocked home and the church's ties with Rome were once again broken; this time for good.

The "Elizabethan Settlement", as it has come to be called, was a parliamentary settlement which made England a legally and constitutionally Protestant country. An Act of Supremacy once again recognised the monarch as supreme governor of the Church of England and abolished all foreign jurisdiction. An Act of Uniformity reintroduced Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer. Royal control of the church was to be exercised through a convocation summoned by the queen and through royal injunctions.

Elizabeth framed the church to be as inclusive of all her subjects as possible. As far as she was concerned people could believe what they pleased as long as they worshipped according to the Book of Common Prayer. Little was done to harass any who remained loyal to Rome until 1570 when pope Pius IV excommunicated Elizabeth and released all English Catholics from their duty to accept her as queen. From that time on her government took a harsher line against them.

Elizabeth regarded the "Settlement" to be final and English Protestants became progressively divided over their adherence to it. On one side there were those who were willing to accept the settlement, despite some reservations about lingering Roman Catholic sentiment which Elizabeth was content not to touch. On the other side were those who challenged the settlement in their quest for a more perfect Reformation. These represented two ends of a spectrum rather than two clear-cut parties. Those at the "further reform" end of the spectrum were soon being nicknamed "Puritans."

Question for Discussion

What would you say to those who argue that it was the intention of the English Reformers to "reform" the Roman Catholic Church?

For Further Study

The story of the persecutions of Mary's reign is told in detail by John Foxe in his "Book of Martyrs." It contains many stories of great heroism taken from public records of the time and from eye-witness accounts. Foxe himself was one of those who fled to Europe in 1554 to escape the persecution under Mary. His chronicle was published immediately after Mary's death in 1559 under the title "Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perillous Dayes."

The book "Lady Jane Grey — Nine Day Queen of England" by Faith Cook not only tells the story of Lady Jane but gives an interesting and challenging insight into this period in English history.