

THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

Sociable, outgoing and a ladies' man, Henry the VIII of England found himself ill-matched with a woman who cared little for the elaborate amusements of the English court. Crowned king in June, 1509, the pressure for his wife Catherine to produce a male heir to the throne increased. Princess Mary, born in 1517, was the only one of Catherine's children to live past infancy, but Henry, wanting to avoid the sort of [civil war](#) that landed his father, Henry VII on the English throne, wanted a prince. Also, Catherine was six years older than he and was beginning to look like the middle-aged woman she was becoming. Henry had a roving eye, to say the least, and he was ready for a new queen. Henry had also become smitten with the dark, mysterious and intelligent Anne Boleyn. The idea of an annulment might have been fermenting in Henry's brain before, but meeting Anne ripened it.

The idea of being king by God's divine will was still the popular view in Henry's day, and he decided the lack of a male heir should be enough to get an annulment for his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. In his plea to Pope Clement VII, he stated that God had not blessed their marriage with a male child because it was not legal in God's eyes. Therefore, it should be annulled.

Pope Clement took a less flexible view of the situation, however, since according to [Canon Law](#), he could not annul a marriage based on a situation which had a papal dispensation of approval previously issued on it. Clement also worried about Catherine's nephew, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, whose troops had sacked Rome earlier and briefly taken the Pope prisoner. Annuling the marriage between Catherine and Henry might well bring Charles down on his head once again. But not annulling it would certainly anger Henry. He dithered about making a decision, so Henry made his own.

Henry, by means of virtual [blackmail](#), bullied the [clergy](#) into supporting the King, not the Pope, as the Supreme Head and protector of the Church of England. Several Acts of Parliament followed, further establishing Henry's authority as Supreme Head of the Church, including those declaring England a completely independent nation and that Henry's Supreme Head status was not to be challenged by any foreign authority. He even went as far as to have the Christian humanist Sir Thomas More beheaded for failing to recognize Henry's authority as head of the new English Church.

In 1533, Henry married a pregnant Anne Boleyn, with the support of Parliament, and had her crowned queen. Catherine had been long since banished from court and lived in exile. Anne gave birth to a princess, Elizabeth, in September, 1533. Henry was excommunicated by the Pope, but when Parliament decreed Henry's marriage legal, Henry went about his usual business of hunting, attending Court functions and womanizing.

One might think such a decision as repudiating the authority of the Church and Pope would have caused more government upheaval in Parliament than it did. However, since scholar-priest John Wycliffe had expressed disgust with Church corruption in the 14th century, and Martin Luther's more recent activities in Germany, all Europe was astir with [debate](#) about the Church's power, her priests and her structure. The Catholic Church was slowly losing its primacy among Christian people.

When a powerful country like England turned its back on the Catholic Church, more nations were sure to follow, and in 150 years, much of Europe was more Protestant than Catholic. The Church had by no means lost all her support or members, but the scales were more evenly balanced.