

# Traveling the Via Media

Class 1: History of the English Reformation and the  
Elizabethan Settlement

*Finding Love and Unity Amid Differing Viewpoints*

# Why This Matters Today

In the USA, we live in a time profound political division.

Marist poll: 47% of Americans think it's likely that a civil war will occur in their lifetime. This sentiment was higher among younger generations: 58%

We disagree on all manner of things: immigration, law and order, justice, economics, government, just to name a few.

We often see ourselves as “Us,” and the others as “Them.”  
We often sense suspicion: Are **they** even good people?

**500 years ago, England faced religious polarization that threatened to tear the nation apart. Their answer might speak to us.**

# The Continental Reformation, 1517

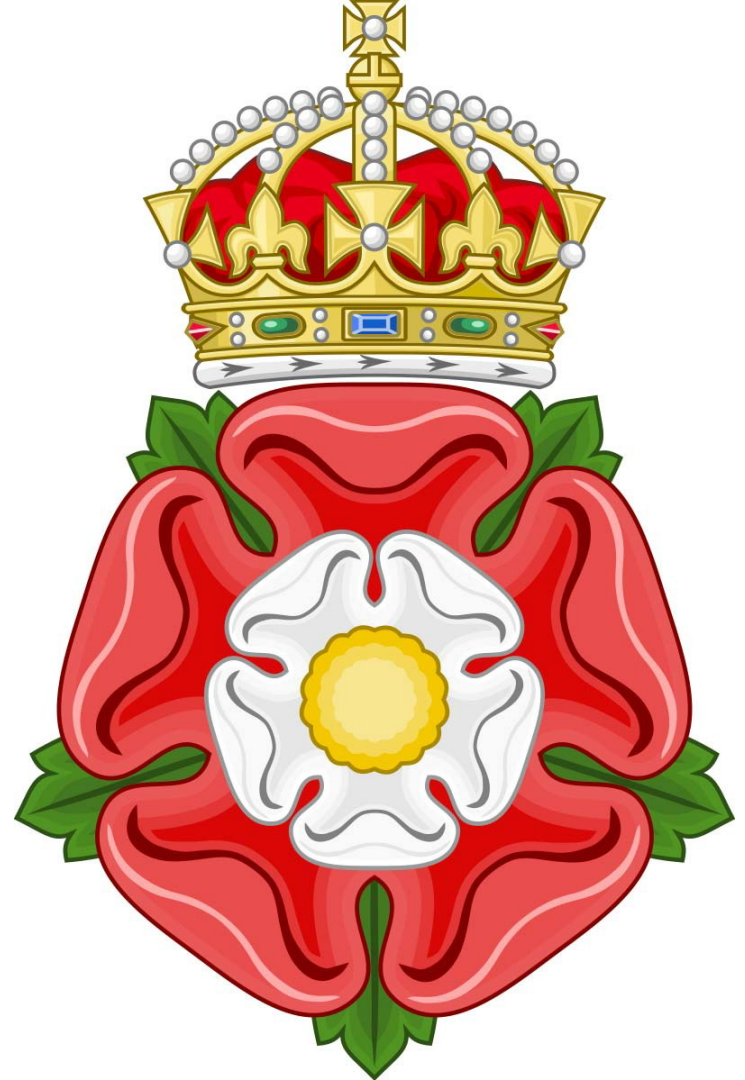
- Martin Luther
- John Calvin
- Ulrich Zwingli
- et alia...

Differences of theology,  
church government and  
structure, and worship.  
=Changing of Western  
Christianity



# Henry VIII and the Break with Rome (1534) The English Reformation Begins

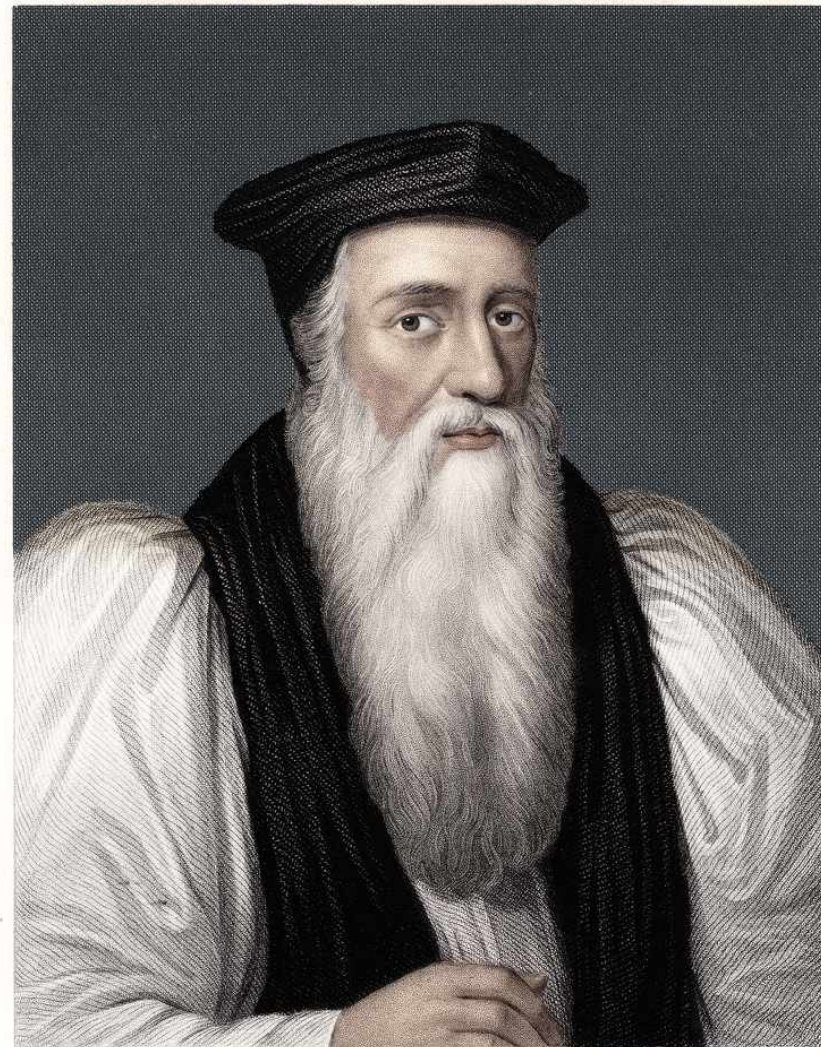
- Henry VIII breaks with Rome
  - Henry wants an annulment. He needs a male heir. The Pope says no.
  - Act of Supremacy: Henry declares himself Supreme Head of the Church of England.
  - Initially political, not theological  
Henry is still Catholic in belief.  
He just removes the Pope from the chain of command.





# Thomas Cranmer

- A key advisor to King Henry VIII and Edward VI.
- First Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury.
- A key figure in the English Reformation.
- Helped establish the Church of England.
- Authored the first two Books of Common Prayer, which shaped Anglican worship and provided a complete liturgy in English, making religious services accessible to the general public.
- Doctrinal Changes: He introduced reforms in areas such as the Eucharist, clerical celibacy, and the role of images in worship.
- Executed by Mary I.







## King Henry VIII

- Catherine of Aragon (A)
- Anne Boleyn (B)
- Jane Seymour (D)
- Anne of Cleves (A)
- Catherine Howard (B)
- Catherine Parr (S)



## King Henry dies in 1547

leaving a church broken away  
from Rome but still mostly  
Catholic in theology—just with a  
king instead of a Pope leading it.

### Henry's Three Children

- Edward VI: Protestant
- Mary I: Catholic
- Elizabeth I: Anglican
  - **Via Media:** The Middle Way





# Edward VI (1547–1553): The Pendulum Swings

Edward is a boy— only 9 years old— when he becomes King, controlled by Protestant regents.

## What Changed:

Latin Mass → English Mass

Priests forbidden to marry → Priests can marry

Church images protected → Images removed from churches

Catholic theology → Protestant theology

His reign saw the continuation of policies that persecuted Catholics. The government, influenced by Protestant leaders, enacted laws that targeted Catholic practices and beliefs. Many Catholics faced imprisonment and some few faced execution.

## Result:

Radical change, fast. People are traumatized. This is their faith being dismantled.





# Mary I (1553–1558): “Bloody Mary,” The Backlash

Edward dies at 16. Mary I (Catherine of Aragon's daughter) becomes queen and swings the pendulum violently back to Catholicism.

## What She Did:

- Restored Latin Mass
- Reinstated papal authority
- Burned ~300 Protestant bishops and leaders at the stake—including Thomas Cranmer

## The Human Cost:

Liturgy changed three times in one lifetime.  
Theology wrenched back and forth.  
Neighbors and priests executed.  
An exhausted nation.



# Elizabeth I (1558–1603): A New Approach

Elizabeth is 25 years old. She's Protestant but she's watched her younger brother and her older sister tear the nation apart.

## The Crucial Question:

*NOT: 'How do I win? How do I eliminate my opponents?'*

***BUT: 'How do we survive? How do we build a church that doesn't tear the nation apart?'***

## Her Famous Statement:

*"I have no desire to look into men's souls."*

Translation: I don't care what you believe privately. Conform outwardly. I won't execute you for your faith.



# The Elizabethan Settlement (1559): The Architecture

## Act of Supremacy

- Reestablished the Church of England as independent from Rome
- Made Elizabeth 'Supreme Governor' (softened from Henry's 'Supreme Head')
- Said no foreign power—meaning the Pope—could claim authority over the English church

## Act of Uniformity

- Worship in English, according BCP (Protestant)
- Priests could marry (Protestant)
- Vestments worn, and candles used (Catholic)
- Bishops were retained (Catholic)



# Act of Uniformity (1559) and the Prayer Book

## Act of Uniformity

- Established Cranmer's Prayer Book for all parishes

## The Genius

The Prayer Book was **theologically ambiguous in just the right ways.**

### Example: The Eucharist (most fought-over issue)

Catholic view: 'This is the literal body and blood'

Protestant view: 'This is **only symbolic**'

**Anglican Prayer Book:** It said both things, '***This is my body and blood. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee.***'

# Ambiguity as Genius

**The Prayer Book allowed both sides to kneel at the same rail and receive the sacraments together.**

## **It included:**

- Church decoration and ceremony (what Catholics wanted)
- No mandatory celibacy for clergy (what Protestants wanted)
- Removal of some Catholic-specific doctrines (what Protestants wanted)
- Apostolic succession and bishops (what Catholics wanted)

## **The Result**

Not 'nobody gets what they want.' Rather: 'We've found the central things that unite us. The secondary things—we can leave room for difference.'

# The Thirty-Nine Articles (1563)

A few years after the Settlement, theological statements were added.

## **They affirmed:**

- Protestant theology on key issues (justification by faith, Scripture's authority)
- But maintained Catholic structures (bishops, liturgy, sacraments)

## **The Key**

They were intentionally written to be readable in multiple ways—allowing both more Catholic and more Protestant interpretations.

## **Why?**

**Ambiguity was the point. The mission of the church is bigger than any single theological interpretation.**



# The Resistance: Why This Was Controversial

## Radical Protestants

'Too Catholic.'

Wanted Prayer Book stripped of ceremonial language.

Wanted bishops abolished.

## Catholics

Saw the Settlement as schism.

The Pope declared Elizabeth illegitimate.

Catholic powers plotted invasion.

## Elizabeth's Goal

Outward conformity.

Freedom of conscience on secondary matters.

Unity amid diversity.

# Richard Hooker: The Theological Justification

Hooker (writing in the 1590s) asked: Why does this approach actually work?

## His Answer: The Three Sources of Authority

**Scripture** – God's revealed word. Non-negotiable but open to interpretation.

**Tradition** – Wisdom of the Church across centuries. Keeps us from idiosyncrasy but can calcify.

**Reason** – God-given capacity to understand Scripture and Tradition in new contexts.

## The Genius

They inform and correct each other. This allows for genuine theological diversity within unified church structure.

# Why This Was Revolutionary

Everywhere else in 16th-century Europe, you had to choose: Protestant OR Catholic.

Wars were being fought. People were being executed. Both sides saw the conflict as a matter of life and death.

## England's Radical Answer

You can be reformed in doctrine but catholic in practice.

You can have bishops but believe in justification by faith.

You can preserve the sacraments but affirm individual conscience.

**You can share communion while disagreeing on how it works.**

*It stopped the killing. It created space for a different kind of Christianity.*



# The Legacy: Anglicanism Across the World

When English colonists came to America, they brought the Via Media with them.

The American Revolution created a challenge: How can we be Anglican without the British monarch as head?

## **The Episcopal Church's Answer**

Keep the same principle: a church that can hold theological diversity within a unified structure.

The Book of Common Prayer—which you use today—comes directly from Cranmer's original, revised over centuries.

*When you pray the BCP, you're participating in a 500-year-old experiment in holding diversity together.*

# The Connection to Our Moment

**Then: Religious polarization tearing England apart.**

**Now: Political polarization tearing America apart.**

## **The Underlying Problem Is the Same**

Divided communities where the other side is increasingly seen as the enemy.

Assumptions that anyone who disagrees with “us,” is an enemy.

## **Elizabeth's Choice Is Ours to Make**

Follow the path of mutual destruction—.

*OR choose the Via Media.*

# Can We Choose the Via Media?

The Via Media doesn't mean denying our differences.

Your convictions about government, liberty, justice, care for the vulnerable—they're real. They matter.

## The Question

Do they have to be *all* that matters?

Can you see the person across the aisle as someone who also loves Christ?

Can you see them as trying to live faithfully, even if you think they're wrong?

*That's the Via Media. That's the gift Anglicanism has to offer in a fractured moment.*

# Before Next Week

**Reflect on these questions:**

Where in your own life have you been acting like we're back in the days of Mary and Elizabeth—where the other side is an enemy that needs to be defeated?

Where might the Via Media challenge you to see your neighbor—the one you disagree with—as someone faithfully trying to follow Christ, even if you think they've gotten some things wrong?