Henry VIII of England

Of all the so-called churches in the world, there is only one of them that will stand firm against the world. This is the house built on rock, the Catholic Church. Everything else out there, all the heresies and other non-Catholic Christian groups, are just houses built on sand, and they’ll be washed away when the storms and winds come.

Like the metaphor? Well, it’s not mine. It’s Christ’s. He says that in the gospels. Christ teaches us that building our own house on sand rather than on the rock of Peter and the Apostles is doomed to failure.

But that doesn’t mean lots of people haven’t tried it. Most of the heresies and non-Catholic Christian groups out there started during a period known as the Protestant Revolt. The Protestants call it the Reformation, but when you’re changing the teachings of God Himself because you think you know better, I feel comfortable calling it a revolt!

We’ve talked about a few of the guys who influenced or led the revolt in continental Europe — Luther, Zwingli, Erasmus — and we’re going to be talking about others later. But there was a second Protestant revolt, a revolt that wasn’t directly connected to the one happening on the continent. That was the English revolt, which happened, as the name suggests, in England.

And the man who started it all was King Henry VIII of England.

Okay, here we are in Merry Old England at the end of the 15th century. Now everyone knows something about Henry VIII. He was king. He was a great warrior and athlete. He liked his food. He got fat. He had six wives, beheaded two of them, divorced another two. One of them died, and the last one survived him.

Now, all of that is true, but it’s not why we’re here. We’re here to talk about his break from the Catholic Church and the foundation of the Church of England, or Anglicanism. And that is tied up with the complex chess game that was Henry’s personal and political life.

King Henry VII and Queen Elizabeth of York had four sons. The eldest was Arthur, and the second was the future Henry VIII.

In 1501, when he was 15, Arthur married Catherine of Aragon, a Spanish princess. Arthur was the Prince of Wales, the heir to the throne of England, and this was a political marriage to secure an alliance between these two nations.

However, after only four months, disaster struck! Arthur fell ill and died, and all of his responsibilities — including being the heir to the throne — fell on the young Henry.

His father and Queen Isabella of Spain also dumped another responsibility on him. They wanted him to marry the widowed Catherine to continue the alliance. Now, marrying your brother’s widow wasn’t cool. Canon law, the law of the Church, forbade it. But Isabella sought a dispensation from the Pope. She said the marriage was never consummated.
With all the crazy ideas about marriage floating around today — men getting “married” to other men, three or more people getting “married,” people getting “married” for tax breaks or green cards or whatever — it’s important to remember the Church has always seen a sacramental marriage as taking place only when the union is consummated — that is, the husband and wife make love open to the conception of children.

Arthur was too sick, and he and Catherine were too young when they were married to be living together as husband and wife. And so the dispensation was granted, and a formal treaty agreeing to the marriage was signed in 1503.

But Henry the Younger and Catherine didn’t get married right away; he was only 10, of course, even younger than his brother. A year later, Isabella died and relations between Spain and England deteriorated.

Perhaps this was why when, in 1509, when his dad died and he became king of England, that Henry VIII agreed to marry Catherine. He needed to establish a good relationship with this powerful country. Remember, this was during the great age of exploration when the Americas were first being opened up to European colonization, and Spain was leading the charge. Gold and other treasures were pouring over the Atlantic into Spain’s coffers.

What Henry wanted over and above his kingdom’s being secure and powerful was a son. Now, he didn’t want a son for the reason you or I might want a son — to take hunting or to play catch or teach football to. No, he needed an heir, a prince who would become king after him. When there was no clear heir, powerful lords tended to fight for the English throne like bears around a bloody seal. Henry was afraid such a civil war would tear his kingdom apart and ruin all the peace and security he was trying to achieve.

And he didn’t just need one son; his brother’s death showed that. He needed “the heir and a spare.”

To be fair, he probably did want a boy to take hunting and play quoits with and teach jousting to.

And so this is where the story gets really sad.

Their first child, a girl, was stillborn. Their second child, a boy, died at seven weeks old. A miscarriage followed. Finally, in 1516, Catherine gave birth to a girl, Mary.

These tragic deaths had put a strain on Henry and Catherine’s marriage, and the king drowned his sorrows with a series of royal mistresses. Catherine was well aware of her husband’s adultery but didn’t protest. She became pregnant again but, sadly, this daughter too was stillborn.

Henry finally fathered the son he wanted — with one of his mistresses. He tried to have him legitimized, that is, declared his legal heir, but the process was difficult and the boy died before it could be complete.

By this stage, Henry was frantic. Catherine was getting older, and it seemed as if he would never get the sons he so badly wanted from her. His mind was consumed with achieving one of three things:
First, he could get a bastard son conceived with one of his mistresses declared his legal heir. He’d tried that already; the process was difficult, took a long time, and required the approval of the Pope. And his “son’s” claim to the throne would be open to challenge by other lords and princes.

Second, he could marry his daughter Mary off as quickly as possible, and *she* could have a son. Then he could bypass a whole generation and get a male heir to sit on the throne. But he wasn’t confident that would work. Mary was small and slight, and Henry didn’t think she would conceive and bear a son before he died.

Thirdly, he could marry one of his mistresses, a pretty girl called Anne Boleyn who was one of his wife’s ladies-in-waiting. Naturally, this seemed the most attractive option to him; all he had to do was divorce Catherine. Easy, right?

Wrong. See, there *was* no such thing as divorce in 15th-century Catholic Europe. Heck, there’s no such thing as *real* divorce now — never has been, never will be. “What God has joined, let no man put asunder.” We’ve got a whole program about this called *Remaining in the Truth* — you should check it out.

What Henry sought from the Pope was a declaration of nullity, commonly called an annulment — a declaration the marriage never existed in the first place. Henry argued that because Catherine was his sister-in-law, he never had the right to marry her, as described in the book of Leviticus. Now, Isabella of Spain had got the Pope to issue a dispensation lifting this, but Henry argued the Pope had never had the authority to do that.

This was happening in 1527, but only six years before Henry had written *Defense of the Seven Sacraments*. This is a brilliant piece of apologetics, arguing against Martin Luther himself. Because of this, the Pope had given him the title *Fidei Defensor*, the defender of the Faith. At this stage, and perhaps throughout his life, Henry didn’t reject teachings of the Church. All he wanted was to be able to divorce his wife so he could marry his mistress and have sons. *That* was his motivation.

The Pope wasn’t a fool. You don’t get to wear the pope-hat unless you’ve got some brains to stuff in there. Henry sent a letter requesting an annulment. The Pope said nope. Henry set up an ecclesiastical court in England to hear the case. The Pope said nope and recalled the case to Rome.

With two nopes from the Pope, Henry didn’t hold out much hope. It was pretty clear the Pope wasn’t going to let him do what he wanted.

So he did it anyway.


For now, Cranmer was the chief cleric in England, and he moved swiftly. In late 1532, Henry married Anne secretly, and she quickly became pregnant. They were publicly married in January the next year. In May, Cranmer declared both Henry and Catherine’s marriage null and void and Henry and Anne’s
marriage valid. Catherine was stripped of her title and spent the rest of her life in quiet obscurity, praying.

Anne and Henry’s daughter was Elizabeth, known as “The Good Queen Bess” by many English Protestants, but perhaps better called “Bloody Betty.” It was she who led the brutal persecutions — the imprisonment, the torture, the horrific executions — of so many Catholics when she was crowned Queen Elizabeth I in 1558.

But that was all in the future. Henry VIII and Cranmer had their own ideas about persecution.

Between 1532 and ’34, the English parliament passed a series of acts, the most important of which were the Act in Restraint of Appeals and the Act of Supremacy. These laws were another divorce — the divorce of the Church in England from the Catholic Church of Rome. Henry VIII was declared the head of the Church in England, and the right of appeal to Rome was abolished. Legally, Henry was now in charge.

Of course, this is where we get the joke: Why don’t Anglicans play chess? Because they can’t tell the difference between a king and a bishop.

But this period in England was no time for jokes. The Catholic monasteries were ripe for the plucking. They had land, money, golden altar vessels and other expensive and beautiful things dedicated to the worship of God. Henry didn’t care; he needed the cash. His lavish lifestyle and many foreign wars cost him a lot of money. He “dissolved” the monasteries, a phrase that means he stole their lands, tore down their buildings, and sold their stuff.

If the monks complained, they were executed. Members of Henry’s own court and government stood against him; they were martyred, too. Lords led rebellions against Henry, trying to restore the Catholic faith. Henry said he pardoned them, but then went back on his word and killed their leaders.

It was a bloody time in Merry Old England.

Of course, Henry is famous for having six wives — and we’re only on wife number two.

As he had with Catherine, Henry cheated on Anne. He had an affair with a woman called Jane Seymour. Like Catherine, Anne suffered miscarriages and stillbirths. When it was clear she wouldn’t give him the son he wanted, Henry had her accused of treason and — get this! — adultery. Well, that’s the pot calling the kettle black!

He had her executed. Within a few hours he was betrothed to Jane, and they married soon afterwards.

Jane kept her head — but didn’t get a crown to put on it. Henry didn’t give her the title of queen. He probably wanted her to give him a son before he did that.

And she did give him a son — Edward. Finally, Henry had what he wanted.

Jane died the very next day from complications with childbirth.
Henry went a whole two years without marrying anyone. But then his government suggested a political marriage. It was important to get Protestant allies in case of a Catholic attack on England. Although Henry’s personal theology was still far closer to the Pope than Luther, he agreed. The sister of the Duke of Cleves, a German woman called Anne, was chosen.

Henry never met Anne before they got married. All he had to go on was a painting of her, kind of like the Tinder of the 16th century. And, just like on dating websites, her picture wasn’t that accurate. It made her look a lot prettier than she was.

Now, Anne wasn’t ugly. She was actually quite pretty, some sources say. But she wasn’t up to Henry’s standards. He was used to having a succession of beautiful mistresses and getting his way. He was angry with Thomas Cromwell, the man who had arranged the marriage. Henry thought he had sold him a pig in a poke.

Henry never consummated the marriage between him and Anne. The marriage was quietly annulled. Anne didn’t fight or complain, and she was rewarded with a comfortable pension, two houses and the grand title “The King’s Sister.”

Cromwell was rewarded with an ax — to the neck. He got his head cut off.

But Henry didn’t watch the execution. He was too busy getting married — again! On the very day Cromwell was killed, Henry married Catherine Howard. She was Anne Boleyn’s cousin and lady-in-waiting. Henry was delighted with her, and gave her gifts of jewelry and all the lands he stole from Cromwell. It’s not like Cromwell needed his estate once he was dead, right?

Henry had clearly fallen in love with Catherine while still married to Anne. He might have committed adultery with her; it was a pattern for him. But he wasn’t pleased when she turned around and did it to him! She carried on an affair with a courtier called Thomas Culpeper.

Cranmer led the investigation and the evidence was pretty clear. Henry didn’t want to believe it, but when her secretary revealed the affair he had no choice. He had her, her lover, and her secretary all executed in 1542.

Just so we are keeping tally here, Henry is now at two executions out of five wives. That’s an average of 40 percent, which is pretty bad, all things considered.

By this stage, Henry wasn’t well. He’d been a great athlete and warrior in his youth — tall and strong, marvelously fit, a skilled wrestler. You can see his suits of armor on display in England. He was six foot tall, which for a man of that period was massive. But now he had a different sort of massiveness; his diet and wounds received in tournaments had caught up with him. He was obese and sick, covered in ulcers and pus-filled boils. He suffered from gout. Some people even think he might have even had scurvy, caused by eating a diet of nothing but roasted red meat. Certainly, he was massively overweight and had to be moved about with the help of mechanical devices.

And that was the man his last wife, Catherine Parr, married. She’d been married twice; both of her previous husbands had died. She wanted to marry Jane Seymour’s brother, but Henry made it clear he
was interested in her. She thought it was her “duty” to marry the king. Or, as they said in England in those days, “Marry me or I cut your head off.”

Catherine Parr was very sympathetic to the Protestant revolutionaries on the continent. She tried to use her influence on Henry, but he remained committed to his weird mix of Catholicism and Protestantism. Powerful people at court didn’t much like her sticking her nose in, and they plotted against her, but she managed to keep her head by telling Henry she only argued so he could teach her the truth. She was a crafty one and managed to save her skin by playing to his ego.

They were married in 1543. Less than four years later, in January 1547, Henry died.

There is one final macabre detail of Henry’s life that perhaps reveals God’s judgment of him.

His coffin was put on display overnight in a monastery as it was being taken to St. George’s chapel in Windsor. Twelve years earlier, a Franciscan friar named William Peyto preached to the king at his palace, saying God’s judgment was ready to fall on his head and that dogs would lick up his blood like they did to King Ahab in the Old Testament.

Henry might have laughed then, but he didn’t laugh when at night in the monastery, the coffin leaked a “corrupted matter of a bloody color.”

Eww ...

So what is Henry’s legacy?

Well, the Anglican Communion — a weird, not-quite-Luther-reformed, not-quite-Catholic theology that was driven further and further from Rome by Cranmer and, later, Elizabeth. Now, of course, Anglicanism is falling deeper and deeper into heresy. They were the first Christians to allow contraception, kick-starting the Culture of Death. And they allow women and gay priests and bishops.

I guess that’s to be expected; the Anglicans started because of sexual desire. Giving in to all kinds of deviancy would be par for the course.

Henry’s impact on the Christian word can only be understood by looking at what his bishop Cranmer did, and that’s what we’re doing next time. But, for now, what lessons can we learn from Henry’s fall?

The obvious lesson, of course, is one of self-denial, sacrifice, abstinence. Henry had large appetites — for food, for power, for wealth, for women. If he had only held his desires in check and not given in to temptation, his story might have been very different.

But that’s not the only lesson here.

Henry’s fall isn’t quite as simple as painting him as a gluttonous, lustful, venial man who wanted to stuff himself full of roast beef and then have a different beautiful woman in his bed each night. Yes, he was all that — but he was also something far worse.
Henry started out by wanting one thing: a son and heir. And he didn’t get it. So rather than accepting this suffering, picking up his cross and carrying it, he demanded the world conform to his desires. Two dead queens, countless other murders, buildings destroyed and art burned, treasures stolen and a whole nation led into heresy later, he still didn’t have what he wanted. His son, Edward, was sickly and wasn’t on the throne for long.

None of us are kings, but we all have crosses to bear, and they’re hard. And the cross Henry should have borne is one a lot of people are given today. Many couples are infertile, or have children who are sick and disabled.

But how many people contracept, saying they’re not ready for children just yet, but then demand children later on, making them in a test tube? How many couples are infertile and, rather than bearing that suffering and becoming holier by it, decided to use IVF or other technologies that leave living children imprisoned, frozen in an incubator hell in some fertility clinic’s fridge?

And that’s just children and fertility — there are people who refuse to live chaste lives, instead giving in to their lusts; married men and women fed up with their spouses who divorce and remarry, or just go off and commit adultery; gays and lesbians who demand their unions be recognized as “marriage”; people with all kinds of temptations who give in to them.

How many people look at the crosses they are given and tell God, “Nope, ain’t picking that one up,” and then use the power of the law or science to get what they want?

Henry is their poster child. And he died with dogs licking up his rotted blood. Remember that if ever something doesn’t go your way and you think you “deserve” what you want rather than the suffering you get.

So we end on a sobering note. Next time, we’re staying in England and staying with Henry’s reign, but we’ll be talking about his pet bishop, the man who did theologically what Henry had done politically, Thomas Cranmer. Until then, stay Catholic and stay holy. I’m Charles Hornbacher, and this has been Houses Built on Sand.