Throughout his life, Henry VIII of England considered himself a faithful Catholic. In 1521, Henry published a stinging attack on the teachings of Martin Luther. The attack delighted the pope, who awarded Henry the title “Defender of the Faith.” However, a few years later, the English king quarreled with the pope over the issue of marriage.

After 18 years of marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Henry had no son to inherit the English throne. Catherine had given birth to many children, including several boys, but only one child, Mary Tudor, survived infancy. When Henry asked Pope Clement VII to grant him an annulment so he could remarry, the pope refused. A strong-willed man, Henry would not accept defeat. Instead, he built up English resentment against the pope.

Between 1529 and 1536, Henry took the English church from under the pope’s control and placed it under his own rule. In 1533, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, annulled Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry then married Anne Boleyn. Parliament recognized the king as the supreme head of the Church of England by the Act of Supremacy of 1534.

English Protestants applauded the steps taken by the king and Parliament to break away from Rome. However, other English reformers, such as Sir Thomas More, wanted change to come from within the Catholic Church. Henry feared his opponents would disrupt the peace, so he ordered the execution of More and others who would not accept the Act of Supremacy.

Before long, Henry took further steps against the Catholic Church. When he heard reports that many monasteries were corrupt, the king promptly closed them.
About 10,000 monks and nuns were forced to seek other homes. Because he needed money, the king then seized monastery lands, which he sold to nobles, wealthy farmers, and merchants. In the years ahead, those who had bought monastery lands would resist any effort to restore land or power to the Catholic Church.

Despite the break with Rome, Henry did not want to change Catholic beliefs. In fact, Henry proclaimed that the Anglican Church, as the Church of England was called, would preserve traditional Catholic practices. However, he did allow priests to use an English translation of the Bible, and he permitted them to marry.

Henry VIII died in 1547 after a turbulent life that included six marriages. After his death, the official religion of England swung back and forth between Protestant and Catholic. Henry’s son, Edward VI, inherited the throne at age ten. During Edward's reign, Protestant bishops issued the *Book of Common Prayer*, which outlined the official rituals and prayers for the Anglican services. The *Book of Common Prayer* combined both Protestant and Catholic ideas.

When Edward died in 1553, Henry VIII’s daughter, Mary Tudor, inherited the throne. Raised as a Catholic, Mary was determined to make England truly Catholic again. She persecuted Anglican bishops who would not accept the authority of the pope. Mary angered many subjects when she married Philip II, the Catholic king of Spain. When Mary died in 1558, her Protestant half-sister, Elizabeth I, became queen.

Queen Elizabeth adopted a skillful policy of religious compromise. She moved cautiously at first but gradually enforced reforms that she felt moderate Catholics and Protestants could accept. However, Elizabeth persecuted both Catholics and Protestants who opposed her policies. Elizabeth firmly established England as a Protestant nation. Yet she took England along a middle road and preserved many traditional Catholic beliefs.