The Protestant Reformation began with criticism of the Catholic Church by priests and other religious thinkers. In England, the Reformation began with the king. Henry VIII became king of England in 1509 at the age of 17. As a young king, he was a devout Catholic who wrote angry protests against the “venomous” ideas of Luther. Henry’s actions won him the title “Defender of the Faith.”

Document #1 - Henry VIII’s Letter to Pope Leo X on the subject of his book “Assertio Septem Sacramentorum” criticizing Martin Luther (1521)

Most Holy Father:

No duty is more important for a Catholic ruler than to preserve and increase the Christian faith and religion by his example and by preventing it from being destroyed by any assailant of the Faith or in any way impaired. ...we shall ever defend and uphold the Holy Roman Church, not only by force of arms but by the resources of our intelligence and services as a Christian.

Your Holiness’ most devoted and humble son, Henry, by the grace of God King of England and France, and Lord of Ireland

1. At this time, what was King Henry’s view toward the Catholic Church?

By 1525, Henry’s wife, Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, had borne only one child, a girl named Mary. This presented a problem for Henry, who wanted a male heir to succeed him one day as king. It was thought that a female monarch could weaken England politically, and Henry believed Catherine, who had reached her forties, would never produce a male heir. Since divorce was technically forbidden by the Catholic Church, Henry decided to have the marriage annulled, or declared invalid based on church laws, so that he could marry again. Of course, there was no real reason why the marriage should be considered invalid, but since he was a king, he assumed that Pope Clement VII would be willing to bend the rules a bit for him.

Document #2 - Letter from King Henry VIII to Lord Benedetto, Henry’s contact to the Pope. Henry was sending his ambassador to ask for a divorce (1529)

Our most dear friend, greetings. In the past we have received kind treatment from you. We feel we owe you such kind treatment in the future, and will not be happy until we are able to do so. We now sincerely beg that you continue to show us your most fair treatment. We are sending another ambassador of ours to His Majesty for important business of ours and we pray you treat him with the same kind treatment and listen to what he has to say as if it were us who were speaking in person.

A fortunate farewell.
From Our court at London, 18 January 1529

2. Why do you think Henry is being so polite in this letter? What is his objective?
However, Henry’s wife Catherine of Aragon happened to also be the aunt of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The emperor was opposed to the annulment, and the pope knew that, if he were to grant it, the emperor would consider it a personal offence. Considering Henry to be less of a threat than the Holy Roman Emperor, the pope refused to grant Henry the annulment. While Henry argued with the pope over his annulment, he fell in love with Anne Boleyn.

Henry soon took matters into his own hands by summoning Parliament. Known as the Reformation Parliament, the gathering led to a declaration that England no longer considered itself under the authority of the pope. Instead, Henry himself became the head of the new Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church. Since, unlike Luther, Henry’s conflict with the Catholic Church was not over matters of belief and practice, he did not do much to change the rituals of the church. However, Henry closed Catholic monasteries and convents and distributed much of the land to nobles. This helped build more public support for the split from the Church.

3. Why did the Pope refuse to grant Henry an annulment for his marriage to Catherine?

4. Anglicanism is very similar to Catholicism in many of its beliefs and practices. Why is that the case?

In 1533, Henry secretly married Anne Boleyn, who was in her twenties. Shortly after, Parliament legalized Henry’s divorce from Catherine. In 1534, Henry’s break with the pope was completed when Parliament voted to approve the Act of Supremacy. This called on people to take an oath recognizing the divorce and accepting Henry, not the pope, as the official head of England’s Church.

Document #3 - The Act in Restraint of Appeals Made by English Parliament (1533)

England is an empire governed by one supreme King who has the power of an imperial crown. Through his government the King has the following of people who owe him humble obedience second only to their obedience to God. Just as importantly, the King is given his power, importance, authority, and the right to render justice within his realm by Almighty God himself. From now on when any cause of the divine law happens to come in question or of spiritual learning, it will be interpreted by the English Church, without the intermeddling of any exterior person or persons, such as the Pope. The King of this realm may also make laws for the conservation of the rights and liberties of the imperial crown of this realm. This will keep us safe from the annoyance and attacks from Rome and any other foreign ruler attempting to weaken or destroy this realm. This includes laws that have been created because of disagreements with Rome about matrimony and divorces, required payments and gifts to the Church. These cause great trouble and costs of the King’s Highness and the English people. This must all happen because the great distance and difference between England and Rome makes it impossible for Rome to know the true cause of an English problem and therefore cannot help solve the problem.

5. According to this act of Parliament, who gives the English King the right to rule?

6. How did this act change the relationship between the English Church and the Pope in Rome?
Document #4 - Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy (1534)

The King's Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England, and so is recognized by the clergy of this realm. By the authority of this Parliament, the king, his heirs and successors, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called Anglicans Ecclesia.

7. According to this act, the head of the Church of England is ________________________________.

The Act of Supremacy met some opposition. Thomas More, even though he had strongly criticized the Church, remained a devout Catholic. His faith, he said, would not allow him to accept the terms of the act and he refused to take the oath. In response, Henry had him arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London. In 1535, More was found guilty of high treason and executed.

Document #5 - Account of the executions of John Fisher and Thomas More written by the Tudor chronicler Edward Hall 1535

This year three monks were condemned of high treason against the king, and sentenced to be drawn, hanged, disemboweled, beheaded and quartered. John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, was also condemned for treason against the king. The jury ruled he should be hanged, cur down alive, his bowels taken out of his body and burnt before him, his head cut off, and his body be divided into four parts and his head and body be set in such places as the king should assign. The effect of the treason was denying the king to be Supreme Head of the Church of England, according to a statute, The Act of Supremacy, made in the last session of Parliament. This year also, Sir Thomas More, sometime chancellor of England, was arraigned for high treason and condemned. He was beheaded and his head was set on London Bridge. The effect of his death was for the same cause that the bishop of Rochester died for.

8. Who were these people and why were they punished in this way?

Henry did not immediately get the male heir he sought. After Anne Boleyn gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, she fell out of Henry’s favor. Eventually, she was charged with treason. Like Thomas More, she was imprisoned in the Tower of London. She was found guilty and beheaded in 1536. Almost at once, Henry took a third wife, Jane Seymour. In 1537, she gave him a son named Edward. Henry’s happiness was tempered by his wife’s death just two weeks later. Henry married three more times. None of these marriages, however, produced children.

After Henry’s death in 1547, each of his three children ruled England in turn. This created religious turmoil. Henry’s son, Edward, became king when he was just nine years old. Too young to rule alone, Edward VI was guided by adult advisers. These men were devout Protestants, and they introduced Protestant reforms to the English Church. Almost constantly in ill health, Edward reigned for just six years. Mary, the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, took the throne in 1553. She was a Catholic who returned the English Church to the rule of the pope. Her efforts met with considerable resistance, and she had many Protestants executed, earning her the nickname “Bloody Mary.” When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth, Anne Boleyn’s daughter, inherited the throne.

9. Why did the Church of England become more Protestant during the reign of King Edward?
Elizabeth I was determined to return her kingdom to Protestantism. In 1559, Parliament followed Elizabeth’s wishes and set up the Church of England, or Anglican Church, with Elizabeth as its head. This was to be the only legal church in England. Elizabeth decided to establish a state church that moderate Catholics and moderate Protestants might both accept. To please Protestants, priests in the Church of England were allowed to marry. They could deliver sermons in English, not Latin. To please Catholics, the Church of England kept some of the trappings of the Catholic service such as rich robes. In addition, church services were revised to be somewhat more acceptable to Catholics. By taking this moderate approach, Elizabeth brought a level of religious peace to England. Religion, however, remained a problem. Some Protestants pushed for Elizabeth to make more far-reaching church reforms. At the same time, some Catholics tried to overthrow Elizabeth and replace her with her cousin, the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots. A strong queen, Elizabeth survived these struggles, firmly establishing the Church of England and her rule as Queen. Elizabeth’s long reign is known as the Elizabethan era. The period is famous for the flourishing of English drama, led by playwrights such as William Shakespeare. England’s defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 associated Elizabeth with one of the greatest military victories in English history.

[Main text adapted from World History: Human Legacy by Susan Ramirez, et al. and from World History: Patterns of Interaction by Roger Beck, et al.]

10. How did Queen Elizabeth reach a peaceful solution to the religious conflict in England?

11. Considering the accomplishments of Queen Elizabeth, do you think Henry’s determination to produce a male heir was worth the trouble? Were his fears about a female ruler justified?