

# Henry VIII's 1534 and 1536 Decrees on Bidding Prayers: Unintended Consequences

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## I

In 1534 king Henry VIII issued a decree having to do with the content of the bidding prayers (general intercessions) that were to be used each Sunday in all the churches of England. He did this to support his claim to supremacy over the church in England. The pope was omitted from the text of the prayer, the king was named first (before the bishops), was designated by name and title, and was identified as head of the church in England. All this was reiterated in a second decree issued in 1536. I refer to the claim to supremacy as the primary effect of Henry's decree, and it definitely was intended. (See the separate document *Sovereign and Pope in English Bidding Prayers Before and After 1534 and Clergy, Nobility, Commoners, the Dead, and Henry VIII's Second Decree on Bidding Prayers (1536)*.)

The differences between Henry's revised texts and those used in English parishes before 1534, however, were more extensive than required to communicate Henry's claim to be supreme head of the church in England. Among these additional or "secondary" changes were an elevation in the status of queens and royal children, a diminishing of references to bishops and other clergy, nobility and the dead, and the disappearance of women and men of the parish as well as members of religious orders. (See the separate documents: *Queens, Nuns, Pregnant Women and Mothers: Consequences for Women of Henry VIII's 1534 Decree on Bidding Prayers*, and *Clergy, Nobility, Commoners, the Dead and Henry VIII's Second Decree on Bidding Prayers (1536)*.)

Here I suggest that these secondary differences were *unintended* and consider why this situation might have come about. In addition, I consider possible consequences of the use of the 1534/1536 form of bidding prayer; again I suggest that there were unintended consequences.

## II

To understand the scenario that I am proposing, it is necessary to appreciate that parochial bidding prayers, diverse as they were in detail, were recognizably similar and constituted a particular type or subset of general intercession; they were not the only type,

however. Local church communities other than parishes used other types of general intercessions that had been adapted to express the identities and needs of such communities. All included intentions for the pope, bishops and rulers, however. Such particular forms of bidding prayers were used in monasteries and by religious orders, in hospitals, universities and pilgrimage sites. Particular forms were also used on special occasions such as synods, the consecration of bishops, weddings of royalty, etc. (See the separate document: *Women and Medieval General Intercessions: Introduction.*)

I suggest finally that the English royal court at worship constituted a distinct form of local worshipping community, and that it employed its own particular form of bidding prayer. (See the separate document: *Queen Mary I and a Court Form of Bidding Prayer in Medieval England.*) I therefore suggest that Henry VIII imposed on parishes a type of bidding prayer that had previously been used by an entirely different local church community, the royal court. Henry, in fact, probably did not have much personal experience with the “regular”, parochial form of bidding prayer; it simply was not used in his presence. He and his court had probably grown up with the court form and might have had little or no awareness or appreciation of the regular parochial form.

The regular court form of bidding prayer -- prior to Henry’s 1534 decree -- in fact already contained many of the differences between the parochial bidding prayer and the texts now prescribed for use in parishes. Thus the status of king, queen and royal children was elevated, references to clergy and nobility were minimized, and the people of the parish were not mentioned. Thus these differences in Henry’s bidding prayer did not result from deliberate omissions and changes on Henry’s part but rather “just happened” because they were present in the text that Henry took as the basis for claiming ecclesial supremacy.

If the intended consequence of Henry’s decree was to claim ecclesial supremacy, an unintended consequence was to impose on parishes a form of bidding prayer that previously had been used only in the royal court.

### III

If the text of the bidding prayer decreed by Henry VIII in 1534 included an unintended consequence, then its actual use expressed and promoted a series of additional consequences that, for the most part, also were unintended. Thus it not only downgraded the clergy and nobility, but also completely eliminated the people of the parish from a prayer that previously had been heavily oriented toward the parish (without neglecting pope, bishops and king, however). These additional consequences included loss of autonomy, loss of identity, loss of connectedness, and loss of prayerfulness so far as the parish was concerned. Let me explain.

*Autonomy.* Prior to 1534, parish bidding prayers were composed by the local parish priest and community (within general limits established more by tradition than by ecclesial or civil authority). Each text was verbally distinct and could be revised and up-dated each week, if

that were thought appropriate.

After 1534, the content of these prayers was no longer determined by the parish community but rather by the king. Local initiative in wording and details of content was eliminated and one uniform text was imposed on all parishes.

The Sunday bidding prayer was thus removed from the control and responsibility of the local parish and its priest. The parish was no longer trusted to act responsibly in this matter, and its autonomy in this respect was taken away; the people of the parish were treated like children rather than adults.

*Identity.* Prior to 1534 the Sunday bidding prayer revealed the individual “face” of each parish community. Each parish was able to express its own identity and needs and the diversity among individual texts expressed what was considered to be a healthy pluralism. At the same time, the traditional bidding prayer included and balanced local, regional, national and international dimensions of church and society.

After 1534 the sections of the bidding prayer that had named parishioners (living and dead) were no longer included and parishes lost the ability to express their own identity and needs. The local, regional and international dimensions of church and society also disappeared. Any local diversity was now considered an unhealthy divisiveness. The Sunday bidding prayer became faceless community -- remote and bland.

*Connectedness.* Before 1534, the Sunday bidding prayer recognized and respected all kinds of people in the parish (as well as others outside the parish); there were many faces to be seen. This prayer helped to bond and connect members of the parish and promote solidarity.

After 1534 as both the parish community as a whole and its members became more invisible and more disempowered, the solidarity of the community -- at least in the context of Sunday worship -- became weakened; bonding was diminished.

Before 1534 the Sunday bidding prayer (together with announcements and the sermon) were ways in which daily life was named, honored and recognized as sacred, within the timeless and more general aspects of the mass liturgy. Losing this type of bidding prayer therefore weakened the connection between liturgy and life. Failure to recognize daily life in the liturgy in this way also increased the divide between sacred and secular and gave less value to daily life.

*Prayerfulness.* Prior to 1534 the Sunday bidding prayer was simply and entirely a prayer. It was a prayer of intercession addressed to God for the benefit of other persons and the civil and ecclesial community. After 1534 it became, in part, a political act and a kind of loyalty oath; hence less simply a prayer. In addition, by becoming more bland, general and remote in character, it became less engaging, less interesting, less worthy of attention and energy.

The big “winner” in all this was of course the king and the nation. The only people who

had faces now were the king and the royal family. The prayer now became a lengthy text on behalf of the king. Unity within church and nation was equated with uniformity to a text imposed by royal authority. Both church and society were identified with the king.

Were these consequences intended? Or unintended? Or both?

#### IV

In conclusion, when Henry VIII decided to use the bidding prayer of the Sunday liturgy to communicate and promote his claim to be supreme head of the church in England, he initiated a chain of events that went well beyond his immediate goals.

So far as I am aware, this was the first time in the (at least) 600 year history of the bidding prayer or general intercessions that civil authorities had so directly intervened and sought to control its content to enhance the power of the king. In addition, this was the first time that either civic or ecclesial authorities had imposed a uniform text that everyone had to use. “Uniformity” was part of the spirit of the times, however.

It would be interesting to examine other aspects of the liturgical shifts of the Protestant and Catholic reformations from the perspective of “unintended consequences”. For example, rejection of saints by the Protestant Reformers diminished the visibility of women in Sunday worship. The decision of the Catholics to use liturgical books from Italy as the exemplars and starting places for post-tridentine revisions also diminished the visibility of women; books from north of the Alps were much more gender inclusive than those from the south.