

Brian L. Hanson

Reformation of the Commonwealth

Thomas Becon and the Politics of
Evangelical Change in Tudor England



Reformed Historical Theology

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Abbreviations

BL	The British Library, London, UK
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
PC	Privy Council of England
SP	State Papers, The National Archives, Kew, UK
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, UK

Introduction

In this work, I examine the commonwealth rhetoric of the early English evangelicals, using Thomas Becon (1512–1567), the prolific pamphleteer, London cleric, Christian humanist, and one of the leading ‘commonwealth men’ of his day. In light of his voluminous output, around thirty-five published tracts with many more editions, it is crucial to consider Becon’s view of a ‘godly’ commonwealth in the context of England’s ever-changing evangelical reformation.¹ His pamphlets compass a span of twenty-five years, 1541–1566, and demonstrate an evolving vision of his ‘godly’ commonwealth model. I begin with Becon’s earliest pamphlets and examine the key themes he focused on, tracking those same themes in his later works. By doing this, I show the continuities and ruptures of his rhetoric, arguing that political, religious, and social currents directly shaped his views on the commonwealth.

However, this study is not only about Becon. It places him within the larger contextual framework of early English evangelicalism, comparing and contrasting his views with those of other evangelicals including those with whom he worked closely. My work examines the ways in which these English evangelicals viewed themselves in relation to the commonwealth. Many early modern scholars have noted the intersection of religion and politics in the English commonwealth. But the precise ways in which the evangelicals participated in and expressed their political and theological views of the commonwealth have yet to be thoroughly explored. Some scholars of early modern England have oversimplified the evangelicals’ views of and visions for a ‘godly’ commonwealth, and have failed to address the fine nuances of evangelical commonwealth ideology.

While this work is a historical study, drawing from English Reformation historiography by acknowledging the chronology of reform, it also utilizes methods of social history and historical theology to explore the evangelical concept of ‘common weale’ in sixteenth-century England. Therefore, this work

¹ See Appendix, Table 1. A precise number of printed tracts for Becon is difficult to determine. Several titles of disputed authorship may have been penned by Becon.

engages with humanist texts on poor relief, companionship, gender, household governance, economy, and religious prophecy in order to demonstrate the intersection of commonwealth rhetoric with Renaissance humanism. This kind of interdisciplinary approach is crucial in unpacking the multifaceted meaning of ‘common weale’ and its implications within the English evangelical community.

At the outset of this study, it is necessary to define the terminology of ‘evangelical’ as used in this work. ‘Evangelical’ and ‘Protestant’ are often used interchangeably in scholarship without any clear distinction. The term ‘evangelicall’ began to appear widely in adjectival form in English print in the 1530s. As the term in the Greek denotes anything pertaining to the gospel, writers of English tracts not only used it in this manner, but Catholic writers specifically described anyone who opposed or protested against Rome as ‘evangelicall’. For instance, Thomas More derided William Tyndale and Robert Barnes for being of the ‘evangelicall bretherhed’.² At the same time, the early evangelicals did not reject the ‘evangelicall’ label. Richard Taverner in 1539 did not hesitate to count himself among those who embraced ‘evangelicall libertie and trouthe of gods worde’ in contrast with the teaching of the ‘Romissh byshop our archenemie and the moste pestilent overthrower of al godlynes’.³ Becon himself identified himself with the ‘evangelical trueth’ and encouraged the conservatives not to ‘hynder’ it.⁴ Like Taverner three years prior, Becon also established a clear distinction between ‘the evangelicall verite’ and the teaching of the ‘wicked Papistes’, ‘oweles’, and ‘antechristes’.⁵ From Becon’s perspective, the dividing line lay in how the two positions viewed biblical authority. Becon argued that the papists ‘despisy[e] the moost confortable lyght of Goddes worde’ and ‘walke in the darkenes of mennes tradicions’.⁶ Another primary distinction Becon submitted was the evangelicals’ view of ‘regeneracion and newe byrth’, specifically the role of ‘fayth’ in salvation.⁷ ‘Protestant’ did not enter English print until 1555 when Bishop Edmund Bonner used it as a derogatory term to describe those ‘newe fangled wyttes’ who flaunt the ‘glorious badge of a protestaunt’.⁸ Nicholas Ridley accepted the fact that he was a ‘protestante’, affirming ‘my protestation shall be this that my minde is and

2 Thomas More, *The apologye of syr Thomas More knight* (London: W. Rastell, 1533) STC 18078, sig. D2v.

3 Richard Taverner, *A catechisme or institution of the christen religion* (London: R. Bankes, 1539) STC 23709, sigs. A4r–v.

4 Thomas Becon, *A Christmas bankette* (London: J. Mayler for J. Gough, 1542) STC 1713, sig. G4v.

5 Thomas Becon, *A newe pathway unto praier* (London: J. Mayler for J. Gough, 1542) STC 1734, sig. R6r.

6 Becon, *Newe pathway unto praier*, sigs. R8r–v.

7 Becon, *Newe pathway unto praier*, sigs. G7v, R6r.

8 Edmund Bonner, *A profitable and necessary doctrine* (London: John Cawoode, 1555) STC 3283.3, sig. D2v.

ever shalbe (God willing) to set furth syncerlye the true sense and meaning to the beste of myne understanding of Gods most holye worde'.⁹ Given that 'evangelical' was the original and predominant term before 1555, I have reserved 'evangelical' to refer to non-Catholic Christians before 1555. While I generally continue to use 'evangelical' for uniformity's sake when referring to contexts after 1555, I occasionally use 'Protestant' synonymously in keeping with the English evangelicals' own usage.

As sixteenth-century England vacillated in its religious direction and social priorities, the evangelicals were faced with a political conundrum and the tension between obedience and 'lawful' disobedience. There was ultimately a fundamental disagreement on the nature and criteria of obedience. This work makes a further contribution to the emerging conversation about English commonwealth politics by examining the important issues of obedience and disobedience within the evangelical community. It will analyse the specific ways in which evangelicals used rebel political rhetoric including 'sedicious' words, 'raylings' against authority, and treasonous euphemisms. A correct assessment of the issues surrounding the relationship between evangelicals and the commonwealth government will lead to a rediscovery and appreciation of both the complexities of evangelical commonwealth rhetoric and the tension between the biblical command to submit to civil authorities and the injunction to 'obey God rather than man'.

My work also examines the ways in which these English evangelicals viewed themselves in relation to the commonwealth. Many early modern scholars have noted the intersection of religion and politics in the English commonwealth. But the precise ways in which the evangelicals participated in and expressed their political and theological views of the commonwealth have yet to be thoroughly explored. This work seeks to fill this particular void in the scholarship of early modern studies.

In this study I argue that the commonwealth views held by the early evangelicals were situation-dependent rather than uniform over time. Indeed, there were sharp differences between the political views of some evangelicals. These differences will be considered within the larger backdrop of the intricately complex, and sometimes messy world of Tudor politics. The evangelicals' own personal experiences and local situations including exile, friendship, and self-image also formed their perceptions of the commonwealth. In Becon's own case it was his experiences as a tutor, domestic and continental exile, practiser of Nicodemism, clergyman of several parishes, and confidant of some high profile evangelicals including Cranmer and Somerset.

9 Nicholas Ridley, *Certe[n] godly, learned, and comfortable conferences* (Strasbourg, 1556) STC 21048, sig. F4r.

Scholarship has generally not been generous to Becon. While most scholars of the English Reformation cite Becon, he rarely receives a serious reading. His quotations are typically submitted as examples of religious polemic and are rarely considered in their full context. At times, he is cited for his signature sarcastic wit in decrying social evils in England. But again, his writings are often misrepresented and extracted from its broader historical context. He has often been lumped together with ‘radicals’ and ‘Puritans’.¹⁰ This is a blatantly oversimplified and myopic view of Becon’s multifaceted identity. Such a characterisation is unfortunate and has negatively shaped the general perception of Becon in scholarship as one only useful for his colourful sayings. This egregious oversight by scholars entirely misses Becon’s significant contribution to early modern English religion and society. I will demonstrate throughout this study how Becon’s writings, properly understood, shed light on many issues of Tudor society: poverty and poor relief, evangelical education and catechising, and sedition and rebellion to name but a few. This work will aim to set Becon in his proper historical and theological context and to assess his writings in light of that context.

Becon, born in Thetford, Norfolk in either 1512 or 1513, was educated at St John’s College, Cambridge where he was deeply moved by the Lutheran-influenced teachings of professors Hugh Latimer and George Stafford. Upon his graduation around 1532, he became a tutor to youth for about six years. During this time, he became acquainted with the influential Thomas Wentworth, a patron and supporter of many early evangelical clergy. In 1538 Wentworth arranged for Becon to take the post of chantrist at St Lawrence in Ipswich, Suffolk. One year later, he was installed as vicar of St Eanswythe parish in the small southeastern Kent village of Brenzett. With the ratification of the Six Articles of 1539, Henry VIII targeted the evangelicals for non-compliance and ‘heresy’. Becon was arrested in 1541 for ‘evil and false doctrine’. During his trial he recanted.

After his recantation Becon kept a low profile in Kent and resided with several prominent men who were evangelicals, men such as Sir Thomas Neville and George Brooke. Between 1541 and 1543 Becon produced numerous tracts under the pseudonym of ‘Theodore Basil’ in order to avoid any suspicion. He was arrested again in 1543 and tried at Paul’s Cross where he read his second recantation statement. From 1543 to 1547 Becon went into exile in the Midlands, beginning in the Peak District. During this second exile, he chose ‘silence’ and mobility in order to evade arrest. His journeys in the Midlands allowed him to

10 Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 63–64; Mike Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral, 1381–1594* (Surrey, 2011), p. 40; Kathrine Koller, ‘The Puritan Preacher’s Contribution to Fiction’, *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 11 (1948), pp. 322, 324, 325, 327; David Zaret, *The Heavenly Contract: Ideology and Organization in Pre-Revolutionary Puritanism* (Chicago, 1985), p. 78.

develop new friendships with the covert evangelical community in that region. When Edward VI ascended the throne in 1547, Becon returned to London where he was appointed chaplain to Protector Somerset's household. Around the same time he became rector of St Stephen Walbrook in London. Sometime in the late 1540s, he married Elizabeth Godfrey, though little else is known of her. Becon resumed writing tracts during the Edwardian era, his works focusing on the social ills of London with the exception of *Fortresse of the faythfull* that addresses the 1549 uprisings in Norfolk.

With Mary's accession to the throne on 3 August 1553, many evangelicals were arrested shortly after including Becon on 16 August. Becon was released from the Tower on 22 March 1554. Taking no risks, he immediately fled to Strasbourg where he joined a community of other exiled English evangelicals. Becon published two tracts of religious polemic while in Strasbourg. He relocated to Frankfurt, most likely in March 1555, to join the community of English exiles there at its insistence as part of a controversy over the liturgy of the English church. In 1556 Becon moved to Marburg to reunite with his wife. He taught at the university, tutored the son of Philip of Hesse, and composed one tract while in Marburg. During their residence there, Elizabeth gave birth to two children, Theodore and Rachel.

When Becon returned from the Continent in 1559, he went through a series of clerical appointments until his death in 1567. He was a prebendary of Canterbury Cathedral, rector of Buckland, Herfordshire, vicar at Christ Church in Newgate, vicar at Sturry, and rector at St Dionis Backchurch in London. Finally, in 1563 he held a brief rectorship at his former cure, St Stephen, Walbrook. Becon was also in popular demand for preaching engagements including venues such as Paul's Cross. In addition to his extensive activity, he continued to compose pamphlets regarding both religious and political concerns. He died in 1567, having lived under four Tudor monarchs.

The only extensive work on Becon is Derrick Sherwin Bailey's 1952 treatment of Becon's career and writings.¹¹ Bailey gave an uncharitable reading of Becon, relegating him to merely a 'propagandist' and a 'vociferous shouter of slogans'.¹² He contended throughout his work that Becon's writings place him outside 'the mainstream of Christian tradition'.¹³ But Bailey failed to substantiate that claim. There are only five pages summarising Becon's tracts. In contrast, my research will argue that once Becon's writings are properly read and contextualised, they

11 Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Thomas Becon and the Reformation of the Church in England* (Edinburgh, 1952).

12 Bailey, *Thomas Becon*, p. xiv.

13 Bailey, *Thomas Becon*, p. xiv.

provide deeper illumination to current scholarship on commonwealth rhetoric, rebel language, and anti-popery.

Earlier studies of the political history of early modern England have centred primarily on the fundamental components of the Tudor commonwealth. Recent historians of early modern commonwealth literature have also narrowed their research to general examples and observations of seditious language, treasonous speech, and political resistance. Scott Lucas, for instance, has argued that the *Myrroure for Magistrates* demonstrates an attitude of political resistance and sedition during the Elizabethan period, but he never explores these specific seditious attitudes in other literature outside the *Myrroure*.¹⁴ While David Cressy has analyzed the use of seditious and slanderous speech against Elizabeth I herself, he does not address the rebel political language directed particularly toward the magistrates.¹⁵ Phil Withington has considered the evolution of the uses of ‘*res publica*’, ‘common weale’, and ‘common wealth’ during the Tudor period.¹⁶ While his meticulous tracking of these terms in relation to their frequency in print is instructive, he overlooks the specific qualities and nuances of ‘common wealth’ rhetoric, including euphemisms, negotiations, political dialogues, and the spectrum of civil disobedience. The absence of references to early Elizabethan literature in his work is particularly striking. Andy Wood’s work on rebel political vocabulary during the 1549 uprisings is a significant contribution to the understanding of perspectives on rebellion and resistance in early modern England.¹⁷ However, Wood suggests that 1549 is the termination of one genre of rebellions, and not the first of a new tradition of rebel rhetoric.

In his treatment of obedience and political theology among the evangelicals, Ryan Reeves demonstrates the connection between early Swiss political teachings and the early English evangelicals’ views of ‘godly kingship’ and its antithesis, ‘papal tyranny’. Reeves argues that polemic against conservative worship and the Mass in particular increased progressively during the Edwardian era.¹⁸ He notes that the evangelical tracts against the Mass almost always appeal to the king’s authority, urging people to submit to his reforms.

14 Scott Lucas, “Let none such office take, save he that can for right his prince forsake’: A Mirror for Magistrates, Resistance Theory and the Elizabethan Monarchical Republic’ in John F. McDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 91–107.

15 David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk: Scandalous, Seditious, and Treasonable Speech in Pre-modern England* (Oxford, 2010).

16 Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge, 2010).

17 Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007).

18 Ryan M. Reeves, *English Evangelicals and Tudor Obedience, c. 1527–1570* (Leiden, 2014), p. 99.

Recent scholarship has also addressed the issues of poverty, hospitality, and charity in the Tudor commonwealth. While many scholars such as Paul Slack, Lynn A. Botelho, Claire Schen, Susan Brigden, and Marjorie McIntosh have held to the traditional view that poverty was indeed an acute problem in England, particularly during the Edwardian era, Steve Rappaport has suggested something quite the contrary. Using figures from surveys in the 16th century, he contends that the number of deserving poor in London was not nearly as high as historians have claimed.¹⁹ Rappaport has suggested that the alleged causes of poverty, the fall of wages and the increase of prices, were not as significant as has been argued by others.²⁰ He argues that inflation was more of a gradual, steady increase over the course of many years rather than an immediate, radical change. What Rappaport fails to address, however, are the references to dire poverty in London in the late 1540s and early 1550s. For instance, Becon and other evangelicals detailed accounts of the delicate situation in London by stating actual financial figures and precise prices. Rappaport overlooks these accounts in his study.

Margaret Yates also concurs with the conclusion that poverty in England was not as severe as has been portrayed by other scholars. She demonstrates that the evangelicals often exaggerated their financial figures in their tracts in order to arouse readers' emotions.²¹ Using the evangelical Henry Brinklow as a case study, she argues that the evangelicals deliberately fudged their figures. Their level of frustration, she observes, affected their rhetoric and may have influenced them to embellish some facts.²² While certainly there was truth in what they were communicating, many of the evangelicals resorted to embellishment.

Other recent scholars of early modern English society such as Marjorie McIntosh have examined the mechanics of poor relief in early modern England. McIntosh's work is useful in understanding the distinctions between individual, face-to-face charity and alms and that of relief by parishes. She has argued that until around 1550 all poor relief was voluntary, though both the Catholics and evangelicals made it mandatory in their instructions to their parishioners.²³ Both she and Lynn A. Botelho note the connection between 'Christian humanism' and a concern for the poor.²⁴ Botelho asserts that evangelicals and conservatives shared similar concerns for the poor, and both deliberately sought ways to relieve the poor. She argues that evangelicals were strongly influenced by Catholic methodology of poor relief. Steve Hindle demonstrates that the evangelicals in

19 Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, p. 169.

20 Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, pp. 151, 153, 155, 160.

21 Margaret Yates, 'Between fact and fiction: Henry Brinklow's *Complaynt* against rapacious landlords', *The Agricultural History Review* 54 (2006), pp. 24–25.

22 Yates, 'Between fact and fiction', p. 44.

23 Marjorie McIntosh, *Poor relief in England, 1350–1600* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 12.

24 L. A. Botelho, *Old age and the English poor law, 1500–1700* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 9–10.

their literature were reluctant to make any distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor. But in practice, especially in the second half of the sixteenth century, church leaders and donors became more selective in their poor relief.²⁵

Claire Schen has demonstrated that parish churches, beginning in the Edwardian period, had a more active role in the community in exercising charity. For instance, parishes began apprenticing children in honest labor and caring for children.²⁶ The threat of children being employed as prostitutes necessitated a calculated response from the London parishes. Schen also argues that both the state and the churches during Edward's reign began taking on an active, joint role in instituting moral reform among the poor.²⁷ The undeserving poor, vagabonds in particular, were admonished to work. Punishments of vagabonds were frequent and harsh, intending to galvanise change in their moral behaviour.

Because Becon and other evangelicals incorporated gendered anti-popery metaphors and also highlighted the role of women and their function in society, my study also interacts with recent scholarship on the evangelicals' view of gender roles and use of gendered language. It has been argued by Katherine Dean, Frances E. Dolan, and Arthur Marotti that the English evangelicals associated the Catholic church with 'feminine' qualities, such as frailty and carnality.²⁸ They point to the examples in evangelical print of the link between the 'weaker sex' and the Catholic church, particularly in the use of gendered metaphors. For example, Arthur Marotti has contended that English evangelicals were guilty of 'Protestant misogyny' in their anti-papist rhetoric, viewing evangelical Christianity as 'masculinized' and associating anything contrary to it with 'feminine' qualities.²⁹ However, this is an overgeneralisation. While the evangelicals did ascribe feminine terms and qualities to the Catholic church and the pope, they were just as willing to associate masculine terms and images to the pope. As Chapter 3 shows, there are countless examples of masculine metaphors that describe the Catholic church, and all of those examples reveal some type of masculine 'weakness'. Some of those images that the evangelicals used displayed the excessive 'masculinity' of the church. This excessive 'masculinity' was certainly not a positive quality, thus countering the arguments of most scholars who

25 Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), p. 100.

26 Clarie S. Schen, *Charity and Lay Piety in Reformation London* (Aldershot, 2002), p. 95.

27 Schen, *Charity and Lay Piety*, p. 94.

28 Katherine Dean, 'The gendered language of anti-papist polemic in England, 1603–1702' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000); Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, gender and seventeenth-century print culture* (Ithaca, 1999); Arthur F. Marotti, *Religious ideology and cultural fantasy: Catholic and anti-Catholic discourses in early modern England* (South Bend, 2005).

29 Marotti, *Religious ideology*, pp. 36–37.

downplay this negative use of masculinity by the evangelicals. Unfortunately, most of the works addressing the subject devote attention to the Elizabethan era, leaving a sizeable gap in gender studies related to the late Henrician and Edwardian reigns.

In relation to the evangelicals' views of the roles of women in early modern English society, most scholars have concluded that early modern English women were restricted within their domestic space and coerced to submit to their husbands. For instance, Christine Peters has argued that women were viewed as mere 'vessels' and were associated with frailty. Consequently, both single and married women were subject to masculine authority. They were expected to be modest, quiet, and humble. Female piety, she has concluded, is depicted as tantamount to physical and emotional weakness.³⁰ Likewise, Amanda Flather has noted that women's space in early modern England demonstrated that evangelicals imposed limitations upon women. Domestic, sacred, and social spaces inhibited women from having true expression of themselves.³¹ Other scholars have pointed out the restrictions of women in working outside the home or practising charity and poor relief in the community.³²

My study takes a different position from these scholars and complements the view of Melissa Franklin Harkrider.³³ She has demonstrated that early modern English evangelical women were more involved in church and social life than has been portrayed. While most historians have focused their attention on evangelical women from upper class circles including the royal court and the female 'sustainers' during the Marian persecution, it is important to note that the 'sustainers' during the Henrician and Edwardian reigns made substantial contributions. Harkrider has noted that many 'common' evangelical women contributed financially and emotionally to the poor commons.³⁴ 'Sustainers', like Mary Glover whom Becon interacted with during his domestic exile in the Midlands, developed close friendships with aristocratic, evangelical women.³⁵

While it is true that Becon and other evangelicals do highlight the domestic, submissive roles of women in order to align with the teachings of the Bible, it is crucial not to overlook the evangelicals' references to women outside their domestic realm. For instance, Becon frequently stressed the roles of women outside

30 Christine Peters, *Patterns of piety: Women, gender and religion in late medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 197.

31 Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 141–143.

32 Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, p. 40; Schen, *Charity and Lay Piety*, pp. 241–245.

33 Melissa Franklin-Harkrider, *Women, reform and community in early modern England* (Woodbridge, 2008).

34 Harkrider, *Women, reform and community*, p. 61.

35 Harkrider, *Women, reform and community*, p. 62.

the home and within the Christian community. Female piety for Becon was not merely limited to internal emotions and ‘weakness’ as many scholars argue. Rather, female piety entailed active, external service for the church community as well as giving succour to the poor and vagabonds on the streets.

Each chapter of this study focuses on a specific aspect of Becon’s understanding of a ‘godly’ commonwealth, explored chronologically. These investigations into Becon’s evolving political and theological convictions support my larger argument that evangelical commonwealth ideology was situation-dependent and was shaped by political and social issues of the time. The latter chapters of this work will also draw connections to themes previously by discussing both continuities and ruptures.

Chapter 1 introduces Becon by exploring his early career as an educator and young cleric and placing him within the broader early evangelical experience in Henrician England. While thoroughly evangelical in his outlook, Becon was unique in his own portrayal of his evangelical status as well as in the content of his writings on piety. While maintaining an evangelical concept of conversion, Becon’s portrayal of his own spiritual journey was atypical for Henrician evangelicals. Furthermore, his writings on evangelical themes were unusual given that evangelical print in the early 1540s was rare, and what little was being written by evangelicals was primarily doctrinal. Becon’s writings on lay piety were intended to be both instructive and polemical as they entered a market dominated by Catholic print on lay piety. Already in his early career, he was becoming a popular pamphleteer, and several of his tracts were bestsellers.

This chapter also addresses the relationship between the language of ‘common weale’ and evangelical household piety in the writings of Becon with particular reference to *A Christmas bankette*, a manual on household governance, published in 1541. Becon’s views on evangelical households were deeply rooted in his vision of a ‘godly common weale’, one intricately linked to the written Word of God, primarily Old Testament teachings. For Becon, household piety had its moorings in the second greatest command of the New Testament, ‘you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself’.³⁶ Household piety was rooted in the idea of Christian humanism, specifically in its concern of worldly needs and charitable acts, all performed for the benefit of the ‘common weale’. Becon’s concept of a ‘godly household’ in terms of both evangelical piety and humanist themes challenges current ideas regarding early modern household piety. Becon’s writings are a crucial component of exploring the relationship between Tudor domestic household piety and charitable acts outside the domestic sphere for the sake of the ‘common weale’.

³⁶ Matthew 22:37.

I also explore Becon's doctrine of justification and evangelical conversion within his Henrician tracts, doctrines that undergird his early views of a Christian 'publique weale'. I will argue that Becon's theology was Lutheran to the core. Becon's works incorporated binaries and emotive language to define evangelical conversion. The chapter also argues that Becon's theology of conversion is foundational in understanding his vision to transform society. He insisted that conversion was the means of producing a godly society. That godly society would be the very people of God, a concept he derived from Old Testament covenant theology. Becon's understanding of a godly 'publique weale' centred around individual virtue and godliness rather than on societal woes.

Chapter 2 examines Becon's years of exile and silence in the Midlands, a period of self-reflection and evaluation. His retrospective account of his exile admitted that he deliberately chose silence, yet he justified that silence. Becon's silence presents a historical dilemma in that it portrays him as a cleric who abandoned his calling and his sheep in time of need. The chapter explores this problem of silence in exile in conjunction with his Nicodemism and constant mobility during his exile. His perpetual movement during his domestic exile allowed him to kindle and develop new friendships, relationships that nourished his soul in vital ways. His travels also afforded him the opportunity to observe the state of religion in England. Becon's critical observations on the spiritual state of some rural communities served as the basis for his push for radical clerical reform during the Edwardian years. His detailed commentary on worship, clergy, and education in the locales he visited displayed a continued interest in commonwealth themes. Furthermore, these observations in the mid-1540s were crucial to Becon's thinking and his ideal of a state-church. They would become the stimuli for Becon to drive ecclesiastical and clerical reform in England when he himself would have oversight and influence.

Chapter 3 evaluates the commonwealth ideology of the evangelicals and the ways in which they juxtaposed theology with commonwealth rhetoric during the Somerset era. While the evangelicals possessed confidence that a 'Christen publique weale' could be realised in England, they also expressed indignation with the moral corruption of the commonwealth. Hence, Becon's writings in the early 1550s were a fusion of unbridled optimism and dark pessimism over England's future. Becon did not hesitate to pronounce what he believed would be God's imminent and certain judgment. His vision of a 'Christen publique weale' as a new Israel influenced him to address social issues as a prophet.

Becon's views of worship and poor relief in the Somerset regime must be understood within his 'publique weale' framework. While his views of charity and hospitality were fairly typical of other evangelicals, his views on worship sometimes differed from them. He envisioned a Christian commonwealth based upon the Old Testament model of a 'godly' people under a 'godly' king, both of which

were bound to the Mosaic Law. While typical of the evangelicals in his understanding of royal authority, Becon's voice was distinct in its urgent tone, cajoling and even threatening his readers if they rejected Edward's reforms. While there is a sense that he was generally content with the progress of reform, Becon occasionally expressed his ire that reform was far from complete. It is within this intricate political, social, and religious context that Becon returned from domestic exile and became a prophetic voice for social justice and virtue.

Chapter 4 addresses a crucial aspect that is often overlooked in scholarship: the relationship between evangelicalism and gender, particularly as it relates to women. Unfortunately, most of the works addressing the subject devote attention to the Elizabethan era, leaving a sizeable gap in gender studies for the late Edwardian and Marian periods. Until now, Thomas Becon's views of women have been unaddressed in scholarship. While most scholars have concluded that evangelical men restricted Tudor women in their roles and limited them to lives of domesticity and submission to their husbands, I will contend that assertion is untrue with Becon. He is unique in his views of women, arguing that they should be active both within their domestic space and in the public sphere. Becon viewed the roles and activity of women as crucial to the success of the English 'common weale'. Becon's prayers for women, his frequent concerns for their welfare, his teachings regarding their roles in their various spaces, his submission of biblical female models, and his own interactions with women warrants a closer investigation of his views of women and his use of gendered language in his writings. This chapter will revisit a very important discussion and will seek to correct the notion that all early modern English evangelicals equally viewed women as 'vessels'.³⁷ Within this volatile social and political context, Becon and other evangelicals ministered in their respective parishes and composed tracts expressing their frustration with English politics and addressed men's and women's roles in a troubled 'common weale'.

In Chapter 5 I consider the evangelicals' ambivalent relationship with the government and how they navigated their way through the highly complex political scene of the 1549 uprisings and the undercurrent of 'sedicion' that persisted until the end of Edward's reign. The evangelicals were not merely concerned with religious or moral matters. The evangelicals' political message was a blend of submission and treason and of political allegiance and sedition. The tension between obedience and disobedience was present in Becon's writings. At times, Becon and the evangelicals argued for both simultaneously. Becon's rebel political language in *Fortresse of the faythfull* incorporates sharp language toward the rich gentry, and at one point, Edward himself. His use of common euphemisms associated with the 1549 rebels themselves identified him with the rebels.

37 Christine Peters, *Patterns of piety: Women, gender and religion in late medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 197.

However, he rebuked them for their physical violence and aggression against the civil authorities. Becon's back-and-forth rebuke and defense of both the rebels and civil authorities is a peculiar feature in his rebel political rhetoric.

In relation to the government of the commonwealth, the evangelicals viewed themselves as Old Testament court prophets, representatives of God, who were commissioned to prophesy to the subjects of the commonwealth. As the prophets, they believed that a national reformation included a purging of social injustice and moral corruption. They attempted to bring change by appealing to the king and his counselors and condemning those who were guilty of social injustice, particularly those who mistreated the poor. If the king himself needed rebuke, they did not hesitate to confront their king as Becon did in print in 1550. They also engaged in a 'prophetic war' of print against 'false prophets', those who would oppose the king's reformation. Finally, true to the model of the biblical prophets, they issued calls for national repentance through tracts and sermons, often threatening the commonwealth with plagues if its subjects did not conform to Edward's reforms. True and lasting reformation was impossible, they argued, if their message of repentance was rejected.

While most scholarship on the Marian period regards the evangelicals as firmly established in their doctrinal positions entering exile, Chapter 6 brings to light some new evidence that counters traditional views. This chapter argues that Becon's tracts reveal substantial changes and ruptures in Becon's theological understanding of some key doctrines, which in turn affect his view of the commonwealth. These shifts in his theology are instructive in dispelling the common characterisation of Becon as an inflexible radical evangelical. Becon's theological views and doctrinal development hardly fit what some scholars describe as the stereotypical English reformer. His Marian writings expose this truth in important ways. This chapter, therefore, will aim to correct a common misinterpretation of Becon's evangelicalism. It will further trace Becon's changes in his doctrine over a span of twelve years and examine the complexity of those shifts while suggesting some potential causes of his theological evolution.

Becon's continental exile afforded him the opportunity to reflect upon the extent of the English Reformation. In so doing, it revealed his conflicted views of both the Henrician and Edwardian reformations. For instance, his Marian writings reveal a tense, conflicted relationship with the 1552 Prayer Book. Both his Edwardian and Marian writings clearly supported Edwardian evangelicalism, yet he still persisted in his differences with the Edwardian Church in matters of clerical vestments and other forms of ceremonialism. This tension will be explored in this chapter within the context of the evangelical divisions in Frankfurt, Becon's residence in exile from 1555 to 1557.

In the final chapter of this study, I analyse the language of rebellion in Becon's writing. I place it within the context of other evangelical 'seditious' print during

the early years of Elizabeth I's reign. While he insisted that the magistrates' laws were tantamount to God's voice and, therefore, must be obeyed, he allowed for disobedience in situations where one's rights were infringed or conscience violated. He condemned Elizabethan magistrates for 'dryving' their subjects to poverty, supporting Catholic liturgy, and abandoning the interests of their subjects. With these criteria he urged all subjects to disobey the magistrates and to 'rayle' against them. But, in contrast, other evangelicals argued that the strict obedience of the subjects of a commonwealth was an absolute necessity, for that obedience would shield a society from 'sedicion'.

This division among the evangelicals regarding obedience and disobedience, the role of the magistrates, and the possibility of 'sedicion' is a topic that has not been addressed in recent scholarship on early Elizabethan England. This chapter also aims to fill the missing spaces in scholarship in relation to evangelical disagreement concerning the functions of commonwealth government and its relationship with its subjects. While most recent scholars have glossed over the evangelicals' political views on obedience and disobedience to magistrates, it is crucial to dissect their views and to place Becon properly within this context. It is also critical to avoid the mistake, one that most scholars have committed, of lumping all evangelicals together. The evangelicals' political views were simply not that cut-and-dry. Rather, the diversity of evangelicals in the sphere of politics is highly complex and fraught with conflicting views and arguments.

This book demonstrates the significance of the early English evangelicals in their contribution to the shaping of the commonwealth. It looks at the evangelicals' shifting political and religious views across the four Tudor reigns in relation to social relationships. The study of the intertwining of their political, religious, and social views provides clues to how the evangelicals arrived at their respective positions, envisioned their respective vision of a 'godly' commonwealth, and how they viewed themselves in relation to that commonwealth. As one of the leaders of the evangelicals and a popular bestseller, Thomas Becon must be considered in any scholarly discussion of the English commonwealth. Becon's writings provide a necessary corrective to current early modern studies that consistently portrays him as a static, recalcitrant Protestant throughout his long career as a cleric. Rather, this book will argue that Becon's views of the commonwealth evolved as a result of substantive political, social, and theological changes in English society. This study will weave together various interdisciplinary fields in order to track the beliefs of Becon and other evangelicals pertaining to a 'godly' commonwealth. Such a project will illuminate new areas of English commonwealth studies and will significantly contribute to aspects that have been unaddressed in recent scholarship. Further, it will challenge previous ideas in early modern studies, ideas which should be modified in light of such an analysis.

Chapter 1.

Thomas Becon's early theology: evangelical conversion and household piety in the 'common weale'

England in the early 1540s was generally not an environment amenable to evangelicalism. The preaching of the Word, for instance, was greeted with apathy at the best, and antipathy in the worst cases. If any man understood this, it was the evangelical preacher and pamphleteer, Thomas Becon. Becon complained about the indifferent attitude of parishioners towards the Bible. They grumbled, 'Speke unto us pleasaunt thinges, preach unto us tales of Robyn hood, take away from us the right way, go out of the pathe, and away with that holy one of Israel from our face'.¹ This demand to be entertained at the sacred desk by the merry band of Sherwood Forest rather than to be illuminated by 'the glorious light of his most holye worde' aroused Becon to threaten these parishioners with divine wrath and justice:

[God] is the lawer, which wyl expulse the darkenesses of mennes tradicions...To be shorte, he wyll detecte and overthrowe all the Idols, that obscure his glory, and set up his bylssed name to be prayseed and magnyefyed for ever and ever.²

This example aptly illustrates Becon's conviction that the Bible should dictate ecclesiastical and spiritual activities. This concept dominated Becon's life and writings throughout his illustrious and multifaceted career.

This chapter will investigate the formal education and early career of Becon and will contend that Becon, while thoroughly evangelical in his outlook, was unique in his own portrayal of his evangelical status as well as in the content of his writings on piety. While maintaining an evangelical concept of conversion, Becon's treatment of his own spiritual experience was atypical of Henrician evangelicals. In addition, I will establish Becon as a commonwealth evangelical,

1 Thomas Becon, *A pleasaunte newe nosegay* (London: J. Mayler for J. Gough, 1542) STC 1742, sig. A7v. Hugh Latimer, in a sermon of 1549 also complained of parishioners' fascination with Robin Hood over sermons. Hugh Latimer, *The seconde [seventh] sermon of Maister Hughe Latimer* (London: John Day and William Seres, 1549) STC 15274.7, sigs. X5v–X6r.

2 Becon, *Pleasaunte newe nosegay*, sig. A8r. 'Detecte' was a technical legal term for the discovery of heretics.