



# Portrait of the Month: March Edward VI and John à Lasco, 1550

by Johann Valentin Haidt (1700-1780)

This picture shows a key moment in the history of English Nonconformity – the first time a Protestant congregation in England was given royal permission to meet without being subject to a bishop in the Church of England.



Edward VI and John à Lasco, by Johann Valentin Haidt  
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The English Reformation began with political rather than theological reasons. In the late 1520s, Henry VIII wanted to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and marry Anne Boleyn. When the Pope refused to grant him a divorce, Henry broke with Rome and assumed power over the Church of England, appointing an archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, who would give him what he wanted. Theological reform did not really begin until Henry's ten-year-old son succeeded him as Edward VI in 1547. Under Edward, the Church of England moved rapidly towards becoming a Reformed and Protestant Church.

In this painting, the year is 1550 - King Edward is still only thirteen years old. He is surrounded by the Duke of Northumberland (in a plumed hat), acting as Lord Protector in the King's minority; and by important figures from the English Reformation: Cranmer, Nicholas

Ridley, and John Knox. Cranmer (on the left) was responsible for the new Prayer Book and for inviting European scholars like Peter Martyr, Martin Bucer, and Jan Łaski (often anglicised to John à Lasco) to make England their home.

Jan Łaski was born in 1499 in Łask, to a noble family. He studied at Rome and Bologna; met Erasmus and Zwingli at Basle in the 1520s; and was pastor in Kraków, Louvain, and Emden. He moved to London in 1549 with his wife and children, at Cranmer's invitation, and became Superintendent of the Strangers' Church, leading a congregation of Dutch, German, French and other European emigrants, who had come to London to flee religious persecution or to pursue opportunities in trade and industry.

The painting shows Edward VI granting a charter giving Łaski permission to hold Protestant services at the Strangers' Church in London, and it emphasises and celebrates the formality of the grant. But when Edward died in 1553, his sister Mary became Queen and restored the Catholic faith. The Strangers' Church was closed, and Łaski and the members of the congregation were ordered to leave the country. Łaski was recalled to Poland to serve the Church and the reformation there, and died in January 1560.

However, many of the "Strangers" returned to the church later in 1560, under the moderate Protestantism of Elizabeth I. Today, the Dutch Church still meets at Austin Friars, in the same place as in Łaski's time (though it was rebuilt after substantial damage in the Blitz in 1940.) The Moravian, Count Zinzendorf, claimed authority as a descendant of the Czech Brethren, who had been part of the Strangers' Church. He believed this exempted him from the rules restricting the rights of those outside the Church of England. The picture he commissioned illustrates his claim.

*Portrait by Johann Valentin Haidt (1700-1780) - one of a series of paintings commissioned for Lindsey House, Chelsea, London, 1752-1754.*

*To see more of our paintings, visit the College page at [Art UK](#).*

Helen Weller, Archivist  
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