Richard Hooker (1554-1600)

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Richard Hooker, presbyter-theologian of the Elizabethan church, has long held a reputation as the quintessentially Anglican theologian. Anglican that is, as opposed to Reformed – more committed to the use of reason than magisterial reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Cranmer. Hooker is portrayed as an exponent of a distinctive Anglican *via media*, a particular way of doing theology which is alien to the reformation's key principle of *sola scriptura*. This view has dominated Hooker studies since John Keble edited the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in the 1830s, in the early years of the Oxford Movement, though the consensus has recently been challenged. Keble aimed to show Hooker's distance from the Reformed centre at Geneva and his proximity to 'primitive truth and apostolical order'.[1] Other scholars have highlighted Hooker's theological debt to the Dominican philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, or the Dutch humanist, Erasmus, who were less than clear about the reformation principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*.[2]

At first sight, the interpretation of Keble and his successors has much going for it. Hooker frequently clashed with the early puritans, who were known for their avowed evangelical commitment. For example, in 1586 a storm of controversy erupted over one of his sermons while Master of the Temple Church in London. As a loyal Elizabethan cleric, Hooker attacked the Church of Rome on the grounds that it failed to administer the spiritual medicine of justification by faith alone, thereby depriving people of 'comfort' when 'overcharged with the burden of sin'. However, although this meant that the Roman Church was 'corrupted' and that the pope was a 'man of sin' and a 'schismatic idolater' it did not mean that all those who were members of the Roman Church and who died in that church prior to the reformation necessarily went to hell. Indeed Hooker argued that Englishmen in previous generations who died as Roman Catholics were not to be regarded as papists but rather as 'our fathers'. Although the Church of Rome was 'drunk' and 'Babylon', it was still

a church – misshapen, no doubt, but still retaining the Scriptures, the creeds and the ministry underneath its errors and superstitions. Hooker concluded that the Church of Rome was still 'to be held and reputed a part of the house of God, a limb of the visible Church of Christ'.[3]

To many radical puritans, Hooker appeared far too indulgent of Roman errors and heresies. Walter Travers, his colleague at the Temple Church, sprang into action that same afternoon with a sermon that sought to highlight Hooker's lack of commitment to the further reformation of the Church of England and, by implication, to the reformation in general. Some puritans even doubted that the reformed Church of England was a true church, because it was reluctant to abandon episcopacy and to undergo further reformation along Genevan lines. They believed the Church of England must be made as unlike the Church of Rome as humanly possible, expunging all vestiges of popery that still remained. Indeed another radical puritan, Thomas Cartwright, argued that it would be safer for the Church of England to mimic Islam than Rome. After their initial salvos, Hooker and Travers were locked in heated theological debate at the Temple Church week after week and began to attract large crowds. Commenting on the controversy years later, Izaak Walton penned a memorable phrase that has bedevilled Hooker studies ever since: 'the pulpit spoke pure Canterbury in the morning and pure Geneva in the afternoon'.

So was there a yawning theological chasm between Hooker's Anglicanism on the one hand and Travers' Presbyterianism on the other? Was Hooker's way of doing theology at root less than evangelical? Again and again he pleaded his wholehearted commitment to reformed orthodoxy. In the preface to his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* he insisted that he was not 'bending himself as an adversary against the truth' which his puritan opponents had 'embraced'.[4] Differences over ceremony and government did not necessarily signal a disagreement over doctrine. On the contrary, Hooker wondered whether the radical puritans could really claim to be the true inheritors of Calvin's mantle. By seeking to out-Calvin Calvin, they were in danger of deforming the church rather than reforming it. He insisted that just because he opposed Calvin's self-declared disciples, this did not mean he was secretly against the Swiss reformer himself. This chapter will therefore focus upon Hooker's theological method – his theological first principles – to see how closely he is aligned with the magisterial reformers themselves.

Hooker's puritan opponents articulated their disagreements in an anonymous tract called *A Christian Letter*, which claimed that in all of Hooker's books 'reason is highly set up against holy scripture', and the Bible's role reduced to 'supplement and making perfect' knowledge which has

been independently obtained through autonomous human thought. This was a serious charge. The reformers who confronted the abuses of the late medieval church were adamant that nothing less was required than a complete reshaping of its theological contours. They believed the fundamental reason that the church had lost its way, was because it had become overly dependent upon Aristotelian philosophy – indeed Luther argued that a spiritually blind pagan philosopher was being used to shed light on Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to shed light on pagan philosophy. Thus, the puritan charge against Hooker was that he was still inhabiting the swampy, low theological marsh lands of late medieval scholasticism, and that he still needed to climb the doctrinal hill of reformed exegesis in order to breathe purer and more bracing air. In short, they were arguing that Hooker was still unreformed.

At this point it should be admitted that Hooker's detailed analysis of reason's ability and role is complex and does sound Thomist in parts. For Hooker was willing, like Aquinas, to claim that the whole of the uncreated and created order was ruled by a hierarchy of laws. Laws which govern the natural realm are known as 'nature's law' and laws which govern supernatural and spiritual beings, such as angels, are laws 'celestial and heavenly'. In both these cases, Hooker maintained, angels and nature obey God's laws almost 'unwittingly'.[5] They are bound to be obedient because they cannot do otherwise. But humanity stands in a unique relationship both to God and to the created order, as creatures made in God's image. We belong to the 'stuff' of this world and are subject to nature's inexorable laws – we need to eat, drink, breathe and procreate. However these natural laws, in themselves, cannot exhaust the meaning of humanity's existence. Created in the image of God, men and women are 'voluntary agents' – to them has been given a freedom denied to other creatures.[6] To be sure this freedom could be manipulated to live lawless and disobedient lives out of step with both natural and celestial law – a point often made by reformed theologians. But Hooker argued positively that this freedom could also be utilised by humanity to frame laws that were in accordance with God's will. The gift of reason could help them to live not in disobedience but in obedience, to discern God's will and live a life pleasing to him. Such teaching made Hooker's puritan accusers nervous. For if Hooker was willing to cede so much power to reason, where was the need firstly of Christ's death on the cross and secondly of Scripture?

In order to be fair to Hooker we must not make the mistake that the radical puritans made. Having decided on *a priori* grounds that Hooker was less than reformed, simply because he was not convinced of the need to expunge episcopacy from the church, his other teaching was treated with immediate animosity – even though Hooker expostulated

that if the puritans simply took off their prejudiced glasses and read his work with the same benevolence with which they read Calvin, they would see that he was standing on the same doctrinal platform. Ironically, in his teaching on reason, Hooker employed that most reformed and evangelical of doctrines, clearly articulated by Luther and embraced by Calvin – namely the doctrine of the 'two kingdoms'. He argued that with the gift of reason, even worthy pagans such as Plato could deduce that God exists and that if he exists it is humanity's duty to worship him, to love him, to pray to him and to depend upon him. From this vantage point of acknowledging God, reason could also deduce that people are duty bound to love their neighbours as well. All this was within reason's ability, in the kingdom of this world. But crucially, Hooker insisted that reason could not go further. It could not discover the way to eternal life, since its default position 'logically pointed to works', which were powerless to save. On this basis, and in the spiritual kingdom, reason was broken, weak and fundamentally corrupt. Therefore, Hooker concluded, humanity stands in need of a 'supernatural way', which is revealed in Scripture.[7]

This distinction between the two kingdoms of grace and nature became a prominent feature of Hooker's mature theology and fed directly into his understanding of scriptural authority. As he weathered the accusations that he was not an authentic reformed divine, he came to see that the radical puritan demands for the Church of England to abolish episcopacy were grounded in a use of Scripture that was slipshod if not positively dangerous. The puritans were determined to advance the 'further reformation' of the Church of England, after the first wave of the reformation which had dealt with doctrinal abuses. On the grounds that the episcopate, as it functioned in the English Church of the 1590s, was a far cry from the purity and simplicity of the office during apostolic times, they trained the big gun of scriptural authority on the small nut of church order.

When Hooker came to realise the full implications of what was being proposed he became increasingly anxious. Years previously, in the first round of debate with the presbyterianizing puritans, the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, had asserted the principle that the episcopal office, as it had been received by the Church of England, was a legitimate expression of church order because it was not contrary to any specific command of Scripture. But now the puritans asked not whether episcopacy was *contrary to* Scripture but whether it was *mandated in* Scripture. They believed the church was being obedient to scriptural authority if, and only if, it acted upon direct and positive scriptural permission. The idea that they could still be obedient to God so long as they were behaving in a way that was not condemned by Scripture

indicated a more nuanced relationship with the biblical text, which they found profoundly unsatisfying.

While Hooker engaged with these puritan demands, he was forced back to a familiar argument. He saw that reason had different roles and different levels of authority, depending on the sphere in which it was put to work. In the kingdom of this world there was no need to consult Scripture on the building of roads or houses, for example. In fact, this would be a misuse of the Bible. Common sense and simple mathematical processes provide all the necessary information to complete the task. In Hooker's theology, Scripture had to be used in close relationship to 'that end to which it tends'. In other words, if the Bible was used to find direction in the minutiae of life – ranging from the ordering of the church to the 'picking up [of] a piece of straw' – the effect would be to destroy its authority in the very area where it mattered the most, the way to eternal life.[8]

This is the heart of Hooker's concerns. Some have argued that his view of Scripture was not the normal Protestant view because he rejected Scripture's omni-competence. But this argument only holds if it is assumed that the radical puritans represented mainstream Protestantism – which in Hooker's view they certainly did not. Hooker maintained that the Bible's sufficiency, authority and overarching thrust must not be diluted by riding roughshod over its principal purpose. If the church was to ransack Scripture in order to find justification for its actions in thousands of different areas the 'main drift' of the Bible would be obscured. Although it may seem that those who constantly turn to Scripture for direction in every area of life are those who respect it the most, this is an illusion – just as when 'incredible praises' are given to men, although it seems an 'honour' it is an 'injury' for it can only serve to 'impair the credit of their deserved commendation'. Hooker states in a crucial passage:

> The main drift of the whole new Testament is that which St John sets down as the purpose of his own history, 'these things are written, that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that in believing you might have life in his name'. The drift of the old [Testament] that which the Apostle mentions to Timothy, 'the Holy Scriptures are able to make you wise unto salvation'. So that the general end of both old and new is one, the difference between them consisting in this, that the old did make wise by teaching salvation through Christ that should come, and that Jesus whom the Jews did crucify, and whom God did raise again from the dead is he.[9]

With this deeply Christocentric appreciation of Scripture, Hooker was reluctant to see the Bible used to justify a novel form of church

government. Like his puritan opponents, he held to the plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture and that it was infallible and could not be supplemented by 'uncertain tradition'. Yet that did not mean Scripture could be used to justify the dismantling of episcopacy. To use the Bible in this way would be to ignore its overall thrust and force people to neglect 'the light of nature, common discretion and judgement'.[10] To appeal constantly to Scripture over a myriad of everyday activities that need no express biblical warrant was, as far as Hooker was concerned, pastorally disastrous and therefore to be resisted.

In their desire for 'the reformation of laws, and orders Ecclesiastical, in the Church of England', puritans like Thomas Cartwright and Walter Travers were seeking to rebuild the apostolic church out of the ruins of its late medieval corruptions. Hooker believed this was a laudable aim, but was concerned that if their zeal extended into too many areas the end result would be not reformation but revolution. Naturally, as good Protestants, Travers and Cartwright sought to base their 'further reformations' on scriptural warrant and they were convinced that a plain, unbiased reading of the biblical text would yield presbyterian order. But Hooker asked: If Scripture so clearly taught the presbyterian case, why has this not been understood until recently and then only by a few? He saw this lack of consensus as a real weakness in the puritan argument, and reminded them that the Bible is a book given to the whole church and not just to individuals. It could be dangerous to read the Bible in 'isolation' on the simple grounds that the human heart is naturally proud and fond of its own inventions. Therefore an isolationist reading might not yield what the text is saying but rather what the individual wants it to say. In a scathing attack Hooker wrote of the puritans: 'when they and their Bibles are alone together, what strange fantastical opinion soever at any time entered into their heads, their use was to think that the Spirit had taught it them.'[11] The remedy for this socially dangerous way of reading the Bible was to remember that it had been studied in the church for 1500 years and no one, until that moment in time, had ever entertained the notion that it taught the presbyterian form of church government. Presbyterianism was a new and 'singular' opinion, and Hooker wrote:

> where singularity is, they whose hearts it possesses ought to suspect it the more, in as much as if it did come from God and should for that cause prevail with others, the same God, which revealed it to them, would also give them power of confirming it unto others, either with miraculous operation, or with strong and invincible remonstrance of sound reason. . . .[12]

So Hooker pleaded that where Scripture is at best silent or at worse

inconclusive the safest course is to follow the teaching and mind of the universal church. There have been bishops since time immemorial, so it would be best to retain them:

> A thousand five hundred years and upward the church of Christ has now continued under the sacred regiment of Bishops. Neither for so long hath Christianity been ever planted in any kingdom throughout the world but with this kind of government alone, which to have been ordained of God, I am for mine own part even resolutely persuaded, as that any other kind of government in the world whatsoever is of God.[13]

In conclusion, Hooker's prominent battles with the radical puritans over church government and scriptural authority must not be allowed to warp our interpretation of his theological position. This quintessentially Anglican theologian stood in the mainstream of the magisterial reformation. His theological method was firmly rooted in the principle of *sola scriptura*, though he was often misunderstood at the time and since. Until the revisionism of the nineteenth century, his Augustinian-Calvinist credentials were widely taken for granted. Hooker did not believe the distinction between 'pure Canterbury' and 'pure Geneva' to be as sharp as either his puritan antagonists or his Tractarian advocates tried to make out.