

We shall end with a timely piece of advice, for we know that, sad as it is, we have not yet laid down our arms, nor have we learnt Hooker's oft repeated lesson that the Lord alone is able to look in depth at the purposes of the heart:

In the meanwhile it may be that suspense of judgement and exercise of charity were safer and seemlier for Christian men, than the hot pursuit of these controversies, wherein they that are most fervent to dispute be not always the most able to determine. But who are on his side, and who against him, our Lord in his good time shall reveal.

(Ibid)



'That they all may be one'

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THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

HIS BODY MYSTICAL

RICHARD HOOKER 2

Richard Hooker, priest and key theologian in the 16th century Church of England, wrote his famous *Treatise of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* at a time of change and upheaval, not only on the English scene but also in the Western Church at large. A way had to be found to stem the threat of total disintegration as newly established national churches set themselves up over against the centralised power of the Papacy, only to be threatened in turn by squabbles between themselves, and the rapid rise of more extremist splinter groupings.

Hooker knew that in essence the Church is and must be one and that this unity must also be visible. Thus the reform of abuses in its external structure and government, though essential at times, must not lead to anarchy in the Church, since a house divided against itself cannot stand. Hooker, therefore, undertook the important task of defining, for his age, the universal nature of the Church, the inherited Tradition that is, both on the deeper spiritual level of its eternal significance, and also on the more visibly human level of structure, government and practice. This Tradition is not an outmoded way of seeing things of course, but rather the underlying, God-given continuum in the Church, which enables the true and the false to be discerned and the new to be properly absorbed, for the upbuilding of all in love. If the continuum were to be broken off the new would come face to face with blankness and, cut off from its roots, would wither and die.

How true this whole picture is still. Thus it seems worthwhile to look

again at some of the things Richard Hooker was saying, though a good four hundred years ago now – presuming, that is, we have the humility to pay heed, and the willingness, when appropriate, to put into practice.

It is in Book Three of the *Laws* that Hooker speaks most clearly of the twofold nature of the Church, the mystical and the external. But he does not ultimately separate the two. Our human minds, he feels, can conceive of the double aspect clearly enough – the real, collective body containing a multitude of people, saints and sinners alike, in the here and now; and the mystical body, the sum total of the redeemed, past, present and future, both on earth and in heaven. Our main difficulty is that we can't actually know for sure whether all the so-called members of the church, currently on earth, are actually part of the mystical body! The distinguishing marks cannot be known to us 'only unto God, who seeth their hearts and understandeth all their secret cogitations.' (Laws Bk. iii, ch.i (2)).

We tend to think well of ourselves: 'If we profess as Peter did that we love the Lord ... charitable men are likely to think we do so, as long as they see no proof to the contrary.' Yet Hooker reminds us again that only God can read our inmost dispositions:

But that our love is sound and sincere ... who can pronounce, saving only the Searcher of all men's hearts, who alone intuitively doth know in this kind who are His?
(Ibid)

Such a merciful, non judgemental approach, we might remark in passing, is typical of Richard Hooker himself. As a 'charitable man', he consistently spoke well of those with whom he was not always in full accord, insofar as he could. This has also often happily been a characteristic of Anglicanism at its best, that tolerant broadmindedness which has been loathe to anathematize, and yet which knows where to draw the line in defence of sound teaching. It would be sad if such an attitude should go

because we adhere outwardly to the Church. Since the Lord alone can read our inmost hearts to know our sincerity, it is to him that we must turn in repentance and hope. The *mystic* Church, we sense, is the home of repentant and forgiven sinners; the visible Church: the net full of good and bad fish, the field of the wheat and tares. (cf. Bk. iii, Ch.i (8))

Times then have not changed very greatly between Hooker's day and ours. He knew only too well that we may never rest secure, thinking maybe that we have rooted up most of the tares. Heresy in fact can often be strengthened by reform:

The weeds of heresy being grown unto such ripeness ... do even in the very cutting down scatter oftentimes those seeds which for a while lie unseen and buried in the earth, but afterward freshly spring up again no less pernicious than at the first. (Bk. v, Ch.xlii))

We may not rest, therefore, on our present day ecumenical laurels, even though it is true to say that Hooker foresaw the need for dialogue and co-operation which we have been able, painstakingly, to get underway. He knew it could not be achieved in his own time, in the heat of controversy, but that nevertheless it would come. He knew as well that the Church of England had been given a special role in this mediating work, because of the moderate way, under God, in which reform had taken place in the English Church. (cf. Bk.1iv, Ch.xiv (6)) Sooner or later, he foresaw, controversy would reach such a pitch that something would have to be done:

... mutual combustions, bloodsheds, and wastes, - because no other inducement will serve, may enforce them through very faintness ... to enter on all sides at the length into some such consultation, as may tend to the best reestablishment of the whole Church of Jesus Christ.
(Ibid)

‘Saracens, Jews and Infidels’ mentioned by Hooker, are ‘*manifestly not members of the Church*’, not because they are living evil lives or are in some sense inferior, but simply because they are not ‘signed with this mark’. Thus they are to be respected for who and what they are in their integrity. Then, secondly, everyone who believes in Christ, who has faith and is baptised, **does**, in consequence, belong to the visible Church. Moreover, according to Hooker, this applies to heretics and schismatics, or even to inveterate sinners:

If by external profession they be Christians, then are they of the visible Church of Christ: and Christians by external profession they are all, whose mark of recognizance hath in it those things we have mentioned (i.e. one Lord, one faith, one baptism), yea, although they be impious idolaters, wicked heretics, persons excommunicable, yea, and cast out for notorious improbity.
(Ibid (7))

Hooker reiterates this elsewhere in very strong words. Though Apostates, heretics, schismatics, sinners and immoral people actually cut themselves off, in a greater or lesser degree, from the ‘*true church of God*’, this is only ‘*at the top*’, as Hooker terms it. They remain all the same, and despite themselves, rooted in the Church: ... ‘*the Church upon the main foundations whereof they continue built, notwithstanding these breaches whereby they are rent at the top asunder.*’ (Laws Book v. Ch. 1xviii (6)). Thus there is always hope.

This is surely a great comfort for us, both in face of our personal falling short, but even more in face of the still sinfully-divided earthly Church. **Nothing**, Hooker claims, can ultimately divide the Church, in its inmost reality, however great our sinfulness and division might be on the visible plain. But Hooker is not thereby implying that sin is immaterial and disunity can be tolerated. We may not presume on the mercy of God simply

by default in the face of present day differences of opinion within Anglicanism generally.

Be that as it may, Hooker reminds us in the same section of his writings, that the ‘*Church of Christ*’, which we properly term his *body mystical, can be but one.*’ Whatever happens, then, among its individual members or separated parts militant here on earth, ultimately the Church cannot be divided. That is the paradox, and also the vision which must inspire all our work and prayer for the visible unity of the Church.

But the *mystical* body did not imply for Hooker something purely spiritual and eternal. He knew only too well that believers must be grounded in the actuality of the Church as it is here below. He has much to say about this later on in Book v. of the *Laws*.

Firstly he stresses that any conception we might have of being united to God is only authenticated by ‘*our actual adoption into the body of his true Church, into the fellowship of his children.*’ (Bk. v Ch.1vi (7)). He goes on to say, even more emphatically:

Our being in Christ by eternal foreknowledge saveth us not, without our actual and real adoption into the fellowship of his saints in this present world. For we actually are in him by our actual incorporation into that society which hath him for their Head.

There’s no room then for the old excuse that ‘you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian,’ and **something** to be said for the slogan: ‘outside the Church no salvation!’

But more seriously, Hooker is leading us here to see that we can’t of course really separate the mystical church from its concrete expression. He says next, in fact, that being joined to Christ in the Church, as to our Head, we make one Body with him:

... for which cause, by virtue of this mystical conjunction, we are of him and in him even as though our very flesh and bones should be made continue with his. We are in Christ because he knoweth and loveth us even as parts of himself No man actually is in him but they in whom he actually is ...

What is this but a fusion of the mystical and concrete?

Having claimed, then, that the *mystical* church is essentially one, Hooker says the same of what he calls ‘*the sensibly known company*’ i.e. the actual church as found – experienced by the senses – here on earth. Of this he says: ‘*And this visible church in like sort is but one.*’ (Bk. iii, Ch. i. (3)). But the unity he is thinking of now is one of historic continuity. Here it is interesting to note that for Hooker the origin of the Church goes back to the beginning of time, and its consummation will be the Parousia:

... this visible Church ... is but one, continued from the first beginning of the world to the last end. Which company being divided into two moieties, the one before, the other since the coming of Christ; that part, which since the coming of Christ partly hath embraced and partly shall hereafter embrace the Christian Religion, we term as by a more proper name the Church of Christ.
(Ibid)

This Church, Hooker reminds us, is universal, made up of people from many nations and walks of life, Jew and Greek, bond and free ... that, too, is a sign of its unity. But alas, not all the members are sound, as Hooker puts it:

... the Church of Christ which was from the beginning is and continueth unto the end: of

which Church all parts have not been always equally sincere and sound.
(Ibid 10)

What are the criteria for judging then, if judge we must? Hooker reminds us that our unity lies, as Saint Paul tells us, in the one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism by which we stand:

*The unity of this visible body and Church of Christ consisteth in that uniformity which all several persons thereunto belonging have, by reason of that **one Lord** whose servants they all profess themselves, that **one Faith** which they all acknowledge, that **one baptism** wherewith they are all initiated.*
(Ibid (3))

Our unity, therefore, is not man-made or achieved, but comes from the grace of our Lord, in his gift of faith and baptismal regeneration.

All the same we Christians tend towards divisive quarrelling even between ourselves. Hooker puts us to shame. Well in advance of his time, ecumenically speaking, his gaze sweeps across the whole spectrum of humanity, recognising the good where it is to be found, while at the same time he seeks to define what is specific to Christianity. Virtuous living and moral integrity, for instance, are not the prerogative of Christians, even though their absence may well exclude from salvation. And yet, adds Hooker: ‘*so doth much more the absence of inward belief of heart; so doth despair and lack of hope; so emptiness of love and Christian charity.*’ (Ibid (7))

Still, the members of the visible Church, Hooker reminds us, ‘*are signed with this mark, “One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism” ... them only she holdeth for aliens and strangers, in whom these things are not found*’. And from this we can draw at least two conclusions: firstly that the