

We cannot understand God's ways but often in our pride we forget 'who and what we are'. Our judgmentalism, Hooker recognises, with the modern psychologist, is nothing but a projection of our own faults onto others: '*we in other men's offences do behold the plain image of our own imbecility*'.

In the end then, for Hooker's time as for ours, there is no safer way for a confused and fractured Church than the way of repentance and humility, the way of forbearance instead of confrontation. Invective only hardens opposing positions and increases prejudice. If we are beginning to learn some of these things in our ecumenical dialogue and activity, it is perhaps in large measure because Hooker saw them before us.

His hope was that those who seemed to be going wide of the mark might: '*come in the end back again to THE MIDDLE POINT OF EVENNESS and moderation*'. His prayer was for himself and for the Church of his day. We could perhaps take it to ourselves:

*Our Lord of his infinite mercy avert whatsoever
evil our swervings on the one hand or on the
other may threaten unto the state of his Church.'*
(Bk. iv, Ch. ix (1))



'That they all may be one'

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THE MIDDLE POINT OF EVENNESS

THE CHURCH'S TASK

RICHARD HOOKER 3

At times of crisis in the Church it is desperately easy to polarize. But for the last few centuries it has been the genius of Anglicanism to hold together as far as possible, under God, the seemingly disparate. Despite the internal strain and stress of such a vocation, and the adverse criticism it can arouse both from within and without, Anglicanism soldiers on still – Catholic *and* Reformed with much else in between. Is such a position really tenable, or even worthwhile, we might ask?

The chief exponents of Anglican comprehensiveness, as it is sometimes termed, developed the doctrine in their teachings and writings during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Richard Hooker is pre-eminent among these so-called 'divines', and it is to his profoundly influential work: *Treatise of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, that we turn now, not merely for historical interest but rather for directives that may help us to see the way forward in the face of current ambiguities.

As old patterns change and familiar landmarks disappear, on the ecclesiastical landscape, an understandable reaction of self or group defensiveness comes to the fore. Only a few catch a glimpse of the whole picture. Foreseeing something of what is struggling to come to birth, they seek, therefore, as far as possible to foster what is good and of the truth in both the new and the old, by holding diverse viewpoints, and their exponents,

together, within the bounds of Christian charity and hopefully of a single Church allegiance. Such was Hooker's vocation and achievement. Such, too, was what he handed on to Anglicanism as an inheritance. Seeing behind the Reformation struggles to the single Tradition of the one historical Church of Christ, and ahead to what could be, when dispute and wrangling were overcome, he advocated for the meantime tolerance and restraint, with the exercise of sound judgement in the avoidance of extremes and the discernment of truth.

Hooker's overall view, then, is thorough and extensive. Here we can only hope to look briefly at a few of the more important aspects of his teaching, and always with the present Church scene in view. We shall begin by examining some of his thoughts about the Church of Rome.

When seeking to understand Hooker's attitude towards Roman Catholicism, we must recall of course that he was speaking as a member of one of the newer national and Reformation churches which had recently broken away from the authority of the Papacy. The wonder is that he should speak with such magnanimity and insight about that church which many of his contemporaries regarded as the arch-enemy. He could not, and would not, obviously, go all out in favour of the Roman Church, nor should we expect him to. There were Puritans about as well, and anyway Hooker was supremely a man of the English Reformation, and architect of that gradually evolving comprehensiveness we have described above.

In Book iii of the *Laws*, we find a clear exposition of how Hooker felt his church should respond to that of Rome. He is sure that the Reformation was of God and that in consequence reform had been right, even though it had regrettably led to a breach with the parent church:

The indisposition of the Church of Rome to reform herself (i.e. in Hooker's time) must be no stay unto us from performing our duty to God; even as desire of retaining conformity with them could be no excuse if we did not perform that duty.

(Bk. iii, Ch. i (10))

he does not condemn but shows a sympathetic understanding, and expects better things. In the following extract, for example, Hooker is speaking of the Scottish and French Churches which have both dispensed with episcopacy. He feels that it is too late for one of them to put this right and impossible for the other in the midst of their present troubles. He continues:

... this their defect and imperfection I had rather lament than exagitate, considering that men oftentimes without any fault of their own may be driven to want that kind of polity or regiment which is best, and to content themselves with that, which either the irremediable error of former times, or the necessity of the present hath cast upon them.

(Bk. iii, Ch. xi (17))

Does this help us to understand *something* of the rationale behind the Porvoo Statement in our own day?

Typically, Hooker will not allow us to despise those with whom we disagree. We must always try to put ourselves in others' shoes: '*and therefore they that judge themselves martyrs when they are grieved, should think withal what **they** are whom they grieve*'. There is always hurt on either side – another lesson for our time?

Thus, as Hooker frequently suggests, we should accept and respect others without judging. God alone knows the inner intention of the heart:

To Him they seem such as they are, but to us they must be taken for such as they seem. In the eye of God they are against Christ that are not truly and sincerely with Him, in our eyes they must be received as with Christ that are not to outward show against him.

(Bk. v, Ch. lxviii (9))

ops as well as priests ... *'we hold there have ever been and ever ought to be ... at leastwise two sorts of ecclesiastical persons, the one subordinate unto the other ...'* As the Apostles were the principal leaders at first, so now should bishops be, Hooker claims. Moreover, and perhaps because of divergent practices growing up in the more extreme forms of the Protestantism of his day, he stresses that official ordination by the Church is essential, since no-one can arrogantly presume to take such authority upon himself:

... it cannot enter into any man's conceit to think it lawful, that every man which listeth should take upon him charge in the Church; and therefore a solemn admittance is of such necessity, that without it there can be no church polity.
(Ibid)

How would Hooker respond to the ideas of lay celebration or presidency being mooted in our day one wonders?

Clearly, he had no truck, in his lifetime, with the novelties being introduced by some of the Reformers merely in order to do the opposite of everything that Rome did:

To say that in nothing they may be followed which are of the Church of Rome were violent and extreme ... As far as they follow reason and truth, we fear not to tread the selfsame steps ... where Rome keepeth that which is ancients and better, others, whom we much more affect, leaving it for newer and changing it for worse; we had rather follow the perfections of them whom we like not, than in defects resemble them whom we love.
(Bk. v, Ch. xxvii (1))

Importantly, Hooker here speaks of the other Reformation Churches and sects as those whom he loves. Much of what he writes about them elsewhere can seem rather critical. Always he is at pains that they should avoid extremes and stay within the mainstream of the Church. But as is his wont,

But he continues: *'Notwithstanding, so far as lawfully we may, we have held and do hold fellowship with them'*. In other words, Hooker can see no reason why relationship between the two churches should be completely cut off.

Admittedly some extremists were claiming that Rome was no longer a true church (unreformed as she was in their eyes). But Hooker notes that the same was being said of his own church too by some still within her ranks! Though for Hooker there were certain aspects of Roman teaching he obviously could not go along with, there was so much else that the two churches had in common i.e. the basic Tradition of the faith. Then he adds (with foresight?) that perhaps one day, under God, Rome too would be affected by the same sort of reforming spirit:

... touching those main parts of Christian truth wherein they constantly still persist, we gladly acknowledge them (i.e. members of the Roman Church) to be of the family of Jesus Christ; and our hearty prayer unto God Almighty is, that being conjoined so far forth with them, they may at the length, if it be his will, so yield to frame and reform themselves, that no distraction remain in any thing, but that we "all may with one heart and one mouth glorify God the Father of our Lord and Saviour", whose Church we are. (Ibid)

Hooker is adamant, in fact, that opposition to things Roman should not be fanatical. It is only corruptions that are to be avoided and not the many rites and ceremonies common to Christians from of old. Since the Reformers earnestly hoped to be an incentive for the correction of abuses, it would be foolish for them to take things too far and, as we now say, throw out the baby with the bathwater. Should this happen, how then could they hope that the Roman Church would follow their example of reform?

When God did by his good spirit put it into our hearts, first to reform ourselves – whence grew our separation – and then by all good means to seek

also their reformation; had we not only cut off their corruptions but also estranged ourselves from them in things indifferent, who seeth not how greatly prejudicial this might have been to so good a cause ... (Bk. iv, Ch.vii (6))

In view of all this, Hooker, we sense, has rejoiced greatly over Vatican ii and ARCIC and will no doubt be praying still as the two churches make their tortuous way forward to hopefully closer unity, despite current setbacks.

But the thing which prompted Hooker to write his *Treatise* in the first place was, of course, the whole question of which laws, rites and ceremonies from former days were legitimate for the Reformers still to use. His approach remains wise and moderate, grounded in tradition. He insists, for example, that:

... the ceremonies which we have taken from such as were before us, are not things which belong to this or that sect, but they are the ancient rites and customs of the Church of Christ, whereof ourselves being a part, we have the selfsame interest in them which our fathers before us had, from whom the same are descended unto us. (Ibid Ch.ix, (1))

Seeing, then, that the English Church is a part of the Church universal, Hooker is saying, she quite naturally inherits and adopts the legitimate customs of that Church. To reject them because those whom some term 'our enemies' also have them, were foolish indeed. And even more significantly, they have been accepted and are still to be used for the praise and honour of God and not as an indirect means of hurting others:

We have most heartily to thank God therefore, that they amongst us to whom the first consultations of causes of this kind fell, were men which, aiming at another mark, namely the glory of God, and the good of this his church, took that which they

judged thereunto necessary, not rejecting any good or convenient thing only because the Church of Rome might perhaps like it. If we have that which is meet and right, although they be glad, we are not to envy them this their solace; we do not think it a duty of ours to be in every such thing their tormentors. (Ibid (2))

Naturally, Hooker had to substantiate his thesis. He gives extensive reasons, for instance, why the traditional celebrations of the Church's liturgical calendar, including fast days and the festivals of the major saints, should still be kept. Also, valuable though preaching is, the sermon should not be allowed so to predominate that other important aspects of worship are ousted out. Scripture should certainly be normative for the interpretation of doctrine, but due respect must be paid to tradition and the right use of reason and intellect. The claim that only those things which are found to be *explicitly* expressed in Scripture are to be believed and taught, is shown to be fallacious and unworkable. Hooker, we feel, would appreciate many of the insights of more recent biblical criticism, though he would no doubt also be at pains (in order to keep a proper balance) to maintain as well the valid and well-tried methods of Patristic and other earlier exegesis.

Similarly, Hooker wished to defend the traditional pattern of church order in the threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon. He says such things as the following:

We hold that God's clergy are a state, which hath been and will be, as long as there is a Church upon earth, necessary by the plain word of God himself; a state whereunto the rest of God's people must be subject as touching things that appertain to their soul's health. For where polity is, it cannot but appoint some to be leaders, and some to be led by others. (Bk. iii, Ch. xi (20))

And the clergy too will have leaders among themselves; there will be bish-