

Eminent English Churchmen By the Reverend Canon Arthur Middleton

Richard Hooker 1553-1600

RICHARD HOOKER was born in Exeter and educated at the Grammar School and came under the sponsorship of Bishop John Jewel of Salisbury who in 1567 enabled him to go up to Christ Church College Oxford. Here he was diligent in learning and piety from 1567-84 as student and Tutor “...enriching his quiet and capacious soul with the precious learning of the Philosophers, Casuists and Schoolmen ... restless in searching the scope and intent of God’s Spirit revealed to mankind in the Sacred Scripture... Nor was this excellent man a stranger to the more light and airy parts of learning, as musick and poetry.” His marriage took him from the tranquillity of the scholar’s life to the cares of a country parish priest in Buckinghamshire before a brief spell as Master of the Temple (1585-91). Here in London he was faced with the busy life and ecclesiastical controversies of the Church in confrontation with the Puritans. He found himself working alongside the afternoon lecturer Walter Travers, a Calvinist who started a pamphlet war against him, one of the charges being that Hooker would not condemn Roman Catholics. Weary of the aggravation Hooker asked the Archbishop to move him to a quiet living where he could devote himself to replying to the Puritans and justifying the Church’s system.

The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity

After eighteen months at Boscombe near Salisbury the first four books of his only work *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* had been written and were published in 1594. In 1595 he moved to Bishopsbourne near Canterbury where he lived as a faithful parish priest giving himself to the duties of his office, to prayer and study. Here in 1597 the fifth book was published but the last three were left in manuscript and not published until after his death three years later.

His response to the narrowness of Puritans who saw the Bible as a handbook of regulations for everything in life and religion and anything in religion and life not condoned by the Bible as sinful, was to

elucidate a much wider and realistic understanding of divine law. God was also Creator as well as Redeemer. The harmony, order and purpose discerned within the natural order are expressions of the divine Reason which lies behind Scripture and the decrees of Church Councils, emanating from God himself and found in the lives of all his creatures. Hence God's revelation comes to us in various ways and our reason and conscience arrives at a knowledge of God's will by "a number of concurrent means and faculties."

Bishop, Priest and Deacon

To say that the Church has an autonomy in many things is not to undermine the supremacy of Scripture, because it is reasonable to expect that the church will have an authority over its own life enabling it to decree rites and ceremonies. He asserts the continuity of the Church of England as part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and therefore certain customs, orders, rites, and ecclesiastical government will continue, admitting that as in nature some laws are immutable so too are some positive laws. In particular matters Hooker has been less universally acceptable to some Anglicans, especially where he loses sight of Apostolic Succession denying the necessity of episcopal ordination where cases of 'inevitable necessity' might arise for departing from that rule. In this he tends at times to reflect the generally inadequate conceptions of his age. It was left to a later generation of theologians and patristic scholars to stress that in the three-fold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon we have an historic guaranteed transmission of ministerial authority and sacramental grace that it is of the *esse* of the Church. He did not agree that the Presbyterian form of Church government was a sub-apostolic model. Yet the real issue of ordination at that time was whether it could proceed from below, that is from popular or lay appointment. Hooker is adamant in Bk V. 77, that the authority of the priesthood is of unearthly derivation while episcopacy is a 'sacred regiment ordained of God.'

Sacraments

In Book V (ch. LVI. 5-7), the Church is not primarily a 'visible society of men' (Bk. III, ch. 1. v, 14), nor is the notion of a mystical body something apprehensible in 'our minds by intellectual conceit' (Bk. III, ch.1. 2.); here the Church and Sacrament become really and truly

one. Henry McAdoo describes Book V, as the first in-depth theological commentary on the *Book of Common Prayer*:

It is a profound theological exposition of why Anglicans believe, think and worship as they do. Church, ministry, sacraments, liturgical principles and practice, are all discussed and not merely in the 'parochial' setting but in the context of participation in the Life of the Incarnate Lord through the grace of Word and Sacraments in the corporate fellowship of the Church.

Hooker understood and expounded the sacraments as major instruments through which we are incorporated into the mystical body of Christ, "Through them 'the medicine that doth cure the world'—God in Christ—was distributed to members of Christ's body." Through Christ's presence in the sacrament, God's causative presence in the world was transformed into his saving presence in the Church. So for Hooker, the grace of the sacraments is the last link in a series whose terminus is the participation of the Saints in the life of God. Hooker expounds a vision of man which finds fulfilment in God, a theocentric humanism. C. S Lewis described Hooker's model universe as being 'drenched with deity'. God is in us, we are in him by way of a mutual participation, in which creature and Creator remain distinct while being no longer separate so that the divine life is in us by grace. Hooker commended fasting communion and private confession before a priest as 'God's appointed officer and vicegerent he regards as a desirable preliminary to communion when the conscience could not be quietened.

Hooker's Importance

'Hooker's firm grasp of Catholic doctrine, his wholehearted adherence to its principles and his lucid exposition of the same undoubtedly preserved the Church of England from embracing a merely negative and destructive protestantism and paved the way for that church revival on sound traditional lines ...' He gave to theological controversy a dignity, a richness and a grandeur. Throughout Hooker there is that wide vision of the continuity and wholeness of the Church's Tradition. This is not for the establishing of a pedigree, but for the transmission of certain living qualities of faith and order which link the present Church with the Primitive Church, being at once the assurance and norm of catholicity.

The influence exerted by Hooker on the Church of England cannot be confined to the contents of this great work of literature and theology. It extends beyond his literary activity to the creation of a school of writers who looked to him as their master. They not only carried on the great tradition of his teaching, but like him they worked in a spirit of independent enquiry and thus enabled and made permanent the adherence of the Anglican Reformation to the principles of Apostolic order as well as primitive truth. After four hundred years Hooker's way of interpreting the continuing life of what became Anglicanism still speaks to issues facing contemporary Anglicans in an age of ecumenism. In a century dominated by empiricism in debates about our knowledge of God, Hooker's *Polity* can still contribute, while his ecclesiology can address the dominant individualism of our times in its conflict with the corporate nature of Christianity. Finally, in the face of a rising biblical fundamentalism Hooker's interpretative principles are a positive antidote.