
Book Reviews

Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason: Reformed Theologian of the Church of England?

Nigel Atkinson

Paternoster Press, 1997, 138 pp. £11.99

This book is a highly significant and long-overdue assessment of the architect of classical Anglicanism from an evangelical perspective. All varieties of churchmanship will find the author's analysis and exposition of Hooker's stance stimulating and provocative. Indeed, it is impossible to be neutral about Atkinson's thesis since the issues involved are very much alive in both academy and church. The author challenges much scholarly interpretation of Hooker, not least John Henry Newman's portrayal of him as 'the theologian of the *via media*'. Exploring the key areas of reason, tradition and Scripture, the author investigates Hooker's understanding of the authority attributable to each. The three main chapters involve in-depth comparisons of Hooker's theology with the views of his contemporary puritan critics on one hand and the thought of the magisterial reformers on the other. The fourth and final chapter is an assessment of Hooker's position in the light of recent scholarship. The author's conclusion is that Hooker's debt to Reformation theology is greater than many scholars have allowed hitherto. A recurring theme in the book is that Hooker was closer to the reformers in general and Calvin in particular than his puritan critics were. Thus the author believes that the question in the book's subtitle demands an answer in the affirmative.

The author argues with ease that Hooker held a Protestant view of Scripture. However this is not the same thing as a Reformed view of Scripture as maintained by Calvin and the Puritans. On the relationship between

Scripture and reason, the author also proves that Hooker was neither rationalist nor fideist. However, the reviewer was not convinced that Hooker's stress on reason was entirely compatible with the magisterial reformers. What is clear from the author's argument is that Hooker is pursuing a very definite agenda: his defence of reason is necessary in order to defend the appeal to tradition which in turn is essential to defend the Anglican retention of episcopacy. The fact remains that while Hooker defends both a Protestant view of the presbyterate and the validity of non-episcopal Reformed orders, he cannot justify Anglican episcopacy from Scripture.

From the reviewer's perspective, the least convincing features of Atkinson's thesis are his interpretation of Calvin and the wedge he attempts to drive between Calvin and the Puritans. For instance, Hooker's case that Calvin's choice of presbyterian church order was determined by the political circumstances prevailing in Geneva (pp. 47, 58) is just absurd. Anyone who has read Calvin in any depth knows that Scripture rigorously determined his thought on every issue he expounded. Doubtless the situation made it easier for Calvin to argue the presbyterian case. That he might have adopted something different had circumstances been otherwise is doubtful pleading indeed.

To say that Calvin regarded the church order of the early church as something indifferent (p. 69) is to ignore his carefully argued case in *Institutes*, IV.3.4–16. Clearly, presbyterian order was based on 'God's pure word', being the 'ministries established by Christ' (*Inst.* IV.4. 1). Atkinson entirely misappropriates Calvin's *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet* to establish his view (pp. 66ff). Calvin's acknowledgement that Genevan church order was "not such as the ancient church professed" did not mean he was making any concessions over bishops. He was happy to leave discipline out of the immediate discussion (*Tracts*, p. 38) merely to show that where *doctrine* was concerned, the Reformed churches had antiquity on their side (*ibid.* p. 37). Regarding the "form which

the Apostles instituted”, Calvin is adamant that in Scripture “we have the only model of a true Church, and whosoever deviates from it in the smallest degree is in error” (*ibid.* p. 38). In the face of Atkinson’s claim, this is some indifference! Calvin’s seemingly sympathetic discussion of early-church episcopacy (*Inst.* IV. 4. 1–15) was merely an account of the changes which were made to apostolic order *en route* to papal episcopacy. His early toleration of Anglican orders was clearly only temporary judging by his correspondence with Cranmer and Grindal (see my ‘Bishop or Presbyter? French Reformed Ecclesiology in 1559’, *EQ* 67.3 (1995)). The author similarly misleads the reader into thinking that Calvin believed God had “prescribed nothing specific” about each churches “form of organisation” (p. 71). However, had the author consulted the context of Calvin’s comment on 1 Cor. 11:2 (instead of simply reciting William Bouwsma’s citation), he would have seen that Calvin is not discussing ministerial offices but unwritten apostolic traditions concerning service times, praying by kneeling and burial customs, etc. All this plainly correlates with *Inst.* IV.10.27–32.

Calvin clearly saw a close relationship between doctrine and ministerial office in the New Testament. In arguing that apostasy occurred in both respects, Cartwright and his puritan brethren were true disciples of Calvin (p. 69). That Scripture speaks clearly in both areas was fundamental to truly Reformed polity *vis-à-vis* the semi-reformed Anglican variety. However, Atkinson makes much of Hooker’s attempted *reductio ad absurdum* of the Puritan’s appeal to scriptural authority (p. 88). Indeed, one must ask, did the Puritans really demand a Bible text for “the taking up of a rush or straw”? This is unlikely, in view of any specific lack of evidence cited by the author. One suspects that this charge is an instance of Hooker’s tendency to exaggerate the puritan position (see Cargill Thompson’s comment to this effect, p. 77, n.3). The fact is that the Puritans did not demand a simplistic omniscient view of Scripture. Cartwright did allow that ecclesiastical ceremonies might vary with circumstances (see M. M.

Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism*, 1939, p. 237). Even Wilcox and Field, the authors of *An Admonition to Parliament* (1572), admitted under interrogation that while “in matters of government and discipline, the Word of God is our only warrant”, yet “rites and ceremonies not mentioned in Scripture are to be used or refused, as shall best appear to the edification of the church” (*English Puritan Divines in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth: Cartwright and his Contemporaries*, 1848, p. 232). In other words, the Puritans did allow a place for sanctified human reason. Hooker’s mistake was to endorse forced obedience to Anglican *adiaphora* through the Act of Uniformity, a policy which occasioned much puritan suffering.

In short, there are serious grounds for rejecting Atkinson’s thesis that Hooker was closer to Calvin than the Puritans were. On reason, tradition and Scripture, a wedge cannot be driven between Calvin and his English sons, at least where church order was concerned. It therefore remains true that the Elizabethan settlement left the Anglican Church a semi-reformed church, even—albeit to a lesser degree than Rome—a ‘disobedient church’. Hooker effectively disregarded clear New Testament teaching about church order in the interests of Elizabethan political correctness. The Puritans were right to highlight Scripture’s teaching in matters of order as well as doctrine. While in these respects they were faithful Calvinists, a case may certainly be made that the Puritans went beyond Calvin in certain dogmatic details associated with the extent of the atonement, the nature of justification and the Sabbath, but that is another story. Suffice to say that Atkinson’s thesis remains highly unconvincing and the enthusiasm of Peter Cousin’s promotional review somewhat excessive (*Nota Bene* 5.1 (1998), pp. 8-9). However this book is a welcome contribution to a debate which shows no signs of going away. One could wish that this otherwise valuable work had provided an index, a deficiency which perhaps will be remedied by a future edition.

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