

THE WORD OF GOD AND  
THE WORDS OF MAN

*Or, the second and third books of  
Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*

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Richard Hooker  
by Wenceslaus Hollar



## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | i   |
| Notes on Editorial Approach                                      | xii |
| <b>Book II</b>   | 1   |
| 1 How Far Does the Authority of Scripture Extend?                | 3   |
| 2 Doing All Things to the Glory of God                           | 8   |
| 3 Must All Things Be Sanctified by the Word of God?              | 11  |
| 4 Acting Without Clear Direction from Scripture                  | 13  |
| <i>[ch. 5 omitted]</i>   |     |
| 6 Arguments from Scripture's Silence                             | 21  |
| 7 The Proper Weight of Human Authority                           | 27  |
| 8 The Right Way to Understand the Authority of Scripture         | 39  |
| <b>Book III</b>  | 45  |
| 1 Defining the Church  | 47  |
| 2 Must Scripture Contain a Complete System of Church Government? | 63  |

|    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 3  | Church Government is not a Matter of Salvation  | 66  |
| 4  | We Do Not Dishonor Scripture                    | 70  |
| 5  | The Word of God and the Words of Man            | 72  |
| 6  | All Churches Add Laws Beyond Scripture          | 74  |
| 7  | The Appeal to “General Rules of Scripture”      | 76  |
| 8  | Reason May Also Serve as a Tool of the Spirit   | 81  |
| 9  | The Right Use of Reason in Devising Church Laws | 100 |
| 10 | Why Scriptural Commands May Not Always Bind     | 105 |
| 11 | Can Biblical Laws Be Changed?                   | 114 |

## INTRODUCTION

*Bradford Littlejohn*

IN THIS volume, we come to what was perhaps Hooker's greatest contribution to Protestant theology—his account of the nature of Scriptural authority. Now we must hasten to clarify that Hooker's contribution was not one of saying something that no other Protestants were saying; on the contrary, in substance, the basic distinctions that Hooker draws in these chapters can be found in most of his great Reformational predecessors and leading Reformed contemporaries. However, he wrote on these matters with a clarity and vigor that is almost unmatched, and he took up his pen at a pivotal moment in the development of Protestantism, English Protestantism in particular.

The Reformation had been built firmly upon the foundation of the Bible from the beginning, but it is important to remember that the doctrine of Scripture was not itself the pearl of great price which the Reformers sought to recover—that was the glorious gospel of justification by grace through faith. The doctrine of Scripture was, so to speak, the strongbox for preserving that pearl of great price: since God had revealed the way of salvation clearly, fully, and sufficiently in Scripture, no human word could add conscience-binding doctrines or traditions that could

serve as conditions of access to God. Faced with the tortured uncertainty of his standing before God, Luther had proclaimed the gospel of justification, as revealed in the Word of God, as a basis of newfound certainty, by which the believer could approach the throne of God with confidence in his favor.

## **Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty**

As the Reformation progressed, however, the newfound freedom of a church of a church that had cast off the authority of a papacy began to breed new uncertainties. After all, the Roman church had not claimed merely to tell believers what they must do to be saved, but had offered authoritative doctrinal and moral guidance on a host of matters, and also helped define the proper scope of other lesser human authorities—from parents to parliaments and everything in between. Without such guidance came the risk of moral uncertainty. And the obvious solution was to turn to the same guide that had banished uncertainty from the realm of salvation: Scripture. With the Word of God as our guide, many reasoned, we could navigate all the challenges of life together with minimal uncertainty.

But what if Scripture did not always address the moral, social, and political questions we faced? Or what if, even when it did so, its guidance was hardly transparent, or seemed specific to a particular historical context? What then? Richard Hooker worried that if Scripture was to be our guide in everything, to the point of replacing other rational and human authorities, “will not Scripture be a snare and torment to weak consciences, filling them with infinite perplexities, scruples, insoluble doubts, and ex-



treme despairs?” (II.8.6) It was these symptoms that he thought he witnessed in the Elizabethan Puritan movement, which claimed to find in Scripture a complete model for church government and liturgy, a complete solution to the various ills they saw afflicting the English church and society.

While their claims were in his view harmful enough even in the narrow context of debates over church government, his greatest worry was that there was little to stop this logic being extended into every area of life. Once one adopted the syllogism: “Scripture tells us everything that is necessary. It seems to us necessary to know X. Therefore, Scripture tells us X” there is no theoretical limit to what truths one may insist on reading into Scripture. And “just as exaggerated praises given to men often turn out to diminish and damage their well-deserved reputations, so we must likewise beware lest, in attributing too much to Scripture, such unbelievable claims cause even those virtues which Scripture truly possesses to be less reverently esteemed” (II.8.7).

The consequences of such reasoning are not merely destructive to our understanding of Scripture itself, but to our lives together as believers. Once one contends that Scripture simply must provide the answer to some question or other, and claims to have found *the* biblical answer, the stakes of any disagreement are raised immeasurably. No longer is failure to agree a mere matter of poor reasoning, inattentiveness to the evidence, or just plain stubbornness; no, it is a matter of basic obedience to God, basic faith in His Word. Thus every disagreement becomes grounds for a potential ugly church split, for why should we maintain fellowship with someone who doesn't take

God's Word seriously?

You do not have to be a professional church historian to recognize that this is hardly a mere hypothetical danger. On the contrary, schism has been a pervasive characteristic of Protestant churches—and especially those influenced by the kind of Puritanism Hooker here opposes—right down through the centuries. Our churches today are still frequently riven by strife of this sort, and false confidence in Scripture's perspicuity continues to fuel arrogant and abusive Christian leaders who dismiss any kind of opposition as infidelity. Countless converts away from orthodox Protestantism cite their weariness with the seemingly intractable disagreements that fracture our churches today.

Hooker's attempt to pre-emptively address these issues, before they tore Protestantism apart, should thus be of intense interest to us today. His answers may not provide a panacea to every crisis of authority, but they do provide a compass for navigating these mazes that remains remarkably applicable today. His response consists of three main arguments: the first, regarding the nature of certainty; the second, regarding the purpose of Scripture; and the third, regarding the nature of the church.

### **“As Much Certainty as the Nature of the Subject Permits”**

On the question of certainty, Hooker sought to dial down the Puritan pretensions to be able to find religious and moral certainty in every area of life. To be sure, there was nothing wrong with seeking certainty in principle. On the contrary, he observed, it is simply human nature: “the mind of man always desires to know the truth with as

much certainty as the nature of the subject permits” (II.7.5). But the key phrase here was the last—*with as much certainty as the nature of the subject permits*. The world, for all its beautiful variety and order (or perhaps *because of its beautiful variety and order*), is not a clockwork deterministic machine. It is a place full of uncertainties, possibilities, and probabilities, and it is the mark of wisdom to adapt the mode of our knowledge, and our claims to certainty, to the nature of the objects being known. Some eternal truths, he thinks, can be known intuitively and self-evidently, others by “strong and invincible demonstration.” But “if both these ways fail, then whichever way greatest probability leads, there the mind follows” (II.7.5). Scripture too can provide us certainty in those things it clearly teaches, but not in those things which it doesn’t. In fact, most of us, most of the time, rely on the probable authority of the testimony of the learned, and adjust our level of certainty accordingly. This probable assurance should suffice in most cases, so that, contra Cartwright, our consciences may be assured without direct guidance from Scripture: “in all things our consciences are best resolved and most in harmony with God and nature when they are persuaded only as far as the available grounds of persuasion will bear.” Indeed, to demand otherwise does not give greater assurance, but rather greater “confusion”:

When bare and unfounded conclusions are put into their minds and they find that they do not have the expected certainty, they imagine that this proceeds from a lack of faith and that the Spirit of God does not work in them as it does in true believers. By this, their hearts are much troubled, and they fall into anguish and confusion. But the fact is that no

matter how bold and confident we may be in words, when it comes down to it, then however strong the evidence for the truth is, so strong is our heart's assent—and it cannot be stronger, if properly grounded. (II.7.5)

In other words, you can't make yourself more certain about something just by trying harder, if the matter is intrinsically uncertain.

### **The Scope of Scriptural Authority**

So which things are uncertain, and which aren't? Hooker tried to answer these questions by providing a fresh account of the purposes of Scripture. Of course there are things on which Scripture offers the believer certainty (Luther's Reformation, at least, had staked itself on this claim), but Hooker insisted that we clarify the scope of Scriptural authority and how it worked in the life of the Church

Hooker was resolute in affirming that Scripture was wholly sufficient “unto the end for which it was instituted.” But what is this end? Well, what does Scripture itself say?

The main point of the whole New Testament is what John describes as the purpose of his own account: “these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31). The same is true of the Old Testament, as the Apostle tells Timothy, they are “able to make thee wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). (I.14.4).

## INTRODUCTION

Accordingly, argues Hooker, everything that is necessary for our salvation in Christ must be either expressly affirmed in Scripture, or able to be readily and necessarily deduced from it (such as the doctrine of the Trinity). On the basis of this conviction, he clearly opposes the Catholic understanding of the authority of tradition, insisting that nothing essential to salvation can be added by human authority: “we utterly refuse as much as once to acquaint ourselves with any thing further. Whatsoever to make up the doctrine of man’s salvation is added, as in supply of the Scripture’s insufficiency, we reject it. Scripture purposing this, hath perfectly and fully done it” (II.8.5). Whatever tradition’s role in the Christian life broadly considered, for Hooker it does not even have a subordinate role when it comes to the central mysteries of the Christian faith (except in clarifying and defending the teachings of Scripture). Likewise, although Hooker insists emphatically on the value of our God-given faculty of reason, he clarifies that, “Fifth, Scripture is perfect, exact, and sufficient for the end to which God ordained it, and we do not add reason to make up any deficiency as far as that end is concerned. It is rather a necessary tool without which we could never reap from Scripture’s perfection the fruit and benefit which it yields.” (III.8.10).

So Scripture is wholly sufficient for the end of salvation, and to this extent, Hooker believes, the Church of Rome has seriously erred. But the Puritans, he says, have erred in an equal and opposite direction, “thinking that Scripture contains not only all things necessary for salvation, but indeed simply all things, such that to do anything according to any other law is not only unnecessary to salvation but unlawful, sinful, and downright damnable.”

(II.8.7). This, he says, while intended as high praise for Scripture, is actually a dishonor, since God is honored only by truth, and Scripture never makes such claims for itself. This is not to say, of course, that Scripture simply has nothing at all to teach us beyond the basic truths of salvation. On the contrary, it is “a storehouse of infinite treasures” (I.14.1). Indeed, Hooker is willing to accept Cartwright’s dictum that “the word of God containeth the direction of whatsoever things can fall into any part of man’s life” with an important qualification. Since Scripture contains “the general axioms, rules, and principles” of the moral law, there is no reason why all moral duties might not “be deduced by some kind of consequence (as by long circuit of deduction it may be that even all truth out of any truth may be concluded)”; however, “no one should feel bound to deduce all his actions from Scripture” (II.1.2). In other words, since Scripture has been given as a supplement to, not a replacement for, the natural law that Hooker thinks is still more or less inscribed on our consciences, we do not always need to appeal directly to Scripture to determine the best way to act in a given circumstance.

But what about when it comes to regulating the life of the church? Sure, many people might admit that Scripture is hardly going to tell us the best way to organize a sports team or run an academic institution (beyond very “general axioms, rules, and principles” at any rate), but why shouldn’t God tell His people clearly how to organize and run the body of Christ, the Church? Well, says Hooker, because the body of Christ *properly* speaking is not the sort of thing that needs to be organized and run, at any rate by us. This last part of Hooker’s argument, which occupies much of Book III of the *Laws*, remains nearly as

## INTRODUCTION

relevant today as when it was first penned. To be sure, the *jure divino* presbyterian error of holding that God must have prescribed a detailed form of church government as forever binding, and that that form happens to be presbyterianism, is not a particularly common view nowadays (although it certainly still has adherents, especially in America). Of course, Hooker's arguments apply equally against *jure divino* episcopacy (as he himself notes), or *jure divino* Baptist polity, etc., all of which are still alive and well, especially in conservative churches. But still, most Protestants today have lived long enough alongside good faithful Christians of other denominational traditions to think that there must be at least a fair bit of flexibility when it comes to how to organize church polity. The same is generally true when it comes to the matter of liturgy. Although Presbyterians in particular can be found still holding to the so-called "regulative principle of worship," denying any freedom to innovate in worship beyond clear biblical liturgical guidelines, our error nowadays is likely to be *too much* freedom in worship rather than too little.

Still, while American Protestants might have largely lightened up relative to their Puritan forebears when it comes to these matters, they have rarely given much thought to why. And this means that sober-minded believers, troubled by the general licentious low-church individualism and love for novelty that they see around them, are inclined to react haphazardly in the direction of some kind of "high ecclesiology" or other. This involves making exorbitant claims for the importance of certain liturgical acts, modes of church discipline, forms of church government, the sacramental power of the church, the office of the minister, or all of the above. In nearly every case, such ec-

clesiologies trade on a pervasive equivocation between what the Reformers termed the “visible” and “invisible” church. There is one Body of Christ, united throughout the world and governed directly by God’s Word and Spirit, but we cannot see it—in two senses: first, we cannot see the bond of its union, the invisible glue of union with Christ that holds it together; and second, we cannot see with any certainty who its real members are. What we can see is all those who *profess* to be members thereof, and it is our duty to charitably treat them as such as long as they do. But this totality of outward professors of faith is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from the invisible Body of Christ. Moreover, existing as it does on earth, it is necessarily broken up into many individual churches with different human authorities overseeing them, each of which must make numerous prudential choices about the mundane challenges that face it in history, challenges that face any social organization or body politic.

By forcefully articulating this magisterial Protestant distinction right at the outset of Book III, Hooker is able to make a convincing case for why it is that the laws which govern church polity and liturgy will for the most part be prudential, circumstantial, and flexible, the same way the laws governing England or France or Geneva or Amsterdam might be. This does not mean an absolute free-for-all—after all, Scripture does lay down a few clear constants regarding the visible Church and its worship—but it does mean that Hooker offers us a principled reason to be suspicious of any of the rigid or exclusive claims that Protestants then or now might want to make about the Church, its officers, its discipline, or its rituals. Most of these fall simply into the category of “good ideas” or “bad



## INTRODUCTION

ideas” not divine injunctions.

This clarification of the distinction between the Church visible and invisible also offers an antidote to misguided quests for ecumenism or catholicity. Too often nowadays, these proceed on the assumption that something is deeply and disastrously wrong with institutional plurality and pluriformity in the Church, that the unity of Christ’s body has been torn asunder unless and until we can get all churches praying from the same prayerbook, singing from the same hymnbook, or convening at the same general synod. This sort of quest for catholicity terminates all too often in Catholicism, which offers at least a persuasive illusion of such institutional unity. In Hooker’s day, there was perhaps nothing that separated Protestantism from Rome so much as the issue of ecclesiology, and yet today, many Protestants are much too confused about what the Church is or isn’t to be able to tell what makes Protestantism different, and why that difference might still be worth defending. Here, as on so many other points, Hooker offers us an exceptionally useful compass even today.

## NOTES ON EDITORIAL APPROACH

MANY OF the following notes will be familiar to readers of our first two volumes, but if you are curious as to just how we set about “translating” a book from English into English, or are seeking for proof of why it was necessary, read on. Also, we should first draw attention to two features of this volume that are not to be found in the previous two: *new chapter titles* and *abridgment*.

Recognizing that Hooker’s chapter titles are frequently lengthy and ponderous, as was conventional for the sixteenth century, we decided for this volume to introduce pithier more modern-sounding chapter titles of our own devising. Beneath each of these, a modernized adaptation of Hooker’s original (similar to what we did in the previous two volumes) appears as a subtitle of sorts.

Also, with some reluctance, we for the first time engaged in the task of abridgment with this volume, cutting out entirely two passages: the entirety of Book II, ch. 5; and several paragraphs from the end of Book II, ch. 6. Both sections, it was felt, go a bit further afield in the polemical weeds than most modern readers would care to venture, quibbling over whether some theologian supported Cartwright’s case or Hooker’s. Given that our plan is to

abridge more substantially in some later books of Hooker's *Laws*, we figured we might as well get readers (and ourselves) used to the idea here.

Beyond these changes, modernizing Hooker's prose was a complex task, certainly more complicated than updating a few archaic words and breaking apart a few lengthy sentences. Hooker's sentences are not just lengthy; rather, his syntax itself is often dense and unwieldy, even by 16th century standards. Much of this is intentional, perhaps, and helps convey Hooker's meaning, but it is so challenging for most modern readers that many sentences required syntactical re-working of some kind. Hooker's idioms and turns of phrase are also frequently archaic or rhetorically elevated in Shakespearean ways that can be obscure to the modern reader, so our vocabulary updates were extensive. Our revision is therefore a deep and pervasive one, with the outcome being more akin to a *translation* than a modernization.

Our translation method was a simple one. First, Brian Marr and (beginning with Book III) our kind friend Sean Duncan would separately read and carefully re-write Hooker's prose from scratch, translating Hooker's meaning and prose into modern parlance as best as he was able. Second, at a later date the three of us—Brian Marr, Bradford Littlejohn, and Bradley Belschner—would sit down and meet to read the prose aloud, beginning with Hooker's original and comparing it to Brian's and Sean's translations. In this way we worked through Hooker's work, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, with an eye towards style, subtle connotations in the text, and key terms in Hooker's argument. It was a laborious process, and often the final version would end up looking markedly

different than Brian and Sean's first drafts. Finally, we read aloud through the entire modernized version on its own, our ears listening for any needless impediments to clarity or readability. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Sean for his time and care on this project, which has been invaluable in helping us gain additional clarity for modern readers without sacrificing fidelity to the original meaning.

Since our goal in this "translation" process was to render Hooker's prose easily accessible to a modern audience, we adopted a method that in traditional terms would be considered dynamic rather than literal. The goal was to convey Hooker's *meaning* as accurately and intuitively as possible to a modern audience. We felt free to use reasonably modern colloquialisms, though we also eschewed any words or phrases that smacked entirely of the current century. We often found that such phrases, transparently modern as they were, drew attention to themselves rather than to the underlying text. This defeated one of our main goals, which was to remove as many distractions as possible from the meaning that Hooker was trying to convey, allowing it to shine through without occasioning the reader any uncomfortable pauses. Indeed, when in doubt, we erred in favor of what might be a more 19<sup>th</sup>- than 21<sup>st</sup>-century English style, when the latter was so clearly incongruous with the subject matter to feel out of place. For this reason, there were certain conventions that we did not seek to bring into line with common 21<sup>st</sup>-century standards, most notable among them Hooker's convention of using masculine nouns and pronouns where gender-neutral ones are now widely preferred. To change his "man" to "humanity" or his "he" to "he or she" would have been so incongruous with the habits of his age as to have drawn

needless attention to itself.

For devotees of Hooker's original, let it not be thought that we needlessly flattened out his often noble rhetoric and remarkable turns of phrase into a bland, flat, and simplistic sentence structure. On the contrary, if the basic phrasing and rhetorical cadence of the original could be retained without great loss of comprehensibility, we did our utmost to preserve it. Some famous and luminous passages we left virtually untouched. Any reader of Hooker cannot but come away with an enhanced ear for the English language, for words that sound crisp or sonorous and those that are flat and dull. Thus, even when it was clear to us that we would have to find some more modern synonym for a now-obsolete term, we often puzzled long over a single word until we found the one that did the job without detracting from the elegance of the original.

Capitalization for the first time posed a significant challenge in this volume—specifically, the word “Church,” which appears hundreds of times in Book III. Our general rule was to capitalize the word when the universal Church (invisible or visible) was in view, and to not capitalize when a particular church (local or national) was in view; however, “Church of Rome” when referring to the organized institution, was capitalized. Likewise, adjectival constructions, like “church government,” were not capitalized. There were a number of gray areas, upon which we expended a great deal of thought, and there is usually a method to our madness in these, even if it is not always apparent.

Speaking of the Church, one translation decision requires particular comment—the rendering of “mystical” (usually used in connection with “Church”) as “invisible”

or “spiritual.” The word “mystical” now carries connotations of *mysticism*, which it did not in the sixteenth century. And although some scholars have contended that Hooker’s use of “mystical Church” implies something different than the magisterial Protestant concept of the “invisible church” there really appears to be no textual (or historically contextual) warrant for this claim.<sup>1</sup>

### Examples of Changes

Throughout, we kept at the forefront of our minds Strunk and White’s famous Rule 17: “Omit needless words.” One should not assume that just because Hooker’s sentences are long, that he is needlessly wordy; still, one cannot deny that on some occasions at least, he is. A favorite rhetorical device of his is to restate an idea in two successive clauses using different words for emphasis. Sometimes we kept such rhetorical repetition; other times, where it seemed to add little for the contemporary reader, we cut the redundant clause. On a few occasions, we even dropped substantive clauses when context rendered them obvious and thus redundant. For instance:

And even hereby it cometh to pass, that first such as imagine the general and main drift of the body of sacred Scripture not to be so large as it is, nor that God did thereby intend to deliver, as in truth he doth, a full instruction in all things unto salvation necessary, the knowledge whereof man by nature could not otherwise in this life attain unto. (*Original*;

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller statement of this argument, see W. Bradford Littlejohn, *Richard Hooker: A Companion to His Life and Work* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), ch. 10.

BOOK II:  
Concerning their First Position  
Who Urge Reformation in the Church of  
England: Namely, that Scripture is the  
Only Rule of All Things Which in This Life  
May Be Done by Men.





## HOW FAR DOES THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE EXTEND?

*An Introduction and response to their argument from Prov. 2:9*

(1.) I HAVE set out to discuss the ecclesiastical laws which govern us here in England, but I do not intend to defend by argument any laws except those which truth and reason will approve. Those who govern human affairs and who execute the law have a Judge who sits in heaven, and they will be called to give account before His judgment seat for any careless abuses or corrupt policies that have justly provoked opposition. Therefore, we are not defending things that should rather be repented of and redressed. However, that which is truly of God, we will defend to the best of our God-given abilities; may everything else perish at the root. We should also set aside all abuses which stem from man's sinfulness and not from the laws themselves. This leaves those aspects of our church government which, I am quite sure, have been unjustly blamed by those hell-bent on overthrowing it in order to replace it with something much worse. The basis of this destructive error is their misplaced conviction that their form of church government is grounded in divine authority.

Although my earnest desire to see this debate peaceably resolved may have led me to be overly optimistic, it seems to me that the matters under debate are far fewer than at first they seem in the heat of argument, when we are tempted to make a mountain out of every molehill. I have therefore drawn together the salient points of disagreement, trusting that after these are resolved, smaller details will take care of themselves. I do not think either the number or length of these controversies should diminish our hope of seeing them end with concord and love on all sides. May the Father of all peace and unity grant such things out of His infinite love and goodness.

(2.) To begin this task, we must first examine the seeds from which everything else grows. Here let us state the most basic question, which has not, I think, been asked in any other churches, and thus, I trust, can be resolved rather quickly. Indeed, the root of it all is a desire to expand the necessary use of the Word of God, expanding it, I am quite sure, beyond what the truth will bear. For whereas God has left many different kinds of laws to men, those with whom we are disputing hold that only one Law, the Scripture, must be the rule to direct all things, even something as simple as “taking up a rush or straw.”<sup>1</sup> On this point, there would be no question and no further controversy, if they simply admitted two things. First, they must not extend the actions in question all the way down to such things as taking up a straw; at the very least, they

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cartwright, *The Second Replie of Thomas Cartwright: agaynst Master Whitgifts second Answer touching the church discipline* [Heidelberg: M. Schirat, 1575], 59 and 60; cf. *The Works of John Whitgift*, ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: University Press, 1851-53), 1:193.

must confine themselves to moral actions, those which have in them vice or virtue. Second, they should not insist that for every action we do, we must support it with a passage in Scripture, as they have repeatedly argued. Instead, they should admit that it is indeed enough if such actions are framed according to the law of reason, a law whose general axioms, rules, and principles are so frequently restated in Scripture that in theory any moral duty could be deduced from Scripture (as indeed any truth can be in some way deduced from any other by a long enough chain of reasoning). However, no one should feel bound to deduce all his actions from Scripture, as if he would be sinning unless he knew a proof-text for his action and had it in mind when he acted. We beg to differ with this reasoning, and will presently examine it.

(3.) In all areas of knowledge, the most general principles are the most reliable. After all, our certainty about particular matters depends on the credibility of the general principles upon which they are based. Although every single question cannot be answered with an argument that excludes all doubts or scruples, those who claim that the whole world agrees with their teachings, and who pass judgment on those who refuse to agree with them, must be especially sure that their argument is built on more than slender probabilities. To satisfy my own doubts, I was determined to untangle and sift this whole question about church government, following that judicial method which serves best for the discovery of truth.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I have

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<sup>2</sup> This is an allusion to the second of the three modes of classical rhetoric: deliberative, forensic (or judicial), and epideictic. Deliberative rhetoric has to do with courses of action; forensic with accusation or defense; and epideictic with praise or blame (cf. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 3).

discovered that the central pillar of all their arguments for changing the church government of England is this: *Scripture is a rule for human actions such that whatever we do without its clear command is sin.* We must consider the arguments in favor of this, but we need not decide right away whether they are weighty enough. I only ask that you hear me out impartially while I seek clarification on certain difficulties which as yet prevent me from assenting to your bold proposition.

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I say the Word of God contains anything that can fall into any part of man's life. For so Solomon says: 'Then shalt thou understand righteousness and justice, and equity, yea, every good path' (Prov. 2:9).

—Thomas Cartwright, *Replie*, p. 26

(4.) First, when they argue that "Wisdom instructs men in every good way"<sup>3</sup> and have inferred from this that no action is good unless wisdom leads to it by Scripture, do they not see that they thereby exclude all the ways wisdom teaches men except for one, namely Scripture? The bounds of wisdom are large and within them much is contained. Wisdom instructed Adam in Paradise. Wisdom gave the patriarchs knowledge of holy things even before the giving of the law. By the wisdom of the Law of God, David surpassed all other men in understanding, and in the same way Solomon surpassed David, learning from this same wisdom many things beyond the law. There are as many

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Cartwright, *A Replie to an Answere made of M. doctor Whitgifte* [Hemel: Hempstead: J. Shroud, 1573], 26; this is a citation of Prov. 2:9.

ways to do well as there are voluntary actions, so whenever we do something well when we might have done it badly, we demonstrate wisdom. If St. Paul, in saying that all Scripture is profitable for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16), meant to say that Scripture taught all forms of well-doing without exception, limit, or distinction, Scripture would have to teach every conceivable art, since every art teaches how to do something well or badly.<sup>4</sup> Wisdom teaches men every good way, but she does not teach every good way in the same way. Whatever men or angels know is a mere drop of her inexhaustible fountain, and she has scattered her treasures throughout the whole world in various ways. And as her ways are manifold, so are the different ways she teaches. Some things she reveals to us by the sacred books of Scripture and others by the glorious works of nature. She teaches some things by a spiritual influence from above, and others only through experience and practice in the world. We must not so admire one of her ways of working that we disgrace her in another, but let us rather adore all her ways as best fits their place and degree.

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<sup>4</sup> [Hooker's footnote:] "2 Tim. 3:16: 'Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness.' He means all and only those good works, which belong to us as we are men of God, and which to salvation are necessary. Or if we understand by men of God, God's ministers, there is not required in them an universal skill of every good work or way, but an ability to teach whatsoever men are bound to do that they may be saved. And with this kind of knowledge the scripture suffices to furnish them as touching matter."

BOOK III:  
Concerning their Second Assertion, that in  
Scripture there must be of Necessity con-  
tained a Form of Church Polity the Laws  
Whereof may in nowise be Altered



# 1

## DEFINING THE CHURCH

*What the Church is, and in what sense it  
requires laws of government*

(1) ALTHOUGH thus far we have been discussing the outward affairs of the church of Christ rather than its inner nature and being, still, we cannot discuss church polity without discussing the nature of the Church itself, and therefore why and how it requires laws of government.

(2.) This Church of Christ, which we properly call His spiritual body,<sup>1</sup> can only be one body. Nor can that body be perceived by anyone's senses, since some of its members are already with Christ in heaven, and as for the rest, although we can see their bodies on earth, we cannot peer into their souls, and so do not know with certainty whether they belong to Christ's body. Only with our minds can we conceive of this body, containing a huge multitude, a real body and yet invisible, because the nature of its union is utterly beyond our sense experience. Whenever we read in Scripture about the endless love and saving

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<sup>1</sup> [Hooker's footnote:] "That it is His body in some sense, we see in Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 3:6, 5:23, Colossians 1:18, Colossians 1:24."



mercy which God shows to His church, it refers to this true church alone. To this flock has Christ promised, "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:28). Those in this society are marked out and identified by things we cannot perceive; only to God who sees the heart and knows all their imaginings are they clearly manifest. All men knew Nathanael was an Israelite, but our Savior, looking deeper, could further say, with more certainty than any mere man could: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (Jn. 1:47). If we profess before men, as Peter did, that we love the Lord, charitable men will take us at our word, unless they see evidence to the contrary. But who can say that our love is deep and sincere and that it comes "of a pure heart and a good conscience and faith unfeigned" (1 Tim. 1:5), except for the Searcher of all men's hearts, who alone knows those who are His in this way?

(3.) On the other hand, just as the everlasting promises of love, mercy, and blessedness belong to the invisible church, so then the duties of the Church of God described in Scripture belong to a visibly discernible community. This visible body is also one, from the beginning of the world to the end, but in it we can distinguish between two parts: one before, and one after the coming of Christ. It is the latter which we more often refer to, properly speaking, as "the Christian Church." Therefore the apostle affirms that all Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, whether slave or free, have been brought into one company and all make up one body. This visible body is one because all its members claim to serve one Lord, all acknowledge one Faith, and all receive one baptism (Eph. 4:5).

(4.) The visible church of Christ is therefore one through its outward profession of those truths which make up the heart of the Christian faith and which are required of every Christian. “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly,” says Peter, “that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified” (Acts 2:36). Therefore, those who do not call Him Master and Lord are not Christians, and from this it happened first at Antioch and then in the whole world that all in the visible church were called Christians, even by the pagans. This name was precious and glorious to them, but in the estimation of the rest of the world even Christ Himself was odious, and for His sake all who acknowledged Him were as well. This Christ Himself foresaw, and therefore He armed His church so that they might endure it without shame: “all these things will they do unto you for my name’s sake ... yea, the hour cometh, that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God” (Jn. 15:21; 16:2). “But these things have I spoken unto you, that when their hour is come, ye may remember them, how that I told you” (Jn. 16:4).

(5.) However, simply claiming Christ Jesus as Lord is not enough to identify us as Christians; we must also embrace the faith which Christ has proclaimed to the world. To show that the angel of Pergamum continued in Christianity, behold how the Spirit of God speaks, “And thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith” (Rev. 2:13). Of this, Tertullian says, “The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable,”<sup>2</sup> and he shows what this rule is by repeating

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<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1, S. Thewell, trans., in *The Ante-*

the few chief articles of the Christian faith. Before Tertullian, Irenaeus said, "The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith."<sup>3</sup> He too goes over the key points of that belief, which are essentially the same as Tertullian's, and from this he infers that,

The Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. ... The faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it make any addition to it [when making a profession of faith], nor does one who can say but little diminish it.<sup>4</sup>

(6.) Even if we know and profess the Christian faith, thus far we are only beginning to enter, and have not yet fully entered the visible church, until we go through the door of baptism. Thus it is that, after acknowledging the faith, the

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*Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth, Minucius Felix, Commodian, Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1. trans., in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 330.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.2, 331.

Eunuch was baptized by Philip, Paul by Ananias, and a multitude of three thousand souls by Peter, all of whom, having been baptized, were then considered part of the visible Church.

(7.) As far as the virtues of moral righteousness and honesty of life, we do not include them here, because although a Christian must display them, they are not unique or distinctive to Christians alone. It is true that the absence of these virtues will exclude one from salvation, and even more so will lack of heartfelt belief, despair and lack of hope, and emptiness of Christian love and charity. However, we are discussing the visible Church, whose children are marked by “One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism” (Eph. 4:5). The Church recognizes any who have these things as her own children, and only those without them are strangers and aliens. For lack of these marks, Muslims, Jews, and infidels are considered outside the bounds of the Church, but all those who have them must be considered part of the visible Church. For it is apparent that all men are necessarily either Christians or not. If they are Christians by outward profession, then they are part of the visible Church of Christ, even if they be impious idolaters, wicked heretics, men worthy of excommunication, or indeed already cast out for great wickedness. However, we do not deny that they are the minions and limbs of Satan, as long as they continue in their sin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hooker is indeed making as radical a claim as he sounds like he is making here, one that will surely give many readers pause. Not only, he says, are heretics and evildoers who are still mixed in with the body of the faithful to be considered, for the time being, members of the visible

(8.) Is it possible that the very same men should belong both to the synagogue of Satan and to the Church of Jesus Christ? Not if we define the Church as Christ's mystical body, since that body consists of none but true Israelites, true sons of Abraham, true servants and saints of God. Nonetheless, some are still members of the visible body and Church of Christ by outward profession even if, through their inward disposition, or even outward behavior, or even parts of their very profession of faith, they are hateful in the sight of God Himself and in the eyes of the sounder parts of the visible Church. Therefore our Savior compares the kingdom of heaven to a net into which not everything that comes is a fish or looks like one (Matt. 13:47). He compares His Church to a field in which tares grow (Matt. 12:34), openly known as such and seen by all men, and yet those tares will continue until the final consummation of the world. God has always had and always will have a visible Church on the earth. When the people of God worshipped the calf in the wilderness, when they idolized the bronze serpent, when they served the gods of the nations, when they bowed their knees to

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Church; no, even those who have already been identified as such and excommunicated are still to be designated members of the visible Church (even if no longer of a particular church) so long as they continue to profess faith. If this view seems overly extreme and permissive, we should simply recognize that Hooker is so concerned about the hyperactive theology and practice of excommunication that he observes among some of his Puritan opponents that he is bending over backwards in the other direction. He has seen too much zeal to determine who is and who is not *truly* a Christian and a member of the Church that he wants to take this question almost entirely out of the realm of human judgment and leave it in God's hands. Thus, he decides, as long as someone calls themselves a Christian, and outwardly professes the basics of the faith, we should call them a Christian too (though we may still bring ecclesiastical and civil discipline against them).

## DEFINING THE CHURCH

Baal, when they burned incense and offered sacrifices to idols, it is true that God's wrath was fiercely kindled against them and that their prophets justly condemned them as an adulterous seed and a wicked generation of reprobates who had forsaken the living God, so that He forsook them and refused to lovingly embrace them as His faithful children (Jer. 13:11). However, they continued to be the sheep of his visible flock as long as they had the law of God and the holy seal of His covenant, even in the depths of their disobedience and rebellion. Therefore, God not only had a true Church *within* Israel among those who never bowed the knee to Baal, but even those who did bow the knee were also of the visible Church of God. Nor did Elijah complain that the Church had been utterly and completely obliterated, but rather that there were none in the world like him who had a true and upright heart towards God, desiring to serve Him according to His holy will.

(9.) The failure to distinguish between the invisible and visible Church of God, and between a healthy and an unhealthy visible Church, has been a source of many errors. This alone is the mistake of those who think that before the Flood, the family of Noah alone was the visible Church of God. This alone is the reason why the African bishops at the Council of Carthage, knowing that the Church alone can administer baptism and thinking that heretics who were severed from the sound and believing Church were completely severed from the Church in every sense, came to the conclusion that baptism administered by heretics could never be accounted a sacrament. Therefore they grounded the practice of re-baptism on this argument that heretics are not at all any part of the Church

of Christ:

Jesus Christ ... built his Church upon a rock, not upon heresy; and gave the power of baptizing to bishops, not to heretics. Wherefore they who are without the Church, and, standing in opposition to Christ, disperse His sheep and flock, and cannot baptize, being without.<sup>6</sup>

Again,

Are heretics Christians or not? If they are Christians, are they not in the Church of God? If they are not Christians, how come they to make Christians? Or whither will tend the Lord's discourse, when He says: 'He that is not with me is against me, and he who gathereth not with me scattereth?' Whence it appears plain that upon strange children and upon the offspring of the Antichrist, the Holy Spirit cannot descend ... since it is manifest that heretics have not baptism.<sup>7</sup>

None, however, were as earnest in this matter as Cyprian:

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<sup>6</sup> Fortunatus of Tuccaboris, "Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, Son of God the Father and Creator, built his Church upon a rock, not upon heresy; and gave the power of baptizing to bishops and not to heretics. Wherefore are they who are without the Church, and, standing in opposition to Christ, disperse his sheep and flock, cannot baptize, being without." Cited in the *Seventh Council of Carthage*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, *Appendix*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1903), 567.

<sup>7</sup> Secundinus of Carpi, cited in the *Seventh Council of Carthage*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 5:565-6.

I know only one baptism in the Church, and none out of the Church ... where a demoniac exorcises; where one whose mouth and words send forth a cancer puts the sacramental interrogation; the faithless gives faith; the wicked bestows pardon of sins; and Antichrist baptizes in the name of Christ; he who is cursed of God blesses; he who is dead promises life; he who is unpeaceful gives peace; the blasphemer calls upon God; the profane person administers the office of the priesthood; the sacrilegious person establishes the altar. In addition to all these things, there is also this evil, that the priests of the devil dare to celebrate the Eucharist.<sup>8</sup>

All this was true, yet insufficient to prove that heretics are in no sense part of the visible Church of Christ, and therefore that their baptisms are not true baptisms. This opinion was afterwards both condemned by a wiser council<sup>9</sup> and was even retracted later by its leading defenders.

(10.) This very same error makes others today ask us where our Church lurked and in what cave of the earth it slept for hundreds of years before the birth of Martin Luther, as if we thought that Luther started a completely new Church. The Church of Christ remains as it was from the beginning and will continue to the end, though not all parts in it have been equally sincere and sound. In the days of Abijah, it appears that Judah was less corrupt than

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<sup>8</sup> Actually Cyprian is citing Caecilius of Bilta, *Seventh Council of Carthage*, 5:565-566.

<sup>9</sup> Hooker is referring to the Council of Nicaea.