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Scoundrels and Fools: Biblical Hermeneutics in Elizabethan England

> "It is entirely possible for you to disagree with me without being, on that account, either a scoundrel or a fool."
> —William Raspberry

Controversies during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I regarding the shape of Christianity in England form the backdrop for our consideration of Hooker's hermeneutics, but these are most easily understood in light of the three decades (and three reigns) that preceded Elizabeth's accession to the throne toward the end of 1558.[1]

1. Distortion and oversimplification are natural companions of any quick overview of an event or series of events of historical significance, including the English Reformation. At the same time, if we begin with a discussion of religious developments in England during the sixteenth century nuanced enough to avoid significant distortion, we will have a very difficult time ever getting around to the subject of this chapter, the controversy that set the stage for Hooker's *Laws*. More nuanced presentations can be found (among many other places) in Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480–1642* (London: Arnold, 2003), and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547–1603*, second ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001). The current overview has drawn extensively on these works.

In the early 1530s, Henry VIII needed a divorce (technically, an annulment) from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, that would free him to remarry and, he hoped, gain the male heir that he was convinced Catherine could not provide. When for a variety of personal and political reasons the pope refused to grant his request, Henry repudiated papal authority over the English church. While certainly a pivotal moment, this was not exactly the beginning of the Reformation in England. For a decade "evangelicals"[2] in England had been calling for reform of the church to discard many of the ceremonies and rituals that dominated the religious life of the average late-medieval English Christian. Keying on a message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, evangelicals condemned ritual confession to a priest, pilgrimages, veneration of saints, performance of the Mass understood as a reenactment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross that brought divine grace, and a host of other means through which the late-medieval church claimed to mediate divine grace to sinful humanity. From the evangelical perspective, such elements were "either a distraction" from the church's true mission of proclaiming God's word to inculcate faith "or, more likely, a damnable delusion," idolatrously shifting attention away from what *God* has done to *grant* salvation toward what *humans* do to *earn* salvation.[3]

Repudiation of the authority of the pope aligned Christianity in England with the evangelical movement in one important way, but further reform in an evangelical direction was not a certainty. Indeed,

2. This is the term scholars are increasingly using to describe the collection of interests, agendas, and shifting priorities that used to be called "Protestant." The new term has the advantage of being contemporary (the term *Protestant* did not come into vogue in England until the reign of Mary). "Evangelical" also calls attention to what the reformers thought they stood for—the "good news" of salvation through divine grace without reliance on human effort and a dedication to promoting the "word of God" as the sole standard of right belief and practice. See Marshall, *Reformation England*, 27; MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 5.
3. Marshall, *Reformation England*, 28.

some religious conservatives in England were hopeful that royal supremacy over the church could function as a bulwark against further evangelical incursions, hopes that seemed reasonably well-placed during Henry's reign. Despite some movement in an evangelical direction in the early years of the supremacy (including the promulgation of doctrinal statements espousing a "kind of watered-down Lutheranism" in 1536–7[4]), by the 1540s the English church was speaking with a more traditional voice. The church over which Henry presided for the last several years of his reign can be broadly characterized as Catholicism with a king instead of a pope. It was, however, an idiosyncratic kind of Catholicism that clearly reflected Henry's personal prejudices and concerns. The hierarchical institutional structure of the medieval church was retained, as were evangelical bugbears such as the doctrine of transubstantiation, private Masses, and clerical celibacy. At the same time, what evangelicals saw as the highest expression of arrogant human effort to earn salvation, monasticism, was abolished in England, and the great evangelical hope, publication of Scripture in the vernacular, was sanctioned by the king.[5]

During the reign of Henry's son, Edward VI, from 1547 to 1553, the English church moved in a much more decidedly evangelical direction. Despite his own conservative proclivities, Henry had allowed men with evangelical sympathies to serve as tutors to the prince and had also appointed a council that leaned evangelical to rule in the young Edward's name.[6] During Edward's reign potentially idolatrous images were removed from churches, and many traditional ceremonies retained under Henry were abolished. Justification by

4. Ibid., 42.
5. Access to Scripture was eventually restricted based on the belief (with some justification) that too much accessibility was encouraging religious dissention. Nevertheless, the English Bible was not removed from parish churches.
6. He was only nine years old at his accession.

faith through Christ's sacrifice alone was adopted as the official position of the church, with consequent adjustments to the liturgy clarifying that the Eucharist was in no sense the sacrificial ritual it had been in the late-medieval church. The ritual was performed in English rather than Latin, common bread was used rather than traditional wafers, and wooden tables replaced stone altars. Clergy were no longer sacramental priests mediating grace but rather the preaching ministers proclaiming God's word that evangelicals envisioned. Yet ambiguities remained; movement in the evangelical direction was clear but cautious. The hierarchical structure of the church remained unchallenged, and certain elements of the church continued to grate on the consciences of zealous reformers. Clerical celibacy was no longer required, but vestments, distinctive clothing for ministers that some saw as promoting belief in a distinct clerical caste antithetical to evangelical celebration of the spiritual equality of all true Christians, remained despite objections. Communion was received kneeling, a posture that some protested suggested an idolatrous adoration of the bread; language was added clarifying that such adoration was not implied, but kneeling remained.

Edward's death in 1553 brought this evangelical experiment to an abrupt end. Whether or not the leaders of the Edwardian church would have continued further down the path of reform as some evangelicals hoped is moot because they did not have the opportunity. When Mary Tudor (reigned 1553–1558) acceded to the throne in accord with Henry's provision in his will, England's return to the Catholic fold was inevitable. The only child of Catherine of Aragon to survive past infancy, Mary, had never wavered in her devotion to the tradition her father had repudiated to free himself from marriage to her mother. Ironically, Mary used the powers of royal ecclesiastical supremacy (which she detested and thought a fiction) to restore the Mass and traditional Catholic worship until,

in late 1554, a papal representative absolved the realm of schism and restored England to papal jurisdiction. Institutionally and doctrinally the church was returned almost to where it had been in the late 1520s when all of the trouble began. One glaring difference was the fact that Marian monasticism was a faint shadow of its pre-schism self. The laity (Catholic as well as Protestant) who had gained control of monastic lands in the preceding decades were simply unwilling to allow a settlement that involved alienation of their property. Ultimately, if reluctantly, the loss of church lands was accepted.

During the reign significant reforms were initiated to raise the level of pastoral care in the restored Catholic England, but the thing for which "bloody" Mary is primarily remembered in the historical imagination is her regime's persecution of heresy targeting the group that from her reign forward can be labeled "Protestant" without anachronism. The campaign, which resulted in the executions of somewhat fewer than three hundred people, was consistent with the queen's detestation of heresy, but it placed many a local official in the awkward position of killing people for espousing what had very recently been officially endorsed belief. One repercussion of the effort to stamp out Protestantism in England was to have long-term consequences. A thousand or so committed evangelicals fled to the continent, where they took refuge in Protestant towns. Free from the oversight of bishop and crown, these communities had for the first time to decide for themselves how to organize and how to worship. Ominously, there was no consensus on these points. Some congregations adopted polities modeled on continental churches and rewrote the Edwardian order of worship to purge it of elements such as vestments that smacked too much of popery; others, however, insisted that they should "do as they had done in England."[7] At Frankfort in 1554–5 disagreements centered on the form of worship

led to factional infighting and eventually the departure of one faction for Geneva.

As with Edward's efforts to shape an evangelical England, questions regarding the long-term success of Mary's attempt at Catholic restoration can only be answered in the subjunctive. In the indicative Mary died after a reign of less than six years and with her the dream of a Catholic England. In 1559, just a few months after Mary's half-sister, Elizabeth, had acceded to the throne, Parliament passed an act restoring royal supremacy over the church while repudiating papal authority. An accompanying Act of Uniformity called for a restoration of worship in English churches in accordance with the forms employed late in Edward's reign with a few minor alterations.[8] England was once again Protestant, but it was a sort of Protestantism notably different from the thoroughgoing purging of popish forms and structures that many English Protestants envisioned. Distinctive clerical vestments, kneeling at communion, and a host of other traditional holdovers remained. While many English Protestants, including many of the church's new leaders, saw the late-Edwardian church as a starting point from which to launch further reform, Elizabeth saw it as a final destination, as supplying the foundational principles upon which her church was to be erected.

Concern over the acceptability of traditional vestments had given rise to disputes in the Edwardian church and among English exiles at Frankfort, and some continued to protest their use in the Elizabethan church. For the queen the issue was not primarily the theological implications individuals might dream the vestments had but rather the importance of an orderly church and obedient subjects. In 1565 she ordered her archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, to crack

7. Quoted in Marshall, *Reformation England*, 108.
8. For overviews of the alterations, see Timothy Rosendale, *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100–101, 127–28.

down on priests who were not using the prescribed vestments, leading to the suspension of some three dozen "Puritan" ministers for noncompliance. Diarmaid MacCulloch calls attention to the importance of this incident: "The affair left a legacy of bitterness; some bishops were shocked at the aggressive obstinacy of their opponents and came to place a new value on discipline, while a few convinced Protestant laypeople began to lose faith in the established Church."[9]

Puritan unease with vestments did not go away, but soon it came to be overshadowed by calls for more thoroughgoing reform of the English church. While Elizabeth's church retained the traditional hierarchical episcopal structure it had inherited from the Middle Ages, some of her leading Protestant subjects had experienced more democratic forms of church government while in exile. They had seen relatively autonomous congregations that elected their own ministers along with elders for discipline and deacons to care for the poor, with oversight provided by regional presbyteries and synods. The model "presbyterian" (as it came to be called) polity and the leader of what was emerging as a self-consciously "Reformed" alternative to Catholicism and Lutheranism was Geneva under the leadership of John Calvin and his successors. In spring of 1570 a professor of divinity at Cambridge University, Thomas Cartwright, delivered a series of lectures in which he argued that presbyterianism was more than a good idea. Rather, he argued, the presbyterian polity was mandated by Scripture, and as a consequence he called for the abolition of bishops and the establishment of a presbyterian polity in England. The task of disciplining Cartwright's insubordination fell to John Whitgift, newly elected vice chancellor at Cambridge. By

9. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 31.