

Hooker's Understanding of the Authority of Scripture As a Resource for Anglicans Today

In 1559, Elizabeth I and Parliament set a course for the Church of England that was intended to avoid the errors of Puritanism on the one hand, and Roman Catholicism on the other. Elizabeth envisioned a church “whose practices were uniform, thus uniting the kingdom in common worship, but in which there would also be great latitude for varying opinions. Within that church, there would be no place for either Roman Catholicism or extreme Protestantism. But any moderate form of Protestantism would be acceptable, as long as it participated in the common worship of the Church of England.”¹

Richard Hooker's *On the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, published in 1594, was the first work to articulate in a systematic way, the theological and philosophical basis for the Church in the wake of the Elizabethan Settlement. Hooker sought to refute the Puritan view that Scripture is the only test of what is correct and to defend the Church's right to make its own laws so long as they were not contrary to Scripture.² In the process he set forth what was to become the classical Anglican view of the authority of Scripture. In view of the continuing controversy over the authority of Scripture in the Episcopal Church in the United States as well as elsewhere in the Anglican Communion and the wider Christian fellowship, it seems to be a particularly appropriate time to revisit Hooker's work. In this essay, I will briefly sketch Hooker's understanding of the authority of Scripture, in the hope of shedding light on the current debates.

Hooker, like other Reformers, believed in the ultimate authority of Scripture. He complained that “The schooles of Rome teach scripture to be so insufficient, as if, except traditions were added, it did not containe all revealed and supernaturall truth, which absolutely is

¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, II, p. 79.

² J.R.H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA 3rd ed. 1980), p. 215.

necessarie for the children of men in this life to know that they may in the next be saved.”³ In other words, for Hooker, Scripture contains all truth necessary for salvation. This was the view that was incorporated into Article Six of the Church of England, established by Convocation in 1563: “Holy Scripture, containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that what is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith.”⁴ The Articles of Religion established by the Episcopal Church in the United States in 1801 adopted the same wording.⁵

Hooker’s belief in the ultimate authority of Scripture was based on a doctrine of verbal inspiration. Like other Reformers in that era prior to biblical criticism, Hooker believed that the prophets “neither spake, nor wrote any worde of their owne, but uttered sillable by sillable as the spirit put it into their mouths, no otherwise than the Harp or the Lute doth give a sound according to the discretion of his hands that holdeth it and striketh it with skill.”⁶

However, Hooker parted company with the Puritans in his understanding of the scope and purpose of Scripture. Scripture, according to Hooker, was given for our salvation—not to replace the role of reason and common sense in the affairs of daily living. The Puritans believed that Scripture provided certain answers to all questions of life, but Hooker disagreed, for practical, pastoral and theological reasons.

On a practical level, it is obvious that Scripture contains many difficult and even conflicting passages. This leads to a pastoral problem for “weake consciences.” Scripture “would begin to tease, perplex, ensnare and fill them with ‘infinite . . . scrupulosities, doubts

³ *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1977), I, 2.8.7, p. 191.

⁴ Articles of the Church of England, quoted in Nigel Atkinson, *Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason* (Paternoster Press, U.K. 1977), p.93.

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 868.

⁶ Hooker’s First Sermon Upon Part of St. Jude, quoted in Atkinson, p. 96.

insoulable, and extreme despaires.”⁷ Such torment is contrary to the purpose of Scripture, which was given for our salvation and is intended to provide “resolute assurance and certaintie in that it teacheth.”⁸ Presumably, only mature Christians with a deep knowledge of Scripture would have the privilege of acting in obedience to God’s commands. People who are unable to read or interpret Scripture are condemned to sin.

On a theological level, the Puritans saw Scripture as superseding natural reason, which they believed to be hopelessly corrupted by the fall. Hooker, on the other hand, believed that natural reason, though limited, was a gift of God. Reason is incapable of providing fallen humanity with saving knowledge; only Scripture can provide that knowledge. Nevertheless, reason enables us to make choices concerning our daily lives. To expect Scripture to furnish answers to every question of human existence is to demand information from the biblical text that it was not designed to deliver.

Hooker arrived at his conclusion that Scripture was designed to give us saving knowledge on the basis of his reading of Scripture. “He interpreted the Bible according to its ‘main drift,’ of the Old Testament that the ‘holy Scriptures are able to make thee wise unto salvation,’ of the New, ‘that ye might believe that Jesus is Christ the Son of God, and that in believing ye might have life through his name.’”⁹ The central message of the Bible is salvation through Christ. The Old Testament looks forward to Christ and the New Testament bears witness to Christ. Hooker’s soteriological and Christological hermeneutic enabled him to differentiate between, for example, the Levitical penal code and the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰ Part of Hooker’s frustration with the

⁷ Atkinson, p.101 (quoting Hooker, *Lawes*, I, 2.8.6, p.190).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Robert K. Faulkner, *Richard Hooker and the Politics of a Christian England* (University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1981), pp.120-1 (quoting Hooker, *Lawes*, I, 14.4.)

¹⁰ This example is from Atkinson, p. 104.

Puritans was due to their practice of quoting from obscure passages in the Old Testament as if they were legally binding on all churches.¹¹

Hooker's method of deriving his hermeneutic from the "main drift" of the text is curiously contemporary. The modernist project was to determine "what really happened" using scientific methods of biblical criticism. The post modernist understanding is that "what really happened" is inaccessible. The text itself has no independent meaning, but carries only the meaning that readers bring to it. What people generally bring to it, in Michel Foucault's term, is their "will to power." Thus, the postmodern interpreter's task is to unmask the agenda of other interpreters and be honest about his or her own agenda.

In response to the subjectivism and nihilism of postmodern thought, various writers have proposed a hermeneutical circle, meaning that the text has independent meaning which is not, however, fully specified until the believing community reads it and attempts to make sense of it in their own context.¹² This view implies that the meaning of the text can change over time, but only within certain bounds, set by the text itself. As in Hooker's thought, faithful interpretation involves listening for the text's central message which then guides the way in which the text is read and lived out by the believing community. Like many contemporary thinkers, Hooker stressed the communal aspect of interpretation. As John Booty writes: "H[ooker] viewed knowing in terms not only of individual knowers but of the community as the locus of meaning, knowledge, experience, and assent. The Christian knower is "in Christ," and therefore is in the fellowship and communion of Christ, the visible church where justification and sanctification occur concretely in relation to the communal sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. In the church Christians live and pursue meaning through the interpretation of reality as we

¹¹ Atkinson, p. 104.

¹² For example, Richard Bauckham, *Scripture and Authority Today* (Grove Books Limited, Cambridge, UK 1999).

experience it and which by faith we know to be God's creation, through which God's will is made known in various ways, including preeminently scripture."¹³

Hooker's Christological and soteriological hermeneutic also enabled him to argue that "The foundation of our faith" is the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Savior.¹⁴ "Only 'direct denial' constitutes apostasy; mere denial 'by consequent,' by failure to hold a necessary implication, does not make a non-Christian. 'Whole Christian churches' have so erred and are yet Christian."¹⁵ Belief in Christ as savior is essential; all else is secondary. By implication, heresy does not preclude salvation. This was in fact Hooker's position: "We must acknowledge even heretics themselves to be, though a maimed part, yet a part of the visible Church."¹⁶ To the fury of other reformers, Hooker allowed that followers of Rome might be saved.

Hooker's views on the authority of Scripture have continuing relevance to the issues confronting the church today. His rejection of biblical literalism enables his view to survive the modernist critique. His understanding that Scripture is given to us for our salvation enables him to remain open to reason and to knowledge aimed at other ends. His emphasis on the central message of Scripture—salvation through Jesus Christ-- as his guide to interpretation is faithful to Scripture and offers a means both of resolving certain disputes over interpretation and putting them in their proper context. Even when disputes over the meaning of Scripture cannot be resolved, they do not undermine salvation, which for Hooker required only the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Savior. Even heretics can be saved because salvation is through God's grace rather than the believer's ability to correctly interpret Scripture.

¹³ John Booty, *Reflections on the Theology of Hooker* (The University of the South Press, Sewanee, TN 1998) p. 93.

¹⁴ Hooker, Sermon II, 23, in *Works III*, p. 513.

¹⁵ Faulkner, p. 121 (quoting Hooker, Sermon II, 25, in *Works III*, p. 515).

¹⁶ Hooker, *Laws*, III.i.11; V.lxviii.6.

Background Notes

Reflections on the Theology of Richard Hooker, John Booty (The University of the South Press, Sewanee, Tennessee 1998).

“He (Hooker) viewed knowing in terms not only of individual knowers but of the community as the locus of meaning, knowledge, experience, and assent. The Christian knower is “in Christ,” and therefore is in the fellowship and communion of Christ, the visible church where justification and sanctification occur concretely in relation to the communal sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion (V.56.11-13). In the church Christians live and pursue meaning through the interpretation of reality as we experience it and which by faith we know to be God’s creation, through which God’s will is made known in various ways, including preeminently scripture.” (p.93).

Richard Hooker: The Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason, Nigel Atkinson (Paternoster Press, UK 1997)

Like other Reformers, Hooker believed in the ultimate authority of Scripture. Hooker complained that “ ‘The schooles of Rome teach scripture to be so insufficient, as if, except traditions were added, it did not containe all revealed and supernaturall truth, which absolutely is necessarie for the children of men in this life to know that they may in the next be saved.’ ” (p.93) (Quoting Hooker, *Lawes*, 2.8.7,1 p.191)

“For Hooker, as for all Reformers, ‘The testimonies of God are true, the testimonies of God are perfect, the testimonies of God are all sufficient unto that end for which they were geven. Therefore accordingly we do receive them, we do not thinke that in them God hath omitted any thing needful unto his purpose, and left his intent to be accomplished by our divisinges. What the Scripture purposeth the same in al pointes it doth performe.’ ” (p. 94) (quoting Hooker, *Lawes*, 2.8.5, 1, p.189)

This is essentially the view that was expressed in Article Six of the Church of England, established by Convocation in 1563 and doctrinally binding on all clergy: Holy Scripture, containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that what is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith.”

Hooker’s confidence in Scripture as the strongest proof of all is based on a thoroughgoing doctrine of verbal inspiration. “ ‘God himselfe was their instructor’ and so they became ‘acquainted even with the secret and hidden counsels of God’. (Hooker, ‘The First Sermon Upon Part of St Jude’ in Folger Edition Works of Hooker, 5, p.15.

“God gave his prophets scrolls to eat, Hooker explains, ‘...not because God fed them with inke, and paper, but to teach us, that so oft as he employed them in this heavenly worke, they neither spake, nor wrote any worde of their owne, but uttered sillable by sillable as the spirit put it into their mouths, no otherwise than the Harp or theLute doth give a sound according to the discretion

of his hands that holdeth it and striketh it with skill.” (First Sermon Upon Part of St. Jude, p. 16) (p.96)

Hooker agrees with the Reformed doctrine of the verbal inspiration and hence the inerrancy of Scripture. Criticized Rome for elevating tradition to the same level as Scripture and Puritans for elevating preaching to the same level as Scripture.

But Hooker parted company with the Puritans. He believed Scripture ‘is perfect and wanteth nothing requisite unto that purpose for which God delievered the same’. (*Lawes*, 2.8.5.1 p.190). (p.99). But his understanding of the purpose for which God gave Scripture was different than the Puritans. Scripture was given for our salvation—not to replace the role of reason and common sense in the daily affairs of our lives. Puritans viewed Scripture as offering sure and certain direction for daily living, but in Hooker’s view, this would eliminate the need for natural reason, a gift that we clearly have.

“ ‘Admit this and marke, I beseech you, what would follow. God in delivering scripture to his Church should cleane have abrogated amongst them the law of nature; which is an infallible knowledge imprinted in the mindes of all the children of men, whereby both generall principles for directing of humaine actions are comprehended, and conclusions derived from them, upon which conclusions groweth in particularitie the choise of good and evill in the daylie affaires of this life.’” Hooker, *Lawes*, 2.8.5, 1, p.190 (p.100)

Against the doctrine that Scripture is intended to offer answers to all questions of life, Hooker argues pastorally that simple believers would be tormented by Scripture, which would tease, perplex, ensnare and fill them with infinite scrupulosities, doubts insoulable, and extreme despaires. But Scripture is intended to the contrary to offer resolute assurance and certainty in what it teaches. If only actions done in obedience to Scripture are exempt from sin, all instinctual actions would be sinful and only mature Christians capable of interpreting Scripture would have the privilege of performing actions acceptable to God. P.101

But also gives a theological reason for his view. “In Hooker’s view Scripture’s main purpose was soteriological; Scripture was given in order to provide a fallen humanity with the saving knowledge so necessary and yet, at the same time, so completely out of reach.” (p.101). Not to obliterate the light of nature which should direct us in daily life. Seeking all answers to every question from Scripture demands from the biblical text information it was not designed to deliver.

Puritans “misdistinguish” between the way of grace and the way of nature. The way of grace is above the way of nature for Hooker but does not supercede it.

“In Hooker’s view it was inappropriate to divorce ‘the absolute perfection of Scripture’ from the relation ‘unto that end whereto it tendeth.’” (quoting *Lawes*, 2.8.5, 1, p.189) (p.102.)

The purpose of Scripture is to save people through Christ—Hooker had a Christological hermeneutic, which is not imposed on Scripture but is provided by Scripture itself.

This hermeneutic quintessentially distinguished him from Puritans—able to see the whole sweep of Scripture and understand its scope and emphasis. Can avoid reading Scripture in a way that places Levitical penal code and Sermon on the Mount on equal footing. “In a sense the whole debate between Hooker and the Puritans can be reduced to a question of hermeneutics.” (p.104). “Hooker’s frustration with Puritan exegesis becomes evident when he tackles the Disciplinarians in their ‘pleade against the politie of the Church of England’. In pleading against this polity the Puritans commonly referred to the ‘law of God, The worde of the Lorde’, but when pressed which ‘law’ and which ‘worde’, Hooker points out, ‘ their common ordinarie practise is, to quote by-speeches in some historicall narration or other, and to urge them as if they were written in moste exact form of lawe’. (*Lawes*, 3.5.1, 1,p.215). In Hooker’s estimation to use some ‘by-speeche’, in an obscure ‘historicall narration’ deeply embedded somewhere in the Old Testament, as if this was legally binding on all Churches was simply absurd. When this is done, ‘bare and unbuilded conclusions’ are placed in the minds of people who either then doubt their faith because they cannot believe that the Scriptures teach what they are said to teach or doubt Scripture altogether. In this way, Hooker warns, ‘we add to the lawes of God’ and “the sentence of God is heavy against them that wittingly shall presume thus to use the scripture’. (*Ibid.*) On the contrary, obscure parts of the Old Testament are to be subordinated to the overarching Christological essence of Scripture; the Christological core is not to be abandoned in favour some obscure part of the Old Testament that might seem to favour Genevan Church polity. It can now be seen why Hooker was so horrified at Puritan attempts to impose Old Testament civil legislation upon society. If this course was pursued, it could only be successfully be accomplished if the central message of Scripture in its entirety was wholly eradicated.” (p.104)

According to Hooker, “[r]eason was powerless, in the spiritual realm, to discover ‘what we should doe that we may attain life everlasting.’ But if reason was weak in this area that did not mean that it was powerless in the realm that pertained to man’ civilly associate’. In this Hooker was following a classical Reformed line unlike the Puritans who argued that because of the fall reason was powerless in every realm and thus Scripture had to direct explicitly in the minutiae of life.” (p.130)

