

Early Reformed Problems of Church Order and Practice

Essays on Puritans and Puritanism, by Leon Howard (Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1986) xii, 221 pages, index.

This posthumous collection of writings touches of key failures of English, Scots and American Christianity to come to terms with its own order, its source of authority and its application to society. The book has three parts. Part One is his unfinished historical introduction to Puritanism; Part Two explores the different directions Puritanism took in England and America (Congregationalism was radical in England but in America developed as a profoundly conservative force); the third section explores Ramist logic (really rhetoric not logic) in Shakespeare's speeches, in Milton, and in Puritan exegesis.

Howard's analysis

Howard recounts the development of the Puritanism in light of the key events separating the English from the continental Reformers and the Puritans from the Establishment reformers. From a wide reading of early Puritan works he achieves a largely fair, balanced and sympathetic treatment, with only an occasional lapse into a supercilious tone. He chooses decisive and revealing moments, avoiding a mere narration of passing events, to bring out the essential goals of the factions and actors.

The English lacked a common model for church reform. Before the reign of Bloody Mary, German and Dutch congregations in London under the superintendency of John à Lasco were the first Presbyterians in England, and they were imitated by some of the underground congregations during Mary's reign. Other influences came from the Marian exiles. One fourth of them were in Geneva, and learned its four office model of pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, and its pastors' association.

The most telling incident Howard considers to be the church struggle of the exile congregation in Frankfurt. "For there, in miniature and in the short space of two weeks, they had uncovered the issues which were eventually to divide English protestantism into two warring camps, Anglican and Puritan, and later destroy the Puritan movement by splitting it into Presbyterian and Independent factions." (p. 32)

The congregation was founded by French exiles, first in England, then in Germany to escape Mary's persecution. They agreed to share their church with later arriving English refugees. The Frankfurt authorities required that the English accept the French Confession, order of service, and church order. One of the ministers was John Knox. Then, new exiles led by Richard Cox arrived, demanding "the face of an English church" with congregational liturgical participation. Knox, for once, was accommodating, and allowed the new group to become members, whereupon they voted him out of office and took over. When the Puritan side appealed to the city authorities the Anglicans applied pressure by accusing Knox of treason to the Emperor. Knox was ordered out of town and the Anglicans had the church.

The affair at Frankfurt is of unusual interest because it brings into view the three conceptions of a church organization which were to trouble England for a century. When Cox and his followers arrived, the organization consisted of a voluntary gathering of the Elect, each convinced of his justification and capable of enduring a rigorous examination on the purity of his doctrine and morals. If it had been kept so, as a majority of the congregation

apparently wished, some of the newcomers would not have been admitted because of an unwillingness to sign the discipline or pass the doctrinal test. But Knox wanted a more comprehensive church which would be territorial in the sense that it would include the whole community of believers although it would be international inasmuch as he believed that Christ's true church would have the same face in every territory. And he was willing—perhaps influenced, at Frankfurt, by a combination of generosity and overconfidence—to modify the severity of its membership requirements in order to achieve it. The newcomers wanted a national church which would preserve its national peculiarities in a distinctive ceremony of worship. They were to have their way in England but struggle long with people of other views. John Knox was to have his way in Scotland, completely and rather soon. But two generations were to pass before the founders' way became the establishment of Massachusetts. (pp. 34-35)

At times Howard loses sympathy for his subject. Like the Anglicans he studies he deplores the theonomy of Thomas Cartwright, for “in his dependence upon the Scriptures he turned away from the course of the Reformation by placing too much emphasis upon the ruthless legalism of the Old Testament”. (p. 47) Howard reports Cartwright's Ramist exposition of the commandment against adultery, “And children begotten in horrible incest were to be burnt or slaine in their mothers wombe”, but the ruthless legalism, so oddly at one with modern feminism, is that of Cartwright, not the Old Testament.¹

Puritanism was heavily colored by its reliance on the analysis, misleadingly called logic, of the French Protestant martyr Peter Ramus. For example, William Perkins, in *The Art of Prophecy* taught that Scripture should be interpreted “by the helpe of the nine arguments, that is, of the causes, effects, subjects, adjuncts, dissentanies, comparatives, names, distribution, and definition.”² The result was a Puritan habit of interrogating Scripture according to the demands of rhetorical analysis, instead of opening themselves to the leading of the text. Here is Cartwright's Ramist exegesis of the seventh commandment.

[A]dultery could be either “inward, of the heart”, or “outward” with regard to the body, or in “itself”. Among the things belonging to the body were external apparel (ranging from that appropriate to the opposite sex to that which was merely “new-fangled”) and internally consumed meat and drink which might be sinful in quality (“too much daintiness”, etc.) or quantity. The body itself could be abused either in its parts or adjuncts (tongue, eyes, ears, etc., by filthy talk or wanton glances and listening) or as a whole, either “by himself” (“as in idleness” as well as sexually) and “with others”. Abuse with others was subdivided to consist of unlawful “conjunction”, which might be “natural” (as in either fornication or adultery) or “unnatural” with one's “own kind” or with “other kind”, or (as the opposite of “conjunction”) in unlawful “separation” which might exist when husband and wife were together but “when due benevolence is not yielded” or when they were separated by prolonged travels, imprisonment, “mislike”, or illegal separation imposed by magistrates. To a Puritan who followed Cartwright's system the indulgence in a choice bit of meat, a new bonnet in the latest style, or the relaxation of a lazy day (or even the thought of such things “of the heart”) was against the Word.... That this particular Word should be the commandment against adultery...is a tribute to the far-reaching powers of extension made possible by the subtleties of Ramist logic. (pp. 80-81)

1 Howard, *Essays on Puritans and Puritanism*, p. 143. He cites *A Treatise on Christian Divinity* (London, 1616), pp. 146-147.

2 Published in Latin in 1592, and in English by Thomas Tuke in 1606. Howard, p. 79.

Sumptuary laws, therefore, fall under the government's obligation to suppress adultery. There is no limit to what can be proved with this type of exegesis, and it may be a factor in the delay until the nineteenth century of the development of the discipline of biblical theology.

Finally, Howard tries to understand the emergence of New England's distinctive Middle Way of Independency and its divergence from English Puritanism. This New England Way

assumed the existence of a weak state which could be the instrument of a restricted church.... England, throughout the reign of the Tudors, had been a strong state in which the church was a national institution and an instrument of political policy. The New England Way assumed that orthodoxy could be maintained by persuasion and the removal of stubborn dissenters from the body politic. The body politic of England was made up of religious dissenters who had passed beyond the power of persuasion and were already engaged in a mortal struggle for power. The New England Way was based upon a belief in the constitutional authority of the written word, as dictated by the Holy Ghost and interpreted by skilled divines. England believed in the authority of principle, precedent, and political power. (p. 109)

To understand the New England Way one must grasp two key elements: the foundation of society on the Word of God, and the distinctive New England doctrine of conscience. It is expressed in John Cotton's frequent phrase "conscience rightly informed". It is "informed", Howard tells us, "by the Word of God rightly interpreted by the best gifts granted to a community of Saints rather than by the meteoric flash of an individual's own vagrant thoughts." (pp. 107-108) The elders were to bring the errant conscience under conviction and the person who then continued to rebel did so against his own conscience which had been supplied with better understanding.

The New England effort to achieve discipline...had produced what we might now call a theory of judicial review of the individual conscience under the written authority of the Scriptures. This was the essential—but, as a theory of government, still undefined—characteristic of the New England Way between the legislative authority of assemblies which was characteristic of Presbyterianism and the lack of all authority characteristic of sectarian Independency. And it was the famed Middle Way which the New Englanders and their English sympathizers tried to urge upon an uncomprehending mother country throughout the entire period of the Long Parliament and the Commonwealth. (pp. 108-109)

The church stood as a quasi-judicial body, independent of the state because in New England society was to be constructed on the Word of God, which the Church interpreted. To do so New England had the advantage from its founding of the world's most educated population measured by the proportion of university graduates.

[T]he absolute supremacy of biblical law was the prevailing belief among the American Puritans who based their first attempts at the codification of civil law upon the judicials of Moses, and, as we shall see later, it provided the basis for their sincere denial of any affiliation with the independent sects of England and for their consistent advocacy of the New England Way as a "middle way" in church government between that of Presbyterianism and Independency. (p. 98)

It was to this characteristic that Roger Williams objected immediately upon his arrival in New England. The magistrates enforced the first table of the law, which Williams saw as religious, not moral. His concept of freedom of conscience required their disconnection.

The three problem areas the Howard has touched on are, church government, the establishment of Christianity and the application of Scripture.

Church government

The Reformers had inherited a certain church traditions from the ancient and medieval churches. They were determined to revise everything in view of the teaching of Scripture. Nevertheless, what they were revising was a fact of their times and was bound to influence their thinking. In Scripture certain offices and certain functions or gifts were spoken of, but which were which? There were bishops, elders, pastors, evangelists, etc. The received order was this: there were the local clergy, and above them were a smaller number of bishops responsible for larger regions. Then there were the super-bishops: the patriarchs in the ancient church and also remaining in the east, and in the west the pope. Along side of these were various orders, either monastic or itinerant.

Since ancient times the catholicity of church was based on the bishops. When the bishops got together in a church-wide council and approved creeds, this was an authoritative decision making a binding theological commitment for the whole church. The Reformers did not want to brake with this catholicity and they wanted to identify themselves as orthodox in terms of the ecumenical creeds. If certain offices never mentioned in Scripture were removed, that is the patriarchs including the pope and the regional bishops, there remained the local clergy, and the Reformers could say that these are the bishops in Biblical terms, and these bishops could get assemble in conventions to express the catholicity of the church.

But the Middle Ages also had another, bottom up, idea of government, which was partly expressed in the Conciliar Movement and also in the conflicts throughout the centuries for lay influence in church government and the attempts of central church authorities to suppress it. The Reformers were able to build this into the election of elders by the congregation, who in some ways were the peers of the clergy and in some ways not. This fit the Bible better than the inherited ecclesiastical system, and also was very useful. But left problems to solve about how far the duties of lay elders and clergy extended.

As this was to a degree an arbitrary construction it is not surprising that there was resistance. In England there was also a desire by many, especially by those who had power to determine matters, to keep the regional bishops in a hierarchical order. Some Puritans, especially in America, made a more complete revision of church offices, with two offices in the place of the local church bishop, namely the pastor and teacher, who divided the duties.

In light of Scripture all of these church systems are questionable, but people at that time tended to see as church offices what in some cases in the Bible are spiritual gifts and not attached one to one to each congregation. Getting these things wrong must have impacted the effectiveness of Christian ministry.

The establishment of Christianity

In England, in the Anglican system, there was more of a focus on establishing the institutional church, with its ecclesiological functionaries and ceremonies, not so much the Christian religion which would have meant that the people generally should change the way they lived and be accountable for their public sins.

In New England there was more of an attempt to establish Christianity with local magistrates taking responsibility for the enforcing the Christian moral order, and also certain matters like marriage moving out of the ecclesiastical area to the civil. As a practical effect, for example, in New England vital records such as births, deaths and marriages were recorded by the town governments from early on, whereas in New York such records were left to the churches until well into the nineteenth century. The Puritans understood this to be a more Biblical allotment of responsibilities as well as a more through going effort to implement Christianity in society.

This was not an attempt to implement a pure, anabaptist type Church or a society of the elect. Following the overthrow on the king in England, some Puritan towns in England shipped their ne'er-do-wells to New England where they would have to shape up or starve. Everyone knew there were unwilling participants in the New England establishment.

In Scotland, of course, there was John Knox and the national covenant idea, which some Presbyterians today still adhere to, but most do not.

Consequently in the Reformed tradition there are multiple conflicting theories about the establishment of Christianity and no sign of any movement toward consensus unless it is the widely shared notion that there should be no establishment of Christianity, thus giving up a big part of the Reformed religious outlook.

Teaching in the churches

The third problem area was that of teaching the Bible through the methods of rhetoric, instead of expository preaching. How widespread this was, how long the practice lasted and how far it eclipsed the practice of teaching the people how to read and understand their Bibles is an open and very important question.

A clue to the answer can be found in the *Systematic Theology* of John Brown of Haddington, as it is now called. He called it *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion*. Brown was an influential minister and also in charge of the theological education of ministry students for his denomination in Scotland. His book uses the method of breaking everything down in points and subpoints and adding a list of proof text references. On major theological topics there is also an explanation or elaboration. This sometimes takes the form of moralism, probably intended as a guide for sermons.

We find this tendency in its more extreme form when he gets to the law of God, which is a highly organized catalogue of every sort of sin, with proof texts. He does not get into the body of the law itself to explain it. This sort of treatment had a predictable effect and this whole locus of theology has dropped out of systematic theologies.

What was the effect of this sort of teaching on the people? The conclusion suggested by a review of these three areas is that the institutional churches experienced an early failure of the Reformation to think Biblically about organization and methods. The impact was on the effectiveness of the training and use of the congregation members creating Christian societies. Perhaps this more than anything else accounts for the progress of the Enlightenment and subsequent movements in displacing Christian thinking and priorities.