

Holy Scripture and the Law of God in Contemporary Anglicanism in the light of Richard Hooker's "Lawes"

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There can be very few who would resist the view that Richard Hooker is even more formative of Anglican Theology and the Anglican theological method than was Thomas Cranmer of Anglican liturgy. Furthermore, the 16th century debate within which Hooker made his most significant contribution was one with striking similarities to the debate underlying the troubled state of the Anglican Communion today.

Hooker was appointed Master of the Temple in 1585, supplanting his cousin by marriage Walter Travers, who had exercised a very influential "readership" or "lectureship" there, obtained for him by his patron Lord Burghley in 1581. Indeed, Burghley was urging the Queen to appoint Travers to the vacant position of Master, most of the role and prerogatives of which Travers had assumed during the illness of the then incumbent, Richard Alvey.

Travers, however was a radical Calvinist and had earlier quit a brilliant career at Trinity College, Cambridge for Geneva and subsequently Antwerp. Archbishop Whitgift, in advising the queen on an appointment to the Temple, and being fully aware of the extent to which Presbyterianism threatened not only the queen's episcopal church polity but also, ultimately, her authority as ruler of church and state, proposed first Dr Nicholas Bond but then, the queen judging Bond's health to be unequal to the task, Richard Hooker.

Whitgift's case against Travers was not based primarily upon Travers advocacy of a Presbyterian polity, not least because of the power wielded by influential figures of a radical turn of mind like Burghley at the centre of political life. However, a non-ideological impediment existed: Travers could not be Master of the Temple, or indeed incumbent of any other cure in the realm, because he had never been properly ordained. Part of the reason he quit Cambridge in 1571 had been that he denied the efficacy of episcopal ordination. He was later ordained in Presbyterian fashion in Antwerp, but this required only selection by elders and approval by the congregation. In a private letter to the queen, Whitgift expounded all the reasons why the appointment of Travers would be a disaster for the Church and the realm, whilst in a letter to Burghley, the queen's chief minister, he explained why, with his defective ordination and his resistance to episcopal ordination, Travers could not be appointed to this or any other incumbency in the Church of England. In such highly charged circumstances Hooker entered upon his ministry as Master of the Temple. During that incumbency he would debate Travers publicly and with great vigour, laying the foundations for the theological understanding and method that has underpinned Anglicanism ever since.

Largely because of the centrality of sacramental theology to the debates of the last two centuries in Anglicanism, attention has been almost exclusively focussed upon Book V of "The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity" to the neglect of the Preface and the other seven books. This is unfortunate and a matter that requires swiftly to be remedied, especially in respect of the manner in which Hooker dealt with Holy Scripture, how it is to be esteemed and how it may be interpreted: an issue central to our contemporary concerns. In particular, the crucial distinctions that Hooker makes between the whole body of scripture and what may be identified as the Law of God needs swiftly to be recovered. It seems, on the face of it, that such essential distinctions, which are central to the theological understanding of all things Anglican, have been allowed to disappear from view in the current ferment. Those distinctions were crucial in securing the Anglican position during the Presbyterian attacks of the 16th and 17th centuries specifically because those attacks were couched in terms of the biblical inappropriateness of the basis of Anglican polity. The arguments and understandings

developed by Hooker in his day remain essential now to exploration of the scriptural dimensions of the current disputes amongst Anglicans.

It is no exaggeration to say that the debate within Anglicanism on the place of homosexuality in human society and the relationship of homosexual acts to the Law of God has become deeply visceral and that the quality of debate has suffered as a result. Furthermore, this specific issue has become the battleground upon which the authority and the interpretation of scripture within the Anglican tradition is being re-fought. Regrettably, most of the discussion appears to be taking place in ignorance of the earlier controversy and its outcome. However, the nature and the urgency of these matters are not dissimilar to those of the 16th and 17th century debate which gave rise to Richard Hooker's magisterial treatise.

Sadly, the most vocal protagonists on both sides of the current debate, in so far as they speak from within the Commonwealth of Anglicanism, have paid scant heed to the Anglican principles established by Hooker. Whether this is by accident or design is not for this writer to judge. Certain it is that everyone engaged in this debate would do well to recall Hooker's overarching admonition, issued in the Preface to his "Lawes", namely that

There will come a time when three words uttered with charity and meekness shall receive a far more blessed reward than three thousand volumes written with disdainful sharpness of wit

[Note: that the spellings of Hooker's text have been modernized but the grammar and sentence construction remains unaltered. All quotations may be found in the Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker]

As I have indicated, the controversy with which Richard Hooker was engaged focussed on issues to do with the form and governance of the Church and the sources of authority for that form and governance. Those who advocated a Presbyterian system claimed, in essence, that such a system was the only one consonant with scripture and church government in primitive Christianity. They also pleaded that the only authority that might be referred to or relied upon was Holy Scripture.

Hooker's defence of the polity of the Church of England, as it had emerged under Elizabeth I, was that it could be entirely reconciled with the evidence of scripture as we have it, taking account of legitimate developments of tradition and the appropriate application of human reason. It is this three-fold cord of Scripture, Tradition and Reason that provide the essential components of the Anglican method. It is two of these three strands that are particularly applicable to the context and the issues of the current debate, namely Scripture and Reason.

It is necessary first to appreciate the reverence with which Hooker approaches Holy Scripture and the weight he attaches to it. Let the following two passages from Book II Chapter 7 stand as testimony:

Scripture with Christian men being received as the Word of God, that for which we have probable, yea, that which we have necessary reason for, yea, that which we see with our eyes is not thought so sure as that which the scripture of God teaches; because we hold that his speech reveals there what he himself sees, and therefore the strongest proof of all, and the most necessarily assented to by us (which do thus receive the scripture) is the scripture.

And again:

I grant that proof derived from the authority of man's judgment is not able to work that assurance which grows by a stronger proof, and therefore although ten thousand general Councils would set down one and the same definitive sentence concerning any point of

religion whatsoever; yet one demonstrative reason alleged, or one manifest testimony cited from the mouth of God himself to the contrary, could not choose but overweigh them all; in as much as for them to have been deceived it is not impossible, it is that demonstrative reason or testimony divine should deceive.

Thereafter, however, in Book II Chapter 8, Hooker goes on to articulate what has become a foundational insight in Anglican understanding. There he contrasts two extreme opinions:

Two opinions therefore there are concerning sufficiency of holy Scripture, each extremely opposite unto the other, and both repugnant unto truth. The Schools of Rome teach scripture to be so insufficient, as if, except traditions were added, it did not contain all revealed and supernatural truth, which absolutely is necessary for the children of men in this life to know that they may in the next be saved. Others justly condemning this opinion grow likewise unto a dangerous extremity, as if scripture did not only contain all things in that kind necessary, but all things simply, and in such sort that to do anything according to any other law were not only unnecessary, but even opposite unto salvation, unlawful and sinful. Whatsoever is spoken of God otherwise than as the truth is; though it seem an honour, it is an injury. And as incredible praises given unto men do often abate and impair the credit of their deserved commendation; so we must likewise take great heed, lest in attributing to Scripture more than it can have, the incredibility of that do cause even those things which indeed it has most abundantly to be less reverently esteemed.

In Book III Hooker goes on to address the character and authority of scripture and he identifies varieties of scriptural material. In particular, Hooker contrasts and distinguishes between what he calls “The Law of God” and “the Word of the Lord”. He is concerned to address the position of those who argue most vehemently that it is to add to the law of God and the words of the Lord when that which the Church has come to incorporate into its polity cannot be found specified directly in Holy Scripture:

True it is concerning the Word of God, whether it be by misconstruction of the sense or by falsification of the words, wittingly to endeavour that any thing may seem divine which is not, or any thing not seem which is, were plainly to abuse and even to falsify divine evidence, which injury offered but unto men, is most worthily counted heinous. Which point I wish they did well observe, with whom nothing is more familiar than to plead in these causes, “The Law of God, The Word of the Lord;” who notwithstanding when they come to allege what Word and what Law they mean, their common ordinary practice is to quote by-speeches in some historical narration or other, and to urge them as if they were written in most exact form of Law. What is to add to the Law of God if this be not? When that which the Word of God does but deliver historically, we conster (understand) without any warrant as if it were legally meant, and so urge it further than we can prove that it was intended, do we not add to the laws of God, and make them in number seem more than they are? [Book iii Chapter 5]

The point that Hooker is making very clearly here is this: adjudications found in that type of Holy Scripture that is essentially narrative in character have application in the circumstances, situation and historical context in which they originally arose but are not, without additional and compelling warrant, to be assumed to have subsequent universal application. Rulings that may have applied and been deemed valid at one time and in one specific circumstance need not necessarily retain that applicability and validity at another.

Thereafter, in Book III, Hooker goes on to assert the necessity of the application of Reason. He counters six positions advanced by those who oppose the application of human reason

to the discernment of the Law of God and who take the view that the application of reason undermines the power and authority of the Word of God as set forth in Scripture:

By these and the like disputes an opinion has spread itself very far in the world, he writes, as if the way to be ripe in faith were to be raw in wit and judgment; as if reason were an enemy unto religion, childish simplicity the mother of ghostly and divine wisdom. [Chapter 8.5]

Such a position cannot even be sustained from scripture itself, Hooker points out. He, therefore, goes on to distinguish between those things which may be accessible through reason and those accessible only through the operation of grace:

Howbeit for all men's plainer and fuller satisfaction, first concerning the inability of reason to search out and to judge of things divine, if they be such as those properties of God and those duties of men towards him, which may be conceived by attentive consideration of heaven and earth, we know that of mere natural men the Apostle testifies how they "knew both God, and the law of God". Other things there are, which are neither so found, nor though they be shown, can ever be approved without the special operation of God's good grace and spirit. [Book III Chapter 8.6]

Hooker adds, in the context of the use of reason by those advocating heretical beliefs, that, of course, reason can be wrongly used and improperly applied but

Heresy prevails only by a counterfeit show of reason; whereby notwithstanding it becomes invincible, unless it is convicted of fraud by manifest remonstrance clearly true and unable to be withstood. When therefore the Apostle requires ability to convict Heretics, can we think it a thing unlawful, and not rather needful to use the principal instrument of their conviction, the light of reason? It may not be denied but that in the Fathers' writings there are sundry sharp invectives against Heretics, even for their very philosophical reasonings. [Book III Chapter 8.8]

Having established the necessity of the application of reason, and having also demonstrated that Paul and the Fathers in their writings frequently employed reason and deployed it in defence of Christian truth, Hooker goes on to examine the issue of truth and knowledge.

There is in the world no kind of knowledge, whereby any part of the truth is seen, but we justly account it precious, yea that principal truth, in comparison whereof all other knowledge is vile, may receive from it some kind of light. [Book III Chapter 8.9]

That "principal truth" of which Hooker writes is the truth of the Gospel itself: that indeed God was in Christ justifying the world to himself. By comparison with such understanding all other knowledge is both feeble and unlovely, yet even that which by comparison is feeble and unlovely can add something, can indeed shed additional light on the truth of revelation and lead to deeper and more complete understanding.

No man comes to God to offer him sacrifice, to pour out supplications and prayers before him, or to do him any service, which does not first believe him both to be, and to be a rewarder of them, who in some sort seek unto him. Let men be taught this either by revelation from heaven or by instruction upon earth, by labour study and meditation, or by the only [unique] secret inspiration of the holy Ghost; whatsoever the means be they know it by, if knowledge thereof were possible without discourse of natural reason, why should none be found capable thereof but only men, nor men til such time as they came unto ripe and full ability to work by reasonable understanding? The whole drift of the scripture of God what is it but to teach Theology? Theology what is it but the science of things divine? What science can be attained to without the help of natural discourse and reason? "Judge you of that

which I speak," says the Apostle. In vain it were to speak anything of God, but that by reason men are able somewhat to judge of that they hear, and by discourse to discern how consonant it is to truth. Scripture indeed teaches things above nature, things which our reason by itself could not reach unto. But those things also we believe, knowing by reason that scripture is the word of God. [Book III Chapter 8.11,12]

Hooker's advocacy of reason continues:

Exclude the use of natural reasoning about the sense of holy scripture concerning the articles of our faith, and then that the scripture does concern the articles of our faith who can assure us? That which by right exposition builds up Christian faith, being misconstrued breeds error: between true and false construction, the difference reason must show. Can Christian men perform that which Peter requires at their hands; is it possible they should both believe and be able, without the use of reason, to render a reason of their belief, a reason sound and sufficient to answer them that demand it, be they of the same with us or enemies thereunto? May we cause our faith without reason to appear reasonable in the eyes of men? This being required even of learners in the School of Christ, the duty of their teachers in bringing them unto such ripeness must needs be somewhat more than only to read the sentence of scripture, and then paraphrastically [i.e. by paraphrase] to school them, to vary them with sundry forms of speech, without arguing or disputing about anything which they contain. This method of teaching may commend itself to the world by that easiness and facility which is in it: but a law or a pattern it is not, as some do imagine, for all men to follow that will do good in the Church of Christ. Our Lord and Saviour himself did hope by disputation to do some good, yea by disputation not only of but against the truth, albeit with purpose for the truth... there is as yet no way known how to dispute or determine things disputed without the use of natural reason... The light therefore, which the star of natural reason and wisdom casts, is too bright to be obscured by the mist of a word or two uttered to diminish that opinion which justly has been received concerning the force and virtue thereof, even in matters that touch most nearly the principal duties of men and the glory of the eternal God. [Book III Chapter 8.16,17]

It remains for Hooker to add one final qualification to his advocacy of the necessity of the deployment of human reason. That qualification is as follows:

In all which hitherto has been spoken touching the force and use of man's reason in things divine, I must crave that I be not so understood or construed, as if any such thing by virtue thereof could be done without the aid and assistance of God's most blessed spirit... For this cause therefore we have endeavoured to make it appear how in the nature of reason itself there is no impediment, but that the self-same spirit, which reveals the things that god has set down in his law, may also be thought to aid and direct men in finding out by the light of reason what laws are expedient to be made for the guiding of his Church, over and besides them that are in scripture. Herein therefore we agree with those men by whom human laws are defined to be ordinances, which such as have lawful authority given them for that purpose, do probably draw from the laws of nature and God, by discourse of reason, aided with the influence of divine grace. And for that cause it is not said amiss touching Ecclesiastical canons, that by "instinct of the holy Ghost they have been made, and consecrated by the reverend acceptance of all the world." [Book III Chapter 8.18; quotation Violatores 25.q.1]

It is appropriate now to consider the implications of Hooker's analysis and method for contemporary Anglicanism and to begin with Scripture, Reason and the Law of God.

Hooker makes an important distinction between material in Holy Scripture that can be determined as being the direct oracles of God and that which may be, or may have been,

derived from what he calls “by-speeches in some historical narration or other.” Hooker specifically criticizes the use of such “by-speeches” by those who “urge them as if they were written in the most exact form of law.” He goes on, “What is to add to the Law of God if this is not?” Therefore, in seeking to identify those scriptural elements that possess universal application as the Law of God it is necessary to exclude all that may be accounted “by-speeches” associated with some form of mere narration and to refrain from interpreting them in any sense as “the most exact form of law.”

Self evidently, to distinguish between direct oracles and “by-speeches” requires the application of reason to the study of scripture. Reason cannot be excluded from the appropriation of the word of God in scripture. Indeed, Paul himself, as well as the Fathers, applied reason to the interpretation of scripture. In Paul’s case it was the interpretation of Old Testament scripture. In the case of the Fathers it was both Old Testament and the New. This being the case, it is inappropriate to exclude the application of reason to the writings of Paul, especially in respect of those sections in which Paul specifically exercises his own faculty of reason.

Turning briefly to the issue of Truth and Knowledge, it is clear that nowhere does Hooker exalt human knowledge to a position which might be said to rival the primacy of “that principal truth” to be found in scripture. He does insist, however, that knowledge enhances what may be known of the truth, indeed it is “precious”. Knowledge and understanding of the measure and mechanisms of the created order offer a deepening of insight into the mind, purpose and action of the creator. Knowledge, therefore, is valuable in itself.

Equally, where the various witnesses of scripture refer to that which comes to them as knowledge of the universe and the whole created order, it will be the responsibility of succeeding generations to assent to the truth of that knowledge only if that understanding as exhibited in the scriptures is accurate, but also to demur if, in the fuller light of contemporary knowledge, such an understanding may no longer be affirmed.

To what extent, then, may it be possible to say that the Patriarchs, the Prophets and witnesses such as St Paul may from time to time be mistaken? Not, surely, when they are declaring the oracles of God conformable with the Gospel of Christ; but, perhaps, where it may be said that they are defective in fact or in reasoned extrapolation, deduction or assertion based upon false premises. Such are tests we need to apply in all cases of scriptural interpretation as it may be applied to faith, truth, morality, and the Law of God. The scriptural evidence as it relates to issues of homosexuality and homosexual acts supplies such a case in point. Key texts therefore require to be analysed to discover their nature and status.

I draw attention, therefore, to one of the texts central to the current debate, namely Romans 1.18-27

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, for God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature and not the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. [NRSV]

Some preliminary observations are in order.

First, the passage deals directly with denial or suppression of the truth. The truth in question has to do with the nature and the worship of God. Whether Paul has in mind pagan devotees or apostate former Christians (and it seems most likely to be the latter,) in either case what can be known about God - which itself is something plain to be seen in the creation (In Paul's words, "understood and seen through the things he has made",) has been deliberately set aside in favour of the worship of idols represented by images drawn from the created order. Paul, then is very clearly referring to a grave contemporary issue for the Church in Rome.

Second, it is entirely clear that for Paul the created order is identified as of substance and significance in understanding the nature of God – "his power and his divine nature have been understood and seen through the things that he has made."(v20) Here Paul applies the force of human reason to establish the position he is concerned to advocate. Refining and developing an increasingly deeper understanding of the things that God has made, therefore can only further expose us to a fuller encounter with the power and divine nature of God. The more we know and the better we understand the mechanisms of creation the better our insight into the power and divine nature of God through the things he has made.

Third, Paul declares as part of the narrative of events that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth."(v18) The wrath of God is against the suppression of truth. The truth suppressed is about the power and nature of God clearly revealed in creation. Punishment, therefore is visited by God on those who are complicit in the suppression of the truth and that punishment is that they are given up by God "in the lusts of their hearts to impurity to the degrading of their bodies among themselves."(v24) "Degrading passions" (v26), therefore, are the punishment of God visited upon those who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie."(v25)

Fourth, those "degrading passions" (v26), are identified as acts of homosexual intercourse: "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another." (vv26, 27) Two things are notable about this passage. The first is the implication that, having once been persons whose natural expression of their sexuality was to seek intercourse with the opposite sex, now (as a punishment of God) they have "exchanged" what was natural to them for that which is unnatural i.e. they are now defying their natural sexual orientation and doing so as a direct result of the operation of the power of God. The second point is this. Paul's assumptions about what is "natural" and what "unnatural" are based upon the knowledge and understandings of the time, relying to a degree on the presuppositions of the Old Testament. If, on the basis of additional knowledge and the application of human reason, such assumptions and presuppositions are shown to be inadequate it will become an absolute requirement to re-visit the definition of what in this area may be described as "natural" and "unnatural". Indeed, such an outcome would actually be consistent with the witness of Paul in Romans 1, for he is describing the suppression of

what was natural and the substitution of what, in the case of those being punished, was unnatural.

Thus, in the case of the passage under discussion, the essentially narrative character of the account rendered by Paul, dealing with a particular situation involving what Paul interprets as the deliberate punishment of God visited on persons who defy and renounce the truth about Him, and featuring the application of reason and the contemporary knowledge of the time to the activities of persons who appear radically and wilfully to have changed their normal sexual orientation to embrace an orientation that was not originally normal for them, it cannot be held that what is unquestionably Holy Scripture is also a declaration of the Law of God. The only aspect that can be placed in the category of "Law" is the requirement to recognize the truth about God and not to exchange such acknowledgment of truth and the worship that goes with it, for the lie that anything other than the God revealed in scripture and through the created order is worthy of recognition and worship.

Indeed, this is the key, not only to the situation confronted by Paul but also to the situation confronted by the contemporary Church. The issue that confronted Paul and confronts us now is how to get across the damaging futility that will be encountered by those – they are a great majority throughout the world – who defy and deny the truth about God. Paul saw in the depravity of his contemporaries the punishment of God not on account of their depravity (which, Paul says was their punishment not their crime!) but on account of their denial and defiance, which was the sin that counted.

Romans 1, therefore, provides no declaration of the Law of God in respect of homosexuality and homosexual acts. Reference to such acts is what Hooker might call "by-speeches", a rationalization by Paul, in the context of an historical narrative and, as such, not a declaration of the God's Law. Furthermore, Paul, in his treatment of the issues, employs reason based upon the knowledge and presuppositions accessible to him in his day. These may be challenged if the knowledge base changes definitively. It is therefore inappropriate on the basis of Romans 1.18-27 and ff to judge or anathematize persons on the basis of sexual orientation. It will be necessary to scrutinize other sections of scripture in a similar way to discover whether elsewhere there may be established evidence of the Law of God in this matter and I have not attempted to do that in this essay. I remain committed to the view, however, that the tools of analysis which Hooker articulated are essential to our contemporary purpose and are especially relevant for the purpose of distilling the Law of God from the total corpus of Holy Scripture.

Finally, let us be clear on this: it has not yet been conclusively shown that for some males and some females homosexuality and homosexual acts are natural rather than unnatural. If such comes to be shown, it will be necessary to acknowledge the full implications of that new aspect of the truth, and that insight applied to establish and acknowledge what may be a new status for homosexual relationships within the life of the Church.