NEW FOCUS

The Hampton Court Conference: Part I

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On 14th January, 1604, four hundred years ago, the Hampton Court Conference met to debate the future of the Church of England. The conference had a lasting impetus on the Protestant Church and was the means under God of undertaking the greatest ever English translation of the Scriptures.

The current ‘Reformed’ interpretation of the conference is that it was a clash of two sides, the Arminian conformity-seekers on the one hand and the Calvinist Nonconformists on the other. This over-simplification is traced back to Thomas Fuller (1608-1661), writing during the Commonwealth period. Fuller, under threat of persecution, chose diplomatically to sit on the fence of history and accommodate himself to new theories which were being back-projected onto former times. Actually, most of the conference delegates were hand-picked by King James and could safely be called ‘Puritan’. However, before going into the details of the conference this first of two essays will deal with the major representatives, especially as several of these might be unknown to the general reader. Each delegate will be dealt with according to age rather than rank.

JOHN WHITGIFT (C.1530-1604)

Called the undaunted champion of the Reformed Church of England, Whitgift was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the conference, outliving it by only a few weeks. Being already very ill, he often let his deputy, Bishop Bancroft, speak for him.

Whitgift matriculated at Pembroke College, Cambridge and was taught by Reformed heroes John Bradford, Nicolas Ridley and Edmund Grindal. At his ordination in 1560, he preached on Rom. 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ." Whitgift’s Protestantism is illustrated by the title of his doctor’s thesis The Pope is the Anti-Christ. Those who nowadays use the term ‘Puritan’ to describe Presbyterianism and Separatism, a meaning foreign to its early 17th century usage, view Whitgift as an Anti-Puritan, though he was looked on with Grindal as the father of Puritanism at the time. Whitgift strove for church unity against the secular powers and believed this could only be obtained by preventing revolutionary, anti-Episcopalian and doctrinally unorthodox men from receiving influential posts in the church via the back door of politicians and plotting gentry. Men who refused to take the vote of allegiance, denounced episcopacy as ‘devilish’ and would not subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles were being

given church preferments by non-ecclesiastical patrons who had inherited or bought 'rights' to ecclesiastical posts. Whitgift believed this was entrusting one's sheep to hirelings.

It is a modern myth that Whitgift was extra harsh to Thomas Cartwright. When Cartwright refused to take the Oath of Allegiance in 1591, Whitgift intervened on his behalf and at the risk of being thought unpatriotic himself used his influence to gain Cartwright's release from the Fleet prison where he had been awaiting trial. The Queen was furious and the Presbyterian Puritans attacked Whitgift for challenging the Queen's powers. Whitgift made sure that Cartwright received a teaching post and financial security and the two men exchanged visits and letters until Cartwright, overcome with a sense of Whitgift's kindness, confessed that he ought to have conformed, had been treated far better than he could have expected and was sorry for the schism which he had instigated.

Though Whitgift is called an enemy of Geneva by modern would-be-Puritans, the truth is that when he heard that Beza was in personal financial trouble, and Geneva was bankrupt and in danger of being absorbed by the surrounding papist states, he determined that its testimony should remain. Thankful to God for all that the city had stood for during the Reformation, he gave a large sum of money from his personal savings to Beza and moved the bishops to donate equally substantial sums in order to preserve Geneva from Rome.

Perhaps the most fitting eulogy on Whitgift comes from the pen of church historian Strype who describes him as "a man born for the benefit of his country and the good of his church."

LAWRENCE CHADERTON (C.1538-1640)

Chaderton, called by Patrick Collinson 'the pope of Cambridge Puritans', taught students until he was well over a hundred years of age and the university gave up looking for successors for him with the excuse that he would outlive them all.

Chaderton became a fellow of Christ's College in 1568 and in that year started a preaching ministry at St. Clements which was to last 50 years. When Sir Walter Mildmay founded Emmanuel College in 1584, Chaderton became its master. He used the Zürich or 'conference' method of instruction, called 'Team Teaching' today. He did away with subject teaching and had all his teachers working together with the students over a joint project. One took care of the translation work, another led the students in grammatical analysis, yet another teacher took over the exegesis and another dealt with the doctrines discovered. Chaderton's motto was the "universities ought to be the seed and the fry of the holy ministry throughout the realm."

These first-class methods reaped criticism from Richard Bancroft.

Chaderton was accused of creating an elite class of ‘clerical puritans’, academically and socially removed from the common people. Bancroft accepted the importance of preaching but he also saw the need for an actively worshipping church. He felt that Chaderton’s preaching seminary was more for the head than the heart and engendered listeners rather than doers. Preaching houses were not enough, he maintained, and church buildings should be houses of prayer and praise.

The Precisians, towards the end of Elizabeth’s reign, did organize fasting days when the people were asked to pray for oncoming events. Bancroft thought this was a trip back to Rome and complained that the people were only organized in this way when the Precisians were planning a campaign against Church, King and country.

JOHN KNEWSTUB (1544-1624)

Little is known of Knewstub (Knewstubs), a Suffolk man and fellow of St. John’s. He was a close friend of Chaderton’s and Lancelot Andrewes’ and studied with them using the ‘conference’ method. Walter Travers names him with Chaderton, Andrewes, Culverwell and Carter as those who "went out like Apollos, eloquent men, and mighty in the scriptures." He followed the Precision and Ultra-Puritan love of ‘fastings’, making himself unpopular with the authorities for proclaiming a general fast without official permission. Separatist gatherings were still forbidden or placed under strict church supervision but not ‘fastings’ so they became a legal way of meeting together from all over the country to discuss various ideas of Reform. These meetings, though called ‘fastings’, often featured the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and a communal meal. Collections were taken to finance the work. Patrick Collinson quotes from a paper of John Field’s which came into Bancroft’s hand stating that such a secret ‘fast’ or ‘feast’ was held near Knewstub’s home "to confer of the Common Book what might be tolerated, and what necessarily to be refused in every point of it: apparel, matter, form, days, fastings, injunctions etc.." Knewstub was in close correspondence with Cartwright. Nevertheless, he declared his allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles and had no qualms about using the Prayer Book, although he no doubt found it worthy of alteration and change. Knewstub remained an Episcopalian and preached against radicalism in the Church. Martin Marprelate quotes Knewstub as being on his side but scholars believe this was to merely throw his opponents off the scent of pursuing the real Marprelate party.

RICHARD BANCROFT (1544-1610)

Bancroft, a Puritan by upbringing and doctrine, had been trained at Oxford during the heyday of Puritanism. He was a motivating engine with William Whitaker (1548-1595) and Whitgift behind the Lambeth Articles (1595) which Samuel Miller of Princeton in his Introduction to Thomas Scott's The Articles of the Synod of Dort says "are acknowledged by all who ever read them, to be among the most strongly marked Calvinist compositions that ever were penned."

Bancroft's great sin, according to Dissenters, was that he was a staunch Episcopalian. The earlier Reformers did not care less whether presbyters were called bishops or bishops presbyters. Bancroft, however, raised the Episcopacy to the high position contemporary Presbyterians gave to their own church-officers. He was therefore bound to clash with those who believed Presbyterianism was God's only way and regarded them as destroyers of the Reformed Church of England and enemies of both King and country. No Presbyterian, however, could stand up to him in debate and he was said to know more about Presbyterian orders, discipline and policy than the Presbyterians themselves. Bancroft distinguished between the Puritan Presbyterian who differed only from other Reformers in his love for the term 'presbyter' and those extreme Precisians of the Marprelate Tract kind who were out for revolution in church and state. Even Thomas Cartwright supported Whitgift and Bancroft against Marprelate dogmas. Bancroft's main argument against the Precisians was that their love for inessentials and fine points invariably led to divisions. He warned them that they would soon be as diversified as the Anabaptists. Today, the term 'Precisian' is scarcely used and such political extremists are wrongly called 'Puritan', although the vast majority of 16th and early 17th century Puritans viewed them as a Rome-bound religion apart. Nowadays, too, the term 'Puritan' is used by many to mean a critic of the Reformed Church of England, a quite unhelpful piece of linguistic jugglery which enhances the confusion we experience in striving to analyse church history accurately. Without accurate terms with specific meanings, no historical interpretation is possible.

Bancroft also accused the Precisians for not believing in the rule of the Church by the Church. He looked upon Convocation as 'the sacred Synod of this nation' whereas the Precisians rejected Convocation and sought for legal and Parliamentary control of the churches. In this, because of their strong support from the secular nobility, they became increasingly successful.

THOMAS BILSON (1546-1616)

Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, was educated at Oxford and joined Bancroft in keeping the status quo of the English Reformation. This was mainly the work of the five hundred or so ministers who had either fled the country under Mary such as Jewel, Lever, Sandys, Foxe, Coverdale and Grindal or gone into hiding throughout that period like Michael Parker and John Whitgift. By sheer dint of sound preaching and the policy of the rule of the

church by the church they had carried on the Edwardian Reformation into the Elizabethan Settlement and made England more Reformed than any other European country of that age. Bilson's motto was "The perpetual government of Christ's Church" and believed that any novelty introduced by the Precisians, Ultra-Puritans and Separatists was an attempt to divert the Church from its divinely led course. Besides writing on the perpetuality of the Church in 1593, Bilson wrote The True Difference between Christian Subjection and Unchristian Rebellion published 1585 and a treatise entitled Survey of the Sufferings of Christ for the Redemption of Man published in 1604.

Bilson followed in the John Hooper tradition of accepting divorce under certain circumstances which earned for him the nick-name 'Sir Nullity Bilson'. This would have drawn Bilson closer to both the Precisians and the Puritans rather than the High Anglican side.

THOMAS SPARK (1548-1616)

Spark (Sparke, Sparks)) was a fellow of Magdalan College, Oxford and, although nowadays placed on the side of the Hampton Court Nonconformists, he was an Anglican through and through as shown by his Brotherly Persuasion to Unity and Uniformity. In later years when he was looked upon as a traitor by extremists who were back-projecting later divisions on to the conference, Spark, according to Reynolds, protested that before the conference, he had made it quite clear that he would not be drawn into taking sides against Anglican orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, Spark had long wished to alter a number of lines in the Prayer Book. In December 1584, Earl Leicester arranged a meeting at Lambeth Palace for Spark, Walter Travers and Richard Field with Whitgift, Sandys and Cooper. This meeting ended amiably. Whitgift made a few concessions and the Precisian party claimed the victory, but so did the conservatives. Leicester was not satisfied and attacked Whitgift in the House of Lords. Lord Burghley also attacked the Archbishop but Whitgift did not budge. Leicester, the lynch-pin of Ultra-Precisian political unrest, died in 1588 and the opposition he had fostered almost died with him. Whitgift managed to persuade the noblemen that he distinguished between moderate and extreme Puritanism and considered only those of the latter group who were against state, Church and government as enemies. This is exactly the line James took in his Basilikon Doren. This was also Spark's position which explains why he got on so well with his monarch.

JOHN REYNOLDS (1549-1607)

Reynolds (Rainolds, Raynolds) a convert from Roman Catholicism, studied at Oxford. His family history is most interesting, though rather tragic. His brother William was as zealous a Protestant as John was a papist but William persuaded John to follow him in the Protestant faith. William, however, returned to Rome and died a papist whereas John remained a true Puritan. Reynolds was of the older Reformed school who believed that a

priest (presbyter) was of the same rank as a bishop. In this, he leaned heavily on Bishop John Jewel's great reforming works. He therefore rejected Bancroft's interpretation of a bishop's office, believing in the absolute parity of all ministers. Reynolds wrote a long letter to Frankfurt veteran Francis Knollys explaining his views against Bancroft but had he said less, he would have been more convincing as a number of the church leaders he quoted, including Jerome and Calvin could easily be turned to wreck his own high views of the priesthood. Reynolds is traditionally looked upon as the main spokesman for the Presbyterians but he was a middle of the road man who wished to live in peace with all and spoilt his appearance at the conference in this writer's opinion, by striving to be too academic and neutral.

LANCELOT ANDREWES (1555-1626)

Andrewes was at Cambridge at the height of its Puritan fame but remained true to the Church of England and was Dean of Westminster at the time of the conference. He progressed to become Master of Pembroke Hall and successively Bishop of Chichester, Ely and Winchester. He also served as chaplain to Queen Elizabeth. He is said to have mastered fifteen languages and his colleagues used to say proudly that he would have made a good interpreter at Babel. Andrewes, called 'the star of preachers' was particularly effective in the North of England where he was the means of converting many papists. His written word was as good as his spoken word in refuting error and bringing peace and comfort to the flock. When challenged by Cardinal Bellarmine, Andrewes answered in such a scholarly and pastoral way that Bellarmine dropped the subject, quite defeated. The fact that Andrewes was a man of holiness and peace is adequately shown in his Preces Privatae or Private Devotions. As Florence Higham says, "They summed up for his generation as for ours the basic needs, the indefinable yearnings of mankind for guidance, enlightenment, strength of will and the grace of God in one's heart."

Modern Reformed men often portray Andrewes as Anti-Puritan. He, however, knew their foibles as he did those of the nigh papists in his church. He had worked closely in his life with John Knewstub whom nobody would suspect of having even half a foot in Rome. He had also served, under George Carleton, the Puritan MP for Northamptonshire as a member of his preaching team at Wisbeck Castle. Here, Andrews and Nonconformist William Fludd (or Floyd) preached Christ to the imprisoned recusants. Andrewes accepted Presbyterian orders as valid, though he preferred the Episcopalian way. He deplored, however, putting 'things indifferent' before fellowship in worship, doctrine and witness. Andrewes is under suspicion today from Reformed men because of his criticism of the Lambeth Articles. The same critics, however condemn the Anglican authors of the Lambeth Articles, though they could not be more Puritan. This is obviously because those Puritans were at home in the Church of England and were for reform within rather than criticism without. Furthermore, even the extreme Precisians such as Humphrey Fen (no Separatist, however,) loved to go to St Paul's and hear Andrewes preach.

Perhaps the best summary of Andrewes' life is"

Doctor Andrews in the Schools,
Bishop Andrews in the Pulpit,
Saint Andrews in the Closet."

JAMES VI OF SCOTLAND AND I OF ENGLAND (1556-1625)

Edinburgh born James Stuart, son of Mary Queen of Scots and Lord Darnley, became King of Scotland in 1567 and England in 1603. Owing to the precarious situation of Scottish politics and religion besides Mary Stuart's domestic intrigues, no one can say that James had an upbringing to be envied. James, like his mother, was educated by George Buchanan whose insistence that a King's position was determined by the mood of the people and his rejection of the traditional interpretation of Romans 13:1, most probably paved the way for James' hatred of things 'democratic'.

James received an intimate knowledge of Scots' church politics from Buchanan but was not impressed by them. He became increasingly critical of the Kirk which was an instable mixture of mediaeval nobility rule, Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism and popery. As religious differences continually caused strife and division in the country, James sought to be a 'universal king' and not the puppet of any faction. The Scots Presbyterians, however, claimed that a King should only be a ruler of earthly realms whereas the church hierarchy ruled the spiritual realms.

Modern would-be Puritans take the story that Melville told the King "Sirrah, ye are God's silly vassal" as sufficient proof that James was a man of few talents and abilities. J. B. Marsden's echoes this in his The History of the Earlier Puritans and the modern writer David Gay in his Battle for the Church would have us believe that James was an immoral moron. We thus tend to forget that James had an excellent education under the tutelage of the leading humanist of his age. He was as versed in modern languages as he was in ancient and wrote several books on statecraft and government. Thus James is said to have ruled Scotland by the pen instead of the sword. He counted a number of Puritans as his friends, especially Field, Spark and Cartwright. He offered Cartwright a university professorship and wrote personally to Elizabeth in his favour. The King conferred with Cartwright and placed him on the list of Hampton Court representatives but he died shortly before the conference started. James was also responsible for settling Protestants English and Scots in Ulster, thus furthering Northern Ireland's Protestantism.

The King was a major instrument under God of setting up the Synod of Dort and preventing foreign Arminianism getting a foothold in England. The Hampton Court Conference was initiated and chaired by him and scholars are nigh unanimous in concluding that the greatest English translation of the Bible ever, the Authorised Version, would not have been accomplished without his strong support. James was determined not to

allow England to fall into the diverse and complicated theological, social and political mess the church hierarchies had plunged the country into in Scotland and thus he determined to make England ‘one Kingdom under one God’.

JOHN OVERALL (1559-1618)

Overall is said to have been the only Arminian at the conference. This statement must be treated warily. He was a fellow of Trinity, Cambridge at the height of Puritan influence and appointed Regius Professor of Divinity in 1596. This was Alexander Nowell’s old post and few Puritans loved the doctrines of grace more than he. Nowell’s catechism which Whitgift had set up as the standard for all theology students and clergy was in many ways more Calvinist than Calvin. It is thus difficult to imagine that Archbishop Whitgift would give Nowell’s post to an Arminian.

Overall was admired by everyone for his saintly life and great scholarship. If he had any fault at all it was that he could hardly speak English. He was so used to reading, writing and speaking the ancient languages that when he became Dean of St. Paul’s and had to preach before the Queen in English, he was quite tongue-tied. He held to the Precisian view of government, believing that after a revolution or conquest, once a new government was formed, a Christian was duty-bound to support it. When the Anglican Non-jurors refused to take the oath of allegiance to William III having already given it to James II, Bishop Sherlock had them read Overall’s treatise and a number altered their opinions. Overall’s Convocation Book shows that his Reformed stand cannot be doubted. He firmly refutes the novelties of Trent in this work in the light of the Reformed Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles. Furthermore, when the more Puritan representatives at Hampton Court asked for an alteration of the Catechism on the Lord’s Supper, it was Overall’s suggestions and wording that they accepted.

RICHARD FIELD (1561-1616)

Field, a graduate of Oxford, was a catechism lecturer there for several years before becoming Rector of Burghclere in Hampshire. He was a noted preacher who drew great crowds. Field was made chaplain to Elizabeth in 1598 and afterwards stood in close friendship with James I. and became his chaplain. On hearing Field preach for the first time, James said, "This is a Field for God to dwell in." Fuller calls him "that learned divine, whose memory smelleth like a Field the Lord hath blessed." Field’s chief work is his five-volumed Of the Church (1606), dedicated to Bancroft which is a defence of the Protestant Church against Rome whom he accused of being Donatists to the core with their claims of purity and exclusiveness. It is a masterly though highly polemic work and long rivaled Hooker’s Ecclesiastical Polity of 1593. Field thought the debate amongst Reformed men which led to splits over outward forms was deplorable. Though Field

preferred the Episcopalian system, he equated the Biblical use of the term ‘bishop’ with that of ‘elder’. Field stood in close correspondence with Reformers throughout Europe and recognized their orders and ordination as being valid. He took part in the 1584 Lambeth Conference with Leicester and the Precisians but is said to have favoured Whitgift’s and Sandy’s interpretations and is therefore looked upon as something of a traitor by today’s Precisians.

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