

The Hampton Court Conference: Part II

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THE MILLENARY PETITION

When James VI of Scotland journeyed to London to become James I of England, most Englishmen expected great things. Mid-stream Puritans such as Reynolds and Spark had been bargaining with James since the early nineties, but so had the papists and almost every other religious and political movement in England. James wanted to start off on the right foot and made diplomatic promises to all. He distributed an English version of his pro-Protestant book on statesmanship *Basilikon Doron* in London as soon as Elizabeth was dead, promising to lend a sympathetic ear to all who were 'learned, honest, and grave'. He also promised to 'care for' the Church. This alarmed many Anglicans who had protested at Elizabeth's interference, resulting in a severe clash between Archbishop Grindal, supported by the bishops, and the Queen. Both Synod and Convocation had then ruled against Royal interference in church matters.¹

Some ministers were over-eager to curry favour with James. They wanted to persuade him that they were learned, honest, grave men with sound plans for the Church of England. They thus decided to beat the papists, formalists and other less Reformed elements to the King's ear and lay their credentials at James' feet before he ever reached London. They drew up and presented what was called *The Millenary Petition* because some 1,000 ministers supported it. It was a risky business. Most of the clergy involved thought merely in terms of an English Church in partnership with an English King but James aimed at joining Scotland and England together as one nation under God with one Church. His own imagery was one womb bearing twins. He thus aimed to draw all extremes to the middle and thus forbade, 'undecent railing speeches against the persons of either papists or puritans.'² Furthermore, James never lost the Scotsman's suspicion of his southern neighbour, as the following anecdote shows. There was an English woman, James related, who believed she was possessed by the devil. Whenever she heard the opening words of John's gospel, she went into a fit. She asked to be exorcised. James sent her his chaplain who read the first chapter of John to her. She remained calm. The chaplain had read from his Greek New Testament. The 'moral' of the story is that the devil must be an Englishman who is too ignorant to know Greek.

There is no extant copy of the petition and several versions vie for acceptance. Most scholars follow Thomas Fuller,³ who claims that his is the 'proper petition'. Cavalier Fuller's account was published when Episcopacy was outlawed. He, many of his relations and friends were

driven from their churches and lectureships when Parliament took over church rule from Convocation. Obviously it was not in Fuller's interest to paint too bright a picture of the ejected Episcopalians. Thus we find Fuller criticizing 'the Prelaticall party' and calling the petitioners 'the Presbyterian Party', though professing Presbyterians were quite absent from the conference and the lower orders outnumbered the bishops. Fuller confessed that the post-Rebellion term 'Puritan' had taken on a new meaning in Cromwell's days referring to Presbyterians and Independents only. He could thus say of Episcopalian Samuel Ward, a Dortian delegate and sturdy Calvinist who was severely persecuted during Cromwell's rule, 'He was counted a Puritan before these times, and Popish in these times; and yet being always the same was a true Protestant at all times.'

THE PETITIONERS' REQUESTS

According to Fuller, the petition was presented in the name of the Church of England by ministers against factions and schisms who had no wish to dissolve the 'state ecclesiastical'. The petitioners flattered James, declaring 'The King, as a good physician, must first know what peccant humours his patient naturally is most subject unto before he can begin his cure.' They referred to 'offenses' in the established Church and asks that 'some be removed, some amended, some qualified'. Thus the Millenary Petition was not the work of left wing Presbyterians, Separatists or revolutionaries as often claimed but men of the Church of England professing allegiance to their King. Their requests were modest and few and divided into four sections. 1. Church Service. The sign of the cross at baptism, questions asked infants (presumably at baptism), confirmation, baptism by women and the public reading of the Apocrypha should be abolished. Vestments and Holy Day rest should be voluntary but preaching and examination before the Lord's Supper compulsory. Rules concerning the marriage ring, church songs and music and Lord's Day activities should be revised. 2. Church Ministers. Only good preachers should be ordained. Poor preachers should be dismissed. King Edward's ruling on the marriage of ministers should be revived and clerical subscription limited to the Articles of Religion and the King's Supremacy only. 3. Church Livings. Pluralities and sinecure posts should be abolished and laymen's fees regulated. 4. Church Discipline. Lay powers over the church should be curbed. None should be excommunicated without his pastor's agreement. Ecclesiastical court cases should be speeded up. Licenses for marriage without bands should be granted with caution.

AN APPEAL TO CAESAR

There was nothing revolutionary here but the appeal to Caesar rather than to the church authorities was quite new. The petition was not particularly 'Puritan' either as it touched issues discussed in the entire Church. The only real bone of contention was confirmation. The Reformed Church of England had stressed the need for a public confession of faith because true entrance into the covenant was through the new birth and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The utilitarian Precisians looked on this as an unnecessary

ceremony though their numerous alternative suggestions were chaotic, contradictory, and quite as ceremonious. The Precisians had often a most High Church view of baptism and covenant theology which toned down their need for teaching the new birth. Bancroft, teased the 'Puritans' by telling them that every Anglican ceremony they abolished was replaced by chaos and he reminded the Precisians that since rejecting the Church of England doctrine of baptism, they had split up six times over the rite. Calvin emphasised in his Tracts that Confirmation should be restored in the Reformed churches so that young people might be 'presented to God, after giving forth the confession of their faith.' However, the more the Precisians fought for separate rights to hold different ceremonies, the more the Church of England felt bound to anchor their traditional rites in Synodal, and Convocational decisions and Church canons. The vestments are a case in point here. The Church of England was very lenient on vestments but when the Precisians started preaching dressed up in the latest French ecclesiastical fashion or in Mullah-like robes, Whitgift and Bancroft tightened the reins on clerical wear.

THE REACTIONS OF CHURCH AND KING

For Fuller the petition was a getting-to-know-you formality rather than a genuine move for reform. He emphasises that petitioners always 'allow some over-measure in their requests,' so they never expect to obtain all they ask for. The reaction to the petition was two-fold. The Church of England sat in Convocation in 1603 to discuss the requests and fenced themselves in. They concluded 'Whoever shall hereafter affirm, that the sacred Synod of this nation, in the name of Christ, and by the King's authority assembled, is not the true church of England by representation: let him be excommunicated.' Concerning calls for a reformation of the ministry, Convocation emphasised the necessity of having bishops, ministers and deacons. No minister should be appointed unless licensed. Unlicensed men already employed should not be dismissed but may read the Homilies 'for the good instruction and edification of the people.' The Synod ruled that no popish meaning was given the sign of the cross at baptism and things should not be abolished merely because of misuse. If the Church of England forbade the sign of the cross altogether, they would separate themselves from the Continental Reformed churches. Concerning vestments, the Synod found their garments 'decent and comely' and hoped 'that in time new-fangledness of apparel in some factious persons will die of itself.' Reforms in ceremonies and rites had been passed in the 1571 Convocation which ruled that every particular or national church may change or abolish ceremonies according to the decision of the gathered representatives of the Church and not privately organized groups.

The second reaction was James' initiative. He listened both to Convocation and the major petitioners and then invited representatives of both to private talks at Hampton Court. The Privy Council were invited as spectators. The term 'conference', hardly applies to these drawing room interviews. James opened the sessions by saying that it was an English custom for Kings to establish the Church in doctrine and policy. Henry VIII altered much,

Edward VI more, Mary reversed all and Elizabeth 'settled religion as it now standeth.' He added that his was a happier state than his predecessors as they had had to change things but he had joined a well-Reformed Church. He admitted that there were still causes for grievances and wished to root out all that was 'scandalous, dangerous and frivolous.' He then read out the petition, adding his own well-informed and balanced comments. Confirmation is not a sacrament but is necessary for the health of the Church as a profession of faith from one who has come to years of discretion. Absolutions, he thought, smacked of the pope's pardons. James argued that if 'private baptisms' meant 'baptisms outside of the church building', this was New Testament practice and to be retained. If 'private' meant that any private person might baptize, this should be forbidden. Secular courts should not dictate church policy especially regarding excommunication.

THE MINUTES OF THE CONFERENCE

Whitgift opened by stating that baptism was imperfect without confirmation and the laying on of hands (Heb. 6:2), leaning on Calvin's exposition of the text. Concerning absolution, Whitgift asked the King to examine the Prayer Book passage for comment. James did so and concluded that the language ruled out any superstitious usage. Bancroft then quoted the Reformed confessions of Augsburg, Bohemia, Saxony and Geneva which specified confessions and absolutions. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the Prayer Book wording should be altered to relate more to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Whitgift rejected the idea of lay-baptism in the Church of England, but the King argued that this was implied in the Prayer Book. It was thus decided to add a rubric forbidding baptism by the laity.

On the following day, the King promised to give a ready ear to the invited petitioners, whom he considered 'the most grave, learned and modest of the aggrieved sort'. Reynolds asked that Article XVI, Of Sin after Baptism should be altered as he believed it meant that one could fall from grace eternally after sinning. He suggested the amendment 'We may depart from grace given yet neither totally, nor finally.' Article XXIII, he complained, states that it is unlawful for any to preach unless lawfully called and sent. Reynolds objected to the indefinite use of 'any', which, he argued, could lead people to think there was a definite 'one' (as opposed to an indefinite 'any') who may preach though not lawfully called. He also demanded that Article XXV on the sacraments should be revised because it taught that confirmation is 'a depraved imitation of the Apostles'.

Reynolds appeared ignorant of his own Articles. Article XVII clearly teaches that a believer cannot fall from grace but is elected to eternal life. Reynolds' play on the words 'any' and 'one' was a pedantic misquote of the Article which refers to 'any man', obviously meaning any particular man. Reynolds totally missed the point of Article XXV which asserts that to accept Rome's confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony and extreme

unction as sacraments is to corrupt Apostolic teaching. Bancroft interrupted Reynolds, scolding him for his dilettantism. The King at once corrected Bancroft saying he could understand his warmth and Reynolds statements were indeed 'needless' but added 'I mislike your sudden interruption of Doctour Reynolds, whom you should have suffered to have taken his liberty; For, there is no order, nor can be any effectual Issue of Disputation, if each party be not suffered, without chopping, to speak at large'.

Reynolds then protested against confirmation being solely in the hands of the bishops who could not possibly examine all candidates adequately. Bancroft replied that the bishops' chaplains, ministers appointed by him and the candidate's own minister perform the initial examination. No bishop confirms without being given the go-ahead from the local church. Here, James made his well-known and variously interpreted statement 'I approve the calling and use of Bishops in the Church, and it is my Aphorism, No Bishop, no King'.

Reynolds now protested against Article XXXVII which states that the Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England. Again, Reynolds quoted loosely and argued that the Article was ambiguous and should further read 'nor ought to have any'. The King answered 'In as much as it is said he hath not, it is plain enough that he ought not.'

Reynolds requested that the articles should declare that the intention of the minister had nothing to do with the efficacy of the sacraments. The King thought that this would complicate the Article negatively and confuse the worshipper and even give him unfounded suspicions.

Then, Dean Overall raised a point about justification being assured to those elect who fall into grievous sin without expressing faith and repentance. The King replied that one cannot separate justifying faith from repentance and holiness in a Christian which is in keeping with the doctrines and decrees of God on predestination and election.

Reynolds now became more practical. He suggested that the Common Prayer Book catechism was too short and Nowell's too long to learn off by heart by newcomers to the faith and pleaded for a single standard catechism of reasonable length containing all relevant doctrines. The King agreed at once. Then Reynolds asked for a campaign to rid the Lord's Day of its current profanation. Everyone agreed.

Reynolds next request was to give him lasting recognition in the history of the church. Up to then at least five Bible versions of various linguistic and theological standards were being used by the Church. Especially the more Puritan side and lovers of doctrine were most dissatisfied with the versions commonly used such as the Matthew's, Bishops' and Geneva Bibles. Thus Reynolds, the scholar and the preacher, now said, 'May your majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated, such as are extant not answering the Originall, and be instanced in three particulars, Galatians 4:25; Psalm

105:28 and Psalm 106:30.’

Bancroft butted in again complaining that ‘If every mans humour might be followed, there would be no end of translating’. He believed that this was for the Church Synod to decide and not individual churchmen. The King, however, took to the idea at once saying that there were no good translation and it was high time for an authorised version to be undertaken by scholars from both universities, reviewed by the bishops then presented to the Privy Council and ratified by Royal Authority. The King now thought it time to end the day’s discussions on this hopeful note. After accepting Reynolds positive suggestions on the catechism and a new Bible translation but having scolded him gently on his admittedly feeble attempts at other reforms, James said that just as a known King with some weaknesses is better than constant change of kings a church with some faults is better than one with constant innovations and concluded, ‘And surely, if these were the greatest matters that grieved you, I need not have been troubled with such importunate Complaints.’

However, Reynolds was not finished. He claimed that seditious books should be suppressed of which he named several. Bancroft told him that sales of these books were already forbidden but some copies were allowed into the country under special supervision so that scholars like Reynolds could refute them. Reynolds then asked that learned ministers be appointed to every parish. Here there was a general agreement but Bancroft added that these ministers should not be preachers only but able to conduct general worship and lead in prayer. James agreed with Bancroft complaining that ministers ‘who place all their religion in the Eare’ promoted ‘the Hypocrisie of out Time.’

Reynolds now argued that there was a wariness to subscribe to the Prayer Book because of the reading of the Apocrypha which contained errors. The King showed Reynolds sympathy here and advised him to make a list of such errors and discuss them on the following Wednesday with the Archbishop, with a view to their removal.

Knewstub spoke up regarding the cross in baptism suggesting that ‘It is questionable whether the Church hath power to institute an outward significant sign’. Fuller complains that Knewstub ‘spake so perplexedly, that his meaning is not to be collected therein.’ Reynolds came to Knewstub’s help by saying that the cross was like the brazen serpent which became an idol. The King said that making a cross in the air was not the same as making a material cross for worship and such crosses had been demolished at Knewstub’s wish.

Knewstub then objected to the wearing of the surplice which, he argued, was the garment of the priests of Isis. Knewstub, it must be said, was adorned in a long black, fur-trimmed gown according to the latest Continental fashion and Bancroft had already said that he looked like a Turkish merchant. The King replied that he could not imagine that the

surplice would lead to heathenism. Reynolds then protested at the use of the term 'worship' in the marriage service and at the churching of women after childbirth. The King, teased Reynolds by saying that if he had a good wife he would think that all the worship and honour he could give her was well-bestowed on her. He explained to Reynolds that the word 'worth-ship' meant to give due honour. Concerning women coming to church to be blessed, the King said that they came all too seldom and needed every encouragement to attend church.

Reynolds said that his last grievance was that laymen had a say in ecclesiastical censures, but he had already heard from the King that this would be amended. Then, quite contrary to the terms of the Millenary Petition, Reynolds suddenly began arguing for a most complicated three-tiered plan to Reform church structures based on an oligarchy of lower clergy. The King was furious, believing Reynolds wished to force on England Scottish Presbyterian forms of government. He exclaimed that Scottish Presbyterianism agreed with Monarchy, as God with the devil. The second day's conference ended with the King claiming that such rebels should conform, go into exile or take the consequences.

The third day started with discussions between the Archbishop, the Lords and the King. The King condemned factions in the Church who were driving people back to Rome. He then turned on Reynolds and demanded his 'obedience and humility'. Reynolds replied, 'We do promise to perform all duties to Bishops, as Reverend Fathers, and to joyne with them against the common Adversary for the quiet of the Church.' Then Chaderton, a Lancastrian and of the Reynolds party, demanded special exemptions from the ruling on vestments and the sign of the cross for his Lancastrian friends. All knew that Chaderton drew very many of his students from that area. Perhaps not surprisingly, as he had already voiced his respect for the Lancastrian itinerants, James agreed.

SUMMING UP

Fuller concludes that James behaved above himself, Bancroft was true to himself but Dr Reynolds fell much below himself. Spark did not utter a word. Despite the poor showing of the petitioners, most of their requests were granted. Various alterations were made in the liturgy, women were forbidden to baptize, the rubric on absolution was altered, Confirmation was called an 'Examination of Children' and the new translation was launched.

Contrary to stories circulated in later revolutionary times concerning a conference between good and evil, all the parties present were friends and colleagues of many years and shared the same doctrines. They all sought unity and wished to avoid divisions. The Church of England was again displayed as the English Church of the Reformation. From it was to issue in the next few years a team of men who were to help codify the doctrines of grace at Dort in the canons still held as the essence of God's Word. So, too,

these staunch Anglicans were to foster a Bible version which was one of the crowning glories of the English Reformation. Nor can the King be unduly criticised here. He was the main initiator behind the Hampton Court Conference, fostered the Synod of Dort and put all his energies into seeing the translation which bears his name completed. However, the petitioners' appeal to Caesar severely weakened Church independency and strengthened government control.

- i. Parker's Book of canons, ratified by all the bishops in both Provinces, Convocation the Convocation of 1558 and especially the Synod of 1571, drew strict lines between the powers of the sovereign and those of the Church.
- ii. Taken from The Church of England 597-1688, pp. 347-348.
- iii. The Church History of Britain From the Birth of Jesus Christ , London, 1656.

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