

Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England
John Milton

Summary and Condensation with Modernized Spelling and Punctuation

Book 1

Opening

I do not know of anything more worthy than to consider first, the foul and sudden corruption, and then after many a tedious age, the long-deferred, but much more wonderful and happy reformation of the Church. Sad it is to think that such a Doctrine should through the grossness and blindness of her Professors, and the fraud of deceivable traditions, drag so downwards as to backslide one way into the Jewish beggary and stumble forward another way into the new-vomited Paganism of sensual Idolatry.

The superstitious man by his good will is an Atheist; but being scarred from thence by the pangs and gripes of a boyling conscience, all in a pudder shuffles up to himself such a God and such a worship as is most agreeable to remedy his fear. Fear fixed only upon the Flesh renders likewise the whole faculty of his apprehension carnal, and all the inward acts of worship issuing from the native strength of the Soul run out lavishly to the upper skin, and there harden into a crust of Formality. Hence men came to scan the Scriptures by the Letter, and in the Covenant of our Redemption magnified the external signs more than the quickening power of the Spirit.

Question

How should it come to pass that England, having had this grace and honor from God to be the first that should set up a Standard for the recovery of lost Truth, and blow the first Evangelic Trumpet to the Nations, holding up, as from a Hill, the new Lamp of saving light to all Christendom, should now be last, and most unsettled in the enjoyment of that Peace, whereof she taught the way to others? For, albeit in purity of Doctrine we agree with our Brethren, yet in Discipline we are no better than a Schism from all the Reformation. For while we hold Ordination to belong only to Bishops, as our Prelates do. we must of necessity hold also their Ministers to be no Ministers, and shortly after their Church to be no Church.

Method

I shall chiefly endeavor to declare those Causes that hinder the forwarding of true Discipline. Orderly proceeding will divide our inquiry into our Fore-Fathers days, and into our Times.

Source URL: <http://www.brysons.net/miltonweb/ofreformation.html>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl402/>

Forefathers' Days

Henry the 8th was the first that rent this Kingdom from the Pope's subjection totally; but his Quarrel being more about Supremacy than other faultiness in Religion that he regarded, it is no marvel if he stuck where he did. The next default was in the Bishops, who though they had renounced the Pope, they still hugged the Popedome, and shared the Authority among themselves, by their six bloody Articles persecuting the Protestants no slacker than the Pope would have done.

In Edward the VI's Days why a complete Reform was not effected to any considerate man may appear. First, he no sooner entered into his Kingdom, but into a War with Scotland; from whence the Protector returning with Victory had but newly put his hand to repeal the 6 Articles, and throw the Images out of Churches, but Rebellions on all sides stirred up by obdurate Papists, and other Tumults with a plain War in Norfolk, holding tack against two of the Kings Generals, made them of force content themselves with what they had already done.

Whatsoever the Bishops were, it seems they themselves were unsatisfied in matters of Religion.

We all know by Examples, that exact Reformation is not perfected at the first push.

It was Episcopacy that led the good and holy Men through the temptation of the Enemy and the snare of this present world to many blame-worthy and opprobrious Actions. And it is still Episcopacy that before all our eyes worsens and slugs the most learned, and seeming religious of our Ministers, who no sooner advanced to it, but like a seething pot to cool, sensibly exhale and wreak out the greatest part of that zeal, and those Gifts which were formerly in them, settling in a skinny congealment of ease and sloth at the top.

They are not Bishops, God and all good Men know they are not; that have filled this land with late confusion and violence; but a Tyrannical crew and Corporation of Imposters, that have blinded and abused the World so long under that Name. He that enabled with gifts from God, and the lawful and Primitive choice of the Church assembled in convenient number, faithfully from that time forward feeds his Parochial Flock, has his coequal and compresbyterial Power to ordain Ministers and Deacons by public Prayer, and Vote of Christ's Congregation in like sort as he himself was ordained, is a true Apostolic Bishop. But when he steps up into the Chair of Pontifical Pride, and changes a moderate and exemplary House for a misgoverned and haughty Palace, spiritual Dignity for carnal Precedence, and secular high Office and employment for the high Negotiations

Source URL: <http://www.brysons.net/miltonweb/ofreformation.html>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl402/>

of his Heavenly Embassy, then he degrades, then he un-Bishops himself; he that makes him Bishop makes him no Bishop.

From hence then I pass to Queen Elizabeth... in whose Days why Religion attained not a perfect reducement in the beginning of her Reign, I suppose the hindering Causes will be found to be common with some formerly alleged for King Edward 6: the greenness of the Times, the weak Estate which Queen Mary left the Realm in, the great Places and Offices executed by Papists, the Judges, the Lawyers, the Justices of Peace for the most part Popish, the Bishops firm to Rome, from whence was to be expected the furious flashing of Excommunications, and absolving the People from their Obedience. Next, her private Councilors persuaded her that the altering of Ecclesiastical Policy would move sedition. As for the Queen herself, she was made believe that by putting down Bishops her Prerogative would be infringed.

Milton's Time

From this Period I count to begin our Times. I shall distinguish such as I esteem to be the hinderers of

Reformation into 3 sorts, 1. Antiquitarians, 2. Libertines, 3. Politicians.

To the votarists of Antiquity I shall think to have fully answered, if I shall be able to prove out of Antiquity, First, that if they will conform our Bishops to the purer times, they must mew their feathers, and their pounces, and make but curtailed Bishops out of them. Secondly, that those purer times were corrupt, and their Books corrupted soon after. Thirdly, that the best of those that then wrote, disclaim that any man should repose on them, and send all to the Scriptures.

Popular Election of Bishops by Congregations

If those that over-affect Antiquity will follow the square thereof, their Bishops must be elected by the hands of the whole Church. The ancientest of the extant Fathers Ignatius, writing to the Philadelphians saith that it belongs to them as to the Church of God to choose a Bishop. Let no man cavil, but take the Church of God as meaning the whole consistence of Orders and Members.

Cyprian—In the 68 mark but what he says, The people chiefly hath power, either of choosing worthy ones, or refusing unworthy.

Hearken what the whole general Council of Nicea the first and famousest of all the rest determines, writing a Synodal Epistle To the African Churches, to warn them of Arrianisme, it exhorts them to choose orthodox Bishops in the place of the dead so they be worthy, and the people choose them, whereby they seem to

make the peoples assent so necessary that merit without their free choice were not sufficient to make a Bishop.

We may read how S. Martin soon after Constantine was made Bishop of Turon in France by the peoples consent.

Thus went matters of the Church almost 400 years after Christ, and very probably far lower, for Nicephorus Phocas the Greek Emperor, whose reign fell near the 1000 year of our Lord, having done many things tyrannically, is said by Cedrenus to have done nothing more grievous and displeasing to the people than to have inacted that no Bishop should be chosen without his will; so long did this right remain to the people in the midst of other palpable corruptions.

Thus the people vilified and rejected give over the earnest study of virtue and godliness as a thing of greater purity than they need, and the search of divine knowledge as a mystery too high for their capacities, and only for the Churchmen to meddle with, which is that the Prelates desire, that when they have brought us back to Popish blindness we might commit to their dispose the whole managing of our salvation.

Errors of Antiquity

1. The best times were spreadingly infected. 2. The best men of those times foully tainted. 3. The best writings of those men dangerously adulterated.

Hegesippus a grave Church writer of prime Antiquity affirms in the same book of Euseb. C. 32 that while the Apostles were on earth the depravers of doctrine did but lurk, but they once gone, with open forehead they durst preach down the truth with falsities. Shameful rents in the Church about the trivial celebration of Feasts, not agreeing when to keep Easter day, which controversy grew so hot, that Victor the Bishop of Rome Excommunicated all the Churches of Asia for no other cause.

Who is ignorant of the foul errors, the ridiculous wresting of Scripture, the Heresies, the vanities thick sown through the volumes of Justin Martyr, Clemens, Origen, Tertullian and others of eldest time? Who knows not how many surreptitious works are engrafted into the legitimate writings of the Fathers, and of those Books that pass for authentic who knows what hath been tampered withal, what hath been razed out, what hath been inserted?

Constantine

They extol Constantine because he extolled them. Of his Arianism we heard, his deferring to be baptized so many years, the excessive devotion, that I may not say Superstition both of him and his Mother Helena, to find out the Cross on

which Christ suffered. And what reformation he wrought for his own time it will not be amiss to consider. He appointed certain times for Fasts, and Feasts, built stately Churches, gave large Immunities to the Clergy, great Riches and Promotions to Bishops, gave and ministered occasion to bring in a Deluge of Ceremonies, thereby either to draw in the Heathen by a resemblance of their rites, or to set a gloss upon the simplicity, and plainness of Christianity.

The Prelates both then and ever since coming from a mean and Plebeian Life on a sudden to be Lords of stately Palaces, rich furniture, delicious fare, and Princely attendance, thought the plain and homespun verity of Christ's Gospel unfit any longer to hold their Lordships' acquaintance, unless the poor thread-bare Matron were put into better clothes. Thus flourished the Church with Constantine's wealth, and thereafter were the effects that followed; his son Constantius proved a flat Arian, and his Nephew Julian an Apostate, and there his Race ended, the Church that before by insensible degrees welk't and impaired, now with large steps went down hill decaying; at this time Antichrist began first to put forth his horn.

There is just cause therefore that when the Prelates cry out Let the Church be reformed according to Constantine, it should sound to a judicious ear no otherwise than if they should say Make us rich, make us lofty, make us lawless.

Insufficiency of Antiquity as Proof of Truth

The last point wherein the Antiquary is to be dealt with at his own weapon, is to make manifest, that the ancientest, and best of the Fathers have disclaimed all sufficiency in themselves that men should rely on, and sent all comers to the Scriptures

Custom without Truth is but the agedness of Error.

The very essence of Truth is plainness, and brightness; the darkness and crookedness is our own.

Libertines

Libertines suggest that the Discipline sought would be intolerable: for one Bishop now in a Diocese we should then have a Pope in every Parish. It is not any Discipline that they could live under, it is the corruption, and remissness of Discipline that they seek.

Book 2

The Form of Church Government Agreeable to Monarchy

This is the masterpiece of a modern politician, how to qualify, and mould the sufferance and subjection of the people to the length of that foot that is to tread on their necks.

A Commonwealth ought to be but as one huge Christian personage, one mighty growth, and stature of an honest man, as big, and compact in virtue as in body; for look what the grounds, and causes are of single happiness to one man, the same ye shall find them to a whole state.

They allege 1. That the Church government must be conformable to the civil polity, next, that no form of Church government is agreeable to monarchy, but that of Bishops. Now certain if Church-government be taught in the Gospel, as the Bishops dare not deny, we may well conclude of what late standing this Position is, newly calculated for the altitude of Bishop elevation, and lettuce for their lips. The ancient Republic of the Jews is evident to have run through the changes of civil estate, if we survey the Story from the giving of the Law to the Herods, yet did one manner of Priestly government serve without inconvenience to all these temporal mutations.

Seeing that the Churchman's office is only to teach men the Christian Faith, to exhort all, to encourage the good, to admonish the bad, privately the less offender, publicly the scandalous and stubborn; to censure, and separate from the communion of Christ's flock the contagious, and incorrigible, to receive with joy and fatherly compassion the penitent; all this must be done, and more than this is beyond any Church authority. What is all this either here or there to the temporal regiment of Wealpublic, whether it be Popular, Princely, or Monarchical? If therefore the Constitution of the Church be already set down by divine prescript; as all sides confess, then can she not be a handmaid to wait on civil commodities and respects: and if the nature and limits of Church Discipline be such as are either helpful to all political estates indifferently, or have no particular relation to any, then is there no necessity, nor indeed possibility, of linking the one with the other in a special conformation.

Episcopacy Dangerous to Monarchy

It shall be my task to prove that Episcopacy with that Authority which it challenges in England is not only not agreeable, but tending to the destruction of Monarchy.

When through Constantine's lavish Superstition they forsook their first love and set themselves two Gods instead, Mammon and their Belly, then taking advantage of the spiritual power which they had on men's consciences, they began to cast a longing eye to get the body also, and bodily things into their command, upon which their carnal desires, the Spirit daily quenching and dying in them, they knew no way to keep themselves up from falling to nothing, but by

bolstering, and supporting their inward rottenness by a carnal, and outward strength. Hitherto he was but a Caterpillar secretly gnawing at Monarchy, the next time you shall see him a Wolf, a Lion, lifting his paw against his raiser, as Petrarch expressed it, and finally an open enemy and subverter of the Greek Empire.

What a dangerous fallacy is this, when a spiritual man may snatch to himself any temporal Dignity or Dominion under pretence of receiving it for the Church's use? What good upholders of Royalty were the Bishops, when by their rebellious opposition against King John, Normandy was lost, he himself deposed, and this Kingdom made over to the Pope? When Bishops shall openly affirm that, No Bishop, no King I will fetch you the Twin-brother to it out of the Jesuits' Cell, One Pope, and one King

Amongst many secondary and accessory causes that support Monarchy, these are not of least reckoning, though common to other States: the love of the Subjects, the multitude, and valor of the people, and store of treasure. In all these things hath the Kingdome been of late sorely weakened, and chiefly by the Prelates. What numbers of faithful and freeborn Englishmen and good Christians have been constrained to forsake their dearest home, their friends, and kindred, whom nothing but the wide Ocean, and the savage deserts of America could hide and shelter from the fury of the Bishops.

Sunday Gaming

But this I am sure they took the ready way to despoil us . . .that we might have one day. . . setapart whereinto... meditate, and commune of our Faith. . . at such a time that men should be plucked from their soberest and saddest thoughts, and by Bishops the pretended Fathers of the Church instigated by public Edict, and with earnest endeavor pushed forward to gaming, jigging wassailing, and mixed dancing is a horror to think.

Financial Extravagancies of the Prelates

Two Leeches they have that still suck, and suck the Kingdom, their Ceremonies, and their Courts. Now I appeal to all wise men what an excessive waste of Treasury hath been within these few years in this Land not in the expedient, but in the Idolatrous erection of Temples beautified exquisitely to out-vie the Papists, the costly and dear-bought Scandals, and snares of Images, Pictures, rich Coaps, gorgeous Altar-clothes.

Antichrist is Mammon's Son.

If they had one thought upon God's glory and the advancement of Christian Faith, they would be a means that with these expenses thus profusely thrown

away in trash, rather Churches and Schools might be built, where they cry out for want; and more added where too few are; a moderate maintenance distributed to every painful Minister, that now scarce sustains his Family with Bread, while the Prelates revel like Belshazzar with their full carouses in Goblets, and vessels of gold snatched from God's Temple.

What more baneful to Monarchy than a Popular Commotion? And what stirs the Englishmen sooner to rebellion, than violent and heavy hands upon their goods and purses? Yet these devout Prelates for these many years have not ceased in their Pulpits wrenching and spraining the text, proscribing and confiscating from us all the right we have to our own bodies, goods and liberties.

Prelates Covet Temporal Power

They covet to be expert in Canons and Decretals, which may enable them to judge and interpose in temporal Causes, however pretended Ecclesiastical. Have not some of their devoted Scholars begun, I need not say to nibble, but openly to argue against the Kings Supremacy? A wise and provident King ought to suspect a Hierarchy in his Realm.

We must cut away from the public body the noisome and diseased tumor of Prelacy, and come from Schism to unity with our neighbor Reformed sister Churches.

Seeing that it hath been inevitably proved that the natural and fundamental causes of political happiness in all governments are the same, and that this Church Discipline is taught in the Word of God, and, as we see, agrees according to wish with all such states as have received it, we may infallibly assure ourselves that it will as well agree with Monarchy.

Two Final Arguments Against Episcopacy

They allege the antiquity of Episcopacy through all Ages. What it was in the Apostles time, that questionless it must be still. . . But if Episcopacy be taken for Prelacy, all the Ages they can deduce it through will make it no more venerable than Papacy.

Assemblies draw to them the Supremacy of Ecclesiastical jurisdiction. No surely, they draw no Supremacy, but that authority which Christ, and Saint Paul in his name confers on them. . . No, this Ecclesiastical Supremacy draws to it the power to excommunicate Kings, and then follows the worst that can be imagined.