The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44

These are exciting times in which to be a scholar of the dynamics of religious reformation in mid-17th century England (and in the wider British Isles). The publication in 2012 of the minutes and collected papers of the Westminster Assembly, edited across five volumes by Chad van Dixhoorn, is surely one of the most ambitious pieces of early modern transcription and editing attempted in recent times, and has opened to researchers the debates of the Assembly’s divines as they attempted to determine the future course of England’s religious doctrine and worship. Judging by the online discussions within Reformed Protestant circles, van Dixhoorn’s work has achieved the kind of tangible research impact of which most of us can only dream. On top of van Dixhoorn’s volumes, we are keenly awaiting new works by Anthony Milton and Elliot Vernon which will shed further light on the often tangled, but always interesting, religious history of this turbulent period.

Hunter Powell’s Crisis of British Protestantism is the first major work to take advantage of the increased accessibility of the records of the Westminster Assembly. The real subject of the book is revealed within its sub-title: church power. Since the coming of Christianity to the British Isles, government by bishops had been the basis for the oversight of the church, though that office came under some pressure during the reformations of the 16th century due to the lack of a firm scriptural basis for the office. Beyond the frequently intense polemical debates, the initiative was sometimes seized at the local level. During its later 16th century reformations, the Scottish Kirk had developed the presbyteries which had governed the church
at the local level under the umbrella of a ‘reduced episcopacy’. (2) In Elizabethan England, where famous presbyterian campaigns had been waged in Parliament between the 1560s and the 1580s, there was often a fine distinction between these campaigners and the alliance between ministry and magistracy which pursued moral reformation in numerous English counties and towns. (3) Whilst on the one hand, there were theological objections to the concentration of so much ecclesiastical power in the hands of one man (the diocesan bishop), there was also the practical dimension of how realistic it was to expect one man (no matter how godly) to oversee the pursuit of effective religious and moral reformations over sometimes large swathes of England.

During the mid-to-late 1630s, under Charles I and his archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, the Church of England’s episcopate became increasingly controversial as ceremonial and doctrinal innovations in the Church became wrapped with broader fears that Charles, through the influence of his French Catholic wife, Henrietta Maria, had become the dupe of a plot within church and state to return England to Catholicism by stealth. Charles and Laud’s cack-handed attempts to force these innovations upon the Scottish Kirk in 1637 had provided the context for the Covenanting movement which led to the abolition of the office of bishop within the Kirk. The culmination of this movement was a Scottish occupation of northern England in the summer of 1640, forcing Charles to call that autumn what would become the Long Parliament. (4) With particular relevance for Powell’s arguments, Scottish influence within English politics would be a recurring theme during the coming decade, and not least when debates were held as to what system of church government would replace an unscriptural episcopal system which, by concentrating ecclesiastical power in the hands of a few ungodly men, had led the English state and its church to the brink of destruction. That said, the assembly of divines which convened at Westminster Abbey in the summer of 1643 at the behest of Parliament, was a forum for English divines to formulate proposals for the reform of the English church which Parliament could consider and, if deemed appropriate, enact. It was only in the autumn that the English members were joined by non-voting Scottish commissioners, a result of the Scots’ military support for Parliament via the Solemn League and Covenant.

In his introductory chapter, Powell highlights what might be perceived as being his ambitions for this monograph. Central to his thesis is what we might describe as being the rehabilitation of the ‘Apologists’ or the ‘Dissenting Brethren’, the five clergymen Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson and William Bridge. Their famous Apologeticall Narration, a defence of the rights of particular congregations within the broader church (as per the labelling of its authors as ‘congregationalists’) published in January 1644, has undoubtedly been handled in somewhat blunt ways by historians in the ensuing centuries. As Powell writes, ‘Their Apologeticall Narration has been described as a declaration of ecclesiastical warfare that sought to break the Aldermanbury alliance in order to secure a broad toleration for independent churches’ (p. 4). Thus, a historiography has emerged which has portrayed two warring sides, presbyterians and independents, who contested against each other over the future of the English church, with the integrity of the particular congregation within that church being at stake. By the autumn of 1644, it was clear that some form of presbyterian government would be endorsed, with the rights of the particular church being subsumed (at least to some extent) within a presbytery consisting of representatives from several particular congregations within a geographical locality. However, the ‘Apologists’ did not formally register their ‘dissent’ until November 1644, after the taking by the Scots’ army of the valuable pawn of Newcastle had caused Parliament to order the Westminster Assembly to send an account of its deliberations thus far. The submitted papers included the vaguely worded Third Proposition (‘The Scripture doth hold forth, that many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government’) against which the ‘Apologists’ subsequently dissented (pp. 232–3). Nearly a year had passed since the publication of the Apologeticall Narration, and Powell has argued that, during that time deliberations within the Assembly had been characterised by attempts to accommodate the ‘Apologists’ rather than to alienate them.

The first substantive chapter of this work focuses upon the Aldermanbury circle, a somewhat shadowy group of clerics who met at Edmund Calamy’s London home from late 1640 as the future direction of the English church was debated via the press, petitions, and Parliament. Powell painstakingly places a tract, The Petition for the Prelates Briefly Examined, written by Jeremiah Burroughs and possibly also by Thomas Goodwin, at
the heart of the Aldermanbury circle, and thus, in the intellectual milieu surrounding the more famous anti-episcopal ‘Smectymnuan’ pamphlets (written by a collaboration of five authors, of whom Calamy was the ‘EC’). Significantly for Powell’s subsequent arguments, the Petition Examined emphasised the role of the parish presbytery, with little focus upon inter-congregational synods. Furthermore, Powell argues against the notion that there was an Aldermanbury ‘accord’, whereby members of the circle had agreed ‘to refrain from promoting their polity publically’, and thus, it was the ‘Apologists’ who had subsequently broken the accord. Rather, as Powell argues, ‘there is no evidence ... that there was a cataclysmic breakdown within this Calamy group’ (p. 30), and if this is the case, then the ‘Apologists’ entered the Westminster Assembly not so much as ecclesiological outsiders, but in fact, as holders of close working relationships with clergymen who would be amongst the Assembly’s leading lights in seeking a godly reformation of the church.

Powell’s second chapter introduces the ecclesiological writings of the early 1640s by George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford, Scottish pastors who would later become commissioners at the Westminster Assembly. Crucial throughout Powell’s monograph are the ecclesiastical ‘keys’ discussed in Matthew 16:19 and 18:17–18. Christ had clearly given the church the power to order its affairs, but who within the church had the scriptural justification for administering that authority was very much a contested issue which underlay the Westminster Assembly’s ecclesiological debates; in brief and highly reductionist terms (and amongst other possibilities), did that power lie with the membership and/or the eldership of the particular congregation, or did that power lie with synods comprised of representatives from the particular congregations within that synod? Even then, should synods have the primary jurisdiction, or should their role merely be advisory to the particular congregation, or as a court of appeal for decisions made by the particular congregation? In essence, by going beyond Gillespie in stating the exclusive jurisdiction of the eldership (rather than that of the congregation as a whole), Rutherford provided a Scottish model for an English context which had relatively recent experience of separatist controversies, and where there was thus a reluctance to give too much church power to the mass of the laity. Powell’s broader point, though, is that the works of both authors were compatible with works emanating from the Aldermanbury circle, such as the Petition Examined; something which (in Powell’s view) suggests that rather than being diametrically opposed, the Apologists and Scottish theologians such as Gillespie and Rutherford may actually have been closer than has often been supposed (p. 6).

From the third chapter onwards, discussion moves into the Westminster Assembly. The third chapter deals with the debates in the autumn of 1643 about ‘the power of the keyes’; in other words, how should Christ’s injunctions in Matthew’s gospel be applied to the current church? In particular, did the power of the elders within a congregation come to them from Christ via the congregation, or did that power come direct to the eldership from Christ, and if so, how did that power relate to the particular congregation? The answer to this quandary would have implications for the role and status of elders within a congregation, and Powell argues that the split at the Assembly over this issue was between different shades of presbyterianism. Thus, to avoid a catastrophic split amongst those with various presbyterian sensibilities, the settling of the issue of the keys, and with it the codifying of a platform for church government, became somewhat sidelined. It was during this stalemate that the Apologetical Narration appeared upon its publication in January 1644, and its immediate reception is the subject of the fourth chapter. In contrast to some of the prevailing interpretations of the Narration, Powell argues that it in fact represented ‘a last attempt to keep the godly united and protect the unity that had been established in 1641’ (p. 91), and as such, it did not offer a platform for church government per se. Rather than causing an initial storm, it would not be until March 1644 that the Narration would be cited on the floor of the Assembly, and it was actually cited positively at the Assembly as representing a potential basis for ecclesiological accommodation. Indeed, there is no evidence that the Narration ‘either caused a stir in the assembly, or drew a reprimand from Parliament’ (p. 98); indeed, the Narration’s allowance of a role for the civil magistrate in overseeing the church was attractive to Parliament. Much of Powell’s study of the impact of the Narration is upon the attempts of the Scottish commissioner Robert Baillie to stoke opprobrium against the Apologists amongst the Reformed churches of continental Europe. Baillie (who was himself breaking the Assembly’s rules by engaging in such correspondence) procured a series of responses to the Narration from continental churches in the hope that they would condemn it, and whilst none wholly endorsed the Narration, neither did they provide the outright
condemnation for which Baillie had hoped. However, the eyes of the continent were now focused upon England’s religious settlement, and with Parliament unsettled by the spectre of foreign correspondence, Powell suggests that the contemporary crisis about the Narration was about the Westminster Assembly being dragged into ‘an international crisis’ rather than regarding the Narration’s position within current ecclesiological debates (p. 114).

The fifth and sixth chapters deal with the role of the respected New England divine John Cotton in the debates of 1644. Cotton’s Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven, published in England by Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye in May 1644, was arguably more influential amongst the Assembly’s divines than the Apologeticall Narration, and was cited at the Assembly on more occasions than the Narration. For Goodwin and Nye, the Keyes offered a ‘Middle-way’ which respected the rights of the members of the particular congregation, whilst ensuring that the eldership held a proper authority within the congregation (p. 125). For Cotton, the eldership and the church ‘had distinct roles which were ordained by Christ and which were meant to be obeyed’ (p. 133); the church had the power to elect its officers, but the people did not have the power to exercise the power of those officers, for example, in administering the sacraments. Powell argues that the publication of the Keyes was ‘a way for the Apologists to reach out to the Scots’, and built upon the Apologists’ existing working relationships with the likes of George Gillespie (p. 159), and furthermore, that Cotton’s distinction between the rights of the eldership and the people received influential support from the renowned Dutch theologian, Gisbertus Voetius. However, in advocating Cotton’s Keyes, Goodwin and Nye ceded some ground in accepting that synods containing representatives from different congregations existed by ‘ordinances of Christ’, though such synods existed to hear cases of maladministration only, and did not have the power to excommunicate (which lay with the particular congregation) (p. 166). This point provides a basis for what is one of Powell’s main arguments, that it was the ecclesiology of the ‘clerical English presbyterians’, the most famous of whom to the modern reader (through the work of Ann Hughes) is perhaps the Westminster Assembly outsider Thomas Edwards, which ‘was the most unique in the Reformed tradition’ in assertion that ecclesiastical ‘power resided exclusively, and as the first subject, in the clerics’ (p. 173).(5)
By May 1644, the ‘clerical English presbyterians had the upper hand’ (p. 203), and the course of this development is examined in the sixth chapter. In the context of the recently agreed Solemn League and Covenant, with Scottish troops now assisting the English Parliament’s armies in the civil war, the Scottish commissioners (the Apologists’ hitherto allies) were now increasingly reluctant to steer the Assembly in a particular direction, and became ever more aligned with the broad coalition of English presbyterians as the previously mentioned Third Proposition was debated and ultimately passed. In the midst of the debates of the spring of 1644, the Yarmouth pastor William Bridge offered a robust defence of congregationalism to the Assembly’s members, but in the Assembly’s attempts to prevent the presbyterian coalition fracturing, the rights of the particular congregation at the expense of the synod was the matter which gave way. It was into this context that Goodwin and Nye introduced Cotton’s Keyes. As we have seen, aspects of the Keyes were attractive to Scottish commissioners such as Gillespie, who at the same time were becoming alarmed by some of the claims towards ministerial prerogative (at the expense of the rights of the congregation) put forward by English clerical presbyterians such as Lazarus Seaman. However, as 1644 progressed, the Scots became less interested in accommodating the Apologists within a church settlement, and more interested in preserving the majority presbyterian coalition. The Scots’ seizure of Newcastle that autumn and the subsequent calling to Parliament of the Assembly’s workings to date (including the Third Proposition) caused the Apologists to register their written dissent to the Proposition. This dissent forced the Assembly to think of itself in two-party terms, and by January 1645, presbyterians of different shades ‘had coalesced into a majority’ (p. 236). Powell’s crucial point, thus, is that to think of the Assembly in two-party terms before the autumn of 1644 is a fundamental error, as coalitions shifted and efforts continued to accommodate the Apologists (who retained a great deal of credit as individuals and as a group) within the church settlement. In his conclusion, Powell points to the clerical presbyterians as those who scuppered the prospects for an accommodation, rather than the Apologists themselves, as debates over the rights of the local church (crucial to the Apologists’ ecclesiology) became sidelined, and by the end of 1644, proponents of different ‘presbyterians’ had ‘been corralled into a coalition’ (p. 244).

Powell’s monograph is undoubtedly an impressive study. He is correct to emphasise that clergymen of differing shades of ecclesiological opinion could nonetheless work constructively alongside each other and recognise the inherent godliness of their opponents. He also notes the scholastic nature of the Assembly’s debates, which (to the modern reader of the Assembly’s minutes and other sources) can serve to make its debates seem more intense and fraught than they perhaps were. In my mind, he does a great service in highlighting subtle shifts in argument which may not be apparent to historians who have not had a deep degree of theological training, and in doing so, he convicingly demonstrates that ‘presbyterianism’ was not a monolithic ecclesiological position, but rather, one which encompassed a variety of shades of opinion with regards to issues such as clerical prerogatives and the rights of the particular church. Indeed, the biggest compliment which I can pay to this work is that I wish that it had been available when I wrote my doctoral thesis!

I must, though, add a couple of caveats to this assessment. This monograph is not the most accessible to the non-specialist, and both terms and characters are introduced without any prior discussion (the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography will be an essential companion, and even then, Powell corrects several of these biographies during the course of this work). Also, whilst perhaps not necessarily the responsibility of the author, the book’s sub-title is perhaps a more accurate reflection of its contents than its title – the real religious ‘crisis’ of the early 1640s arguably lay in the parochial tensions and hostilities which ultimately fed into the civil war, and these are not discussed in this book.(6) Indeed, until almost the very end of the monograph, the presiding sense is of how the Assembly’s divines strove to avoid a crisis, both by keeping their affairs (as far as possible) within the Assembly, but also in their attempts to accommodate the Apologists. Nonetheless, this is a fine work of scholarship, and it will surely become essential reading for those investigating the religious politics of the British Isles at a critical moment in their histories.

Notes


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