

RICHARD HOOKER “THE PELAGIAN”. IS THERE A CASE?
NOTES ON THE *CHRISTIAN LETTER*

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ABSTRACT. Richard Hooker explicitly rejected the charge of Pelagianism. In late 16th century Reformation England, this was no small charge. The extreme sensitivity of the question together with Puritan suspicions of actual or latent Catholic sympathies left Hooker on the defensive. This situation came together in the *Christian Letter*. Although Hooker’s *marginalia* is fragmentary, they reveal his considerable frustration at the question of his theological integrity. The anonymous author(s) of the *Christian Letter* attributed their suspicions to the density and ambiguity, as they saw the matter, of Hooker’s writing. For Hooker, this way of writing and thinking was simply what was needed in order to handle the subtleties of Christian theology, especially in times of religious disruption. Theology was not for him, a blunt instrument, but a reasoned and precise scalpel the wielding of which required a commensurate measure of skill to use properly. However, there were important points of departure between Hooker’s protagonist and his own outlook. The author of the *Christian Letter* had clearly set out to depict Hooker’s writing style as so excessively subtle and dependent on the Schoolmen that contrary motives might well lie behind it. If not Catholic, then Pelagian.

KEY WORDS: Richard Hooker, Pelagianism, *A Christian Letter*, Puritanism

In the *Lawes* and elsewhere Richard Hooker felt compelled to defend himself against the charge that he was a Pelagian. The charge was consistent with the Puritan belief that we was soft on Rome and worse, a sympathetic observer. Rome was the whore of Babylon, the Antichrist, the deceiver of souls, where the slightest hint of compassion towards its people was guaranteed to cast doubt on anything else Hooker might say. Thus, his characteristically rational approach to polity and theology, his ease among the philosophers and his belief that we err act out our errors because we think wrongly, placed him squarely in the Puritan’s sights—if others could err, so might Hooker. His own reasoning capacity was clearly intimidating to his opponents and they suspected that if there was no smoke, it was surely

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because the fire was well hidden. Hooker it was argued was overly subtle and if so there must be dark and perhaps sinister motives at work. Even when Hooker praised Calvin in the *Lawes*, this was taken by the authors of *A Christian Letter* to be a slight of hand wherein he was *really* picking a fight and *actually* surreptitiously undermining the Calvinist cause through a kind of false friendship. Perhaps damning Calvin through faint praise. Now despite Hooker's respect for Calvin there is certainly warrant for the view that Hooker was unwilling to depict Calvin as the touchstone for orthodoxy. This is more hinted in the *Lawes* where the limit of Calvin's authority is clearly the French church thus inferring as Hooker does elsewhere in claiming the right of England to structure its ecclesiastical life in the ways it might choose.

A founder it had, whome for mine own part, I thinke incomparably the wisest man that ever the french Church did enjoy, since the houre it enjoyed him. His bringing up was in the studie of the Civill Lawe. Divine knowledge he gathered, not by hearing or reading so much, as by teaching others. For, though thousands were debtors to him, as touching knowledge in that kinde; yet he to none but onely to God, the author of that most blessed fountaine, the booke of life, and of that admirable dexteritie of wit, together with the helpes of other learning which were his guides...¹

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Hooker's sentiments but then, he knows very well the sensibilities surrounding one's heroes—as he says in the *Christian Letter*, Calvin “is the boile that may not be touched”.²

Given the Elizabethan context, Hooker's opponents lost no opportunity to score points. Thus, theological skirmishes were serious and not to be distinguished from their political implications. Again, while *A Christian Letter* charges Hooker with heterodoxy with respect to justification by faith, the sacraments, the sufficiency of the Scriptures, the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, and so on, the cumulative effect of such charges was to consolidate the Puritan view that he wrote in “cunningly framed sentences to blinde and intangle the simple”³ and engaged in nothing more than sophistry. The issues at stake in English resistance to Rome were considerable and so Hooker could also be accused of being unpatriotic. Surely, reason the authors of *A Christian Letter*, why else would Hooker approach his subject in this way if not through “certaine metaphisicall and crupticall method to bring men into a maze, that they should rather wonder at your learning, then be able to un-

1 Richard Hooker, *Lawes*, Preface, 2.1: 1.3.13-20, in *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. by John E. Booty, gen. ed. W. Speed Hill, Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

2 Hooker, “A Christian Letter”, in *Attack and Response*, volume 4 of *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. by John E. Booty, gen. ed. W. Speed Hill, Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 67:15.

3 Hooker, “A Christian Letter”, 72:13.

derstand what you teach in your writinge"?⁴ Therefore, Hooker's motives must be to obfuscate the integrity of Genevan reform in England, cast doubt upon the greatness of Calvin, and seditiously work against the majesty of the Puritan's

... worthy instrument of... joy, that blessed *Halcyon* and Christian *Deborah*, his annoynted hande-mayde our soveraigne Ladie and Queen *Elizabeth*, whom the sunne of righteousnes hath rayed upp to still the raging streames and roaring waves of Gods enemies, even the cursed Cananites of Romish Babilon...⁵

The writers of *A Christian Letter*, with this final flourish of patriotic emotion declare themselves to be the true Englishmen and God's friends. Hooker falls under suspicion that he may not be God's friend because he fails the tests, in their view, of Puritan orthodoxy. As in 1588, a mere ten years earlier, England became "justified" as a Protestant land, complete within itself and in favor with God. This was a state of affairs that needed defending in the name of God and Queen, against the crafty and insidious reasoning of Hooker who allegedly masked his true colors under cover of sophistry.

Yet, despite this flurry of innuendo, the writer(s) of the *Christian Letter* name John Whitgift as one their symbols of national orthodoxy. The same archbishop who placed Hooker in the Temple Church and supported Hooker by silencing Travers and who deprived Cartwright of his professorship in 1571. So it may be that the *Christian Letter* is attempting to drive a wedge between Hooker and Whitgift by forcing the question of political orthodoxy. But surely Whitgift would have been unmoved by such a blatant and unsophisticated move? What's going on here? Why the favour shown to Whitgift whose handling of Puritans was firm? As Speed Hill has noted, Whitgift was "circumspection itself" when called upon to adjudicate doctrinal disputes but as noted above, this did not prevent him from acting when politically necessary decisions had to be made. Doubtless his appointment of Hooker in the first place involved some well-considered theological acumen.

Hooker, of course, understood the rhetorical sleight of hand by which his opponents accused him. He is both amused, frustrated, angry and dismayed not least by the anonymity of the accusations. Death by innuendo and a thousand cuts. Referring to the slaying of Caesar by Cassius and Brutus, "Was there any feend he had so ill minded as not to believe such honest protestations?... You have given me as many stabs as my body could receyve at your hands..."⁶

When we consider the Dublin fragments it is clear that Hooker has been accused of being a Pelagian. He rejects the very idea of such a thing. This is found

4 Hooker, "A Christian Letter", 72:14ff.

5 Hooker, "A Christian Letter", 78:24ff.

6 Hooker, "A Christian Letter", 78:2-6.

also in the *Lawes*. Why is Hooker charged with Pelagianism? What do his critics see that leads them to this accusation? Is it because the lines are too closely drawn. Speed Hill draws attention to the charge made against the *Lawes* that they were seditious and associates this charge with either atheism or popery—those were the options presented! Does this merely reflect the *Zeitgeist* or do Hooker's critics have an active case perhaps built around Hooker's method or the subtlety of his polemic. It is clear from the *Christian Letter* that even if its authors are less concerned with polity—Whitgift is for them one of the great prophets and he had both appointed Hooker to the Temple Church and silenced Travers—they see in Hooker underlying theological sympathies which in context, are politically subversive and very serious. To discredit Hooker would be to call Whitgift's judgement into question.

The Pelagian question itself is often drawn into some relationship with Arminianism (Jacob Arminius, 1560-1609). The two theological perspectives, though different are related by their consequences for salvation and if so related, then the matter of Christian assurance and the indelible character of election are immediately drawn into the discussion.

Semipelagianism is the mediating position between Augustine and Pelagius in affirming the inability of man to approach God initially without prevenient grace while offering subsequent growth in Christian life through sanctified effort. Saving grace is external to human will but sanctifying grace requires conscious and rational cooperation—that is, we work out our own salvation with the knowledge of God in us—internal grace.⁷ In addition, with respect to Pelagianism particularly, Hooker explicitly rejects both. To do this, Hooker has to defend his understanding of grace and it should be noted that as he does so, he makes little attempt to engage in the sort of tight abstractions in which his opponents indulged. This is Hooker's way of redirecting the debate towards a more humane position. He adopts the same strategy in the *Lawes* over the question of transubstantiation and baptism. And with the regard to the Sacrament he simply refuses to move pass the statement that it is the worshiper that is transubstantiated, not the elements.

Hooker rejects the charge of Pelagianism and its forms by turning to the question of free will which naturally leads to a discussion of grace and predestination. He does so by using the familiar distinction by “aptnes and will” and by carefully working through what he means by these terms. This is always Hooker's starting point in controversy and exegesis—to define the very terms being used. The *Dublin Fragments* provide his line in the sand.

7 Philippians 2:12f.

... cursed... be that man which beleeveth not as the *Church of England*, that without Gods preventing and helping grace, wee are nothing att all able to doe the workes of pietie which are acceptable in his sight.⁸

Perhaps if Hooker had left it that, such writers of *A Christian Letter* may well have been content. But Hooker cannot do it. He goes on, "Butt must the will cease to be itselpe because the grace of God helpeth it?"⁹ And here he invokes the meaning of "aptnes" as that by which a person may

freely take... or refuse things sett before it, is soe essentiall to the will, that being deprived of this it looseth the nature, and cannot possiblie retaine the definition of will... To actuate att any tyme the possibilitie of the will in that which is evill, wee neede noe helpe, the will being that way over inclinable of itselpe butt to the contrarie soe indisposed through a native evill habit, that if Gods speciall grace did not aide our imbecilitie, whatsoever we doe or imagine would be only and continuallie evill.¹⁰

Thus for Hooker, to be human is to be accept man as a contingent being, having will and reason, and able to distinguish the voluntary agencies with which he is endowed and surrounded by his very createdness. Thus Hooker writes, "... had wee kept our first ablenes grace should not neede, and had aptnes alsoe been lost, it is not grace that could worke in us more then it doeth in brute creatures".¹¹

From this one can see where this line of reasoning might lead in the mind of a strict Puritan. The very mention of contingency, or voluntary agency might well provoke the suspicion that human effort is involved not only in recognising grace but actively appropriating its saving extent. Such "aptnes" varies considerably in each person—predestination guarantees that "aptnes" is not a contingent factor in man's salvation. But Hooker seems to be saying in the *Fragments* that predestination removes all idea of voluntarism which makes any action in the flesh of no consequence, either good or evil. In other words, to be predestined to damnation and have no other possibility but evil makes any possibility of recognition of the Good impossible. And even it were possible, the good could be of no superior moral value because it would not thereby proceed from a genuinely restored nature. Therefore, Hooker writes that

... predestination... doth not implie the bestowing of other natures, then creation att the first gave, butt the bestowing of gifts, to take away those impediments which are growne into Nature through sinne. Freedom of operation wee have by nature, but the

8 Richard Hooker, "The Dublin Fragments", in *Attack and Response*, volume 4 of *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. by John E. Booty, gen. ed. W. Speed Hill (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 101:3-6.

9 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 101:6f.

10 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 101:10-18.

11 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 101:28-31.

abilitie of vertuous operation by grace... without the influence of his speciall grace, they [our natural powers] bring forth nothing in his sight acceptable, noe nott the blossoms or least budds *that tend to the fruit of eternal*.¹²

So, Hooker concludes,

Prescience, predestination, and grace impose not that necessitie by force, whereof man in doing good hath all freedome of choice taken from him. If prescience did impose any such necessitie, seeing prescience is not only of good butt of evill, then must wee grant that *Adam* himselfe could not chose but sinne... If predestination did impose such necessitie, then was there nothing voluntary in *Adams* well doing neyther...¹³

Thus Hooker argues that both prescience and predestination are neutral concepts insofar as they describe the possibilities of the godhead from a human standpoint. Such terms do not allow mortals to adjudicate the mind of God generally so that the particulars of any given human situation must be made to conform to it. The consistency of Hooker's position is that if the character of the attributes of our createdness as intended by God, cannot be negated, then neither can the secret attributes and counsels of God—his inscrutability and mystery must be accepted as part of his known will also. So in the case of individuals, conversion and repentance supplied the necessary confirmation that transformation had occurred yet even here, Hooker is circumspect about just how far human motives can be probed.

The core problem is that the writer(s) of *A Christian Letter* were unwilling to make the same distinctions as Hooker regarding grace. They were evidently very sensitive to this question for it touched upon the centrality of justification and assurance insofar as “aptnes and abilitie” were both held to be lost in the Fall. So trigger words such as “impediments”¹⁴ or “motive efficacie” with respect to our “imbecilitie” and fallenness did not go far enough to depict the radical depravity envisaged by Genevan doctrine. And in his marginal reply Hooker notes that in relation to nature, “... under coulor of condemning corrupt nature you condemn nature and so in the rest”.¹⁵ The Puritans were reacting to stimuli, the “bugs wordes”¹⁶ rather than reasoning Hooker's case because Calvin was the “boile that may not be touched”¹⁷ and who does not want to defend their heroes from critique. The irony is that Hooker has only moved somewhat from Geneva in asserting that there remained sufficient in the human constitution to which grace might

12 Hooker, “Dublin Fragments”, 103:6-17.

13 Hooker, “Dublin Fragments”, 102:13-30.

14 For example, Hooker, “Dublin Fragments”, 103:8.

15 Hooker, “A Christian Letter”, 17:28.

16 Hooker, “A Christian Letter”, 17:25.

17 Hooker, “A Christian Letter”, 67:15.

appeal. And indeed, the formal motive and activity of God that enlivens human appreciation of its own predicament is always the prevenience of God in mercy and grace. This evident lack of shared understanding or clarity of thought is clear from the *Christian Letter*:

For if from sound and sincere virtues (as you say) *full joy and felicitie ariseth*, and that *we all of necessitie stande bounde unto all partes of morall duetie in regarde of life ot come*, and God requireth more at the handes of men unto happines, then such a *naked beleefe*, as Christ calleth *the worke of God*: alas what shal we poore sinful wretches doe, who have no confidence in the flesh... yea our verie righteous workes we finde to be staynd like a filthie cloth...¹⁸

To which Hooker replies in the marginalia, "Repent and believe". And further, "Is faith alone the formall cause of justification? And faith alone a cause in this kind. Who taught you this doctrine?"¹⁹ Here Hooker anticipates the question whether it is the believer's faith in Jesus that saves or trust in the faith Jesus himself exercised as the true and obedient one. It seems clear that Hooker is defending the view that effectual faith is the faith that justified Jesus (so to say), the second Adam, as the formal cause of justification rather than the achievements of faith.²⁰ This alone makes Hooker the Pelagian seem impossible. Yet despite this Hooker presses the point. He wants to show that grace allows man to respond and that its character must be understood to be grace which can only happen in the context of aptness. Thus our noetic depravity for Hooker is not complete but rather weakened, admittedly to the point where such reason as remains can do no good to the end of salvation. Grace therefore quickens both mind and Spirit to grasp its own predicament and its way of salvation. Yet it retains the capacity to recognize the Good when it sees it. To see through Hooker at this point his Puritan readers had to understand him as conflating his nuanced understanding of grace, appearing to make no distinction between justification and sanctification. Hooker never wanted to lose sight of the nature of man as a voluntary being and against which predestination constantly pressed:

... powers and faculties notwithstanding retaine still their naturall manner of operation although their originall perfection be gone, Man hath still a reasonable understanding, and a will thereby frameable to good things, butt is not thereunto now able to frame himselfe. Therefore God hath ordeyned grace, to counterveye this our imbecillitie, and to serve at his hand, that thereby wee which cannot moove ourselves, may be drawne,

18 Hooker, "A Christian Letter", 21:14-24.

19 Hooker, "A Christian Letter", 21:19, 33f.

20 The debate is between subjective and objective genitive in Romans 3:21f. Nigel Turner is unable to decide and opts for a third option, the "mystical genitive" where translation could go either way. This allows for the sort of theological compression to be found in Paul.

butt amiablie drawne. If the grace of God did enforce men to goodnes, nothing would bee more unpleasant unto man than vertue, Whereas... It delighteth us...²¹

To the Puritan reader, Hooker may have been trying to describe a mere unfortunate set of circumstances which sadly resulted in men being less happy than they might be otherwise. It cannot be said that Hooker himself ever entertained the matter in this way—he was completely alert to the deep predicament of man, but to Puritans fired with religious and political urgency, eternal souls and the state of the nation were at stake.

And now the Pelagian question. In the *Fragments* Hooker explicitly rejects the Pelagian agenda. It is grace that draws our minds but grace cannot do this if aptness is destroyed. Something of the *imago dei* must remain. Any response on the part of man's will comes only from the inward illumination of grace. Writes Hooker:

The only thing that Catholique Fathers did blame, was the error of them whoe ascribed any laudible motion or vertuous desier tending towards heavenly things *to the naked libertie of mans will, the grace of God being severed from it*; In a word... the manner of Gods operation through grace is by making heavenly mysteries plaine to the darke understanding of man, and by adding motive efficacie unto that which there presenteth itselfe, as the object of mans will.²²

However, where Hooker may well have let the matter settle he continues in the *Fragments* extending his treatment of Pelagius to declare "... know that I doe understand grace soe as all the ancient Fathers did in their writings against *Pelagius*".²³ Hooker could hardly state it more plainly. But to a suspicious reader, Hooker is already manipulating language and using his special knowledge to say something other than he means.

To some extent, Hooker's detractors have a point. If he had concluded with his analysis of Pelagianism and his shared condemnation of it—though his condemnation was perhaps not sufficiently thorough for Puritan convictions—perhaps he may have avoided the sort of criticisms found in the *Christian Letter*. After all, his summary statement in the *Fragments* is plain;

Soe the whole question of grace being growen amongst the ancient unto this issue, *whether man may without God seeke God, and without Grace, eyther desire or accept grace first offered, the conclusio of the Catholique part was, No*, and therefore in all their writings, the

21 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 103:17-27.

22 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 104:21-27.

23 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 109:6f.

point still urged is grace, *both working inwardlie, and preventing the verie first desires*, or motions of man to goodnes.²⁴

Unfortunately, if that is the last word, Hooker feels the need to further strengthen his point. He wants to bury his reader in a comprehensive mountain of evidence the cumulative effect of which is, naturally, to settle any possible objections, which he knows to be coming. To do this Hooker introduces "The diviner sorte of the Heathens..."²⁵ something he did in the *Laves* who, when they reflected on their own "more eminent perfections" realised that more than ordinary influence had brought such achievements about. Hooker's point was to show that no final confidence can be located in the will to good even if it might be accepted that human will was sufficiently free to do so. Can it be that Puritans would have found such reasoning compelling? For Hooker uses this argument to show that notwithstanding any human achievement, including that of the church;

... the first grace saveth not the Church itselfe by vertue of the second without the third. Saving grace is the guift of the Holy Ghost which lighteneth inwardly the mindes, and inflammeth inwardlie the hearts of men, working in them that knowledge approbation and love of things divine, the fruite wherof is æternall life. In grace there is nothing of soe great difficultie as to define what manner and measure it worketh.²⁶

The first grace is common—it sustains creation and human society and stimulates man to seek God. The second grace makes us teachable and open to the things of God. The third grace is given in the gift of the Holy Spirit. "... that baptisme with heavenlie fyer, which both illuminateth and inflameth... unto things divine, whereupon our eternall felicitie ensueth".²⁷ The problem is that Hooker really seems to be discussing sanctification when he discusses the third grace and he is not slow to depict some of its more militant outcomes. For while it may indeed "restraine insatiable desiers", it also "... banish[es] sects, to make manifest the rule of trueth, to silence heretiques, to disgorge miscreants and inviolably to observe the *Ghospell of Jesus Christ*".²⁸ And so in a word Hooker declares that "Grace is not given us to abandon labour, butt labour required least our sluggishnes should make the grace of God unprofitable".²⁹ Is this the same as entertaining the possibility of falling from grace? Is Hooker saying grace is actually resistable?

Although Hooker is clear that *his* understanding of "labour" is not that of Pelagius because his understanding of labour towards God required the operation of

24 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 111:4-9.

25 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 111:14.

26 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 111:27-33.

27 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 112:9-11.

28 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 112:16-18.

29 Hooker, "Dublin Fragments", 112:28-30.

divine grace, he has surely left the door open to misconstrual something his critics were happy to engage. For Calvin himself had discussed the notion that there was a kind of grace that could not avail for salvation in and of itself. For it is only the elect who may receive the special grace necessary in regeneration. Calvin rejected the idea of “equally and indiscriminately distributed” grace.³⁰ What distressed Calvin was the idea that grace could be parcelled up into its kinds. Citing Peter Lombard and Bernard, both of whom he believed to have misunderstood Augustine, Calvin rejects any notion that free will is really free because this meant we are free to accept or reject grace which he considers impossible in light of election. Calvin accepted the idea that human will to good comes from grace (Hooker’s *aptnes*?) but goes on to condemn the view that there is an impulse also toward the good that is of nature rather than grace and whose failures are the result of (mere?) human ineffectiveness. This was wholly unsatisfactory to Calvin because it placed man in a totally ambiguous relation to both himself and God. And this is what Calvin read in the Fathers whom he regarded as uncertain—authoritative but not finally. “At one time these writers teach that man, despoiled of the powers of free will, takes refuge in grace alone. At another time they provide, or seem to provide, him with his own armor”. Is this what the Puritans saw in Hooker?—an excessive dependence on the Fathers? It may be that Hooker’s nuanced distinction between “aptnes and ablenes” was over-subtle for a Puritan readership accustomed to the more precise theology of Calvin. For Calvin, free will is a mirage since we are noetically depraved and if Hooker’s “small vital odor” really did exist, does it lead us to God? If it does not save, does it lead to faith? If it does lead to faith then it must lead to salvation and so is of God with grace and assurance thereby secured. No amount of argument would seem to suffice for the writers of *A Christian Letter*. For Calvin, it is not that our desires are unruly, or that our impulses have dominated us, but rather that we are *compelled* to sin. Anything less than this does not fully express the guilt of our actual situation.

Conclusion

Hooker, in the *Fragments*, time and again rejected Pelagius—at no time was Calvin disavowed by Hooker, except in terms of his underlying temperament. But for Hooker, a discussion of human labor in relation to grace and divine prevenience required a particular understanding of nature and grace as categories within a divinely sustained created order. Within this order God still acted and called forth an elect people. Opponents, said Calvin, eventually see “error from one word

30 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, volume XX of *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), I:2:2:6.

than truth from a wordy discourse".³¹ In this respect, he was absolutely correct. Hooker knew it, but ironically, the *Christian Letter* did not.

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31 Calvin, *Institutes*, I:2:2:7.