

The Disciplinarian Controversy

by J.I. Packer

The Disciplinarian Controversy was a debate between the Puritan reformers and the Anglicans over the form of church government, with the Puritans advocating for a Presbyterian scheme and the Anglicans supporting the Episcopal hierarchy.

Duration: 52:56

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 10:25, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Church Government", "Ecclesiastical Authority"

Description

In this video, the speaker discusses the points made in the admonition, a document written by Edwin Sam in 1573. The admonition criticizes young men who are seeking to overthrow the ecclesiastical authority and establish a new platform for the church. The speaker also mentions the division within the Puritan party regarding the approach to treating sin, with some believing that it should be ridiculed rather than deplored. The video concludes by summarizing the seven points presented in the admonition, which include the belief that the civil magistrate has no authority in ecclesiastical matters and that the government of the church should be entrusted to the clergy.

Transcript

May we pray. Just again to get into the story of the disciplinarian controversy between the Puritan reformers, or would-be reformers, and the defenders of the Elizabethan establishment. I spoke to you of Thomas Cartwright, and I was just in process of speaking to you of Field and Wilcox, the two young men who took up the torch from Cartwright, and in 1572 presented an admonition to the Parliament.

They censured the errors of the Book of Common Prayer and called for their reform, not for the abolition of the liturgy, but for a purifying of it, let's be clear on that, and also, for good measure, they called for the abolition, now I do mean the word this time, the abolition of the Episcopal hierarchy in the Church of England, and the substitution for it of a Presbyterian scheme of governance. Let me read to you from the summary of the contents of the admonition, in this book, D. J. McGinn, *The Admonition Controversy*. The admonition condemns the Book of Common Prayer.

In a general way, it deplores the origin of the Book in the Mass, the forms of prayer that it gives, and the way it uses the name priest instead of minister. It also attacks specific portions of the Book, particularly all the ritual taken over from the Roman Church. Various traditional elements in the communion service were picked out there for censure.

Also they censured the use in baptism of surpluses, interrogatories ministered to the infant, godfathers and godmothers, prompts and crossings brought in, they affirmed, long after the purity of the primitive church. The point about interrogatories for the infant, by the way, is that the Anglican tradition, the Cranmer's way of expressing in the baptism service the idea that the child baptized is committed to be a Christian, and that it's on the basis of this commitment that it is baptized. The way this is done is to ask the godparents, the sponsors who represent the church, to declare in the child's name a commitment to the Christian faith.

A lot of Anglicans in many centuries have thought this was a little bit artificial. These particular Puritans thought it was intolerable. They also objected to confirmation and the use of the wedding ring and the private administration of the sacraments and the rite of giving thanks after childbirth and the observing of Saint's Day.

Also they objected to the words receive the Holy Ghost and then they attacked the whole existing form of ecclesiastical government, non-episcopal hierarchy, also the abusers of the system, non-residents and pluralities, that is, men holding more livings than one at the same time and not residing, therefore, necessarily in some of the livings that they did hold. All those things must go, they said. And they put in a plea for Presbyterian discipline.

Presbyters, lay elders and deacons supplanting the Anglican three orders of ministry. I say supplanting because the deacons, whom the permanent officers concerned with the relief of the poor, not men doing their first year of ministerial, probationary ministry really, before being ordained, which then and now is the Anglican use of the diocese. And they go on to prescribe the sootfall, which we're going to see in a moment.

They end up by asking this pertinent question. If Presbyterianism is good for Scotland, how can it be bad for England? That's an appeal to the fact that in Sicily they secured a Presbytery. Well, such was the admonition.

And it was a platform to which Edwin Sands, who at that time was Archbishop of York, wrote about the young men of Cambridge and elsewhere in the country who'd taken up the points made in the admonition. Alongside my summary of the contents of the admonition, I thought I would read this to you, just to give you further testimony as to what the young Presbyterians were rooting for. New orators are rising up from among us, writes Sands.

Foolish young men who, while they despise authority and admit no superiors, are seeking the complete overthrow and rooting off of our whole ecclesiastical policy and are trying to shape out for us I know not what new platform of a church. Accept this summary of the question of issue reduced under Serfin Head. And then he summarises what they're standing for in seven points.

This, I think, is the clearest of all the summaries that you get, that's why I'm reading it to you. One. The civil magistrate has no authority in ecclesiastical matters.

He is only a member of the church, the government of which ought to be committed to the clergy. This point Cartwright had made, though in a mutiny. Two.

The Church of Christ admits of no other government than by Presbyterianism. Three. The names and authority of archbishops, archdeacons, chancellors, commissaries, and other titles and dignitaries of the

like kind should be altogether removed from the Church of Christ.

That's the whole inherited medieval system of interpretation of administration, I must say. Four. Each parish should have its own Presbytery.

Five. The choice of ministers necessarily belongs to the people. Six.

Here's a new point, which I don't think any of the other documents have made, namely the point of disendowment. The goods, possessions, lands, revenues, titles, honours, authorities, and all other things relating either to bishops or cathedrals, and which now of right belong to them, should be taken away forthwith and forever. Seven.

No one should be allowed to preach who's not a pastor of some congregation, and he ought to preach to his own flock exclusively and nowhere else. Sans opposes this on the ground that it's first, needlessly radical, and second, certainly disruptive. These things, he writes, as far as I judge, will make, not for the advantage and peace of the Church, but for her ruin and confusion.

Take away authority, and the people will rush headlong into everything that is bad. Take away the patrimony of the Church, and you will by the same means take away not only sound learning, but, well, my concern here is simply that you should see what these young men were after, and you should also see what some of the older men in the Reformed tradition thought of it. So much now for the men and for the admonition.

The effect of the admonition was to produce two weighty controversies. One between Cartwright and John Whitgift, W-H-I-T-G-I-F-T, who at the time of the controversy was Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and later became Archbishop of Canterbury. And the second was between Walter Travers, one of these young Puritans, and Richard Hooker, who argued it out when they were both ministers at the Temple Church in London.

That was a church serving specifically the legal community based on the law courts. They were both ministers, as I say, at the Temple Church in London, and they argued it out for about 12 months, preaching against each other, sermon by sermon. That was from 1585 to 1586.

Thomas Fuller, the 17th century historian of the Church of England, a man of Puritan sympathies as far as piety was concerned, though of strongly Royalist views in politics, he wrote a history of the Church of England describing this controversy, he said rather quaintly, the forenoon sermon, that's Hooker's, folk pure Canterbury, and the afternoon, Geneva. That was Hooker laying down various traditions, and Travers in the afternoon sermon, the second service, controverting them. The issues were first, in the doctrine of predestination, whether reprobation was consequent or antecedent, you know what that means, I hope, whether God reprobates those whom he does reprobate on the foresight of their sins, or apart from that foresight.

Then they argued the toss in the area of sermons against each other, as to whether assurance of faith was less certain than assurance of sense, and Hooker said it was less certain, and Travers, and then came the biggest issue, whether the Church of Rome was an albeit disfigured, that was Hooker, or whether the Church of Rome must be adjudged no part of the Church of Christ at all. Which was Travers' doctrine. And they argued the toss, and one Church issue led to another, and Hooker found himself at the end of this prolonged debate, feeling that he wanted to write something about the Church, which would, on

the one hand, clear the issue on this particular question, and would, on the other hand, and more important, vindicate the Anglican establishment, against the criticism that men like Travers, Travers was known for his private Presbyterian preferences, which meant they would vindicate the Church of England against the Presbyterianism of Travers and others.

Travers already in 1573, twelve years before this controversy, had brought out a book, in Latin, entitled, well I'll give you an English translation, A Full and Clear Explanation, from the Word of God, of Ecclesiastical Discipline, and of the Wandering, Aberrationis, the wandering away of the Church of England from it. Making the points in the admonition to the Parliament all over again. Well, against this background, the debate went on, Hooker did write his big book, The Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy, which is still, perhaps, the most distinguished book that has ever been produced, in defence of the kind of thing that you had in the Tudor establishment.

And, equally, witch gifts, writings against Carterites, have generally commended themselves to critics as being far more distinguished and cogent, simply as arguing, than anything that Carterite was able to put up against them. But nothing, in fact, was achieved in the direction of Presbyterianising the establishment. These literary guns were fired off, but nothing came of it.

Parliament, to whom the admonition was addressed, did, as a matter of fact, almost pass, in 1572, a bill that would have legalised non-conformity from the details of the prayer book service. But Elizabeth, when she heard what they were doing, sent down word to the Parliament House to say that no religious bills must be introduced until they pass convocation, and after that rebuff, the Parliament never even attempted to put through, on its own initiative, a bill to Presbyterianise the establishment. In 1583, witch gifts became Archbishop.

He set himself to put down all forms of Puritan activity, or, rather, Presbyterianising activity, and to expel from their livings men of Presbyterian sentiment. He had a way of doing it. He revived a document which Parker had drawn up in 1571.

Three articles to be subscribed by all clergy suspected of disloyalty to the established order. The first acknowledging the royal supremacy, the second acknowledging that the Book of Common Prayer contains nothing contrary to the word of God, and issuing an undertaking to use that book, and no other, in public worship, and the third subscribing the doctrinal articles of the Thirty-Nine. Well, this, of course, caught a lot of Presbyterianising Puritans at a sore spot.

They could have described the proposition that the prayer book contained nothing contrary to the word of God. In 1585, after two years of very rough handling of the Puritans by the use of the three articles, Whitgift was persuaded to modify his attitude a little, and to content himself by making Puritan suspects sign an undertaking to use the Book of Common without their actually having to subscribe the proposition that it contained nothing contrary to the word of God. That gave them a *modus vivendi*, and most of them, at any rate, were able to manage.

So much, then, for the leaders and the outline of the story. So far as achievement is concerned, it was a story of complete failure. They didn't Presbyterianise the Puritans, it can be said.

But I'm going to say a little more, in order that you may understand the movement better, having spoken of its leader's history, I'm going on now to speak of the arguments that were used in these debates between Cartwright and Whitgift, Travers and Hooker, and then we'll say just a little about particular forms of

Puritan undercover activity during these years. The arguments, then. I quote a sentence from a certain H.C. Porter.

He writes, Cartwright's teaching was never improved upon in Elizabethan Cambridge, nor were any important additions made to his arguments. That is true. The admonition, and Travers' book on ecclesiastical discipline, and a whole lot more texts and books that were published in favour of Presbyterianising the establishment, didn't really do more than echo Cartwright.

Now, Whitgift, writing against Cartwright, in one of these exchanges, replied to an answer. Cartwright had answered what Whitgift had first written against the admonition. Whitgift now replies to Cartwright's answer.

And Whitgift says that Cartwright's position, I quote him, consisted of two false principles and rotten pillars. It really boils down to two points at which he goes astray. The one is that we must, of necessity, have the same kind of government that was in the Apostles' time, and is expressed in Scripture, and no other.

The second, that we may not retain in the Church anything that has been abused under the Pope. That's actually a very perceptive summary. All Cartwright's articles, or Cartwright's arguments, rather, are expositions, and applications of one or other of those two theses.

Now, against this, Whitgift and Hooker argued that the intention of Scripture is actually misconstrued. The primitive ecclesiastical practice, the ecclesiastical practice of the New Testament gospel, is a norm for all time, and it's given to be such. But what we are told about New Testament church order, so they argued, is recorded more as a narrative of fact, and what actually happened, than as a theological statement of an ecclesiastical norm.

And, as I say, you misinterpret if you treat it as a norm, and say we must have a church order just like that which they had in the days of the Apostles. And therefore, said Whitgift and Hooker, it's no disobedience to the word of God to alter the New Testament pattern of church life and practice, provided that it's clear that by altering it, in the changed situation of a later age, you are doing the best thing possible for edification. Cartwright and his friends wouldn't allow that you could possibly, in principle, be doing the best thing for edification if you altered the New Testament church order.

Whitgift and Hooker didn't agree. Whitgift does his argument historically, and he pursues this line of thought, that now that you have what you didn't have in the first century AD, namely Christian magistrates, a Christian civil government, and a Christian state, you no longer need, in the way that you needed in New Testament times, the plural eldership, the corporate eldership in each individual church, nor do you need the order of deacons as a class of men whose whole job was a matter of poor relief. They're arguing, of course, from Stephen and the other six in Acts 6. Nor do you need a set-up in which the church is independent of the state.

Our circumstances, said Whitgift, would make adherence to them at those three points inappropriate and doubtfully edified. Provided that we have good order, and an edifying pattern of government in the church, then the ends for which church government is instituted are met. And the fact that we are doing it a different way from the Church of New Testament times, the Christian magistrates, the Queen in Parliament, settling religion, establishing the Protestant faith in the country, and an episcopal form of government within the church, rather than a Presbyterian one, these facts are not to be regretted, they need not be altered.

They're developments rather to be welcomed. They're just as good, to say the very least, as was the New Testament. That's his argument, based on the change of times and seasons.

He... What do we mean, he says, when we say that Scripture has, and must have, final authority in the Church of Christ? Well, he says, that we must be careful in answering this question. Because there are certain things that Scripture presupposes. It's a book addressed to men.

And it presupposes human nature. It presupposes in its recipients reason. It presupposes, and here Hooker picks up a conception which he took straight from the scholastic theologian, it presupposes that there is a law of nature in God's creation, which is embodied in the right use of reason, also in the judgments of the Christian Church, as well as being embodied in Scripture.

Now, Hooker isn't saying for a moment that reason and the Church don't make mistakes. He's not saying for a moment that it isn't necessary to detect and correct those mistakes by Scripture, when it appears that Scripture is taking a different line from what the Church has said and what reason has said. But, he says, Scripture presupposes that those who read it have already acknowledged the law of nature and are and are men who use their reason and men who judge things by reason, also that they are men who take seriously what has happened in the history of the Church, in which, says Hooker, the Spirit of God has all these centuries been active, and on the basis of his insistence that Scripture presupposes a law of nature, and also that it presupposes legislative power in societies, Hooker argues both the propriety and the utility of the Elizabethan establishments.

He says it's perfectly proper that historic institutions like bishops and certain ceremonies of, so he would say, proved edifying power, that's his claim, it could be disputed, but that's what he says, bishops and ceremonies of proved edifying power and a liturgy which embodies a great deal of old stuff, it's perfectly proper and appropriate that those things, by the judgment of the Church, by the judgment, rather, of the Christian community, which is both Church and State in England, should have been established as the ecclesiastical, it's perfectly appropriate that the Queen should be Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The law of nature expressing itself approves them as being natural in the situation, appropriate, fitting, congruous, and, in their results, edified. And we are not in any way contravening the authority of Scripture, this hooker, in accepting the Tudor establishment as it stands.

Now, that was the argument. It's complementary to Wyckoff's argument, as you can see. Both of them, both hooker and Wyckoff, go on to argue that it is, in fact, impossible to extract a complete Church order from Scripture that these isolated facts recorded about what they did in apostolic times don't make up as much of a Church order, so that you will, in any case, have to fill certain gaps by making your own judgments as to what they define and what's appropriate.

Sooner or later, everyone who would write a Church will be doing it. And they're able to develop this ad hominem argument against Carchite and his friends, who claim, you see, to be arguing from Scripture entirely. And they're able, I say, to develop this argument against Carchite and his friends in a very effective and powerful manner.

They just were better controversialists than their opponents. Now, all I'm asking you is whether you understand the argument. I don't ask you whether you approve or disapprove.

These are issues which take a certain amount of thought before one can come to an opinion. But my question now is, have you understood the argument? You see how the Anglicans argued against the

Presbyterians. This, again, is important to understand if you would appreciate the way that this situation was developing.

The Anglicans were convinced by their arguments the Presbyterians weren't. The Anglicans were convinced that they were being thoroughly loyal to Scripture in supporting the Tudor establishment. The Presbyterians were convinced that they were contravening the Scripture.

The Presbyterians expected judgement on the Church of England because of its iniquities. The Anglicans believed that they could, with a good conscience, pray for the health of God in all their necessities. This is part of the tragedy of the set-up.

Both sides convinced that they had God on their side and that the other side is in fact going against the mind and will of God and simply dishonouring Him and endangering the Church and Commonwealth. This is why the Anglicans regarded the Puritans as thoroughly mischievous people just as the Puritans regarded the Anglicans as committed to thoroughly ungodly principles. It was a tragic situation and it just got worse.

You'll see when we move into the Jacobean period. This argument was only used by the Anglicans and by that time and they never even sat under pressure. Move on then to just a little tailpiece for that Puritan underground... well, yes, that's my heading and it's the right one.

Two underground activities to be noted here. Both of them dating from the 1580s. First, the classic movement.

A set-up whereby in particular in different parts of the country groups of ministers used to have in effect a presbytery meeting to debate issues to decide on common policy to make common decisions helping ministerial work in the country parishes of the country the country parishes of England, quite simply. Between 1583 and 1587 the Classes using a new edition which they hoped to bring out as an even better manifesto than the original Book of Discipline and the Admonition to the Parliament. But then in 1588 Fields died and alas some of the papers from his desk fell into the hands of one of Whitgift's chaplains a man named Bancroft.

Whitgift by then was Archbishop of Canterbury and Bancroft was a man of the same spirit as himself very strong against the Puritans and these papers which fell into Bancroft's hands gave all the details to meetings up and down the country where they were cited and who the members were and so on and Bancroft exposed this scheme in public in a sermon in the pamphlet and then went into action as Whitgift's representative to put down these ministerial meetings and disband them on the grounds that they were seditious they were hostile to the establishment and men who were suspected of complicity in these local ministers' meetings were brought before the infamous Court of Star Chamber Do you know what that is?

It's a court which King Edward VI before the Reformation had set up in which he himself at his own discretion through commissioners appointed by himself could investigate first hand any case which he as King of England thought ought to be a matter for the monarch's own jurisdiction there was no there were no strings no legal strings it was an extra-constitutional court strictly and in the Court of Star Chamber you could do just what you liked well, Whitgift in cahoots with the Queen over this said Bancroft to bring these people suspected of complicity in the Catholic movement before the Queen's ecclesiastical commissioners and the Court of Star Chamber and some of them had a bad time and in the year 1590 a whole string of them were sent off to jail for complicity in this movement the

reason behind all this was what it had been from the first Elizabeth would not have Presbyterianism or any disruption of the ecclesiastical order in her kingdom and she was not prepared to appoint as her ecclesiastical officers men who were willing to be kind to Presbyterianism either when the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1590 passed a resolution calling for prayer for the poor persecuted Presbyterians of England Elizabeth wrote a furious letter to James VI that is James VI of Scotland later to be James I of England telling him for goodness sake don't you let them get away with it don't you let them pray for our Presbyterians let me read to you the way in which she addressed James you find the letter in this book the non-conformity of Richard Baxter by Irvonwy Morgan Morgan page 20

and she writes to James there is risen both in your realm and mine a sect of perilous consequence such as would have no kings but a presbytery and take our place while they enjoy our privilege with a shade that is the pretext of God's word which none is judged to follow right without their censure yea, look we well unto them James reading this said to himself a sect of perilous consequence why, that's my national church but as far as Elizabeth was concerned it was a thoroughly sectarian manifestation and indeed James undoubtedly took the line of thought which her letter expresses to heart because when he came down to England after her death to be James I of England he'd have no more truck with Presbyterianism than she would he was just thankful to be out of Scotland where these wretched

ministers and well where the whole national church claimed so much independence well there it was and that was the end of the classist movement second underground activity the Mar Prelate Tract this is worth mentioning it was rather fun while it lasted in 1588 and 1589 cavernous tracts lampooning the bishop began to appear in the oddest places not put out through the ordinary channels of distribution they were just found in bundles done up in stacks by the side of the highway and in steel paths and so on at least this was the story and then people opened them and found the tracts and distributed them free they were printed by a secret press that kept moving round the country it's quite a romantic story how the but then law enforced the secret press and eventually they did so and the press

the significance of these tracts is that they give you an index of just how unpopular the whole episcopal hierarchy was getting that it was possible to satirise it in this surrogating way and to have a good deal of popular support and have people laughing with you rather than finding that you've spoken off the record and that the mind of the country is against you and this lampooning of the bishops and this sustained Presbyterian criticism of the episcopal order did incidentally have another effect which I ought to tell you which I will tell you now prompted Anglican theologians to cast around for ways of defending the inherited diocese of Italy and it led to the publication of books beginning with a book by Bishop Dilson Thomas Dilson the 33 books which maintained that episcopal

government was of apostolic institution and therefore of divine right and ought to be preserved in the Church of Christ for that reason this was an innovation neither Wittges nor Hooker have taken this line they've taken the line which all the previous Anglican reformers all the previous supporters of the Tudor establishment have taken namely that since the episcopacy is a venerable ecclesiastical institution it's better to hold on to it if you can than if you can't but if you can't well it's not a great loss and it certainly isn't a maiming of the Church but here after Dilson and then Bancroft and then a whole series of writers in the 17th century you've got Anglicans insisting that the Church which Christ founded is maimed if there are no bishops in it and the Churches without bishops

can only at the best be judged second class churches although when they've had these writers went on to say when they've had to give up the episcopal order because of circumstances we understand it and we

sympathize and we don't blame them too much but nevertheless they are named churches said these writers because they haven't got this particular apostolic institution which we in the providence of God retain well the mantra of texts I suppose did something to create the state of feeling which made these Anglicans feel that they must say something strong for episcopacy and so which moved them to put reformed Anglican theology well that's all that I have to say in the by the end of Elizabeth and its leader he never simply stopped writing Cartwright and Travers both stopped writing before

1590 and lived the quiet life well Travers not too quiet he went to 1598 but after he came back in 1599 materializing Puritan relapsed in other words into inaction and in a very perceptive and judicious phrase by A.F.

Scott but in this book page 359 Pearson says they lapsed into inaction quote giving their wanted allegiance to the establishment but waiting for a better day in which to renew their efforts in favour of Presbyterianism unquote but alas that better day never came meanwhile in the 1590s after all the Presbyterian propaganda of the 1570s and 80s a whole set of writers began to put out pamphlets and texts defending the Anglican establishment from one standpoint or another against its critics I think that this is to be explained partly as a natural reaction pendulum do swing vigorous propaganda on one side of a disputed issue does lead to vigorous propaganda on the other side but it's also I think to be explained partly as post-armada euphoria I mean after the Spanish armada had gone to pieces

in 1588 how could an Englishman doubt that the Lord was on their side and that implied that the Lord approved of their church the Puritans had been saying well with a church in the state in which it is certainly the judgement of God is going to come down and this mood of post-armada euphoria lies behind some of the things that began to be said in favour of the Church of England as she was established and that then is the end of that not the ordinary secular but it certainly divided the Puritans because some of the Puritans themselves thought that this was the wrong way to treat evil one of them about whom you'll hear Richard Greenham put on record the following observation which just about sums up what a lot of them were feeling the text he said makes sin ridiculous where they ought to

make it odious that is they encourage people to laugh at sin rather than to deflore it and the milder and more genuine I think it's fair to say genuinely godly did feel this but the ordinary uncommitted any general questions oh there's a book and all the information that you want don't know whether you can get hold of any of his but he gives you complete well no look by the way you put what they would have said had all the all the backing that scripture affords to any church order this was their line it was really a hermeneutical difference a difference in evaluating what the new testament actually says about what they did in the church concerned to defend the establishment unworthy motive I mean rather they were concerned to defend it because they thought it was the now you may say you

may want to say but you have to when you look at the new testament you have to weigh the facts the evidence on church order is all very occasional I mean it describes what was done in particular and when in the pastoral epistles you've got specific injunctions for church life to be handled they're there but we don't know anything about and yet most modern presbyterians and if they were arguing in the churches you would have thought really that they all and mind Cartwright he's going the way too that modern brethren of God everything you do in the church must have scripture and everything that has precepts or example in the scripture must be done in the church well it's a position that in argument I'm afraid people were able to make well as I say I mean you just say well give me the bible

and let's look up devising a godly precept

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