

Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity

Richard Hooker

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The universal consent of man is the greatest sign of a thing's goodness, for nature is God's instrument, and we are fitted by nature to know the difference between good and evil. The laws of nature direct each thing to goodness of operation. Reason is the guide to the rules that secure our own good. The most fundamental of these rules are self-evident. No one can be ignorant of them; they were known among the ancient thinkers. Thus it is evident to reason, for example, that we ought to love others as ourselves. From this rule of equality there follows many other laws that ought to govern us in society. We can know this law, like every other law of nature, independently of Sacred Scripture.

Book I

Chapter 8

3. Signs and tokens to know good by are of sundry kinds; some more certain and some less. The most certain token of evident goodness is, if the general persuasion of all men do so account it.

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And therefore a common received error is never utterly overthrown, till such time as we go from signs unto causes, and shew some manifest root or fountain thereof common unto all, whereby it may clearly appear how it hath come to pass that so many have been overseen. In which case surmises and slight probabilities will not serve, because the universal consent of men is the perfectest and strongest in this kind, which comprehendeth only the signs and tokens of goodness. Things casual do vary, and that which a man doth but chance to think well of cannot still have the like hap. Wherefore although we know not the cause, yet thus much we may know; that some necessary cause there is, whensoever the judgments of all men generally or for the most part run one and the same way, especially in matters of natural discourse. For of things necessarily and naturally done there is no more affirmed but this, "They keep either always or for the most part one tenure" (Ἡ αἰεὶ ἢ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ ὡσαύτως ἀποβαίνει. Arist. Rhet. I. i).

The general and perpetual voice of men is as the sentence of God himself. For that which all men have at all times learned, Nature herself must needs have taught*; and God being the author of Nature, her voice is but his instrument. By her from Him we receive whatsoever in such sort we learn. Infinite duties there are, the goodness whereof is by this rule sufficiently manifested, although we had no other warrant besides to approve them.

**"Non potest error contingere ubi omnes idem [ita] opinantur." Monticat.* in 1. Polit. "Quicquid in*

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omnibus individuīs unius speciei communiter inest, id causam communem habeat oportet, quæ est eorum individuorum species et natura.” Idem. “*Quod a tota aliqua specie fit, universalis particularisque naturæ fit instinctu.*” “*Si proficere cupis, primo firme id verum puta, quod sana mens omnium hominum attestatur.*” Cusa in Compend. cap. 1. “*Non licet naturale univ-ersaleque hominum iudicium falsum vanumque existi-mare.*” Teles. “Ο γὰρ πᾶσι δοκεῖ, τοῦτο εἶναι φαμέν. Ὅ δὲ ἀναιρῶν ταύτην τὴν πίστιν οὐ πάνυ πιστότερα ἐρεῖ. Arist. Eth. lib. x. cap. 2.

The Apostle St. Paul having speech concerning the heathen saith of them, “They are a law unto themselves” (Rom. ii. 14). His meaning is, that by force of the light of Reason, wherewith God illuminateth every one which cometh into the world, men being enabled to know truth from falsehood, and good from evil, do thereby learn in many things what the will of God is; which will himself not revealing by any extraordinary means unto them, but they by natural discourse attaining the knowledge thereof, seem the makers of those Laws which indeed are his, and they but only the finders of them out.

4. A law therefore generally taken, is a directive rule unto goodness of operation. The rule of divine operations outward, is the definitive appointment of God’s own wisdom set down within himself.

The rule of natural agents that work by simple necessity, is the determination of the wisdom of God, known to God himself the principal director of them, but not unto them that are directed to execute the

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same. The rule of natural agents which work after a sort of their own accord, as the beasts do, is the judgment of common sense or fancy concerning the sensible goodness of those objects wherewith they are moved. The rule of ghostly or immaterial natures, as spirits and angels, is their intuitive intellectual judgment concerning the amiable beauty and high goodness of that object, which with unspeakable joy and delight doth set them on work.

The rule of voluntary agents on earth is the sentence that Reason giveth concerning the goodness of those things which they are to do. And the sentences which Reason giveth are some more some less general, before it come to define in particular actions what is good.

5. The main principles of Reason are in themselves apparent. For to make nothing evident of itself unto man's understanding were to take away all possibility of knowing any thing. And herein that of Theophrastus is true, "They that seek a reason of all things do utterly overthrow Reason" (Ἀπάντων ζητοῦντες λόγον, ἀναιροῦσι λόγον. Theoph. in Metaph.). In every kind of knowledge some such grounds there are, as that being proposed the mind doth presently embrace them as free from all possibility of error, clear and manifest without proof.

In which kind axioms or principles more general are such as this, "that the greater good is to be chosen before the less." If therefore it should be demanded what reason there is, why the Will of Man, which doth necessarily shun harm and covet whatsoever is

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pleasant and sweet, should be commanded to count the pleasures of sin gall, and notwithstanding the bitter accidents wherewith virtuous actions are compassed, yet still to rejoice and delight in them: surely this could never stand with Reason, but that wisdom thus prescribing groundeth her laws upon an infallible rule of comparison; which is, "That small difficulties, when exceeding great good is sure to ensue, and on the other side momentary benefits, when the hurt which they draw after them is unspeakable, are not at all to be respected."

This rule is the ground whereupon the wisdom of the Apostle buildeth a law, enjoining patience unto himself; "The present lightness of our affliction worketh unto us even with abundance upon abundance an eternal weight of glory; while we look not on the things which are seen, but on the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. iv. 17): therefore Christianity to be embraced, whatsoever calamities in those times it was accompanied withal. Upon the same ground our Saviour proveth the law most reasonable, that doth forbid those crimes which men for gain's sake fall into. "For a man to win the world if it be with the loss of his soul, what benefit or good is it? (Matt. xvi. 26).

Axioms less general, yet so manifest that they need no further proof, are such as these, "God to be worshipped;" "parents to be honoured;" "others to be used by us as we ourselves would by them." Such things, as soon as they are alleged, all men acknowl-

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edge to be good; they require no proof or further discourse to be assured of their goodness.

Notwithstanding whatsoever such principle there is, it was at the first found out by discourse, and drawn from out of the very bowels of heaven and earth. For we are to note, that things in the world are to us discernible, not only so far forth as serveth for our vital preservation, but further also in a twofold higher respect. For first if all other uses were utterly taken away, yet the mind of man being by nature speculative and delighted with contemplation in itself, they were to be known even for mere knowledge and understanding's sake.

Yea further besides this, the knowledge of every the least thing in the whole world hath in it a second peculiar benefit unto us, inasmuch as it serveth to minister rules, canons, and laws, for men to direct those actions by, which we properly term human. This did the very heathens themselves obscurely insinuate, by making Themis, which we call Jus, or Right, to be the daughter of heaven and earth.

6. We know things either as they are in themselves, or as they are in mutual relation one to another. The knowledge of that which man is in reference unto himself, and other things in relation unto man, I may justly term the mother of all those principles, which are as it were edicts, statutes, and decrees, in that Law of Nature, whereby human actions are framed.

First therefore having observed that the best things, where they are not hindered, do still produce

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the best operations (for which cause, where many things are to concur unto one effect, the best is in all congruity of reason to guide the residue, that it prevailing most, the work principally done by it may have greatest perfection): when hereupon we come to observe in ourselves, of what excellency our souls are in comparison of our bodies, and the diviner part in relation unto the baser of our souls; seeing that all these concur in producing human actions, it cannot be well unless the chiefest do command and direct the rest (Arist. Pol. i. cap. 5).

The soul then ought to conduct the body, and the spirit of our minds the soul. This is therefore the first Law, whereby the highest power of the mind requireth general obedience at the hands of all the rest concurring with it unto action.

7. Touching the several grand mandates, which being imposed by the understanding faculty of the mind must be obeyed by the Will of Man, they are by the same method found out, whether they import our duty towards God or towards man.

Touching the one, I may not here stand to open, by what degrees of discourse the minds even of mere natural men have attained to know, not only that there is a God, but also what power, force, wisdom, and other properties that God hath, and how all things depend on him.

This being therefore presupposed, from that known relation which God hath unto us as unto children (Οὐδεις Θεος δύσνους άνθρωποις. Plat.

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in Theæt.), and unto all good things as unto effects whereof himself is the principal cause (Ὁ τε γὰρ Θεὸς δοκεῖ τὸ αἴτιον πᾶσιν εἶναι καὶ ἀρχὴ τις. Arist. Metaph. lib. i. cap. 2), these axioms and laws natural concerning our duty have arisen, “that in all things we go about his aid is by prayer to be craved (Ἄλλ’, ὦ Σώκратες, τοῦτό γε δὴ πάντες, ὅσοι καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ σωφροσύνης μετέχουσιν, ἐπὶ πάσῃ ὀρμηῇ καὶ σμικροῦ καὶ μεγάλου πράγματος Θεὸν αἰεὶ πού καλοῦσι. Plat. in Tim.): “that he cannot have sufficient honour done unto him, but the utmost of that we can do to honour him we must” (Arist. Ethic. lib. iii. cap. ult.); which is in effect the same that we read (Deut. vi. 5), “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind:” which Law our Saviour doth term (Matt. xxii. 38) “The first and the great commandment.”

Touching the next, which as our Saviour addeth is “like unto this” (he meaneth in amplitude and largeness, inasmuch as it is the root out of which all Laws of duty to menward have grown, as out of the former all offices of religion towards God), the like natural inducement hath brought men to know that it is their duty no less to love others than themselves.

For seeing those things which are equal must needs all have one measure; if I cannot but wish to receive all good, even as much at every man’s hand as any man can wish unto his own soul, how should I look to have any part of my desire herein satisfied, unless myself be careful to satisfy the like desire which is undoubtedly in other men, we all be-

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ing of one and the same nature? To have any thing offered them repugnant to this desire must needs in all respects grieve them as much as me: so that if I do harm I must look to suffer; there being no reason that others should shew greater measure of love to me than they have by me shewed unto them.

My desire therefore to be loved of my equals in nature as much as possible may be, imposeth upon me a natural duty of bearing to them-ward fully the like affection. From which relation of equality between ourselves and them that are as ourselves, what several rules and canons natural Reason hath drawn for direction of life no man is ignorant; as namely, "That because we would take no harm, we must therefore do none;" "That sith we would not be in any thing extremely dealt with, we must ourselves avoid all extremity in our dealings;" "That from all violence and wrong we are utterly to abstain" ("*Quod quis in se approbat, in alio reprobare non posse.*" L. in arenam, C. de inof. test. "*Quod quisque juris in alium statuerit, ipsum quoque eodem uti debere.*" L. quod quisque. "*Ab omni penitus injuria atque vi abstinendum.*" L. i. sect. 1. Quod vi, aut clam.); with such like; which further to wade in would be tedious, and to our present purpose not altogether so necessary, seeing that on these two general heads already mentioned all other specialities are dependent ("On these two commandments hangeth the whole Law." Matt. xxii. 40).

9. Laws of Reason have these marks to be known by. Such as keep them resemble most lively in their voluntary actions that very manner of working which

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Nature herself doth necessarily observe in the course of the whole world. The works of Nature are all be-hovetful, beautiful, without superfluity or defect; even so theirs, if they be framed according to that which the Law of Reason teacheth.

Secondly, those Laws are investigable by Reason, without the help of Revelation supernatural and di-vine.

Finally, in such sort they are investigable, that the knowledge of them is general, the world hath always been acquainted with them; according to that which one in Sophocles observeth concerning a branch of this Law, "It is no child of to-day's or yesterday's birth, but hath been no man knoweth how long sithence" (Οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε κάχθες, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ ποτε; Ζῆ ταῦτο, κούδεις οἶδεν ἐξ ὅτου ἴφάνη. Soph. Antig.) It is not agreed upon by one, or two, or few, but by all. Which we may not so understand, as if every particular man in the whole world did know and confess whatsoever the Law of Reason doth contain; but this Law is such that being proposed no man can reject it as unrea-sonable and unjust. Again, there is nothing in it but any man (having natural perfection of wit and ripe-ness of judgment) may by labour and travail find out.

And to conclude, the general principles thereof are such, as it is not easy to find men ignorant of them, Law rational therefore, which men commonly use to call the Law of Nature, meaning thereby the Law which human Nature knoweth itself in reason universally bound unto, which also for that cause may be termed most fitly the Law of Reason; this

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Law, I say, comprehendeth all those things which men by the light of their natural understanding evidently know, or at leastwise may know, to be beseeming or unbeseeming, virtuous or vicious, good or evil for them to do.

