

The Root and Branch Petition

15,000 Londoners

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Editors' Introduction:

THIS petition was presented by 1,500 persons on Dec. 11, 1640, on behalf of 15,000 Londoners who had signed it. The Commons postponed its consideration, but in the following February referred it to a committee. The petition must be distinguished from the Root and Branch Bill said to have been drawn up by St. John, and presented to Parliament by Vane and Cromwell in May, 1641. The bill was dropped in the House of Commons, and finally abandoned after long debates in August.

[Rushworth, Hist. Coll. iv. 93, ed. 1721.]

To the Right Honourable the Commons House of Parliament.

The humble petition of many of his majesty's subjects in and about the city of London, and several counties of the kingdom. Sheweth,

That whereas the government of archbishops and lord bishops, deans, and archdeacons, &c., with their courts and ministrations in them, have proved prejudicial and very dangerous both to the Church and Commonwealth, they themselves having formerly held that they have their jurisdiction or authority of human authority, till of these later times, being further pressed about the unlawfulness, that they have claimed their calling immediately from the Lord Jesus Christ, which is against the laws of this kingdom, and derogatory to his majesty and his state royal. And whereas the said government is found by woeful experience to be a main cause and occasion of many foul evils, pressures and grievances of a very high nature unto his majesty's subjects in their own consciences, liberties and estates, as in a schedule of particulars hereunto annexed may in part appear:

We therefore most humbly pray, and beseech this honourable assembly, the premises considered, that the said government with all its dependencies, roots and branches, may be abolished, and all laws in their behalf made void, and the government according to God's word may be rightly placed amongst us: and we your humble suppliants, as in duty we are bound, will daily pray for his majesty's long and happy reign over us, and for the prosperous success of this high and honourable Court of Parliament.

A particular of the manifold evils, pressures, and grievances caused, practised and occasioned by the prelates and their dependents.

1. The subjecting and enthralling all ministers under them and their authority, and so by degrees exempting them from the temporal power; whence follows,
2. The faint-heartedness of ministers to preach the truth of God, lest they should displease the prelates; as namely, the doctrine of predestination, of free grace, of perseverance, of original sin remaining after baptism, of the sabbath, the doctrine against universal grace, election for faith foreseen, freewill against Antichrist, non-residents, human inventions in God's worship; all which are generally withheld from the people's knowledge, because not relishing to the bishops.
3. The encouragement of ministers to despise the temporal magistracy, the nobles and gentry of the land; to abuse the subjects, and live contentiously with their neighbours, knowing that they, being the bishops' creatures, shall be supported.

4. The restraint of many godly and able men from the ministry, and thrusting out of many congregations their faithful, diligent and powerful ministers, who lived peaceably with them, and did them good, only because they cannot in conscience submit unto and maintain the bishops' needless devices; nay, sometimes for no other cause but for their zeal in preaching, or great auditories.
5. The suppressing of that godly design set on foot by certain saints, and sugared with many great gifts by sundry well-affected persons for the buying of impropriations, and placing of able ministers in them, maintaining of lectures, and founding of free schools, which the prelates could not endure, lest it should darken their glories, and draw the ministers from their dependence upon them.
6. The great increase of idle, lewd and dissolute, ignorant and erroneous men in the ministry, which swarm like the locusts of Egypt over the whole kingdom; and will they but wear a canonical coat, a surplice, a hood, bow at the name of Jesus, and be zealous of superstitious ceremonies, they may live as they list, confront whom they please, preach and vent what errors they will, and neglect preaching at their pleasures without control.
7. The discouragement of many from bringing up their children in learning; the many schisms, errors, and strange opinions which are in the Church; great corruptions which are in the Universities; the gross and lamentable ignorance almost everywhere among the people; the want of preaching ministers in very many places both of England and Wales; the loathing of the ministry, and the general defection to all manner of profaneness.
8. The swarming of lascivious, idle, and unprofitable books and pamphlets, play-books and ballads; as namely, Ovid's Fits of Love, The Parliament Of Women, which came out at the dissolving of the last Parliament; Barns's Poems, Parker's Ballads, in disgrace of religion, to the increase of all vice, and withdrawing of people from reading, studying, and hearing the word of God, and other good books.
9. The hindering of godly books to be printed, the blotting out or perverting those which they suffer, all or most of that which strikes either at popery or Arminianism: the adding of what or where pleaseth them, and the restraint of reprinting books formerly licensed, without relicensing.
10. The publishing and venting of popish, Arminian, and other dangerous books and tenets; as namely, 'That the Church of Rome is a true Church, and in the worst times never erred in fundamentals;' 'that the subjects have no propriety in their estates, but that the king may take from them what he pleaseth;' 'that all is the king's, and that he is bound by no law;' and many other, from the former whereof hath sprung:
11. The growth of popery and increase of papists, priests, and Jesuits in sundry places, but especially about London since the Reformation; the frequent venting of crucifixes and popish pictures both engraven and printed, and the placing of such in Bibles.
12. The multitude of monopolies and patents, drawing with them innumerable perjuries; the large increase of customs and impositions upon commodities, the ship money, and many other great burthens upon the commonwealth, under which all groan.

13. Moreover, the offices and jurisdictions of archbishops, lord bishops, deans, archdeacons, being the same way of church government which is in the Romish Church, and which was in England in the time of popery, little change thereof being made (except only the head from whence it was derived), the same arguments supporting the pope which do uphold the prelates, and overthrowing the prelates, which do pull down the pope; and other reformed Churches having upon their rejection of the pope cast the prelates out also as members of the beast. Hence it is that the prelates here in England, by themselves or their disciples, plead and maintain that the pope is not Antichrist, and that the Church of Rome is a true Church, hath not erred in fundamental points, and that salvation is attainable in that religion, and therefore have restrained to pray for the conversion of our sovereign lady the queen. Hence also hath come:
14. The great conformity and likeness both continued and increased of our Church to the Church of Rome, in vestures, postures, ceremonies, and administrations, namely as the bishop's rochets and the lawn-sleeves, the four-cornered cap, the cope and surplice, the tippet, the hood, and the canonical coat; the pulpits clothed, especially now of late, with the Jesuits' badge upon them every way.
15. The standing up at Gloria Patri and at the reading of the Gospel, praying towards the East, the bowing at the name of Jesus, the bowing to the altar towards the East, cross in baptism, the kneeling at the Communion.
16. The turning of the Communion table altar-wise, setting images, crucifixes, and conceits over them, and tapers and books upon them, and bowing or adoring to or before them; the reading of the second service at the altar, and forcing people to come up thither to receive, or else denying the Sacrament to them; terming the altar to be the mercy-seat, or the place of God Almighty in the church, which is a plain device to usher in the Mass.
17. The christening and consecrating of churches and chapels, the consecrating fonts, tables, pulpits, chalices, churchyards, and many other things, and putting holiness in them; yea, reconsecrating upon pretended pollution, as though everything were unclean without their consecrating; and for want of this sundry churches have been interdicted, and kept from use as polluted.
18. The Liturgy for the most part is framed out of the Romish breviary, rituals, mass-book, also the book of Ordination for archbishops and ministers framed out of the Roman Pontifical.
19. The multitude of canons formerly made, wherein among other things excommunication, ipso facto, is denounced for speaking of a word against the devices abovesaid, or subscription thereunto, though no law enjoined a restraint from the ministry without subscription, and appeal is denied to any that should refuse subscription or unlawful conformity, though he be never so much wronged by the inferior judges. Also the canons made in the late sacred Synod, as they call it, wherein are many strange and dangerous devices to undermine the Gospel and the subjects' liberties, to propagate popery, to spoil God's people, ensnare ministers, and other students, and so to draw all into an absolute subjection and thralldom to them and their government, spoiling both the king and the parliament of their power.

20. The countenancing of plurality of benefices, prohibiting of marriages without their licence, at certain times, almost half the year, and licensing of marriages without banns asking.
21. Profanation of the Lord's Day, pleading for it, and enjoining ministers to read a declaration set forth (as it is thought) by their procurement for tolerating of sports upon that day, suspending and depriving many godly ministers for not reading the same only out of conscience, because it was against the law of God so to do, and no law of the land to enjoin it.
22. The pressing of the strict observation of the saints' days, whereby great sums of money are drawn out of men's purses for working on them; a very high burthen on most people, who getting their living on their daily employments, must either omit them, and be idle, or part with their money, whereby many poor families are undone, or brought behindhand; yet many churchwardens are sued, or threatened to be sued by their troublesome ministers, as perjured persons, for not presenting their parishioners who failed in observing holy days.
23. The great increase and frequency of whoredoms and adulteries, occasioned by the prelates' corrupt administration of justice in such cases, who taking upon them the punishment of it, do turn all into moneys for the filling of their purses; and lest their officers should defraud them of their gain, they have in their late canon, instead of remedying these vices, decreed that the commutation of penance shall not be without the bishops' privity.
24. The general abuse of that great ordinance of excommunication, which God hath left in His Church as the last and greatest punishment which the Church can inflict upon obstinate and great offenders; and the prelates and their officers, who of right have nothing to do with it, do daily excommunicate men, either for doing that which is lawful, or for vain, idle, and trivial matters, as working, or opening a shop on a holy day, for not appearing at every beck upon their summons, not paying a fee, or the like; yea, they have made it, as they do all other things, a hook or instrument wherewith to empty men's purses, and to advance their own greatness; and so that sacred ordinance of God, by their perverting of it, becomes contemptible to all men, and is seldom or never used against notorious offenders, who for the most part are their favourites.
25. Yea further, the pride and ambition of the prelates being boundless, unwilling to be subject either to man or laws, they claim their office and jurisdiction to be Jure Divino, exercise ecclesiastical authority in their own names and rights, and under their own seals, and take upon them temporal dignities, places and offices in the commonwealth, that they may sway both swords.
26. Whence follows the taking commissions in their own courts and consistories, and where else they sit in matters determinable of right at common law, the putting of ministers upon parishes, without the patron's and people's consent.
27. The imposing of oaths of various and trivial articles yearly upon churchwardens and sidesmen, which they cannot take without perjury, unless they fall at jars continually with their ministers and neighbours, and wholly neglect their own calling.

28. The exercising of the oath ex officio, and other proceedings by way of inquisition, reaching even to men's thoughts, the apprehending and detaining of men by pursuivants, the frequent suspending and depriving of ministers, fining and imprisoning of all sorts of people, breaking up of men's houses and studies, taking away men's books, letters, and other writings, seizing upon their estates, removing them from their callings, separating between them and their wives against both their wills, the rejecting of prohibitions with threatenings, and the doing of many other outrages, to the utter infringing the laws of the realm and the subjects' liberties, and ruining of them and their families; and of later time the judges of the land are so awed with the power and greatness of the prelates, and other ways promoted, that neither prohibition, Habeas Corpus, nor any other lawful remedy can be had, or take place, for the distressed subjects in most cases; only papists, Jesuits, priests, and such others as propagate popery or Arminianism, are countenanced, spared, and have much liberty; and from hence followed amongst others these dangerous consequences:

1. The general hope and expectation of the Romish party, that their superstitious religion will ere long be fully planted in this kingdom again, and so they are encouraged to persist therein, and to practise the same openly in divers places, to the high dishonour of God, and contrary to the laws of the realm.
2. The discouragement and destruction of all good subjects, of whom are multitudes, both clothiers, merchants, and others, who being deprived of their ministers, and overburthened with these pressures, have departed the kingdom to Holland, and other parts, and have drawn with them a great manufacture of cloth and trading out of the land into other places where they reside, whereby wool, the great staple of the kingdom, is become of small value, and vends not; trading is decayed, many poor people want work, seamen lose employment, and the whole land is much impoverished, to the great dishonour of this kingdom and blemishment to the government thereof.
3. The present wars and commotions happened between his majesty and his subjects of Scotland, wherein his majesty and all his kingdoms are endangered, and suffer greatly, and are like to become a prey to the common enemy in case the wars go on, which we exceedingly fear will not only go on, but also increase to an utter ruin of all, unless the prelates with their dependencies be removed out of England, and also they and their practices, who, as we under your honour's favours, do verily believe and conceive have occasioned the quarrel.

All which we humbly refer to the consideration of this honourable assembly, desiring the Lord of heaven to direct you in the right way to redress all these evils.

Speech by Edward Derring in the House of Commons, regarding the Root and Branch Bill

“They who deny that ever any such Bishops, (that is, Bishops presiding over Presbyters) were in the best and purest times, I entreat some one of them (if any such be here) to stand up and show me, teach me, how I may prove, that there never was an Alexander at Macedon, or a Julius Caesar, or a William the conqueror in the world. For, Sir, to me as plain it is, that Bishops-president have been the constant, permanent, and perpetual governors of the Church of God in all ages. And this being matter of fact, I do hope that historical proof will be sufficient adequate proof in that, which in its fact is matter of history; but proofs here are so manifold and clear, that I borrow the free and true assertion of a worthy and learned gentleman, (Sir Thomas Aston’s Review of Episcopacy, P. 1.). *It may be thought want of will rather than want of light, which makes men deny the antiquity of Bishops in the primitive times.* Therefore answer not me, but answer Ignatius, answer Clemens, Tertullian, Ireneus; nay answer the whole undisputed concurrence of the Asian, the European, and the African Churches, all ages, all places, all persons : Answer, I say, all these, or do as I do, submit to the sufficient evidence of a truth.”

“Parity of degrees in Church Government hath no foundation in holy scripture, and is as treasonous to reason as parity in a state or family. Indeed it is a fancy, a dream, a mere non-entity; it neither hath nor never had a being. If it be any thing, it is absolute Anarchism, and that is nothing; for privation of government is not a government.”

“But, Sir, I have heard some among us say, if then we must have a Bishop, let him be like a pilot, only for a voyage ; let him be like yourself, a speaker only for a Parliament. But if I do affirm, *ab initio non suit sic.* Your Bishop of old was not occasional, *pro re nata*, and immediately degraded; nothing so; but continued a fixed, constant, perpetual moderator and president for life, unless outed for his own demerits?”

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1640

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The response was published in Calder, Robert, *The Priesthood of the Old and New Testament by Succession* (J. Wilson, 1773), 116–119.

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