

**A SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF
ERASTIANISM: TOGETHER WITH TWO
SERMONS ON THE REALITY OF
CHURCH ORDINANCES, AND ON THE
PRINCIPLE OF CHURCH AUTHORITY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649521678

A Sketch of the History of Erastianism: Together with Two Sermons on the Reality of Church Ordinances, and on the Principle of Church Authority by Robert Isaac Wilberforce

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ROBERT ISAAC WILBERFORCE

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THE REALITY OF CHURCH ORDINANCES,
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SECOND EDITION.



LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET;
JOHN AND CHARLES MOZLEY, PATERNOSTER ROW.
1851.

John and Charles Mosley, Printers, Derby.

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HISTORICAL SKETCH

OF

THE SYSTEM OF ERASTIANISM.

RELIGION addresses itself so directly to the inner nature, and is so much concerned with the feelings and duties of individuals, that men are apt to attach inferior interest to its public concerns and collective character. And yet there are occasions when these likewise require attention. The Christian faith was originally proclaimed as the germinant principle of a society; and it cannot be otherwise than important that it should be perpetuated among ourselves under conditions not inconsistent with its original constitution and organic laws. This is matter of especial concernment to the clergy, who are bound by solemn engagements to "minister the Doctrine and Discipline of Christ," not only "as this Church and realm hath received the same," but likewise "as the Lord hath commanded." And obvious circumstances make the subject peculiarly interesting at the present day.

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Under this feeling it is that I propose to make some remarks on the History of Erastianism. By Erastianism I understand that system of opinions and that course of action, which deprive the Church of Christ of independent existence, and resolve it into a function of the civil government. It is the more needful to consider the nature of this system, because by many it has been supposed to be involved in an admission of the Royal Supremacy. Hence it has often been supposed that the Church of England designed to surrender her liberty to the temporal power, and that the clergy are inconsistent when they assert their independence. But the characteristic features and essential principle of Erastianism can hardly be understood, without some knowledge of the circumstances which have led to its prevalence. For this purpose we must go back to those great events which convulsed Europe during the sixteenth century. I propose, then, to consider—first, what principles of Church authority were engendered either here or abroad by the Reformation; secondly, how these principles gave birth to the system of Erastianism; thirdly, what effects have followed from its predominance.

CHAPTER I.

THE EPISCOPAL SYSTEM, OR THE THEORY OF
CHURCH AUTHORITY DURING THE AGE FOLLOW-
ING THE REFORMATION.

To conduct this inquiry with advantage, we must first consider in what Church authority consists. It resolves itself into two parts—the first relating to persons, the second to things. Since the Church is a society, it belongs to Church authority to give men commission to exercise public functions—the function, *i. e.*, of ministering Sacraments and Sacramentals. This power depends—first, upon ordination; and, secondly, upon the continuance of the commission bestowed in ordination. Thus arise Orders and Mission. Again, it belongs to Church authority to settle what persons shall be allowed to partake in the ordinances thus administered, *i. e.*, to regulate admission to communion. And further, among those who have commission to minister, some must be selected who shall be presented to the authorizing power for employment in this or that place. This is the right of patronage. So that the exercise of Church authority has reference to Orders, Mission, Communion, and Patronage.

But Church authority involves also a question of things. For the Church was instituted not only that Sacraments and Sacramentals might be ministered to its members, but likewise for the maintenance of that Faith, which was once for all delivered to the Saints. Hence the preaching of the pure word of God is laid down in our Articles to be as necessary a condition of the Church's existence, as the right administration of Sacraments. Now, the practical settlement of this question will commonly arise in the adjudication of disputes which grow out of the rights of persons; questions of doctrine will commonly be tested by the acceptance or rejection of those who hold it: and this is the very circumstance which renders it so important that the rights of persons should be properly regulated. Strictly speaking, however, the interpretation of doctrine is a question of *things*: it is the determination what is and what is not to be received as the Church's decision. So that the question arises, who settles the Church's faith?—whether legislatively by the formation of laws, or judicially by their interpretation. And, therefore, the subject-matter of Church authority may be classed under five heads: 1, Orders. 2, Mission. 3, Communion. 4, Patronage. 5, Interpretation of doctrine.

The first question before us is to whom these powers were assigned, after the Reformation, in the different countries which separated themselves from Rome. There were plainly three claimants among whom they might be divided—first, the clergy, as possessing a commission from Christ; secondly, the

whole body of Christians, as possessing paramount authority either by revealed appointment, or natural right; and, thirdly, the temporal power. Of what did these claimants severally become possessed, and how was it assigned to them?

We should form a false estimate of events at that period, if we supposed that men were fully alive to the greatness of the transition which they witnessed, and forecast the new aspect which has since been presented by the Christian world. That great changes were going on, and that new rulers were coming in the place of old ones, was manifest; but no one seems to have imagined that the principle of authority itself was about to be endangered. From the time that the old heretical bodies had died out, there had been no such thing as different religious persuasions in western Europe; the whole west had been "of one language and of one mouth." Great dissatisfaction, indeed, had existed among the Lollards, but they could not openly avow their opinions, and had no common bond of union. Now it does not seem to have occurred to men in any country of Europe that this system was about to cease. Established usages, indeed, underwent great changes in various countries, but the submission of the private to the national mind was not relaxed. The idea that individual intellect was to supply the place of common consent in the interpretation of scripture, seems hardly to have existed. Those who took a larger view of things, indeed, could not fail to see that the different courses pursued by different nations might lead to the disruption of the European family.