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A Puritan Work by Robert Browne

Among the documents printed by the Puritan leaders in *A Parte of a Register* in 1590 was one entitled¹ *A Viewe of Antichrist his lawes and ceremonies in our English Church vnreformed*. This work was of composite authorship and the first section² was by "A. Gilbe"³. The first section was composed of four parts made up as follows :

- (i) Page 55, Introduction.
- (ii) Pages 56-7. A table headed "The booke of the generation of Antichrist the Pope . . ."
- (iii) Pages 57-9. A table headed ". . . of the displaying of the Pope and poperie in our vnreformed Church of Englande . . ."
- (iv) Pages 59-65. A table headed ". . . an hundred pointes of poperie, remaying . . ."

This last part, in which in sober fact 149 "pointes of poperie" were listed, also appeared in Antony Gilby's *A Pleasavnt Dialogue* published in 1581. It would appear, however, that some, at least, of this first section was written before the death of Archbishop Parker in 1575 since there was a reference to⁴ "The Pope of Lambeth . . . Matthewe of Canturburie." Gilby⁵ an extreme Puritan, who had been one of the Frankfurt exiles, died in 1585. Another of his writings⁶ *A godly and zealous letter written by Mai. Antony Gilby, about anno 1570* was also printed in *A Parte of a Register*.

The second section of *A Viewe of Antichrist*, from the hand of one signing himself⁷ "T.W.", was also compiled in the form of a table⁸ "Of the bringing in of diuers of the popish corruptions, yet remaying in our Eng. Church." This too had also appeared in *A Pleasavnt Dialogue*⁹ with a note that it was¹⁰ "not put too of the authour."

The third and final section was unsigned¹¹ and is transcribed in full below. (Transcript "A.") It seems possible to date it approximately from two pieces of internal evidence. A *terminus a quo* is given by the reference to¹² the "article of the Bishop of Londons" which was published, according to Strype¹³, on January 29th, 1581. In addition, the *terminus ad quem*, the close of the 23rd year of

the reign of Queen Elizabeth I mentioned in¹⁴ the concluding prayer, was on November 17th, 1581.

The fact that the last section of *A Viewe of Antichrist* was written between the early spring and late autumn of 1581 became far more significant when it was noted that a lengthy portion of it, from line 7 of the transcript, "First, we are taught . . ." to line 102, "newe and (y)earely iniunctions" was reproduced, with certain modifications, in Robert Browne's undoubted work¹⁵ *A True and Short Declaration*.

Two main lines of reasoning indicate that Browne was not merely incorporating a Puritan anti-episcopal tract by another writer but that, in fact, he was reproducing, and significantly modifying, an earlier work of his own.

The first is chronological. Dr. Albert Peel shewed¹⁶ that Browne was still a Puritan during the early days of his stay in Norwich since he signed the Puritan¹⁷ "Supplication of Norwich men to the Queenes Matie" (c. 1580). On the other hand, the first dated reference to Browne as a Separatist was in a letter of Bishop Freke of Norwich in April, 1581. Freke¹⁸ said that Browne had been "lately apprehended, on complaint of many godly preachers, for delivering unto the people corrupt and contentious doctrine. Furthermore, his supporters among "the vulgar sort of people" were "assembling themselves together . . . in private houses and conventicles." The "godly" preachers were the Puritan party of the day. Into such a chronological framework this writing, if it were produced in, perhaps, March 1581, would quite neatly fit.

The second, and more conclusive, reason for ascribing this work to Browne, is based on his own writing *A True and Short Declaration*. Throughout that work he insisted that the prime cause of his separation was hostility to the authority and office of the bishops. Secondly, Browne claimed¹⁹ that before the final act of separation and the taking of the covenant at Norwich he not only sought to win assent for his views by spoken argument but that he "also set dovne in Vwriting his principles." Above all, far from giving any hint that he was interpolating the writing of another man, he appeared to stress that the whole of the parallel section in his own work was his. The following is the passage which preceded without any break between, the introduction of the excerpt from the earlier work²⁰. "He first considered the state of Cambridge, hovve the church of God vvas planted therein. For he iudged that the church vvas to call and receaue, if he should be there chosen and appointed to preach. Then did he thinck on this, vvho should be chieftest, or haue charge before others, to looke to such matters. For the bishops take vppon them the chieftie, but to be called and authorised by them, he thought it vnlavvfull. And vvhy he vvas of this minde, he had these & such like vvarrantes: namelie thei

should be chiefest, vvhich partake vnto vs the chiefest graces, and vse of their callings. And that doeth Christ . . .”

No one reading this passage would doubt that what followed was the fruit of his own thinking. Furthermore, in his version of lines 37-8 of the transcript from *A Viewe of Antichrist* which there read “This is not only against the wickednes of the Bishops,” he rephrased the clause²¹ “This he iudged, not onelie toe be against the Vvickedness of the bishopes . . .” This was surely an explicit claim to the authorship of the passage.

Two further comments may be added. First, no one has ever accused Brown of being incapable of composing his own invective and abuse, and it seems, a priori, highly unlikely that he would adopt the work of some unknown Puritan whose writing was not entirely satisfactory for his purpose, modify it where necessary, and yet slavishly copy whole paragraphs of the remainder almost verbatim. On the other hand, if the author of this last section of *A Viewe of Antichrist* were Browne it would certainly explain why the editors of *A Parte of a Register* allowed the other two sections to retain their authors' identity and suppressed it in the third. It were better that the work appeared, without father and without mother, than that it should have so notorious a parentage.

In Transcript “B” is given the section of the parallel passage from *A True and Short Declaration* where significant modifications were made to the original in *A Viewe of Antichrist*. The remainder of this passage was closely reproduced by Browne. In Transcripts “A” and “B”, spelling oddities apart, the close verbal parallels are italicised. Although a comparison of the two versions will shew that in some degree the correspondence of thought between the two is even greater than the verbal parallels indicate there are, nevertheless, certain important differences.

The fundamental difference between the two versions is in the definition of “the church” in the quotation of *Mt. xviii 17* “Tell the Church.” In Transcript “A” it was stated, in lines 17-18, “By this Church is meant the Ministers and Elders that are chosen out of the Congregatiō to watch ouer the rest of the flocke.” In the same context, in Transcript “B” lines 13-14 “the Church” is evidently “the voice of the Vvhole people, guided bie the elders and forwardest.” Thus, in his interpretation of this classic passage for the seat of final authority in the Church, Browne had moved from a Presbyterian position to a Congregationalist.

This change of view was reflected in other parts of the passage. The omission from Transcript B of the passage in Transcript A (lines 22-29) from “The proceedings of this Church . . .” to “. . . but Christ from one to more” is partly due to its substance being compressed into Transcript B (lines 16-17) “Therefore the meetinges together of manie churches, also of euerie Vvhole church, &

of the elders therein . . .” But the compression also involved a change of emphasis similar to that noted above, namely from the equation of the Church, in this matter, with the Elders alone to the Church as the body of members guided by its Elders. Again a change in the same direction was made from lines 39-40 in Transcript A which read: “if the authoritie of the Church be aboue the Bishops” to lines 27-28 of Transcript B which read “if the authoritie of the church, & of the forvvardest breethren or elders therein, be aboue the bishopes.” The insertion of “& of the forvvardest breethren or elders therein” both altered and qualified the meaning of “Church” in that context.

In the light of these examples another small variation between Transcript A and Transcript B gained in significance: in the latter, in the quotations of *John* i 16 and of *Psalm* cxlix 9 the word “all” correctly appears in each case whereas in the former it was in both cases omitted.

One conclusion to be drawn from this is obvious: the alterations made by Browne when he reproduced this passage in *A True and Short Declaration* reflect a profound change of meaning in the references to the seat of authority within the Church. Two other conclusions may also be drawn at this stage which are borne out by further study of Browne’s concept of the nature of the Church and the Ministry. First, though the body of the Church was the final seat of Church authority, its decisions were to be guided and shaped by the Elders. Browne did not believe that one Christian’s voice or vote was necessarily as valuable or as divinely guided as another. Secondly, the almost purely “functional” view of the ministry which he took, that is that the authority of the ministry was derived less from office than from spiritual gifts can be illustrated from his revision in Transcript B lines 1-2, of his earlier views: “Thei shoulde be chiefest, vvchich partake vnto vs the chiefest graces, and vse of their callinges.” It should, however, be added that the word “functional” is not derived from his vocabulary and that it is quite possible that he would have recognised no essential opposition between authority of office and spiritual gifts.

This passage has a further value for, not only does it illustrate the precise nature of Browne’s shift of opinion concerning the seat of Church authority, but also it shews how he moved from one position to the other.

The argument concerning the seat of Church authority in both versions follows substantially the same lines and the differences serve to make clear the line of reasoning Browne was using.

In Transcript A (lines 1-39) the argument went as follows: Browne began by pointing out (lines 1-2) “we haue shewed the Antichristian authoritie vsurbed by one, and so from one to one

continued to this day in gouvernement and ceremonies." He then established by citing proof texts that (lines 11-12) "none but Christ onely hath full and sole authoritie to make lawes vnto his Church." Next he pointed out that no single person had the right to exercise discipline in the Church on his own (lines 12-16) "but together with those that are authorised by the Church, accordinge to the direction of our Sauour, who warneth vs, that if our brother will not be admonished of his faulte by one, nor by two, then we should tell the Church, *Mat. xviii 17.*" If the matter could not be settled within the local congregation it should be taken to a meeting of the Churches in a province and even, if necessary, to a national assembly (lines 25-26) "if it be a matter of greater waight, to proceede to a greater number." His position was summed up (lines 28-29) "Antichrist . . . in his proceedings goeth from one to one, but Christ from one to more."

In Transcript B the same texts were called to testify to Christ's unique authority then again the authority of a single person was denied (lines 6-12) "Novve next vnder Christ, is not the bishop of the dioces . . . nether anie one vvhich hath but single authoritie, but first thei that haue their authoritie together : as first the church, vvhich Christ also teacheth . . . If he vvill not vouchsafe to heare them tell it vnto the church." In fact the same trend of argument, with the further extension of it setting the final authority not in the Elders as in Transcript A but in the body of the Church, was retained in *A True and Short Declaration*. It will be noted that the pivot of the argument is a literalistic application of *Mat. xviii 17* where the progress is from private rebuke, to rebuke before witnesses and finally, when the offender's defiance has become most grave, rebuke and, if necessary, excommunication, in the presence of the whole congregation. It is this logical and wholehearted application of *Mat. xviii 17* which led Browne to abandon the Presbyterian position he had formerly held. This verse contains the core and kernel of Browne's doctrine of the final seat of authority in the Church: the interpretation followed in both the versions discussed above makes clear precisely why he came to hold it and how.

To sum up it must be confessed that this article is only by nature of a prolegomenon to the full study of Browne's doctrine of the Church and of his place in the development of English Separatist thought. On the other hand, it explains and expounds an essential moment in his thought and in his own development.

BROWNE'S PURITAN WRITING

(Transcript "A")

Nowe that we haue shewed the Antichristian authoritie vsurped by one, and so from one to one continued to this day in gouvernement and cere-

monies, it will bee necessarie brieflie to declare the power and authoritie of Christ Iesus our Lawe giuer, King, and Prophete, which he receyued from God his Father: and then to shewe the authoritie our Sauour hath deliuered and left vnto his Church by the Ministerie of his worde and Discipline.

- 5 First, we are taught that *God hath made all things subject vnto Christ our Lorde, and hath appointed him ouer all things, to bee the head of his Church, which is his body, Ephe. i. 22.* And that of his fulnes haue we receyued grace for grace, *Iohn i. 16. Euen the fulnes of him which filleth all things, Ephe. i. 23.* Whereby it appeareth, that none but Christ onely hath full and sole authoritie to make lawes vnto his Church: neyther is it lawfull for any to exercise the Censures of the Church him selfe alone, but together with those that are authorised by the Church, accordinge to the direction
- 10 of our Sauour, who warneth vs, that if our brother will not be admonished of his faulte by one, nor by two, then we should tell the Church, *Mat. xviii. 17.* By this Church is meant the Ministers and Elders that are chosen out of the Congregatiō to watch ouer the rest of the flocke: by such approbation as the worde requireth, *Actes xiv. 23.* This is that Church, which is called by the Apostle, *The pillar and grounde of trueth, 1 Timoth. iii. 15.* This is that *great honour* which the Lord hath bestowed on his *Saintes, Psal. 149.* The proceedings of this Church in matters of difficultie, if it can not be determined in their Congregation, is to call a meeting of the rest of the Churches in that prouince: and if it be a matter of greater weight, to
- 20 procede to a greater number: yea a generall meeting of the whole Churches of the lande, and there with fasting and prayer to enter into the causes, and to ende the same, example *Actes xiv. 23.* So that we may see this order to be contrarie to Antichrist, who in his proceedings goeth from one to one, but Christ from one to more: This Church or Consistorie hath authoritie
- 30 *about the Apostle about the Prophete, the Euangelist, the Pastour, the Teacher, and euery particular gouernour in the Church. For, the ioyning and partakinge of manie Churches together, and of the authoritie which many haue, must needes be greater and more waightie then the authoritie of anie single person. And this also meant the Apostle, Paule, 1 Corin. ii. 22. We are yours, and you are Christes, and Christ is Gods. So that the Apostle is inferiour to the Church, and the Church is inferiour to Christ, and Christ concerninge his manhoode and office in the church, is inferior to God. This is not only against the wickednes of the Bishops, but also against their whole power & authoritie. For if the authoritie of the church be about*
- 40 *the Bishops, howe should it not followe, but that the Bishoppes may be commanded, accused, and charged by the church: yea also discharged and separated as is their desert?* But now because of their popishe power, canon lawes, and commission, they haue lift vpp their authoritie more high, then the Church can take accountes of them: and not onely by force doe thtust (sic) out and trouble whō they list, but also raigne as Lordes and Dukes in their Dioces, their authoritie must needes be vsurped. For the Apostles did giue accouttes (sic) to the church of all their doinges, as we reade in *Act. xi. 4, Act. xv. 2, 3 and Rom. xv. 31.* But these being got about the Apostles, will sit in the throne of Christ: and as Christ is not
- 50 inferiour to the Church, no more will they be. For Christ hath chosen vs sayeth the Scripture, & not we him, *Iohn xv. 16,* and therefore he is greater then vs all. And seeing the church cā not chuse the Bishoppes, nor those hyrelinges, whom the Bishoppes thrust vpon them, thefore (sic) they also will be greater then the church, and with whom then doe they compare them selues in degree but with Christ? and so make them selues antichristes. Naye they presume further then Christ, which would not thrust his Apostles vpon any congregation, nor suffer them to take charge of any which did not willinglie receyue them, *Luc. x. 10.* But these doe force vpon the people euery where, and in sundrie places against their willes, not onely Ministers
- 60 vnknown, but also such as are known to be blinde bussardes, wicked fel-

lowes, and idoll shepheardes. Likewise Christ hath all rule in his hande, as it is written, that we are complete in him, which is the head of all principallitie and power, *Col. ii.*, and he can not sinne, nor offende the law of God, nor be accused by the same. For so the scripture testifieth, that none could
65 reprove him of sinne, though hee offered him selfe to them to accuse him if they could, *John viii.* And he is that high Priest, as againe it is writtē, *Heb. vii.*, which is holy, harmelesse, vndefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher then the heauens. Howe high then doe they lift them selues, whiche will rule alone as lordes ouer the flocke, though the worde hath said, It shall
70 not be so, *Luke xxii. 26*, 1 *Pet. v. 3*. Which will be Rabbies, Doctours, and reuerende Fathers, though we haue but one doctor Christ, *Mat. xxiii.*, which also take vpon them, not as seruantes in the house as was Moses, *Heb. iii.*, but haue sent after him that is Sonne and heire in his owne house, saying, They will not haue him to raigne ouer them, *Luc. xix. 14*. For they haue
75 refused his gouernement, and chosen their owne popishe disciplines in steade thereof. This appeareth, because they enter and take on them their offices in popish wise, and as that lawe prescribeth them, and also doe misgyde the people by that popish tyrannie. For who knoweth not, but that they watche for the liuing, or Bishoprike, when it shall fall, and then sewe & paye well
80 for the same, if they obteyne it: So are they rauenous and wicked persons, as sayth the Scripture, *Zacha. iii.* They are make-shiftes and troublers, seeing they rule rather because they seeke their own aduantage, or glorie, or mischeuous purpose, then the welfare and benefite of the Church. Yea they all looke to their owne waye, as sayeth the Prophete *Esai. lvi. 11* euerie one
85 for his aduantage and for his owne purpose. Who knoweth not also, but that they whiche are not duellie receyued and called to gyde, and that by due consent and agreement, they are eyther Antichristes in the church, or Tyrantes in the common wealth, because they vsurpe in the church or common wealth. Such are they of whom Paul speaketh, 2 *Cor. xi. 20*, that the Corinthians did suffer them to much. For they did suffer if a man brought them
90 into bondage, if a man deuoured, if a man tooke, if a man exalted him selfe, if a man smote them on the face. For in deede the people doe suffer the Bishops, though they take from them their libertie of chusinge good Pastors and refusinge euill: yea they suffer them selues to be robbed, and be beaten
95 by those spirituall courtes, they suffer the great vntowardnes and wickednes of the Bishops to be coloured and hidden by their pompe, authoritie, tytels, and power, and some times by their flattering sermones and pleadings: For they rule by three sortes of lawes, to say, by the ciuill, the Canon, and their commissions, which are three kingdomes vnto them, or as the Popes triple
100 crown, and by pretending the fourth lawe, which is the word of God, they ouer-rule to toe (sic) much: they spare not to come vpon the people with force and power, and they care not to bridle them with newe and [y]earely iniunctions, and articles, to intangle the best Preachers, as in one article of the Bishop of Londons, that the church wardens shall present all Preachers
105 which doe in their Sermons name the vnreading Ministers, dumbe dogges, although they haue the prophet Esai vsing the same words, *Esai lvi. 10*. And our Sauour also calling them blinde guydes, *Mat. xv.* But to extoll them selues, they doe giue commaundements, That what Preacher soeuer doeth not praye for the Bi. of the Dioces in his sermon, shalbe presented: with diuers other such articles, to vpholde their owne glorie. Whereby we plainly see,
110 they seeke to iustifie them selues in all their proceedings, not minding to procure with vs, any other reformation, then that they presenting possesse, whiche is the very plotte to put out the light of the Gospell amongst vs, and to increase the deedes of darkenes: Beholde howe vnder
115 the dumbe ministerie, the Iesuites and all maner of rebellious persons are bredd vpp, to the great daunger of her Maiesties person, & all her best subiects. Therefore they are no better to be thought of, then enimies to the Gospell of Christ, her Maiestie and people, that seeke to keepe Christ

his holy Discipline from amongst vs. Wherefore lette vs neuer suffer
 120 our eyes to take rest, nor eye liddes slumber, till they beholde Christ
 Iesus in his chutch (sic), & antichrist quite thrust out: Let vs crye out
 with the poore Widowe in the Gospell, vntill wee be hearde, *Luc. xviii.*
 so shall wee thorough Gods mercie, obteyne our sute in the ende, to his
 glorie, and the good of all his people.

125 A Prayer

O Lord God, graunt for thy mercies sake, that as Iehoshaphat in the thirde
 yeare of his raigne, destroyed the high places & groues out of Iudah, and
 sent his Princes and Priestes, and gaue them the books of the Lorde with
 them, for to reforme Religion by, and so feare came vpon euery citie, that
 130 they made not warre against Iehoshaphat. So Lorde, we humbly beseech
 thee, to strengthen the Queenes highnes with thy holy spirite, that in the
 23. yeare of hir raigne shee may cast downe all the high places of Idolatrie
 within hir land with the popish Canon lawe, and all superstition and com-
 mandements of men, and to plucke vpp all filthie ceremonies partayning
 135 to the same: And that hir highnes may sende forth hir Princes and Minis-
 ters, and giue them the booke of the Lorde, that thereby they may bring
 home the people of God to the puritie & trueth of the Apostolike church.
 And then shall the feare of the Lorde come vpon euery Citie and
 COUNTRY, that they shall not make warre against our Iehoshaphat, the very
 140 enimies that be without, shall be compelled to bring presentes to hir grace.
 Thus, O Lord, graunt that hir highnes may not onely haue, a happie, longe
 and prosperous raigne with peace of conscience in this life, but also in the
 life to come, hir highnes man enioye, by the merites and death of Christ
 our Sauour, life euerlasting: to whom with the Father, and the holy
 145 Ghost, be all honour, and glorie, for euer and euer, Amen.

And let hir Maiesties true subiectes say, AMEN.

A TRUE AND SHORT DECLARATION

(Transcript "B")

"Thei shoulde be chiefest, vvhich partake vnto vs the chiefest graces,
 and vse of their callinges. And that doeth Christ, as it is vwritten, *of his
 fullnes haue all vve receaued, and grace for grace. Ioh. i. 16.* And to him
 hath God made all things subiect saieth Paul, *Ephes, i. 22,* euē vnder his
 5 feet, and hath appointed him ouer all things, to be head of the church,
 vvhich is his bodie, euen the fullnes of him, vvhich filleth all in all things.
 Novve next vnder Christ, is not the bishop of the dioces, by vvhōe so manie
 mischiefes are vvrought, nether anie one vvhich hath but single authoritie,
 but first thei that haue their authoritie together: as first the church, vvhich
 10 Christ also teacheth, vvhē he saieth, If he vwill not vouchsafe to heare
 them tell it vnto the church, & if he refuse to heare the church also, let him
 be vnto the(e), as an heathen mā & a publican, *Mat. xviii. 17.* Therefore is
 the church called *the pillar & ground of trueth.* 1 *Tim. iii. 15* & the voice
 of the Vvhole people, guided bie the elders and forwardest, is saied to be
 15 the voice of God. And that 149. *Psalme* doth shevve this *great honour,*
 Vvhich is to all the *saincts.* Therefore the meetings together of manie
 churches, also of euerie Vvhole church, & of the elders therein, is *above the
 Apostle, above the Prophet, the Euangelist, the Pastor, the Teacher, &
 euerie particular Elder. For the ioining & partaking of manie churches
 20 together, & of the authoritie Vvhich manie haue, must needes be greater
 & more Vvaightie, then the authoritie of anie single person. And this
 alsoe ment Paul Vvhē he saith. 1 *Cor. ii. 22. Wee are yours, & you are
 Christes, & Christ is Godes. Soe that the Apostle is inferior to the church,
 & the church is inferior to Christ, & Christ cōcerning his manhood & office
 25 in the church, is inferior to God. This he iudged, not onelie toe be against**

the Vvickednes of the bishopes, but also against their Vvhole power & authoritie. For if the authoritie of the church, & of the forvvardest breethren or elders therein, be aboue the bishopes, howe should it not followe, but that the bishopes maie be commauded, accused & charged 30 bie the church, yea also discharged & separated as is their desert?"

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *A Parte of a Register*, 1590, pp. 55-72.
- ² *ibid.*, pp. 55-65 (p. 65 wrongly paged '75').
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 65.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 57.
- ⁵ D.N.B. Article: Gilby, Anthony.
- ⁶ *A Parte of a Register*, pp. 12-19.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 68.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 65-8.
- ⁹ Gilby, A., *A Pleasaunt Dialogue*, 1581. Unpaged.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹¹ *A Parte of a Register*, pp. 68-72.
- ¹² Transcript "A" lines 103-5.
- ¹³ Strype: *Aylmer*, pp. 53-4.
- ¹⁴ Transcript "A" lines 130-2.
- ¹⁵ Browne and Harrison, *Works*, pp. 399-401.
- ¹⁶ Peel, A., *The Brownists in Norwich and Norfolk*, 1580, pp. 6-8.
- ¹⁷ Peel, A., *Calendar of Seconde Parte of a Register*, 1915, pp. 157-9.
- ¹⁸ Lansdowne MSS. (BM) xxxiii. 13. Reference and transcription given in Dexter, *Congregationalism*, p. 70.
- ¹⁹ Browne and Harrison, *Works*, p. 412.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 399.
- ²¹ *ibid.*

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