CHAPTER FIVE

‘IF THE PRINCE SHALL FORBID’: DIVISIONS OVER EVANGELICAL OBEDIENCE IN THE 1560S

The religion of Elizabethan England was something of an enigma, with an evangelical queen\(^1\) blowing hot and cold on religious reform, a mostly Catholic populace, and a growing troupe of evangelical preachers and bishops not always in step with Elizabeth.\(^2\) Elizabeth’s reign saw the rise of moderate and radical Puritanism as well as the counter-balancing force of English conformity. Running throughout these discussions is the ongoing debate over the limits of obedience and the right to resistance. By the mid-1560s, the challenge faced by non-conformists was how to justify their disobedience to Elizabeth without exposing themselves to the charge of sedition and treason, a tension that runs back to Henry VIII. Non-conformists argued that the use of vestments was impious, leading honest men and women into sin. They therefore claimed that their consciences would be wounded should they obey the queen. The language of non-conformity, then, was the classic defence of passive disobedience—Elizabethan ‘hot’ Protestants denied that they were resisting the higher power and described their non-conformity as an expression of their obedience.

The focus of this chapter will be on Elizabethan evangelicals who either came out of conformity or returned from exile and their relationship to the Elizabethan church. We will also explore evangelical connections with the continent. During the 1560s, evangelicals regularly appealed to the Swiss confederations for counsel and support in times of crisis and, in particular, when questions were raised about conscience and Christian

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liberty. This chapter, therefore, examines only part of a very complex Elizabethan picture, and is not an exhaustive study of Elizabethan Protestantism, which included Lutheran, non-Calvinist and politique alike. The goal of this chapter is to study debates over conformity to royal authority and the alleged influence of Calvinism on English evangelical thought. The reason for restricting our focus in this way is that Swiss theology played an undeniably important role in later Elizabethan and Jacobean England. As Peter Lake has argued, though not every English elite was influenced by the Swiss, Reformed thinking nevertheless dominated the English intellectual world. For this reason, the connections between Reformed and English evangelical political thought are a perennial topic of research.

For a number of years, there have been claims of a ‘Zurich Connection’ with England, in which Bullinger and others heavily influenced the Elizabethan formulation of the Supremacy and helped add a Swiss accent to ‘Anglicanism’. The argument of this chapter is somewhat different: while evangelicals identified with Swiss ideas, a number of non-conformists ultimately ignored the advice of Bullinger and Gualter and challenged Zurich’s teaching on obedience. In addition, the Swiss reformers themselves were at odds over English conformity and, at times, offered contradictory advice—Bullinger himself gave two different answers on the subject. There was therefore confusion under Elizabeth over who offered the authentic Reformed voice on the issue of obedience. Thus, evangelicals on both sides of the vestiarian controversy (1565–1569)

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