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"Fair Persuasions"? The Implementation of Laudian Altar Policy in the Diocese of Bath and Wells

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"Fair Persuasions"? The Implementation of Laudian Altar Policy in the Diocese of Bath and Wells

This article investigates the implementation of William Laud's restoration of the altars in England in the 1630s, using the Diocese of Bath and Wells, where Laud's ally William Piers served as bishop, as a case study. In so doing, it raises questions about the character of the Laudianism more generally. William Prynne's history of the 1630s continues to influence historiography in the present day, but was constructed to portray Laud and his allies as tyrannical ideologues insensitive to the law, especially regarding the altarwise communion table. Churchwardens' accounts, which allow the Laudian Reformation to be tracked at the parish level, offer an alternative proposition. Here it is argued that Piers, in contrast to certain other 'Laudian' bishops but like Laud himself, was acutely conscious of his precarious legal situation. He adopted a nuanced approach to implementation, moving quickly to enforce the erection of table rails but playing the long game on the altarwise positioning.

I. Innovation and orthodoxy in histories of Laudianism

The focal point of every English parish church is the communion table. In form and furnishing, the table can vary dramatically according to theological and liturgical taste, and at various times in the history of the post-Reformation Church communion tables have looked strikingly different from parish to parish. But whether an ornately carved and elaborately dressed piece of artwork, or a functional and simple wooden construction, the table represents the very

essence of communal Christian worship. If the former, the table may be taken as a statement of sacerdotalism and priestly intercession. If the latter, it may represent a conscious rejection of these values and an affirmation of memorialist interpretations of the Eucharist. In short, the table can be "reverenced…as an altar", or "looked upon…as a mere table".[1] Regardless, the pews of the parish church are turned to face it irrespective of what it is made from or where it is located. Whether as a locus around which a congregation gather to remember Christ's sacrifice, or as a pseudo-altar, to which the community travel through banks of pews to kneel before it, the table is always at the heart of communal Christian worship.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, a period during which the English monarchy and bishops were overthrown and subsequently restored, a narrative of the 1630s was established which has persisted in the historiography to the present day. It posits that a group of clerics around William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, tried to force through a reform programme, the most notable expression of which was the moving and beautification of tables, "with the highest pitch of tyranny and arbitrary government". This, the story goes, was one causal factor behind the calamity of civil war in the 1640s.[2] One of those Laudian clerics was William Piers, Bishop of Bath and Wells from 1642, upon whose diocese this article focusses. Laud himself encouraged his bishops to bring people to an acceptance of the altarwise table by employing "fair persuasions", while Piers claimed to have proceeded in altering the tables in a "persuasive way", statements which are seemingly incompatible with

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[1] S. R. Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War, 1603-1642*, 8 vols, vol. 8 (London: Spottiswood and Co., 1884), 165.

[2] William Prynne, *Canterburies Doome, Or, The First Part of a Compleat History of the Commitment, Charge, Tryall, Condemnation, Execution of William Laud, Late Arch-bishop of Canterbury* (London, 1646) [Wing / P3917], 16-17, 93-99.

the notion that they enacted their reformation with the application of considerable ecclesiastical force.[3] They were retrospectively supported by a counter-narrative established after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, which shifted the blame away from Laud and his allies and onto "factious and unquiet men". According to Peter Heylyn, Laudian moves to "perswade Conformity" on the issue of the table met with considerable success until the "rich, well-backed, and disaffected" churchwardens of Beckington in Somerset refused to comply.[4]

Laud's inability to convince his contemporaries that he had only employed persuasive means ultimately cost him his life at the hands of the Long Parliament. In December 1640, he was arrested and detained in the Tower of London. Among the charges against him was the accusation that he had sought to "bring in Innovations into the Church", one of many "traitorous designs" that together amounted to an attempt to "set up Papistry and superstition in the Church" and "reconcile us to the Church of Rome".[5] William Piers also faced trial by the Long Parliament. The articles of impeachment drafted for Piers's trial accused him of introducing "sundry Innovations in the Rites and Ceremonies of the Church…tending to Popery and Superstition", specifying his attempts at the "setting up of Alters".[6] Crucial to the parliamentary charge was the accusation that Piers had thrown the full weight of the ecclesiastical court system behind his innovations, that he had proceeded "by

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[3] Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 216. For Piers's use of the term, see below, 16.

[4] Peter Heylyn, *Cyprianus Anglicus, or, The history of the life and death of the Most Reverend and renowned prelate William, by divine providence Lord Archbishop of Canterbury…* (London, 1668) [Wing / H1699], 41, 289-90.

[5] England and Wales, House of Commons, 'Articles Exhibited in Parliament against William Archbishop of Canterbury' (London, 1641), 2-4 [Wing (2nd ed.) / A3822D].

[6] England and Wales, House of Commons, 'Articles of accusation and impeachment…against William Pierce' (London, 1642), 5 [Wing (2nd ed.) / A3832].

example and command", and had "enjoyed the strict observation…under the heaviest Censures of the Church". This charge was of paramount importance. If Piers and Laud had merely employed "persuasive" means, then Parliament's accusation that their actions had been "contrary to the Lawes of the Land" could not be made to stick. In the febrile atmosphere of the 1640s, the Laudians' methods, as well as their aims, formed a crucial part of the case against them.

Prynne's account of the 1630s has enjoyed great longevity, in part because its basic contours have found acceptance even among his ideological opponents. Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon and Laud's post-Restoration successor at Canterbury, reworked the narrative to make it a badge of honour for the Laudians. Their reforms were presented by Clarendon as having been acceptable to "grave and intelligent persons", detested by "the people", and as having met with widespread resistance from those accustomed to "negligence" and "uncleanliness".[7] The view of Laud as a diligent, elitist and authoritarian enforcer survived to became a favourite staple of Victorian scholars, who sought to cast the civil wars as a battle between monarchical and clerical tyranny and parliamentary liberty. Samuel Rawson Gardiner, for instance, talked about Laud's promotion of "strict disciplinarians" in a bid "to reduce the Church of England to order".[8] The narrative remained intact in Hugh Trevor-Roper's 1940 biography of Laud, which presented Piers as the Archbishop's willing acolyte, "*ordering* the same uniformity" until eventually he was met by churchwardens of Beckington

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[7] Edward Hyde and Paul Seaward (ed.), *The History of the Rebellion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26-7. Clarendon was consistent in his portrayal of the lower and middle orders as troublemaking supporters of Parliament, as noted by Ronald Hutton, 'Clarendon's History of the Rebellion', *English Historical Review* 97/382 (1982), 74.

[8] Samuel Rawson Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War, 1603-1642*, 8 vols., vol. 7 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1884), 314.

and their refusal to bow before "the authority of the Bishop's *command*".[9] The gravitational

pull of Prynne's narrative pervades more recent scholarship too.

Underpinning recent discussion of the early Stuart Church is a contested narrative in which

groups of innovators, be they *avant-garde* bishops or punctilious puritans, wrestled for

control with the forces of orthodoxy. At the end of the 1980s, it appeared that the forces of

orthodoxy had been essentially Calvinist in nature. Nicholas Tyacke's argument that the

Church of England had been doctrinally Calvinist before the accession of Charles I in 1625,

after which the new king promoted a new breed of "Arminian" innovators, came to print as a

monograph in 1987.[10] Tyacke proposed that "Arminians" like Richard Neile and Richard

Montagu placed a new emphasis on sacramental grace, equated Calvinism with Puritanism,

and ultimately attempted to suppress orthodox Calvinist theologies of predestination, at first

by mocking Puritan pride and hypocrisy and later by closing down debate altogether.[11]

Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake had argued, two years before the publication of Tyacke's

monograph, that James I's ecclesiastic bench was a politic assemblage of moderates designed

to isolate both radical papists and radical puritans. In their formulation, the accession of

Charles I marked the moment when "anti-Calvinists and Arminians captured the central

apparatus of the church".[12] G. W. Bernard, Sheila Lambert, and Peter White presented a series

[9] H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud, 1573-1645*, 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan, 1962; f.p. 1940), 153-4. My emphasis.

[10] Nicholas Tyacke, *Arminianism in England, in religion and politics, 1604 to 1640* (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1969); idem, "Puritanism, Arminianism and Counter-Revolution" in *The Origins of the English Civil War*, ed. C. Russell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973); idem, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[11] Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 116, 137, 182.

[12] Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I", *Journal of British Studies* 24/2 (1985), 169-70, 206.

of challenges to Tyacke's 'Calvinist consensus' in the early 1990s, reaffirming the moderate nature of the Church of England and its position as a middle ground between Catholicism and Protestantism.[13] For their pains, they were labelled "Anglican insiders" by Tyacke who, writing in 1996, argued that the main purpose of their work had been to restore the notion of the Anglican *via media*, something which Diarmaid MacCulloch had dismissed in 1991 as a convenient "myth" for seventeenth-century Laudians and nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholics alike.[14]

Historiographical stalemate was reached as each side sought to associate the other with civil war "revisionism". Revisionist scholarship sought to reassess the causes of the civil war by placing an emphasis on short-term, contingent factors.[15] On the one hand, Peter White had in the 1980s identified weaknesses in the "revisionist" argument which, he contended, had been papered over with an "apparent unanimity [in] which William Laud is still cast as the villain of the piece".[16] Meanwhile, Tyacke argued in 1996 that his "Anglican insiders" had "received powerful reinforcement from certain revisionist historians, who discern a congruence between the alleged moderation of Anglicanism and their own commitment to a

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[13] G. W. Bernard, "The Church of England, c. 1529 – c. 1642", *History* 75 (1990), 183-206; Sheila Lambert, "Committees, Religion and Parliamentary Encroachment on Royal Authority in Early Stuart England", *English Historical Review* 105/414 (1990), 94; Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11, 13.

[14] Nicholas Tyacke, "Anglican Attitudes: Some Recent Writings on English Religious History, from the Reformation to the Civil War", *Journal of British Studies* 35/2 (1996), 139; Diarmaid MacCulloch, "The Myth of the English Reformation", *Journal of British Studies* 30/1 (1991).

[15] E.g. John Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces: Conservatives and Radicals during the English Civil War, 1630-1650* (London: Routledge, 1980); Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies, 1637-1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[16] Peter White, "The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered", *Past and Present* 101 (1983), 34.

consensual model of English politics in the decades before the Civil War".[17] With this, Tyacke and his allies nimbly shifted attention directly onto communion tables and, just as the table is the focal point of any parish church, so too has it become the focal point of recent historiography. Fincham and Tyacke's 2007 *Altars Restored* reinforced their position by focussing on material rather than on doctrinal developments in the century and a half after the Reformation. Attempts in the 1620s and 1630s to reposition communion tables, turning them north-south at the east end of churches and railing them in, were portrayed as emerging from the clerical circle around Bishop Neile in the 1620s and the "triumph of the anti-Calvinist or Laudian interest at court".[18] Their monograph, together with much other research on the material aspects of Laudianism, helped to fill an historiographical lacuna that had appeared fourteen years previously, with White's claim that Laudian policy represented little more than vigorous enactment of longstanding arrangements, if ones which were previously seldom enforced.[19] Moreover, it struck directly at the Laudians' own claims that their reforms amounted to little more than proper enforcement of longstanding Church of England law.

This article does not propose to re-open the debate about the so-called "Calvinist consensus", but the "material turn" in historical studies of the 1630s, and particularly the focus on tables

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[17] Nicholas Tyacke, "Anglican Attitudes: Some Recent Writings on English Religious History, from the Reformation to the Civil War", *Journal of British Studies* 35/2 (1996), 140.

[18] Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547-c.1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4, 177.

[19] Peter White, "The *via media* in the early Stuart Church" in *The Early Stuart Church, 1603-1642*, ed. Kenneth Fincham (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993), 228. For how the debate has shifted onto the material dimensions of Laudianism: Ian Atherton, "Cathedrals, Laudianism, and the British Churches", *The Historical Journal* 53/4 (2010), 895-910; J. F. Merritt, "Puritans, Laudians, and the Phenomenon of Church-Building in Jacobean London", *The Historical Journal* 41/4 (1998), 935-960; Graham Parry, *Glory, Laud and Honour: The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008).

or altars, opens different windows on which to view the character of Laudianism. It is important to address not only *what* Laud and his allies wanted to achieve, but *how* they set about achieving it. Even Peter White has accepted Prynne's ultimate premise that Laudian policies were enacted by enforcement alone.[20] Laud's own recommendation that "fair persuasions" be employed in the policy's implementation, and Piers's claim that he proceeded in a "persuasive way", have been taken to be a somewhat euphemistic characterisation of their frequently harsh deployment of the court system to achieve their goals. While the 'Laudians' were not engaged in a programme of evangelisation and conversion, their use of the terminology of 'persuasion' calls attention to the fact that their reformation of the Church of England was self-consciously a process. In the same way that early leaders of the Reformation were "very aware that the reform of the church was a task of great complexity", as Andrew Pettegree has argued, Laud and his allies approached their mission in knowledge of the fact that it would take time.[21] Renewed attention on the chronologies of reform, which the churchwardens' accounts reveal as no other source can, offers important perspective on what the Laudians meant by "persuasion".

II. The reformation of the communion table

The issue of where the table should be located in a reformed church, and whether communicants should be expected to kneel before it, has sparked controversy since the earliest days of the English Reformation, attested by Thomas Cranmer's battles with the Duke

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[20] *Ibid*., 228.
[21] Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

of Northumberland and John Knox.[22] The 1559 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Elizabethan Injunctions of the same year fudged a messy compromise, stating that "the table…shall stand in the body of the churche, or in the chauncell", and that it should be kept "in the place where the altar stood…saving when the communion of the sacrament is to be distributed; at which time the same shall be so placed in good sort within the chancel".[23] To some, this was simply a disorderly embarrassment, with Bishop Grindal observing in 1565 that

> The Table standeth in the body of the church in some places, in others it standeth in the chancel; in some places the Table standeth altarwise, distant from a wall a yard, in some others in the middle of the chancel, north and south; in some places the Table is joined, in others it standeth upon trestles; in some places the Table hath a carpet, in others it hath not.[24]

In the 1630s, renewed attention was given to churches as sacred spaces whose interiors should reflect the fact that they were houses of God. As one clergyman remarked in 1637, "our churches by Gods mercy are a glory to our Religion…fairly built of Stone, covered with Lead, beautified with goodly Glasse-windows, Pinnacles, Battlements, have their Postures, and Altars standing towards the East…"[25] Laud himself claimed that the position of the table

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[22] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 525-6.

[23] Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 200; Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124.

[24] Quoted in N. G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish: The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 456.

[25] John Pocklington, *Altare Christianum* (London, 1637), p. 26. [STC (2nd ed.) / 20076].

was a matter of "indifferency"–in other words, that it had no scriptural mandate–but that there should be "order" and "uniformity" of practice in "the *externall decent worship* of God" within the Church of England.[26] A case heard before the Privy Council in November 1633, involving the small parish church of St Gregory's, besides St Paul's Cathedral in London, rejected the argument of five parishioners that the table "be placed where it may stand with most fitness and convenience", and instead established the principle that parish churches should resemble their "cathedral mother church, by which all other churches depending thereon ought to be guided and directed".[27]

The move to reform communion tables was part of a much broader programme, and William Piers's campaign to beautify and repair Somerset's parish churches was expensive and wide-ranging. Julia Merritt, for London, and Andrew Foster, for five English dioceses including Bath and Wells, have previously noted that parish communities were increasingly investing in their churches before 1625, and Diarmaid MacCulloch has hypothesised that Laudianism may have attracted hostility "because they often interfered with recently competed schemes of furnishing and restoration".[28] In Somerset, average annual disbursements by churchwardens nearly doubled between 1632 and 1637, from approximately £14p.a. to approximately £27p.a.. However, most of this expenditure can be accounted for in basic but costly repairs:

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[26] William Laud, *A Speech Delivered in the Starr Chamber…* (London, 1637), pp. 11, 54. [STC (2nd ed.) / 15307].

[27] Act of the Privy Council on the Position of the Communion Table at St Gregory's, 3 November 1633, reprinted in *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution*, edited by S. R. Gardiner (Oxford, 1980; f.p. 1906), p. 199.

[28] J. F. Merritt, "Puritans, Laudians, and the Phenomenon of Church-Building in Jacobean London", *The Historical Journal* 41/4 (1998), 935-960; Foster, *Churchwardens' accounts*, 88-89; MacCulloch, *Myth of the English Reformation*, 14.

pointing the stonework, re-leading roofs, re-casting bells, or liming the walls.[29] Table rails, and

other accoutrements like silk fringes, cushions, and Decalogue boards, were inexpensive by

comparison. There was however one key difference between altar policy and the rest of the

Laudian agenda: on this issue, and despite their keenness for it, both Laud and Piers knew

that their legal position was far from watertight and that they should proceed with caution.

Piers, who has been described as "meticulous, orderly, and mercenary" by one historian, was

a vocal and early supporter of the Caroline government's liturgical policies.[30] He was an

implacable ally of Laud's, with the Archbishop frequently commenting that from Bath and

Wells he had "received a very good and happy certificate".[31] Two of Piers's sermons from

1642 indicate that he was attracted to ceremonial as a means of "prov*ing* thy patience, thy

faith and thy love", though his own justifications for turning the tables and railing them in,

which he outlined in 1632, rested purely upon functional and practical issues.[32] It would allow,

he argued, "more roome for the comunicants when receiving the sacrament, and would

discourage prophanations of the table such as writing upon it, or the laying hats and satchels

upon it, and parishioners doing their business around it". Furthermore, it would mean that,

during divine service, the face of the priest "is seene of all, and his voice is better heard of

all". That there should be some difference "betweene the placing of the Lords Table in ye

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[29] John Reeks, *Parish Religion in Somerset, 1625-1662, With Particular Reference to the Churchwardens' Accounts* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Bristol, 2014), 55-60.
[30] Phyllis M. Hembry, *The Bishops of Bath and Wells, 1540-1640* (London: Athlone Press, 1967), 226.
[31] John Henry Parker, ed., *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, William Laud, D.D.*, 7 vols., Vol. 5 Pt. 2, Accounts of Province, &c. (Oxford: J. H Parker, 1853), 319, 334, 339.
[32] William Piers, *Two Sermons Preached in the Tower by the Bishop of Bath and Wells* (London, 1642) [Wing (2nd ed.) / P2211], 9, 21.

church, and the placing of a mans table in his house" was presented as being simply a matter of common decency. Echoing the language of the St Gregory's case, Piers concluded with the declaration that "as daughters should be like their mother, the parochiall churches should be like the cathedrall churches".[33]

Some Caroline clerics were keen to move on the altarwise table at the earliest opportunity, drawing upon the full weight of their ecclesiastical machinery, and seemingly without much regard for the legal complexity of the issue. Samuel Clerke, the Archdeacon of Derby, issued visitation articles in 1630s calling for the table to be "set at the east end of the Chancell".[34] Matthew Wren's 1635 articles for Hereford inquired whether the table "doth stand up at the east end of the Chancel, where the Altar in former times stood".[35] Archbishop Neile of York is said to have acted with "greater boldness" than Laud in Canterbury, moving to introduce the "railed altar" before 1633.[36] By comparison, Kenneth Fincham has drawn attention to the careful language of Laud's own visitation articles. This, he posits, may "not reflect his distaste for official policy so much as an acute awareness…that it lacked full canonical status", given that supportive colleagues such as Neile of York and William Juxon of London used equally vague language in their own articles from the 1630s.[37] Piers, like Laud, used noncommittal language in his own visitation articles, declining to specify exactly where in the church or chapel he expected the table to be located. As late as 1636, he asked the churchwardens

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[33] William Piers, 'Reasons why the Communion Table in every church', Lambeth Palace Library, London, MS943, Papers of William Laud and others, March 9, 1632, ff. 475-6.
[34] Fincham and Tyacke, *Altars Restored*, 186-187.
[35] Matthew Wren, *Articles to be Inquired Of Within the Diocesse of Hereford…* (London, 1635) [STC (2nd ed.) / 10217], n.p., ch. 3, n. 2.
[36] Fincham and Tyacke, *Altars Restored*, 190-191.
[37] Kenneth Fincham, 'Introduction' to *Visitation Returns…*, vol. 2, xx.

simply if their parish church had "a decent and convenient Communion Table…placed in such convenient sort as is ordered and appointed in that behalf".[38] Such a formulation does not appear, on the face of things, to be in keeping with Piers's own professed preference for the altarwise table.

The mechanisms of enforcement available to Piers and the other bishops were certainly extensive when called upon. Though the activities of the archdeacons' courts are extremely poorly recorded for the 1630s, we do know that Piers was adept at manoeuvring supporters into these positions, even promoting his son to the Archdeaconry of Taunton in 1638.[39] Moreover, the bishop's court at Wells gained a new prominence in the lives of the parish churchwardens as Piers called ever greater numbers of them to answer for their parish's deficiencies: the churchwardens of Cameley, for instance, were called to the court at least eleven times between 1633 and 1635.[40] Churchwardens themselves were made to swear an oath which committed them to act as the bishop's eyes and ears in their parishes.[41] In a sure sign that the churchwardens' oath was having the desired effect, it came under withering attack from the godly minister of Batcombe, Richard Bernard, who remarked that wardens were now presenting petty offences which "before the Almighty GOD are nones".[42] Commissioners and apparitors appeared regularly in the 1630s churchwardens' accounts,

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[38] Piers, *Articles* (1636), n.p., n. 3.

[39] Stieg, *Laud's Laboratory*, 283. Stieg claims that none are extant, the latest being that of the Archidiaconal records of Taunton in 1623/24. It has been pointed out to the present author that a few may survive for the 1630s in various miscellaneous episcopal collections.

[40] CWA Cameley, D/P/cmly 4/1/1 (1633-1635).

[41] "The Oath to be Administered to the *Churchwardens*, and Sidesmen" in William Piers, *Articles to be Enquired Of, in the second Triennial Visitation…* (London, 1636) [STC (2nd ed.) / 10137.9].

[42] Richard Bernard, *A Short View of the Prelatical Church of England* (London, 1641) [Wing / B2033], 16.

arriving in the parishes to inspect church infrastructure and to deliver orders and summons. There was no hiding from Bishop Piers and the diocesan machinery of compulsion. None of this, however, could change the fact that the altarwise table lacked a solid legal foundation. Piers's own nervousness on the issue became apparent when a long-rumbling dispute over the table at Beckington spilled into the courts.

On 2 January 1636 Piers wrote a letter to the Dean of the Arches, Sir John Lambe, in response to an ongoing dispute at Beckington, a prosperous market town south-east of Bath. Here, the churchwardens and a group of leading parishioners had challenged an order to remove the communion table from the centre to the east end of the chancel. There is some dispute about whether the Beckington altar controversy should be viewed as indicative of deeper unease about the policy, potentially even the spearhead of a wider Puritan backlash, or as an exceptional trouble caused by the bishop's unwillingness to back down, or to sympathise with local concerns.[43] For our purposes, what matters is the update provided by Piers on the progression of the table reforms in his diocese, and the insight provided by the letter onto the tactics he claimed to be adopting. He stated that

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[43] For the former view, see David Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973), 23; T. G. Barnes, *Somerset 1625-1640: A County's Government during the "Personal Rule"* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 16-7. For the latter view, see Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 226; Sharpe, *Personal Rule*, 336; John Reeks, "'The churchwardens have not used to meddle with anie seate': seating plans and parochial resistance to Laudianism in 1630s Somerset", *The Seventeenth Century* (Forthcoming: e-publication preceding print, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2017.1301830), 12-16.

the Communion Tables are placed already in above 140 of them, as the Communion Table is placed in our Cathedrall Church here: I have begun and proceeded herein in a *persuasive way*.

He went on to portray this as a success, remarking that "some parishes were no sooner spoken to, but they obeyed; other parishes refused at the first, but they were quickly satisfied, and then submitted".[44] Here, Piers was attempting to make several points. First, he wanted to portray the rollout of the new table policy as having proceeded so far without much dissent, and to paint the Beckington disputants as exceptional troublemakers. Second, he sought to highlight his reliance on "persuasion" alone to ensure compliance at the parish level. Third, he wanted to impress upon Lambe the seriousness of this case, and to warn that failure in Beckington would serve to encourage further resistance. Ultimately, he wanted to suggest that an unfavourable decision in the Beckington case could result in the failure of the table programme in its entirety.

Two aspects of this letter have attracted particular attention from historians. The first is the figure of "above 140" parishes which, by January 1636, Piers claimed had already enacted the table reforms. There were 469 parishes in his diocese, and so this represents a success rate of about thirty percent. Historians have been critical of Piers's achievement. George Yule remarked that Piers "*tried* to enforce Laud's policy", but that "after four years the large majority of tables…were still not placed altar-wise".[45] Timothy Peake referred to it as a

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44 Prynne, *Canterburies Doome*, 98.
45 George Yule, "James VI and I: furnishing the churches in his two kingdoms", in *Religion, culture and society in early modern Britain: Essays in honour of Patrick Collinson*, ed.

"failure rate of 70 per cent" which "indicates that the proposed change had encountered widespread resistance".[46] Derek Hirst, in stating that "by 1640, only one quarter of Somerset parishes had obeyed Laud's injunctions over the communion table", plainly suggests that the remaining three-quarters had refused to comply.[47] The problem with these reactions is made plain by the broader context of Piers's letter. He clearly believed that "above 140" parishes had been a fair achievement, having followed with the remark that those parishes he had asked had been "quickly satisfied" and then had "submitted". How could Piers have possibly included this line in the very same letter that specified a compliance rate of only thirty percent? He may well have embellished his annual reports, but to suggest that he would have put his name to a letter containing two completely contradictory statements would require a leap of the imagination. There is clearly more here than first meets the eye.

The second consideration is Piers's use of the phrase "persuasive way" to describe his approach. This clearly mirrors Laud's earlier and rather vague suggestion that "fair persuasions" be employed.[48] The notion that "persuasion" formed a core part of Piers's approach sits rather uncomfortably with the "mercenary" personality described by Hembry. As Timothy Peake has pointed out, Piers was quite prepared to use the courts to get his way, not just at Beckington, but also at Mells as early as 1634.[49] Margaret Stieg has identified five instances, besides Beckington, where disputes over the position of the communion table

Anthony Fletcher and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 199. My emphasis.

[46] T. H. Peake, *The Somerset Clergy and the Church Courts in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, 1625-1642* (MLitt diss., University of Bristol, 1978), 204.

[47] Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict, 1603-1660: Kingdom, Community, Commonwealth* (London: Edward Arnold, 1999: f.p. 1986), 136.

[48] Davies, *Caroline Captivity*, 216.

[49] Peake, *Somerset Clergy*, 203.

ended up in the Consistory Court, though it should be noted that in each case the persons presented, be they churchwardens or ministers, had removed the communion table *from* a position at the east end of the chancel.[50] While it would be naïve to suggest that by the use of the phrase "persuasive way" Piers was implying a strategy based solely upon asking politely, we have no reason to suspect that he felt any compulsion to be untruthful in his letter to Lambe. Besides having no clear motive to do so, we would be left with a letter that contained at least three false or contradictory statements. This would make him not just a liar, but a thoroughly incompetent one at that. Clearly, a great deal rests on how we can interpret the words "persuasive way".

These details touch upon how the progress of the Laudian Reformation is to be interpreted more generally, and upon the crucial issue of whether it is seen to have met with success or failure. For Stieg, Piers "arrived in the diocese intending to carry out a thorough 'reformacion'", but was frustrated by his dependence on the churchwardens, whose "cooperation might be lukewarm, to say the least".[51] As we have seen, her analysis is shared by Yule and Peake. Andrew Foster and Julian Davies have taken the opposite view. Foster, looking beyond the court records, has taken issue with Stieg's failure to cross-check visitation material with the churchwardens' accounts, which "testify to a pretty successful campaign to get Somerset churches equipped with rails".[52] Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke have

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[50] Margaret Stieg, *Laud's Laboratory: The Diocese of Bath and Wells in the Early Seventeenth Century* (East Brunswick, London, and Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1982), 297. The other locations are Mells, Taunton St Mary, Chaffcombe and Stratton (where the churchwardens had committed the offence), and Batcombe (where the puritan minister Richard Bernard had performed the act).

[51] *Ibid.*, 283, 291.

[52] Davies, *Caroline Captivity*, 226; Andrew Foster, "Churchwardens' accounts of early modern England and Wales: some problems to note, but much to be gained" in *The Parish*

proposed that, of the bishops in the southern province, Piers was the "most prompt" in agitating for change, ensuring that "as early as December 1633" commissioners had been dispatched to "view churches and recommend railing in communion tables altarwise".[53] Arguing that Piers was ultimately successful, they note that "by 1638 the remainder…had fallen into line and cases disappear from the court books".[54] The question remains, though, as to how this victory was achieved and whether "persuasive means" can be said to have played a part in it. Only unpicking the methods deployed by Piers in his diocese can help to address this question.

The problem is brought into stark contrast by a comment of Julian Davies, that "there exists no evidence for the assertion that only a quarter of the churches within the see had rails in 1640". His view that much changed between 1636 and 1640 is reasonable, and as we have seen, it is one shared by others. Importantly though, Davies read Piers's letter to Lambe as saying that "by January 1636 140 churches out of 469 had already *introduced the rail and altarwise position*".[55] This is a significant reinterpretation, for there is in fact no mention of rails in the letter. The dispute at Beckington concerned only the position of the table in the chancel. According to the churchwardens, rails had long been installed around the table, though the table itself was not in an altarwise position.[56] Whether tables were located in the centre of the chancel or nave, or at the east end of the chancel, rails had been customary in

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in *English Life, 1400-1600*, ed. by Katherine French *et al* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 91.

[53] Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547-c.1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201.

[54] *Ibid.*, 210.

[55] Davies, *Caroline Captivity*, 226. My emphasis.

[56] Prynne, *Canterburies Doome*, 97-8.

many parishes for a great many years.[57] The location of the table, though, had been so contentious that the issue was sidestepped altogether. Only the unexpected calling of the Short Parliament, to deal with the crisis then engulfing Scotland, ensured the Convocation in 1640 that gave the altarwise table a proper legal footing.[58] This distinction between the location of the table and the appearance of rails around it is critical when assessing the Laudian and Piersian approaches in the 1630s.

We know that, for Piers, the goal was for tables to be turned altarwise *and* surrounded by rails. But failure to bear the crucial distinction between the two policies in mind would result in a judgement of him by unfair and anachronistic criteria. In practical terms, they must be considered entirely separate policies. Julian Davies has observed that there were rumours that Laud wanted a Parliament, and thus a Convocation, to be called in the early 1630s.[59] Though this may represent his opponents' fears more than Laud's own intentions, it remains true that without one, the bishops would be building their new temples on very sandy soil indeed.

III. "Cancelled in from prophane use": the implementation of altar policy in Bath and Wells

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[57] Sharpe, *Personal Rule*, 342; Valerie Hitchman, *Omnia Bene or Ruinosa? The condition of the parish churches in and around London and Westminster, c. 1603-1677* (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2008), 89; Ephraim Udall, *Communion Comlinesse* (London, 1641), 20 [Wing (CR-ROM, 1996) / U13].

[58] Church of England, *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical…* (London, 1640), n.p., Canon 7 [STC (2nd ed.) / 10080].

[59] Davies, *Caroline Captivity*, 26.

The evidence of the Somerset churchwardens' accounts, which detail the purchase and erection of table rails, can now be considered. Twenty surviving churchwardens' accounts for Bath and Wells cover enough years in the 1630s to allow for unproblematic analysis of when the table rail was installed.[60] Several sets of accounts with incomplete coverage should be ignored, such as the accounts of Churchill, which only run from 1639 onwards, or those of Langford Budville and Blagdon, which are missing key years in the 1630s. At East Quantoxhead, the churchwardens paid one shilling for the removal of the table rails in 1646, but it cannot be seen when they were first erected. While twenty may seem a small sample, compared to Andrew Foster's suggestion that 100-200 accounts constitute a good sample for quantitative analysis, it is also uniquely well balanced and represents one of the best survival rates for an early modern English diocese.[61] With a mean benefice value of £59.5, this sample falls squarely in line with Timothy Peake's calculation of a £60 average for the diocese, meaning that it has not been skewed by the inclusion of unusually wealthy parishes.[62] Three

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[60] Somerset Heritage Centre (hereafter SHC), Taunton, Somerset, Churchwardens' Account Books (hereafter CWA): Axbridge, D/P/ax. 4/1/1 (1570-1670); Cameley, D/P/cmly. 4/1/1 (1613-1653); Castle Cary, D/P/cas. 4/1/1 C/1910 (1628-1706); Cheddar, DD/SAS SE14 (1612-1674); Crewkerne, D/P/crew. 4/1/1 (1625-1700); Durston, D/P/durn. 4/1/1 (1633-1719); Halse, D/P/hal. 4/1/1 (1627-1636); Hinton St George, D/P/hin.g. 4/1/1 (1633-1673); Ilminster, D/P/ilm. 4/1/1 C3295 (1633-1673); Kilton, D/P/kln. 4/1/1 (1634-1636); Locking, D/P/lock. 4/1/1 S/125 (1633-1683); Minehead St Martin, D/P/m.st.m 4/1/1 (1637-1694); Pilton, D/P/pilt. 4/1/3 (1626-1641); Shepton Mallet, D/P/she. 4/1/1 (1617-1704); Somerton, D/P/som. 4/1/1 (1581-1640); Swainswick, D/P/swk. 4/1/1 (1631-1712); Thorne Coffin, D/P/th.co. 4/1/2 (1622-1653); Wellington, D/P/wel. 4/1/3 (1611-1637); Williton, DD/WY I C/306 (1590-1713); Wrington, D/P/wri. 4/1/1 (1634-1675).
[61] Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, f.p. 1994), Appendix 1, 263-293; Andrew Foster, "Churchwardens' Accounts of early modern England and Wales: some problems to note, but much to be gained' in *The Parish in English Life, 1400-1600*, edited by Katherine French, Gary S. Gibbs and Beat A. Kümin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 74-75.
[62] T. H. Peake, *The Somerset Clergy and the Church Courts in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, 1625-1642* (Unpublished MLitt Thesis: University of Bristol, 1978), 23. See Stieg, *Laud's Laboratory*, 149-163 for a complete list of Somerset benefice values.

parishes in the sample were peculiar jurisdictions. Here, the bishop was no longer the Ordinary but retained the right of visitation, which according to Paul Barber meant that they were "effectively part of the diocese".[63] Geographical distribution is also remarkably even, with the twenty parishes located evenly across the habitable areas of the diocese: five along the southern border with Devon, three in the far south west, four in central Somerset south of the Levels, and a further eight in the north of the diocese scattered between Wells and Bath. There is a good mixture of large urban parishes, such as Shepton Mallet and Minehead, and smaller and more remote churches, such as Kilton or the tiny chapel at Thorne Coffin.

It is clear from this sample that a systematic campaign was conducted in Bath and Wells from 1633 onwards, one that involved the full weight of the diocesan machinery, to co-opt the churchwardens in the drive for rails. Of the twenty accounts that can be reliably evaluated, three record the erection of rails in 1633[64], nine in 1634[65], four in 1635[66], two in 1636[67], and one in 1640[68]. This leaves just one: Cheddar's account book does not mention the purchase of rails at all in the 1630s. This is hardly suggestive of widespread resistance or outright defiance.[69] Rather, this snapshot demonstrates an extremely swift and successful campaign

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[63] Cheddar, Ilminster, and Pilton; Paul Barber, "What is a Peculiar?", *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 3/16 (1995), 301.

[64] Castle Cary, Ilminster, Wrington.

[65] Axbridge, Cameley, Halse, Shepton Mallet, Somerton, Swainswick, Thorne Coffin, Wellington, Williton. Somewhat ironically, the Swainswick account book bears the signature of William Prynne, a native of the parish.

[66] Crewkerne, Durston, Locking, Pilton.

[67] Hinton St George, Kilton.

[68] Minehead St Martin.

[69] Cheddar may have complied with Piers's directions: the 17*d* expended in 1636 for 'dismissinge the Court aboute the orgaines and the Channcell' may indicate prior refusal to erect rails, though 4*s* expended in the same year for communion table mats indicates that parishioners received the sacrament while kneeling. A mere 4*d* was expended erecting table rails in 1643 - suggestive of the fact that the parish already owned a set.

to equip Somerset churches with table rails: sixty percent had erected them by the end of 1634, at or around the time of Piers's first triennial visitation; ninety percent by the time Piers wrote his letter to Lambe in 1636. These are figures far exceeding the figure of thirty percent cited by Piers himself in that year. Even allowing for concerns about the reliability of churchwardens' accounts, and for this relatively small sample, there exists a large enough disparity to demonstrate that Piers must, in his letter to Lambe, have been talking about something other than the erection of table rails.

The table rail was not mentioned in the 1604 canons. Canon 82, which concerned the communion table and its decorations, only specified the requirement that it be "kept and repaired in sufficient and seemly manner" and to be "placed in so good sort within the Church or Chancell, as thereby the Minister may be more conveniently heard".[70] Nonetheless, Piers clearly felt confident that the policy could be pursued through the usual channels of the visitation, in which churchwardens reported on the state of their parishes either triennially to the bishop himself, or annually to the archdeacon. Laud's 1633 metropolitan visitation articles for Bath and Wells, and Piers's own visitation articles of 1636, contained a strong indication of their intentions, with identical questions on how the table should be stored when not in use:

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[70] Church of England, *Constitutio[ns] and canons ecclesiastical treated upon by the Bishop of London...* (London, 1604), n.p., n. 82 [STC (2nd ed.) / 10070.5].

…And whether it is so used out of the time of Divine Service as is not agreeable to the holy use of it, as by sitting on it, throwing Hats on it, writing on it, or is it abused to other prophaner uses?[71]

The only satisfactory answer the churchwardens could have given to this point would have been to say that their parish had erected a set of table rails. Among his justifications for the rail, itemised in the list of reasons he sent to Laud in 1632, were fears that an exposed table would invite "prophanation".[72] The use of the rail was, for Piers and for other Laudians, primarily a means by which a line of demarcation might be established between the sacred and secular spheres, to protect the former from the pollutions of the latter. The fact that the railing of tables could be pursued through the visitation meant that the full weight of the diocesan investigatory and judicial system – commissioners, apparitors, fines – could also be deployed. All this served to ensure that the clear majority of communion tables in Bath and Wells were railed in by the mid-1630s.

There was good reason for Piers to be cautious with the contentious issue of table position, though, because ordering the altarwise table could complicate and imperil the whole enterprise. It appears that in Minehead, the last of the sampled parishes to purchase rails, the order for railing the table became wrapped up in a wider restructuring of the whole chancel area: the 1638 accounts record the payment of 2*s* 6*d* to the apparitor for bringing a

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[71] William Laud, *Articles to be Enquired of in the Metropolitan Visitation…of Bath and Wells* (London, 1633), n.p., 'Concerning the Church', n. 1 [STC (2nd ed.) / 10137.7]; Piers, *Articles to be Enquired…* (1636), n.p., 'Articles concerning the Church', n.3.
[72] Lambeth Palace Library, London, MS943, Papers of William Laud and others, ff. 475-6.

demand to clear the chancel of seats.[73] That the churchwardens were evidently asked to comply with the two sets of orders simultaneously may explain their slowness in purchasing rails. In Cameley, the wardens disbursed 33*s* 4*d* to a joiner for railing the table in 1634.[74] Piers, however, had decided that it would be appropriate for this parish to turn the table as well, and on this issue enjoyed rather less immediate success. In 1635, the account book records an expense of 5*s* for being called "several times" before the bishop's court for failing to comply with the request. The matter was still unresolved by 1637, when a further 2*s* 6*d* was spent on an order "about the table". A sum of 5*s* for altering the rails, made shortly afterward, suggests they had finally complied in turning the table before the end of that year.[75] Importantly, this does show that when Piers had claimed that parishes "were no sooner spoken to than obeyed", and that others were "quickly satisfied", he was clearly being a little misleading. Nonetheless, he was clearly shrewd enough to have pursued his campaign for altarwise and railed tables according to different timetables. Consequently, it should be no surprise that even parishes which David Underdown has identified as having been home to strong Puritan voices, such as Wellington, Somerton, and Shepton Mallet, can be seen to have railed their tables early in the 1630s.[76]

In this context, proceeding 'persuasively' appears to have meant proceeding selectively and carefully, avoiding confrontation where possible, attempting to enact change in more sympathetic parishes first, and building a new sense of what constituted normal parish

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[73] CWA Minehead St Martin, D/P/m.st.m 4/1/1 (1638, 1640).
[74] CWA Cameley, D/P/cmly 4/1/1 (1634).
[75] CWA Cameley, D/P/cmly 4/1/1 (1635, 1637).
[76] David Underdown, *Somerset*, 22; CWA Shepton Mallet, D/P/she 4/1/1 (1634); CWA Wellington, D/P/WY 1 (1634); CWA Somerton, D/P/som 4/1/1 (1634).

practice over time. In Wells St Cuthbert, for instance, it appears that some of the substantial

parishioners bought into the new policy on condition that they could alter the seating plan of

the church to match their own perceived status. They petitioned their bishop in 1635, using

his own language of "decencie and conveniencie", to argue that the pews of the church be

re-oriented to face the east. Piers "approved thereof and commanded itt to be done", no

doubt rather pleased that the parishioners of Wells had provided him the cover of local

initiative.[77] In Beckington, initiative had been shared between Piers and the supportive rector

there, Alexander Huish, who put forward his "personal conviction of the convenience,

decency, and reverence" of the altarwise table on 21 December 1635.[78] That the Beckington

case ultimately proved so problematic should not obscure the fact that a Laudian choice for

the benefice like Huish probably seemed a safe pair of hands to oversee the successful

implementation of the altar policy.

Ultimately, Piers was conscious that some policies could be implemented immediately and

others would need more time. Just four parishes with extant churchwardens' accounts

purchased organs in the 1630s, for instance, despite the Long Parliament's later accusation

that Piers had forced parishes to buy them "to their intolerable cost". These were Somerton

in 1636, Minehead St Martin and Wellington in 1637, and Shepton Mallet in 1639: all larger

urban parishes which Piers probably felt could afford them.[79] Regarding the rails, Andrew

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[77] Taunton, SHC, Deposition Books of the Consistory Court of Bath and Wells, D\D/cd/83
(1636), *Ex pte Elizabeth Cornishe*, 4 January 1636/7, unfol.
[78] Nicholas Keene, 'Huish, Alexander (1595-1668)', *Oxford Dictionary of National* Biography,
Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn., Jan 2008
[http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14101, accessed 1 April 2017]
[79] CWA Somerton, D/P/som 4/1/1 (1636); CWA Minehead St Martin, D/P/m.st.m 4/1/1
(1637); CWA Wellington, D/P/wel 4/1/1 (1637); CWA Shepton Mallet, D/P/she 4/1/1 (1639);
Articles of Accusation, 5-6.

Foster is clearly correct to point out that the wardens' accounts paint a very different picture to Margaret Stieg's portrayal of failure and frustration. Kenneth Fincham has remarked that although the accounts record the cost of erecting rails, "they rarely reveal anything about the repositioning of the communion table, since no money need be spent".[80] This is perfectly correct: one could even say that the churchwardens' accounts simply indicate that the clear majority of parishes in Bath and Wells had table rails by 1636. Significantly, this neither undermines nor disproves Piers's claim that only 140 out of 469 parishes had altarwise tables by the same year. Most churchwardens had probably not been asked to reposition their tables before 1636. Where a policy might be enforced through traditional means, the visitation, it could enjoy a significant degree of success. Where Piers had to rely upon different mechanisms, the process was more fraught with difficulty, and was pursued as a longer-term aspiration, rather than an immediate demand.

IV. Conclusion: "Persuasion" and Progress in Laudian Altar Policy

It is proper that Laud's and Piers's statements, that they proceeded in a "persuasive way" to enact their altar policies, have not been taken at face value. We have nevertheless seen that their phraseology was not without meaning. Prynne and Heylyn, writing from the vantage points of the 1640s and 1660s respectively, were at pains to judge the events of 1630s according to anachronistic criteria. Looking forward from the 1630s, rather than backwards from the 1640s, it is possible to see that Laud's and Piers's methods were rather more nuanced than either author would have us believe. This article has addressed three issues.

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[80] Kenneth Fincham, "The Restoration of the Altars in the 1630s", *The Historical Journal* 44/4 (2001), 928.

First it has shown that Piers, like Laud, had a clear idea about what he wanted to achieve, with respect to the communion tables, from early in the 1630s. Both wanted to bring the parishes into line with their cathedral "mother churches" by turning the tables altarwise and railing them in. Second, and crucially, it has shown that Piers was shrewd enough to break altar policy into its component parts. Third, it has considered the different chronologies of implementation and, in so doing, it has challenged several teleological assumptions. For all Piers and Laud knew, when they acceded to Bath and Wells and Canterbury in 1632 and 1633 respectively, they had a lifetime to bring about their reformation of the Church of England. Treading carefully and proceeding steadily, especially on issues without firm legal foundation, was for them a viable political choice.

We have also seen that the historiography has become rather tied in knots over the issue of railed and altarwise tables. Is Piers's own estimation of a compliance rate of one in four parishes by 1636 representative of 'failure', or is it instead, and in light of the evidence of the churchwardens' accounts, simply untrue? Should the reliability of the churchwardens' accounts themselves be questioned? In short, either Piers was wrong, or the churchwardens' accounts are misleading. This paper has proposed a different approach, one which looks forward from the evidence, rather than backward from the narrative of enforcement and resistance established from the 1640s onwards. The picture which emerges is one in which Laud and Piers had a clear idea about what they wanted to achieve, but also a clear sense about how they might achieve it. Their overall vision for the communion tables involved several different components, which included turning them altarwise and railing them in. Each component could be implemented independently of the other. Confidence to move on rails early in the 1630s was not matched by similar confidence on the altarwise orientation. A

slower and more cautious approach, based upon "persuasion", was required for the latter policy. In other words, they had to proceed selectively, to encourage, and if necessary to force, individual parishes to comply with the new policy until altarwise tables became the new normal. Whether this approach is judged to have been a success or a failure by historians, William Piers was plainly content that, by 1636, it was achieving success enough: one quarter of parishes with altarwise tables was, in his view, a sign that significant progress had to date been made.