

Extracts from the clerk's two-page summary of Elizabeth's speech to her bishops and other clergy at Somerset Place, 27 February 1585.

The context of this meeting is clear from the text. Clerical subsidies were voted separately, and by the Convocations, not by Parliament. There were two Convocations, one for Canterbury Province and the other for York: Canterbury was much the larger and more

important. By 1585 the Convocations had lost most of their earlier power and functions to the Parliament, which legislated on all matters to do with regulating the national Church. Convocations met at the same time as Parliaments, and the lay and clerical subsidies were part of the same taxation package. The tension between the lay Councillors, and particularly Cecil, on the one hand, and the Archbishop, John Whitgift, on the other comes through

clearly. Elizabeth is emphasizing her own control rather than taking sides.

The issue about unfit clergy was a long-running one, because ordinations had declined steeply after 1558, and there was an acute shortage, particularly of preachers, which the Queen was reluctant to acknowledge. By the end of the century the situation was improving rapidly, as graduates came forward in increasing numbers.

ELIZABETH'S SPEECH TO HER BISHOPS:

A brief effect of her Majesty's speech unto the bishops and other of the clergy offering unto her their subsidy in her Privy Chamber at Somerset Place, 27 February 1584 [5] at what time there were of the clergy my lord Archbishop of Canterbury [John Whitgift], the bishops of Worcester, Sarum and Rochester, Mr. Archdeacon of Canterbury prolocutor [Speaker of the Lower House of Convocation], the Deans of Pauls, Westminster and Ely, Doctor Bell and Doctor Bound, and in the presence of my lords Chancellor, Treasurer, Leicester, Bedford, Chamberlain and Hampton, Mr. Secretary Walsingham and Mr. Solicitor.

1. Imprimis. [First (in a list of items)] The subsidy being delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the name of the whole clergy, her majesty answered that she did accept of it thankfully, and the rather for that it came voluntarily and frankly, whereas the laity must be entreated and moved thereunto. My lord Treasurer [Lord Burghley], standing by, said Madame, these men come with mites [small coins], but we will come with pounds.

Her majesty answered, I esteem more of their mites than of your pounds, for that they come of themselves not moved, but you tarry [wait] till you be urged thereunto, and gave the clergy thanks, saying, Whatsoever you have bestowed upon me, I am to bestow it upon you again. God grant I may bestow it to His glory and the benefit of this realm.

2. Then she said unto the bishop, We understand that some of the Nether House [the

Commons] have used divers reproachful speeches against you tending greatly to your dishonour, which we will not suffer; and that they meddle with matters above their capacity not appertaining unto them, for the which we will call some of them to an account. And we understand they be countenanced by some of our Council, which we will redress or else uncouncil some of them. But, said she, we will not charge the whole House with this disorder, for although there be some intemperate and rash heads in that House, yet there be many wise and discreet men who do find just cause of grievance against some of you; first in that you have not greater care in making ministers, whereof some be of such lewd [disorderly] life and corrupt behaviour whereof we know of some such that be not worthy to come into any honest company.....

5. After this, she wished the bishops to look unto private conventicles [secret religious meetings]. And now, quod [said] she, I miss my Lord of London, who looks no better unto the city, where every merchant must have his schoolmaster and nightly conventicles expounding scripture and catechizing their servants and maids, in so much that I have heard how some of their maids have not sticked [hesitated] to control learned preachers, and to say that such a man taught otherwise in our house.....

7. Then spoke my Lord of Canterbury, saying, Madame for mine own part, I will look unto these things as well as I can, and

I will take such order with my brethren as I trust they will look better unto such things. But, Madam, let me use the best means I can, some things will escape and be amiss; and when it is so, I would every man were charged with his own fault and not the fault of one or two to be laid unto all.

8. Then spake my Lord Treasurer, saying, Truly, my lord, her majesty has declared unto you a marvellous great fault in that you make in this time of light so many lewd [ignorant] and unlearned ministers.

My Lord of Canterbury said, Well. Quod her Majesty, Draw articles and charge them with it that have offended.

I do not burden, quod my Lord Treasurer, them that be here, but it is the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry [William Overton] that I mean, who made seventy ministers in one day for money; some tailors, some shoemakers, and other crass men. I am sure the greatest part of them is not worthy to keep horses ...

10. Then said my Lord of Canterbury, We complain, in these days, of darkness in time of light, of ignorance in time of learning, of want of preachers in time of plenty. I dare avouch, let all records be sought, and there was never that number of learned preachers that is in these days, and do and will increase daily more and more.....

