The year 1637 marked the high-water mark of Charles’s personal rule. In the Hampden case, he established his right to continue collecting ship money. Earlier in the year in an equally celebrated case the Court of Star Chamber crushed three opponents of his religious policies (John Bastwick, Henry Burton, and William Prynne). Observing these events, the Venetian ambassador in London concluded that Charles had ‘changed the principles by which his predecessors reigned’. It was still too early to know ‘if the road he has taken will lead him to absolute royalty, which is definitely the goal he has set himself’. Considering how upset the English were over their loss of liberty and changes in religion, the ambassador thought that Charles would be ‘very fortunate if he does not fall into some great upheaval’. None the less, success was possible ‘if his Majesty adopts gentle methods in his government and in religion’.1 The treatment of Bastwick, Burton, and Prynne was far from gentle. All three had their ears cut off. Prynne (whose ears had already been cropped as a result of a previous prosecution) also had the initials ‘SL’ for Seditious Libeller branded on both cheeks. All three men were next transported to remote prisons where the intention was to keep them isolated from the outside world for the rest of their lives.2 In the higher circles of English society there was concern that gentlemen from three respected professions (a physician, clergyman, and lawyer) could be treated so harshly; but the case aroused more widespread sympathies too. Although many of Charles’s subjects were dissatisfied with his foreign and domestic policies, it was his religious policy that generated the most zealous opposition and produced the most dramatic examples of repression. When Charles tried to extend
that policy to his kingdom of Scotland, where his rule had already aroused discontent on other grounds, he virtually invited rebellion. Faced with the Scottish challenge to his authority, Charles overreacted as usual, marching northward with an army intending to crush the Scots. He was *Rex Bellicosus* again, and again the results would prove disastrous.

**Religious Policy**

On the surface, the religious policy of the personal rule was eminently reasonable. Charles and Archbishop Laud were appalled by the deteriorating physical condition of the churches. They launched a campaign to repair and adorn them. They were worried, too, by the extent to which the laity had gained the power to appoint and support many of the clergy (through the purchase of impropriations and advowsons). They tried to remedy this by making the clergy more financially independent of lay control. They thought that respect for the clergy had declined. They sought therefore to enhance the status of the ministry and the power of the church hierarchy, particularly the authority of bishops. They thought the actual form of worship in the church had become too lax and disorderly. They tried therefore to impose higher standards, reduce lecture-ships and sermons, enforce the official liturgy, and generally restore the splendour and ceremony of the church service, what Laud called the ‘beauty of holiness’. Ministers were enjoined to wear the surplice and worshippers to bow at the name of Jesus. Nothing came to symbolise this shift toward ceremony and formality more than the issue of the communion table. In many churches the table where people received communion was located in the middle of the church, although it was supposed to be stored in the east end of the church when not in use. Standing out in the open, the table was subject to such indignities as people laying hats on it and dogs urinating on it. Charles and Laud preferred to see the table protected by a railing, and preferably located permanently in the east end of the church, in a north–south orientation (what was called ‘altarwise’). This arrangement of the table carried the further expectation that members of the congregation could be won over to the habit of receiving communion at the rail, perhaps even in a kneeling position.