

Christ the Only Head of the Church

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Reformed · Late Medieval · Treatise

STROMATA 223

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INTRODUCTION

Written in 1413 as Hus was already under interdict and about to be summoned to Constance, where he would be burned two years later, these pages advance the argument that cost him his life: that Christ, not the Roman pontiff, is the sole head of the church. Hus writes as a scholastic — marshaling Scripture, Augustine, and even Boniface VIII's *Unam Sanctam* against papal claims — but the stakes are pastoral and, ultimately, personal. The treatise became one of the primary conduits through which Wycliffite ecclesiology entered the Bohemian Reformation and, a century later, shaped Luther's confrontation at Leipzig. Expect close, patient argument by distinction and proof-text, sharpened throughout by the pressure of a man defending doctrine he knows may kill him.

In view of what has been said, the conclusion is (i) that Christ alone is the head of the universal church, which church is not a part of anything else. This is clear because, if any one is the head of the universal church, then is he made better than the angels and than any blessed created spirit, Heb. 1:4; but this befits Christ alone, for it behooved him to be the first-born among many brethren, Romans, 8 : 29, and consequently it behooves him to be the chief by the right of the law of primogeniture, Col. 1 : 15. This conclusion also follows from the apostle's words, Eph. 1 : 20: " Which God wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name which is named not only in this world but also in the world which is to come, and has put all things under his feet and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body." From this it is clear that, if any Christian were to be the head of the universal church with Christ (for the church cannot be a monster having two heads, as is set forth in Boniface VIII's bull, beginning *Unam sandam*; therefore, the bull says, "the church is one body and has one head, not two heads, like a monster "), it would be necessary to concede that the Christian who was the head of that church was Christ himself, or otherwise it would be necessary to concede that Christ is inferior to that Christian and a lowly member of him. The conclusion shows that the thing is impossible. Hence, the holy apostles agreed in confessing that they were servants of that one Head and humble ministers of the church, his bride. No one of the apostles ever presumed to claim that he was the head or the bridegroom of the church, for this would have meant to adulterate with the queen of heaven and to arrogate the name of dignity and office — the dignity by which, according to the eternal predestination, and the office through which, by eternal appointment, God ordained that Christ should

be supreme ruler of his bride. This also appears from St. Augustine's letter to Dardanus [Migne's ed., 33 : 832 sqq.], where he says: "She only has one head, namely him who rules over her, excelling all and typifying in one union the spiritual and secular rule."

Therefore, it is possible to understand the "Head of the Church" in a twofold sense: inward and outward. In the inward sense, as the chief person of his church, and he is this in two ways: either by superintendence over the material goods of his church or by ruling over its spiritual things. As outward head he is a person that superintends persons inferior to his nature, but he is called the head to those outside of this number whom he rules by his influence in virtue of his nature. And so Christ is the outward head of every particular church and of the universal church by virtue of his divinity, and he is the inward head of the universal church by virtue of his humanity; and these two natures, divinity and humanity, are one Christ, who is the only head of his bride, the universal church, and this is the totality of the predestinate. For this divinity is the man who descended from heaven and who ascended again into heaven, as is said in John 3 : 13, not the whole of the divinity considered as divinity, but according to the headship whose descent was not a local movement but an incarnation or self-emptying. And the ascent was a local movement by which he took with himself the other parts of the body.

Hence, it is plain that there is nothing inconsistent in a particular church having several heads. For it may have three heads, namely the divinity of Christ, his humanity, and the chief appointed by God to rule over it. But there are degrees of subordination in these heads, because the divinity is supreme, Christ's humanity is intermediate, and the chief is the lowest. But the universal church, as has been said, has two heads, the outward head which is the divinity and the inward which is the humanity.

Further, from these things it is seen that Christ from the very beginning of the world down to his incarnation was, in virtue of his divinity, the outward head of the church, but from the incarnation on he is the inward head of the church, by virtue of his humanity. And so the whole holy catholic church always has had and now has Christ as its head, from whom it cannot fall away, for she is the bride knit to him, her head, by a love that never ends, for the bridegroom says to the church herself, Jer. 31 : 3: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee." Therefore, always, from the very beginning, the bridegroom has been present with the whole church by virtue of his divinity, who later was with the holy fathers by virtue of his humanity. Hence Augustine says, commenting on Psalm 37 : 25, "I have been young [junior, younger] and now I am old": "The Lord himself in his heart, that is, his church, was younger than the first men. And, behold, now that he is old, ye know and do not know, and ye understand because ye are fixed in this, and so ye have believed, because Christ is our head, we are the body of the head. Are we alone the body and not those also who were before us? All who were righteous from the beginning of the world have Christ for their head. For they believed that he was for to come whom we now believe to have come, and in the faith in him they were healed, in which faith we also are healed; that he verily might be the head of the whole city of Jerusalem, all the faithful being included from

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the beginning even unto the end, and all the legions and armies of the angels being also added — that so there might be one city under one king, and one province under one emperor, happy, lauding God

in its never-ending peace and salvation, and blessed without end. Christ's body, which is the church, is, as it were, like a young man. And now in the end of the world the church is of plump old age, because, with reference to this, it was said of her: 'They shall be multiplied in her plump old age.' She has been multiplied among all nations." So much Augustine, in whose words it appears how Christ is the head of the holy church, in whom the fathers believed as the one who was for to come in virtue of his humanity that he might be their head in his humanity as he had always been present with them in his divinity. And in this head all the elect are united, together with the holy angels.

(2) The second point concerns the objection that no reprobate is a member of our holy mother, the Catholic church. For, not only is our holy mother, the Catholic church, one from the beginning of the world, which without mixture has been embraced with never-ending love by the right hand of the bridegroom, as is plain from what has been said above and on Augustine's authority: Inasmuch as the church, after the day of judgment, will have no other members than she has and will have before the day of judgment, but all who are to be saved after that day of judgment are predestinate, therefore none of them, before that day of judgment are reprobate. And consequently no reprobates have ever been members of the church, the bride of Christ. By the same kind of reasoning this will always be true, that no reprobate whatsoever is a member of our holy mother, the Catholic church.

Likewise, it is not possible that at any time Christ does not love his bride or any part of her, for he necessarily loves her as he loves himself. But it is not possible that he should love any reprobate in this way; therefore it is not possible that any reprobate should be a member of the church. The antecedent is clear from that notable principle, "that God is not able to know or love anything *de novo*," as Augustine says, *de Trinitate*, 6 [Nic. Fathers, 3 : 103]. For God is not able to begin to know anything or to give up knowing anything or to call forth an act of his will, for he is unchangeable and also because the divine knowledge or volition is not conditioned by anything from without.

From this it is evident that Christ loves the whole church as he loves himself, because he loves her now, just as he will love her after the day of judgment, when she will reign with him as is plain from the Canticles. For, otherwise, there would not be a true marriage out of the never-ending love of Christ, a party to the divine nuptials, if the bridegroom who is one person with the bride did not love her even as he loves himself. To this the apostle was speaking when he said: "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it that he might purify it, washing it in the laver of water, the word of life, that he might present it unto himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish," Eph. 5 : 26, 27. For this reason Bernard, in his 12th homily on the Canticles [Migne, 183 : 831] says: "The church is Christ's body, dearer to him than the body he gave to the grave." It is plain, therefore, that it is befitting that Christ always love his bride, the holy church, just as he will love her after the day of judgment; and in the same way he hates every reprobate, just as he will hate him after the day of judgment. For, inasmuch as God knows fully what the end of every reprobate will be, and what penance every predestinate person who falls will, with God's unending grace, do — it is evident that God loves a predestinate person who sins more than he loves any reprobate person, no matter what measure of grace the latter may enjoy in time, because God wills that the predestinate have perpetual blessedness and the reprobate eternal fire. Thus, the Psalmist [5 : 6] says: "Thou hatest all who work iniquity." Hence, because the pride of the reprobate, in proportion as they hate God, always ascends after final impenitence, they are not of Christ's body. For St. Augustine says: Sermon on the Lord's Words, 53 [Migne's ed., 354, vol. 39 : 1568]: "A lowly head and a proud member ! Nay. He who loves pride does not wish to be of the body of Christ the head." And again, Sermon 50 [Migne's ed., 138, vol. 38 : 765], he says: "Christ spoke truly in regard to certain shepherds, for he holds all good shepherds in himself, when he said: 'I am the chief Shepherd and all ye are one in me.' 1 But the reprobate, who is a member of the devil, is not duly joined together in the same structure with his head." Augustine also, de doct. Christi, 3 : 32 [Nic. Fathers, 2 : 569], after he shows that Christ and his body, which is the church, are one person, censures Tychonius,² who in his second rule calls the whole human family the twofold — bipartitum — body of the Lord. This, he says, ' ' was no proper name to apply to the body of Christ. That in truth is not the Lord's body that will not be with him through eternity. Tychonius ought to have spoken about the real body and the mixed body of Christ, or about the real body and the simulated body, for, not only through eternity but now, hypocrites cannot be said to be with him." How plainly does that holy man show that the reprobate are not truly of Christ's church! To refer to Augustine again, de Pen., 4 [Friedberg, 1 : 1230], he draws the conclusion that no one belongs to Christ's kingdom, which is the church, except the son whom the Father gave to him, about whom it is said, John 3 : 16: "That he should not perish but have everlasting life." Therefore, he says: "Let it not move us that God does not give to some sons that gift of perseverance, for surely this could not be the case if these were of the predestinate and of those who are the called according to his purpose, who are truly the sons of promise. But, because these live piously, they are called sons of God; but those who shall continue to live wickedly and shall die in their wickedness, these he does not call sons."

And again Augustine, treating the words of I John 2 : 18 [Friedberg, 1 : 1231], "They went out from us but were not of us," says: "They were not of the number of sons, and when did they have the faith of sons? Because those who are true sons are foreknown and predestinate to be conformed to the image of God's Son and according to His purpose are called to be holy even as they are elect. For not does

the son of the promise perish, but the son of perdition. These, therefore, were of the multitude who were called and not of the few who were chosen." A little further on he remarks: "For he knew from the beginning who would believe on him and who would betray him, and he said: 'Therefore, have I spoken to you, because no one can come to me, except it be given him of my Father. ' Af ter that, many of his disciples went back and no longer walked with him. They were for a time called disciples in the Gospel, nevertheless they were not true disciples, for they did not abide in his words as he said : 1 If ye shall abide in my words, then are ye my disciples. ' Therefore, as they did not have perseverance, they were not Christ's true disciples, and so they were not true children of God, although for a time they seemed to be so and were called so. Therefore, we call those the elect, disciples of Christ and God's children, and they are to be called children whom we see living regenerate and pious lives. And then they truly are what they are called when they abide in that on account of which they were so called [which is the ground of their receiving these names]. But if they have not the gift of perseverance, that is, do not abide in that on account of which they started out to be, then they are not truly called on account of that which they are called [for that which gives them their name], and such they are not [that is, they are not what their names indicate] ; f or those things do not exist with Him to whom is known what they will be in the future, that is, evil persons who have proceeded from being good" [that is, from being by name and in appearance good they will at last appear to be what they really are, namely, evil]. Thus much St. Augustine. How clearly does not he show that many are in the church who are nominally called "sons" by men, who nevertheless are not of the church, for they are not truly sons of God predestinated unto the life of glory!

This also is made plain by St. Chrysostom in his *de opere imperfeto*, Hom. 9, who says: "Those who are of God cannot perish, because no one can pluck them out of God's hand." This appears also from John 10 : 28: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life and no one shall pluck them out of my hand." And later Christ, the best of teachers, proves by the greatness of God's gift, which is the Holy Spirit, that no one is able to do this, because his Father is almighty, and from his hand no one is able to pluck anything. But, because Christ and his Father are one with the Holy Spirit — who is Christ's gift, by whom the church is knit together with him — therefore, no one is able to pluck his sheep out of his hand. For he himself from eternity has chosen every member of his church into the bridal relation. Therefore he will desert no such member; because, if this were not so, he would choose without foresight and proper provision to glory. And to this the conclusion of the great philosopher applies when he says of the reprobate who abode for a time in grace: "If they had been of us, they would have continued with us," I John 2 : 19. For this conditional clause cannot be impossible or heretical, for it is formulated by the Holy Spirit. To this text may be added Matt. 10 : 20, "It is not ye who speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you"; and also Romans 8 : 35, where the apostle, as I have quoted above, speaking of himself and of the predestinate who are members of the church, proves that no creature shall be able to separate them from the love which is in Christ Jesus. And he gathers his members together gently, for the love of predestination does not fail, I Cor. 13. Hence the apostle says: "Ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. But if any one hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his," Roman 8 : 9. And he understands that such an one is not a part of his body.

And if, after all, it be objected that the reprobate living in this present time in love has this bond [of perfectness] and consequently is united with Christ, and the predestinate living in sin lacks this bond and consequently is not united with Christ, it is evident that, as in the human body there is fluid moisture and a radical moisture, so in Christ's mystical body there is, so it must be granted, a grace according to present righteousness and also a perfecting grace. As ulcers develop and display themselves through the moist fluid and are not continuous on account of a difference of nature [from the body itself], so for the present it is with the members of the devil who are known according to present righteousness. But the predestinate, although they may be for a time deprived of fluent grace, nevertheless have radical and abiding grace, from which they cannot fall away, and so the predestinate, being now righteous and having twofold grace, are bound by a twofold bond.

But here the objection is made that, in view of the things said above, we ought to grant that at one and the same time the same person may be righteous and unrighteous, one of the faithful and an unbeliever, a true Christian and a heretic, in abounding grace and without grace (not to use other such contradictory expressions), it follows that there is a manifest contradiction. In this objection it is said that it should be granted that the same person is at one and the same time both righteous and unrighteous; but it is inconsistent with the truth, that the same person is at one and the same time both righteous and unrighteous in respect to the same thing. Even as contraries cannot at one and the same time inhere in the same person in respect to the same thing, so the names given above are, on account of their ambiguity, not contrary one to the other, for, according to the Philosopher only one thing can be opposed to one thing, and so the same man is righteous by virtue of predestinating grace and unrighteous by virtue of destructive vice, as was Peter in his denial of Christ and Paul in his persecution of him. For they were at that time not fallen away from the love of predestination. Consequently they were, in view of this love, in grace and therefore righteous; and because they were at that time in sin they were deprived of fluent temporal grace and therefore were unrighteous. And if the inference be drawn: therefore they were at that time not righteous and consequently were not righteous at all, the inference is drawn by denying the first consequence. For a consequence which is drawn by proceeding from a denial to a negation does not hold except with modification as follows in this proposition, namely:

Peter and Paul were unrighteous; therefore, according to present grace, they were not righteous. This conclusion is true. As it was properly conceded that they were righteous according to the grace of predestination and were not righteous according to present grace, so, in a similar way, Paul was one of the faithful in view of predestination and one of the unfaithful by reason of his persecution, an Israelite by predestination and a blasphemer by the law of present unrighteousness, was in the love of predestination and yet was without grace, that is, without the love of present righteousness.

Paul's own words, drawn from Hosea, confirm this: "I will call that my people which was not my people, and her my beloved that was not my beloved; and her to have acquired mercy which did not acquire mercy, and in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called the sons of the living God," Romans 9 : 25, 27. Hence it is evident that this Scripture and other Scripture like it are not understood except by those who know that there is not a contradiction, unless opposites are predicated of the same person according to the same thing and for the same instant of time. Those who know how to carry on such discussion acknowledge that Christ was both dead and alive during the three days; yea, as Ambrose says: "He was dead and was not dead, for he lived in the spirit and was dead in the flesh; died as a man and did not die as God." So the apostle says, I Tim. 5 : 6, that "a widow living in pleasure is dead while she liveth," because she lives in the flesh but does not live in the spirit. It is clear that neither what is contrary nor self-contradictory follows.

Finally, to sum up what has been said, it is evident that no reprobate is truly a part of holy mother church. For, if St. Thomas or any one else should be found to call a reprobate who is in grace a member of the church, then he is speaking ambiguously with Augustine and sacred Scripture, giving

'Thomas Aquinas, the angelic doctor, d. 1274.

heed to the popular mode of speech and the popular notion of the militant church. Hence it was stated above that St. Augustine said [DisL 4:8, de Pen.; Friedberg, 1 : 1232]: "If they have not perseverance, that is, if they do not abide in that for which they started out to be, then they are not truly called what they are called, and they are not what they are called. For these things do not exist for Him who knows what they will be in the future, that is, evil persons who have proceeded from being good" — *ex bonis mali*. This saying of Augustine should stand against all objections wherein ambiguity is to be noted.

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