

The Abuse of Scripture in the Interest of Clerical Power

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Reformed · Late Medieval · Treatise

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INTRODUCTION

Written by the Bohemian reformer roughly a century before Luther, this short polemic dissects a pattern its author saw everywhere in the late medieval church: the clergy's habit of seizing upon scriptural texts that magnify their authority while quietly ignoring those that demand poverty, meekness, and service. Hus would be burned at Constance in 1415 for convictions of just this kind, and the argument here — that ecclesiastical power divorced from the imitation of Christ is a fraud upon Scripture itself — became foundational for the Hussite movement and, later, for the wider Protestant critique of Rome. The method is forensic: passage set beside passage, the verses clergy embrace paired with the verses they evade. Expect a sharp, accusatory reading, closer to a prosecutor's brief than a sermon.

Because many priests abandon the imitation of Christ, the high priest, and boast of the power committed to the church, without doing works that correspond, therefore up to this time we have been speaking of the power of this kind. For they extract out of Matt. 18 : 16, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," that whatsoever they do, every man ought altogether to approve. And from the words of Matt. 23 : 2, "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, therefore all things whatsoever they bid you, these do," they extract that every inferior is to obey them in all things. And so these priests clamorously apply to themselves at their own pleasure whatsoever appeals to them out of Christ's Gospel, and without any ministry of love on their part to correspond. But what plainly calls for toil and worldly self-abnegation and the imitation of Christ, that they spurn away as something inapplicable to themselves, or make believe they hold it when they do not.

Hence, because Jesus said to Peter, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, etc," this they lay hold of with great complacency for the exaltation of their own power. But what the Lord said to Peter, John 21 : 17, "Follow me and feed my sheep," this they flee from as poison. Likewise, what he said to his disciples, Matt. 18 : 18, "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," they gratefully seize upon and glory in. But what he says, Matt. 10 : 9, "Get you no gold nor silver," they shun as hurtful. In the same way what he said to his disciples, John 20 : 23, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained," very placidly they accept. But what he says

in Matt. 11 : 29, "Learn of me for I am meek and lowly of heart," even the gentleness and meekness, which prepare a place for the Holy Spirit, they do not admit to their hearts.

Also what the Lord said to his disciples, Luke 10 : 16, "He that heareth you heareth me," they seize upon as meaning obedience to themselves, but what the Lord says in Matt. 20 : 25, "Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles do lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you, but, whosoever would become great among you, shall be your minister, and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister," — this most weighty saying they repudiate in word and deed — in word, saying that they ought to rule, and in deed because they do not wish to minister to the church after the custom of Jesus Christ the Lord.

And that I may gather up briefly all that the Scripture says, and especially the Gospel: what seems to indicate to them that they ought to be rich, live delicately, be famous in the world, and suffer no reproach for Christ, these sayings they ruminate over, proclaim aloud and make known all too extensively. But whatever calls for the imitation of Christ, as poverty, gentleness, humility, endurance, chastity, toil or patience — these passages they suppress or gloss over at their pleasure or expressly set aside as not pertaining to salvation. And the devil, who is the worst of sophists, leads them astray by their ignorance of the logical consequences, arguing in this way: "Christ gave such authority to Peter and the rest of the apostles, therefore also to you." And from this they draw the inference that it is lawful for them to do whatsoever they please, and so, by reasoning of the same kind, they are most blessed fathers together with Christ in pronouncing judgment in the church and because they are to be crowned later with an everlasting crown. But blessed be Christ, the omniscient, who said these things to his apostles, knowing that the authority which was given to them they would use according to his good pleasure in ministering to his bride.

So far, therefore, as the power — authority — is concerned in which the clergy glories it is to be noted, that power is sometimes taken to mean lordship or real power, as in Romans 13 : i: "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers." Sometimes it is taken in an ambiguous sense to mean assumed or simulated power, as Christ said to his captors sent by the power of the high priests, Luke 22 : 53: "This is your hour and the power of darkness." And it is said, Rev. 6:8: "Lo, a pale horse: and he that sat upon him, his name was Death: and hell followed him, and there was given unto him power over the four parts of the earth to kill with sword, famine, and death, and by the wild beasts of the earth." Also it is said, Rev. 13 : 4, that the "dragon gave his authority — power — unto the beast, and they worshipped the beast saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to war with him? ... And it was given unto him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and there was given to him authority over every tribe and people and every tongue and nation; and all that dwell on the earth shall worship him, every one whose name hath not been written in the book of life and of the Lamb,¹ that hath been slain." Who is this beast whom men worship out of fear of his power? He who reads let him understand and resist assumed power of this kind and let him not fear, as they did, because it was given to that beast to make war against the saints and to overcome by the death of this body — the saints who, dying for the law of Christ, finally overcome that beast. For to these very ones the Saviour said, "Fear not them which kill the body," Matt. 10 : 28, and "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have

overcome the world," John 16 : 33. Here Augustine, in his Com. on John [Nic. Fathers, 7 : 393], says: "In whom do they have good cheer and overcome except in Him? For he would not have overcome the world if the world overcame his members. Hence the apostle says: 'Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory,' and adds, 'through our Lord Jesus Christ, ' who said to his disciples, 'Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world.'" Thus much Augustine. But they overcome the power of the dragon and the beast who have the power of predestination which is the chief of powers and of which John speaks: "To them gave he the power to become the sons of God," John 1 : 12. And to this power is added perfecting power, and that is the power which God gives to the blessed in the heavenly country to fully enjoy the Lord and every creature in Him.

Therefore, the true worshippers of Christ, wishing to obtain that power, ought to resist every assumed power which seeks to remove them from the imitation of Christ by force or craft, for, in thus resisting such power we do not resist the ordinance of God but the abuse of power. And such abuse, in respect to the power of the keys, the simoniacs exercise who allege that they can either damn the deserving or loose those who are bound, and they do this because the obedience they falsely demand is refused them or for the sake of the gain they derive. Of such priests the Lord said: "They polluted me among my people for a handful of barley and a piece of bread that they might slay souls, which do not die, and make alive souls, which do not live, lying to my people which believes lies," Ezek. 13 : 19. On this passage Gregory comments, 11:3, Plerisqm [Friedberg, 1 : 667], and says: "Rightly does the prophet say they put souls to death which do not die and make alive souls which do not live. For, indeed, he puts to death one who does not die when he condemns the righteous, and he attempts to make alive him who does not live when he seeks to loose the guilty from the sentence of death." This abuse of power they exercise who sell and buy the sacred orders, episcopates, canonries, and parishes — plebanias. They secure and sell simoniacally who make spoil out of the sacraments, living in pleasure, avarice, and luxury or who, by any other kind of criminality, defile the power of the priesthood. For even if they declare that they know God, they, nevertheless, deny Him by their deeds, Titus 1 : 16. Consequently, they do not believe in God, and so, as unbelieving children, they have unbelieving thoughts about the seven sacraments of the church and also about the keys, the ministries, censures, the customs, ceremonies, and sacred things of the church and likewise the worship of relics, indulgences, and sacred orders.

This is clear because such despise God's name. Hence it is said in MaL 1 : 6, 10: "Unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name ? Ye offer polluted bread upon my altar. . . . Oh, that there were one among you that would shut the doors and kindle sumed to say, saying fifteen a day, they would not have gotten through in fifteen years. One of Gregory VLT's reform movements was to do away with clerical simony. Dante put simoniacal popes in hell, including Boniface VIII.

often as thy tongue sounds the praises of God, so often thy life blasphemes." How, then, shall the avaricious, simoniacs, the self-indulgent and those guilty of other crimes think in goodness of heart about the Lord or about his sacraments when they, like infidels, despise the Lord's name, defile his bread, crucify to themselves the Son of God and put him to an open shame, deal wickedly with God's law and despise government and blaspheme?

It is also clear that to this class belong the pestiferous clergy who, in an infidel way, think of the seven sacraments of the church and of the keys and of other things belonging to Christ's law. It is also clear that the dictum of the doctors — whose leader at that time was Stephen Palecz, supported by Stanislaus, who led after them Peter of Znaim, John Heliae, Andrew Broda, John Hildissen, Matthew the Monk, Herman the Hermit, George Boras, and Simon Vuenda — laid down as a statement of the matter of disagreement, is to be verified by the conduct of the clergy who were living in sin. For, in the beginning of their writing, they say: "The matter of this disagreement is manifest from the lives of some of the clergy who are pestiferous." Because Christ's priests preach against the offenses of pestiferous clerics, therefore has this disagreement arisen, for the reason that the clergy in imparting to the people the plague of criminal living and refusing to tolerate the preaching of those who preach against their plague, which is at variance with the Gospel and who seek to cure their infection by the Word of the Lord, has conspired together and desires in malice to suppress preaching. But the purpose of the said doctors was to prove that those who evangelize against the wickedness of the pestiferous clergy were heretical on the subject of the keys, which, with the help of the Lord, during the term of their lives, they will not prove.

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