

Huss's Resistance to Papal Authority

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Reformed · Late Medieval · Treatise

STROMATA 236

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INTRODUCTION

Written from prison in 1412 as Hus awaited the summons that would take him to Constance and the stake, this treatise answers the Prague theological faculty's demand that Bohemian clergy submit unconditionally to papal and prelatic authority. Hus dismantles their proof-texts one by one — from Matthew 23, Bernard, and Augustine — arguing that obedience is owed to superiors only insofar as their commands align with the law of Christ, a distinction that would become foundational for later Reformation arguments about conscience and ecclesial power. The tone is that of a man cornered but unhurried, methodically exposing what he calls the mixture of "the false with the true, flattery with fear." Expect argumentative theology at close quarters, with the pressure of martyrdom pressing behind every clause.

Further, as for the principal thing according to which they believe all their sayings to be necessary or true, the afore-mentioned doctors lay down that "obedience is due to the apostolic see and to prelates from inferiors in all things whatsoever, where the purely good is not prohibited or the purely evil commanded, but also in that which is intermediate, which, in view of the mode, place, time or person, may be either good or bad in accordance with the Saviour's statement, Matt. 23:2: 'Whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe.' " And they add the following from Bernard's Letter to Adam the Monk [Migne's ed., 182 : 95], which begins thus: " 'If thou remain in love, the law for obedience is nixed as in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which was in the midst of paradise.' In such things certainly it is not right to submit our interpretation to the opinion of the magisters, and in such things neither the command nor the prohibition of prelates is in any wise to be spurned."

And they add: "But some of the clergy in the kingdom of Bohemia refuse to agree to this, endeavoring, as much as in them lies, to lead the faithful people to disobedience towards prelates and to irreverence towards the papal, episcopal, sacerdotal and clerical dignities, not giving attention to that which St. Augustine says in the words (Sermon 8): 'If thou hast fasted, hast made prayer night and day, if thou hast been in ashes or begging, if thou hast done nothing else except what is prescribed for thee in the law and thou hast been wise in thine own sight and not obedient to thy father — understand, not bodily father, but spiritual — thou hast lost all virtues. Therefore obedience is worth more than all the other moral virtues.' "

By the combination of the above sayings the doctors mix up the false with the true, flattery with fear, and these three things are involved in these words: "Certain of the clergy" — here having in mind our party — "refuse to agree to this, endeavoring as much as in them lies to lead the faithful people to disobedience." See what a false lie this is, by which they indicate that we are become seducers of the people, when it is (i) not the purpose of our side to seduce the people from real obedience, but that the people may be one, governed harmoniously by the law of Christ. (2) The purpose of our side is that the rules of antichrist shall not seduce or separate the people from Christ, but that the law of Christ shall honestly rule in connection with the customs of the people so far as they are approved by God's law. (3) The purpose of our side is that the clergy live honestly according to the doctrine of Jesus Christ, laying aside pomp, avarice and luxury. (4) Our side wishes and preaches that the church militant, in its different parts which God has ordained, be honestly commingled, namely, of Christ's priests those who administer his law in purity, and from the world the nobles who press for the observance of the ordinances of Christ and the common people, both these parts serving in accordance with Christ's law. Therefore, let the doctors bestow this wrong on our side. But the flattery which they show to prelates and the fear with which they would affright our side are involved in the words: "endeavouring to lead the faithful people to disobedience towards prelates, and irreverence towards the papal, episcopal, sacerdotal and clerical dignities." Blessed be Christ Jesus that they have not dared to lay on us the calumny of disobedience to Jesus Christ — or perhaps they have forgotten to do so, for to serve him is to reign, and obedience rendered to him avails so much that it is of no advantage to obey any one except in so far as such obedience is obedience to our God.

Wherefore, as to that saying of the doctors, "that obedience is due to the apostolic see of the Roman church and to prelates by inferiors in all things," etc. [we proceed as follows] :

As for obedience, this is to be said : It is to be noted that obedience first is to be understood by analogy or in a very general sense, as is the loyalty of any created thing whatsoever, in respect to the divine will which all created things obey, without resistance — repugnantia — even as a stone obeys by falling or tending downwards, or fire by rising and the sun by illuminating, and so in regard to all other created things. Or else obedience is rendered with resistance, as the devil or a damned man who obeys by suffering because he must. And in this way the saints speak when they say that all things obey their Creator, and man alone, the sinner, does not obey; that is, the sinner does not submit to the rule of the Creator without resistance on the part of his will. But obedience, so far as it is an act of virtue or is virtue, is thus described by some, namely, obedience is the subjection of our own will to the will and judgment of a superior in things lawful and honest — or obedience is the disposition to follow voluntarily a superior's command in things lawful and honest.

The first kind is exhibited in acts, the second in the disposition. And from these definitions, it follows that there is no such thing as obedience in the case of things unlawful. And so obedience is correlated to that which is good, disobedience to that which is evil. But the first definition seems to me to be wanting in this, that obedience is a more general thing than submission, since obedience is becoming in God and submission is not, for God obeyed a man's voice, for it is said, Joshua 10 : 14: "There was no day like to it before or after, that God hearkened unto the voice of a man and fought for Israel." Nevertheless God, the Trinity, was not subject to man, or under a man as a lesser to a greater. Nor is all obedience to

the will of a superior, for Christ was subject to his parents, Luke 2:51. And it is certain that, as among others born of women a greater than John the Baptist hath not arisen, so Christ was infinitely greater than Joseph or Mary.

Therefore, as Christ did nothing but what he ought to have done, it is plain that the greater ought to be subject to the lesser, that is, be obedient to him; for whatever the fountain of religion, as the chief of all, may teach, that is to be held. Hence Christ, who was of a twofold nature, was obedient in a twofold sense, for (1) he obeyed God, his Father, in all things, as being on the side of his humanity less than the Father, for he himself said: "The Father is greater than I," John 14 : 28. And (2) he was obedient to his parents as to the lesser. And he was also obedient to others and endured willingly at their hands, and he is obedient to true and holy Christians, supplying their need and filling up their desires. And it is clear that the conclusion does not follow: because one obeys another, therefore he is less than the other. Similarly, it does not follow that, because one serves another, therefore he is less than the other. For Christ obeyed another man and served him, wherefore he said, Isaiah 43 : 24: "Thou hast made me to serve in thy sins, thou hast put upon me toil in thy iniquities. I am he that blotteth out thy iniquities for my own sake, and I will not remember thy sins. Put me in remembrance that we may be judged together." He also said: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister," Matt. 20 : 28. And the apostle was speaking of him when he said : " Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," Phil. 2:7. And it is also said, John 13 : 4: "He girded himself with a towel, poured water in a basin and washed his disciples' feet." Hence he is not falsely but truly a bishop, a servant of the servants of God,¹ not only a Roman bishop but, in a general way he is the bishop of all the churches. He is himself the bishop of Prague. But, as he is a servant or minister not by the compulsion of civil law, because a life where activities are moved by compulsion did not befit him, so he is the bishop of souls, not of secular riches or possessions, for he as bishop, lowly and meek, mounted the foal of an ass, as is attested by Zech. 9 : 9. And he said: "Foxes have holes, and the birds of heaven have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head," Matt. 8 : 20. Why was this? The apostle gives the reason when he says: "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich," II Cor. 8 : 9.

The second definition of obedience is also defective, as is seen from what has already been said, because it states that obedience is the disposition to follow the command of a superior. For all obedience is not with respect to a superior to whom the obedience is rendered, or with respect to a command. For sometimes obedience is with respect to an inferior, as has been said already. And obedience is also related to counsel, as when a man obeys the counsels of God, which he is not under obligation to obey under any pain of mortal sin. Obedience is also related to entreaty, as when God obeyed at Joshua's entreaty, bidding the sun stand still over Gibeon and not be moved towards its setting. Hence Jerome, Ep. 1 13, says : " God sometimes seems to obey the prayers of the saints." And it is clear that obedience is sometimes a fulfilment of a command, sometimes of a counsel, and sometimes of an entreaty, which is neither a command nor a counsel. And sometimes it is the result of persuasion, the way in which the devil persuaded Christ, Matt. 4 : 5, to go with him to the holy city and to a very high mountain, and Christ in a most virtuous way consented to this and fulfilled the devil's will. And so in view of this distinction, it is to be said that to obey is to truly fulfil another's will, and for this reason obedience

always involves the relation of one to another. But this is not the case with other virtues, as for example, continence and temperance.

From these things it is gathered that obedience, like humility, is of three kinds: namely, of the greater to the less — which is the highest form of obedience; — of an equal to an equal — which is the intermediate form; — and of the less to the greater — which is the lowest form. To the last the first definition of obedience applies — namely, that obedience is the subjection of one's own will to the will of a superior in things lawful and right. And it may be defined thus: obedience is an act of the will of a rational creature by virtue of which he voluntarily and intelligently submits himself to his superior: and such obedience is related to what is good, just as disobedience is related to what is evil. In both cases, however, it pertains to the rational creature and his subjection. And secondly, it refers fundamentally to activity, suffering, silence or any other activity of this sort to which the command is directed.

Hence, as all sin is disobedience and as disobedience is related to sin, and as every good man obeys God, so every sinner is disobedient. But obedience may be in the understanding and the will—in the understanding, which discerns that obedience ought to be rendered in given cases; and in the will, which yields consent to him who commands. But its results are shown in certain powers within and in an external effect. And, because there is found in Scripture good obedience and evil disobedience, it is clear what the good is; and of the evil it was said to Adam, Gen. 3 : 17: "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife rather than unto my voice, cursed is the ground for thy sake." It is also said, "Why do ye also transgress the commandments of God, because of your traditions," Matt. 15 : 3, and, "We must obey God rather than men," Acts 5 : 29.

Hence, whenever obedience is rendered to man rather than God, as Adam obeyed Eve, then it is always evil obedience, so that every one obeying evilly is disobedient to God; and so it is that the same man may be obedient and disobedient, with respect to the different persons commanding or to different commands. And it does not follow that, because a beloved man is disobedient, therefore he is not obedient, but it does follow that the man is not obedient to him with respect to whom he is disobedient or with respect to whose commands he is disobedient. And it is clear that to obey in one's brotherhood [religious community] is to fulfil the will of the one giving commands, and this is well, as when a man or a created spirit living in grace fulfils the lawful will of the one giving commands. But to obey is bad when either living in sin one fulfils the will of a superior as to a given command, as when one who lives in luxury, fasts from respect to the command; or, secondly, when one fulfils a bad command against God. In view of these things it is clear that it is impossible for a rational creature to be virtuous morally unless he is obedient to his God.

And so it must be known that, according to St. Thomas [Aquinas] 2 : 104, art. 5 [Migne's ed., 3 : 798], *obedience is threefold, namely, sufficient, perfect and unreasoning. Sufficient obedience is that which obeys only in those things where the obligation is of natural law and does not go beyond the limits of its own station. That is sufficient obedience by which any one obeys in those things to which he is expressly obligated, and examples of this there are in holy Scripture. For children are bound to obey their parents, according to the apostle where he says: "Children, obey your parents in all things," Col. 3 : 20. This is to be understood only to apply to those things which concern the outer course of life and household care, as Thomas says. Similarly, servants are bound to obey their masters: "Obey your masters according to the flesh in all things," Col. 3 : 22, and, "Servants, be in subjection to your masters in all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward,"*

Perfect obedience is that whereby the person obeying places all his willing and not willing—*velle et nolle*—in the will of his prelate, to do the acts commanded, so long as the command does not gainsay the divine will or good morals or the necessities of life, and so long as it does not connict with the commands and counsels of the Lord Jesus Christ. And because obedience appertains to commands and counsels, the difference is to be noted between a command and an evangelical counsel, so far as they may be distinguished as opposites.

A precept or command is a general teaching of God, obligating every man under pain of mortal sin—namely, in cases in which he has fallen away from the command. Hence the saints who for a period of

their life lived hypocritically sinned mortally for that period. So also the damned, by persistent false living sin persistently in hell.

A counsel is a special teaching of God, obligating under pain only of venial sin and for the period of this life. And so the doctors say that precepts are for the imperfect, obligating them for the reason that they are servants. But counsels are for the perfect which obligate above what is commonly required by reason and everywhere and always under pain of mortal sin. And that they may shun the occasion of sin, counsels advise them as friends. Hence, if a saint should make a divine counsel an occasion of falling from his height into mortal sin — that would be by the breaking of the first command and not by a refusal to obey the divine counsel. But in the heavenly country where the danger and occasion of sin do not exist, the counsel is not spoken of in this way. For in the heavenly country there is no voluntary poverty nor is there any savor of indigence. This Christ counselled when he said, Matt. 19 : 21: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast."

The second obedience is by co-operative submission to a superior, of which it is said, " If any one would come after me, let him deny himself," Luke 9 : 23, as does the beloved disciple. And in heaven there is no struggling against chastity, of which it is said : " There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," Matt. 19 : 12. Nor is there found there any retaliation against adversaries, of which it is said: "Do good to them which hate you," Matt. 5 : 44. Nor is there any patient endurance of those who smite violently, of which it is said: "Whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," Matt. 5 : 39. Nor are there any supererogatory works of mercy there, about which it is said, " Give to every one that asketh of thee," Luke 6 : 30; nor any refraining from words and oaths, of which it is written: "For every idle word which men shall speak they shall give account in the day of judgment," Matt. 12 : 36, and, "I say unto you, swear not at all," Matt. 5 : 33. Nor will there be left the occasion to commit sin, of which it is said: "If thine eye cause thee to stumble, or foot, or hand, pluck it out and cut it off and cast it from thee," Matt. 5 : 29. Nor will there be any easement of any time, rebuke should be made when it seems likely to be useful.

Up to this point it is to be noted that human obedience is threefold — spiritual, secular and ecclesiastical — spiritual, which is due purely according to God's law, and under this kind of obedience Christ and the apostles lived and each Christian should live. Secular obedience is obedience due according to the secular code. Ecclesiastical obedience is obedience according to the regulations of the priests of the church aside from the express authority of Scripture. The first kind of obedience always excludes what is of itself evil, both on the part of the person giving the command and on the part of the person obeying. For he who commands according to God's law and he who obeys act rightly, and of both it is said: "Thou shalt do whatsoever the priests the Levites have taught, according to all I have taught them," Deut. 29 [Deut. 24 : 8].

Here it is affirmed that he who commands ought only to command things in agreement with the law, and the person obeying ought to the same extent to obey them and never act contrary to the will of God Almighty. On this I have in another place quoted Augustine, Gregory, Jerome, Chrysostom, Isidore, Bernard and Bede, as well as the Scripture and the canons. These for the sake of brevity I will pass. Only let the saying of Isidore be given, n : 3 [Friedberg, 1 : 672]: "He who presides, if he command

anything or say anything otherwise than in accordance to God's will or what is plainly commanded in Holy Scripture, he shall be regarded as a false witness of God, or as committing sacrilege."

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