

DE ECCLESIA: THE CHURCH

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JOHN HUSS & DAVID S. SCHAFF

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INTRODUCTION

OF the writings of John Huss of Bohemia, the *Treatise on the Church* is the most important.¹ From its pages the charges were drawn upon which the author was pronounced a heretic by the council of Constance and the same day, July 6, 1415, burned at the stake. It was written in Latin and the translation, here offered, is the first that has appeared in English and seems to be the first to be issued in any language. It is offered as a help in the appreciation of a memorable man who deserves well of Western Christendom and as a contribution to the study of ecclesiology.

I. THE AUTHOR. John Huss is the chief religious character of Bohemia, as Luther is of Germany, and John Knox of Scotland; and he is the one contribution his country has made to the progress of religious thought and of culture in Western Christendom. His fame it has been possible for several centuries to obscure through the semi-mythical personality of the Roman Catholic saint, John Nepomuk, but recently Huss's eminence as a notable preacher and an unselfish patriot has come to recognition among his people, and in Southern Bohemia, though it is loyal to the Roman Catholic church, his memory is yearly celebrated.²

Born in 1373, Huss studied at the university of Prague—then in the golden period of its history. In 1403, he was made its rector, holding the position six months and later,

¹ Loserth, who pronounces the same judgment, says that the treatise has inspired friends and foes alike with deep respect, *Wiclif and Hus*, p. 182. Huss's main treatise attacking John XXIII's bulls of indulgences and his *Reply to the Eight Doctors*, *Monumenta*, 1 : 215-237; 366-402, are more spirited and make the impression of being more direct, because they are less encumbered by quotations from the canon law and other sources.

² For details of Huss's life, see Schaff, *Life of John Huss*, N. Y., 1915.

in 1409, for the term of a year. In 1403, he was also appointed preacher at Bethlehem chapel which had been founded ten years before to afford preaching in the native Czech tongue. Under Huss the chapel became the most conspicuous religious centre of the city next to the cathedral of St. Vite and the centre of a national movement. His sermons at once attracted attention by their Scriptural fervor and by their attacks upon the abuses of the clergy. As Æneas Sylvius bears witness,¹ he was forcible in speech; and his purity of character was such that no charge was ever made against it in Bohemia or during his trial in Constance. The hostility of the clergy, which his attacks aroused, followed him till his death.

There were three specific movements, which involved Huss in trouble and brought on violent dissension in Prague.

The first was the spread of Wyclif's views. Soon after Wyclif's death, 1384, his writings were carried to Bohemia, where they made as deep an impression as in Wyclif's own country. His views had been pronounced heretical by Gregory XI and what was heresy in England was heresy in Bohemia. By some of the Prague clergy XLV Articles said to contain Wyclif's views were brought to the attention of the university, 1403, for its decision. In spite of Huss's protest and the protest of Palecz and Stanislaus of Znaim, Huss's intimate friends, and other members of the theological faculty, the writings were forbidden to be read or taught. Huss declined to accept the decision, and was charged with declaring for the remanence of the bread and wine after the words of institution and with publicly announcing the pious hope, that Wyclif's soul was among the saved. Vigilant for the interests of the orthodox faith, the clergy hostile to Huss appealed to Rome, and first Innocent VII and later the Pisan pontiff, Alexander V, instructed Zbynek, archbishop of Prague, to proceed against Wyclifite heresy, and Alexander ordered

¹ *Hist. of Bohemia*, chap. XXXV.

chapels, such as Huss preached in, to be closed. Against Huss's open protest the archbishop seized two hundred of Wyclif's writings and made a bonfire of them in the courtyard of his palace, 1410. After this event, Huss publicly defended one of Wyclif's writings, the tract on the Trinity.

A second movement which involved Huss in violent controversy and trouble was the change in the charter of the university, 1409. By this change the Czech element was given three votes, and the foreign nations reduced from three to one. Against Huss, the recognized leader of the movement, was aroused the bitter opposition of the German population which exercised an influence in the city out of all proportion to its numbers. In this issue the court party was on Huss's side, but the hostility of the Germans, so Huss felt, thenceforth threatened even his very life.

The third cause of trouble for Huss was his attack, in 1412, upon the sale of indulgences authorized by John XXIII to enable him to carry on a crusade against Ladislaus, king of Naples. Deserted over this issue by most of his intimate friends at the university, Huss nevertheless spoke out as boldly as Luther did a hundred years later against the unholy traffic. He had already refused to obey a citation to Rome and was now placed under the ban of excommunication by the curia. This proving ineffective, the city of Prague was put under the interdict. In the meantime, Huss had appealed from the apostolic see to Christ himself, as the just judge and the supreme ruler of the church.¹

The interdict meant moral and religious starvation. In part to avert the calamity of a cessation of divine ministries and heeding the friendly counsel of the king, Wenzel, Huss withdrew from Prague and spent the next two years, from the fall of 1412 to October, 1414, in the rural districts of Bohemia, protected by powerful members of the nobility,

¹ Palacky, *Documenta*, 192, 464-466, 726. See Schaff, *Life of Huss*, pp. 138, etc.

and preaching in the villages and on the fields and active with his pen.

The œcumenical council, which was appointed to meet at Constance in 1414, seemed to offer an opportunity for a fair hearing of Huss's case and the removal from Bohemia of the ill-fame of heresy which now attached to it. For Huss's name was spread all through Europe and was scarcely less notorious than Wyclif's. Provided with a safe-conduct by Sigismund, heir of his brother Wenzel and of the empire, Huss proceeded to the council but, soon after his arrival in Constance, was seized by the cardinals and consigned to prison, where he languished till death put an end to his trials.

Examined by one commission after another, including among its members such eminent men as d'Ailly and Cardinal Zabarella, he persistently refused to abjure, unwilling, as he professed, to offend against God and his conscience. On July 6, 1415, the council in full session charged him with thirty errors and turned him over to the civil authority to suffer the penalty appointed for heretics, death in the flames.

II. THE CIRCUMSTANCES under which the treatise was written. The immediate occasion of the writing of the *Treatise on the Church* was a document signed by eight doctors belonging to the theological faculty of the university, dated February 6, 1413. Its immediate occasion was the papal bulls calling for a crusade against that refractory Christian prince, Ladislaus of Naples, and the sale of indulgences on the streets of Prague. It asserted the duty of absolute submission to the commands of pope and other ecclesiastical superiors, condemned the XLV Wyclifite Articles as scandalous and heretical and demanded that the kingdom of Bohemia be cleared of heresy, if necessary by the severest ecclesiastical and also civil punishments.¹ The Bohemian clergy and nation, it affirmed, were in complete accord in all matters of belief and worship with the Roman

¹ For the text in Latin and Czech, *Doc.*, 475-485.

church—*tenet et credit fideliter sicut Romana ecclesia et non aliter*—the pope being the head of the Roman church and the college of cardinals its body. Of all names, so the doctors confessed, the name heretic is the most to be abhorred. As for the sentences pronounced by Rome upon Huss, it was not within the province of the clergy of Prague to sit in judgment upon them—*nec est cleri in Praga judicare si justa vel injusta est M. J. Hus excommunicatio et aggravatio a curia romana.*

These and other positions of the eight doctors the Treatise on the Church takes up one by one and discusses. Huss's work called forth replies from Palecz and Stanislaus of Znaim, two of the signers of the document, and to each Huss made a rejoinder as he also wrote a more elaborate and very vigorous rejoinder addressed to the eight doctors as a body.¹ In the first two of these rejoinders Huss cites his Treatise on the Church by name at least eleven times, and in the Reply to the Eight Doctors at least five times.² The Treatise on the Church grows in interest as it is read in connection with these three cognate works, which further elucidate some of its principles and add items of personal interest.

Intended as a reply to the document issued by the eight theological doctors, this treatise became Huss's *apologia pro sua vita*, the defense of the views which he had drawn from Wyclif and advocated. With Cajetan before Luther at Augsburg, the eight doctors knew of only one word applicable to Huss, the word recant. His case was not arguable. Unquestioning submission was imperative. Rome had spoken: "Yield and obey," they wrote—*obediendum et parandum est.*³ Huss's final reply was not recorded with pen or expressed by word of mouth. He sealed his convictions with his life at Constance.

¹ The text is given in *Mon.*, 1 : 318-331; 337-365; 365-408.

² *Mon.*, 1 : 320, 321, 323, 328, 329, 335, etc. In the rejoinder to the eight doctors the Reply to Stanislaus is quoted at least twice.

³ *Doc.*, 1 : 480.

III. CONTENTS. Huss's line of thought runs as follows: First, the author defines the church and its headship. He proceeds by discussing the authority of the pope and the college of cardinals. The power of the keys is then taken up at length, and the limits in ecclesiastical matters of the authority of superiors over inferiors examined. Finally, the Scriptures are set forth as the sufficient standard of faith and conduct. The conclusions, thus reached, Huss then applies to his own case of alleged contumacy to the mandates of his ecclesiastical superiors with the result that a Christian's supreme duty is to the Scriptures and God, for, as he often repeats: "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Not only are these main principles also discussed in the three rejoinders referred to above, but they are taken up in other works such as his Six Errors, *de sex Erroribus*—his Attack on the Bulls of Indulgence, his Reply to an Occult Adversary and in his letters written during the period of his semi-voluntary exile from Prague and his imprisonment at Constance, especially his letters to Christian Prachaticz, rector of the university of Prague.¹

In the following fundamental positions the Treatise on the Church opposed the accredited ecclesiastical system which the fifteenth century had inherited from the age of the Schoolmen.

1. The Church.² The holy catholic—or universal—church is the body of the predestinate in heaven, earth and purgatory. The church is either general or particular. Wherever two or three are gathered together in Christ's name there is the church, whether in India, Greece, Spain, Rome or any other locality. The church is one throughout the world. The bond of unity is predestinating grace or, as Huss also put it, faith, hope and love.³ The pope, as he affirmed dis-

¹ *Doc.*, 54-63.

² Especially chaps. I-VII.

³ Pp. 14, 49, 59 etc.

tinctly, is not the bond of Christian unity, and nowhere does he represent the sacraments as the bond of unity.

Following Augustine, Huss proceeds to show that the church is a mixed body, made up of predestinate and *præcili*, or reprobate, and he uses the parable of the net and other parables to prove it. Although according to the popular opinion—*vocationem vulgarem et reputationem ecclesiasticam*—all Christians are members of the church militant, yet it is one thing, Huss affirmed, to be in the church and another to be of the church. Judas was in the church for a season, but ultimately lost, and Paul by predestination was of it even during the period of his persecuting activity, when he was not in it.¹

These definitions set aside the following views which prevailed in Huss's time.

The pope and the cardinals do not constitute the church. This was a wide-spread popular conception and Huss is at great pains to prove its fallacy. The document of the eight doctors had so defined the church. Wyclif, before Huss, had said that "the public understands by the Roman church the pope and the cardinals."²

The church is not confined to the body over which the apostolic see has jurisdiction. The particular Roman church is a company of the faithful living under the obedience of Rome, as the companies of the faithful living under the obedience of Antioch and Constantinople were called the church of Antioch and the church of Constantinople. In a notable passage in one of his letters to Prachaticz, Huss said succinctly: "The Roman church is not the catholic apostolic church, for no partial church can be the holy catholic church.

¹ Pp. 16 sq., 21, 30 sqq., 41 sqq., 58, etc. Huss's word *præcili*, or foreknown, does not contain all that the word reprobate means, although they are one in this that they both imply ultimate perdition. The first word does not involve an active decree of reprobation which the word reprobate is usually taken to involve.

² Pp. 58, etc., Wyclif's words are: *Communitas intelligit per Rom. eccles. papam et cardinales quibus est necessarium omnibus aliis obedire. de Eccles., 92.*